

## WEEKEND'S TV Paul Hoggart



# Just what the Doctor ordered



LORRAINE HEGGESSEY has taken some stick as Controller of BBC One, but the quest for good popular entertainment is never easy, and she must feel a twinge that two of her most successful commissions are being celebrated as she departs. Both involved reinterpretations of past glories. Last year *Strictly Come Dancing* revived both ballroom dancing and Bruce Forsyth to popular approval. Now *Doctor Who* returns after 16 years, presumably spent in some kind of time-vortex.

The gaunt, glowering and usually working-class Christopher Eccleston seemed an odd choice for the Time Lord, but he gives the role a surprisingly warm, dotty energy, even joking about his northern accent. Baby-faced Billie Piper is a suitably cute but feisty assistant, and Russell T. Davies's script has enough verve, wit and clever allusions to keep ageing fans of Doctors past chortling merrily.

Much of the action involved the familiar world made evil, and contrived to be funny and scary at once: killer mannequins, man-eating wheelie-bins and the London Eye as a transmitter of deadly signals. The special effects were impressive for a children's TV show, and I enjoyed the new interior of the Tardis, evocative of H. R. Giger's designs for *Alien*. Revivals are always risky, but the new *Doctor Who* is a joyful, exuberant reinvention and a fine legacy from Ms Heggeseley.

In fact, there were modern reinterpretations of the past everywhere this weekend. Sarah Waters has carved a literary niche by writing the Victorian novels that Dickens, Trollope and Eliot could not write, ie, the ones exploring explicit lesbian relationships. *Fingersmith* (BBC One, Sunday) was beautifully shot, alternating between two worlds: a warm and wacky thieves' kitchen run by Mrs Sucksby (Imelda Staunton) and the sepulchral Gothic gloom of the mansion owned by Mr Lily (Charles Dance).

It is a powerful story about the powerlessness of women in a malevolent world. The naive orphaned heiress Maud (Elaine Cassidy) is exploited by her domineering but desiccated uncle Lily and is about to be treated

even more badly by the plausible conman Rivers (Rupert Evans), who has something of the amoral swagger of the young Brad Pitt in *Thelma and Louise*. But the relationship at the heart of the story, between Maud and the pickpocket Sue (Sally Hawkins), who poses as her maid, is handled with tremendous sensitivity.

It couldn't really have happened, of course, because as Queen Victoria pointed out, homosexuality between women simply did not exist then. Similarly, as we all know from countless black-and-white films starring John Mills or Kenneth More, there were no ruthless bounders in the British Army during the Second World War.

The modern twist in *Colditz* (ITVI, Sunday) is that the most interesting character, McGrade (Damian Lewis), is an opportunist cad and a complete contrast to the wholesome airborne officer Lewis played in *Band of Brothers*. Having become the first British PoW to escape back to Britain, McGrade, a chippy working-class Scot, first tries to wriggle out of further military service, then sets about seducing his imprisoned comrade's girlfriend. It is this and this alone that saves *Colditz* from being yet another reworking of a thousand previous escape sagas, but unlike *Fingersmith* the modern twist is hardly enough to make it interesting.

Well, there was no nonsense about modern reinterpretations in *The Queen's Castle* (BBC One, Sunday), the first of three behind-the-scenes visits to the castle the Queen calls "home". There are none of the potentially embarrassing revelations associated with the series on the Royal Opera House or the House of Lords. We do get unusual access to the Duke of Edinburgh, but sadly he seems on his best behaviour. In fact it was all rather *Hello!* magazine. Only time will tell if this carries some kind of curse.

The 300 staff were preparing for the 100th anniversary of the Entente Cordiale and the visit of President Chirac of France for a banquet and performance of *Les Misérables*. The weight of tradition is overwhelming, with every antique table and elaborate ornament cleaned and polished to perfection. In the Chiracs' guest suite (No 240) "even the soap will have been personally approved by the Queen", we were told. The Senior Coffee Room Maid padded the royal butter balls, stamping each with a Royal Crown. Here is the past proudly displayed in the present, a time-warped without a Tardis.