

Doctor Who? There's no question he's a cult hero

By ROLF RYKKEN
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NEW YORK — About 900 "Whovians," including a smattering from Delaware and the Philadelphia area, attended the first "Doctor Who" festival to be held on the East Coast on Saturday, only to have the second day of the two-day event canceled.

And who, you might ask, is "Doctor Who?"

For the unfamiliar, "the Doctor" — the Who in the title is rhetorical — is the jocular, science-fiction hero of a British television series that is almost an institution in England, where it has run for 20 years. It was first shown in the United States in 1976, and has since attained a cult status here similar to the following generated by "Star Trek."

The gathering of young and old, some from such distant points as upstate New York and Wyoming, Del., came to celebrate the Doctor. On Saturday, these celebrants — called "Whovians," though only by the festival organizers, the Doctor Who Fan Club of America — watched rare and new videotaped episodes on a large screen, bought "Doctor Who" merchandise (ranging from \$10 T-shirts to \$60 satin jackets) and entered a series of raffles. They also waited in a long, hot

line to receive autographs from two actors who have appeared in the show.

The month-long series of conventions, usually two-day events with showings of rare episodes, costume contests and appearances by some of the series actors, producers and writers, began this month in Tampa, Fla.

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A special one-day convention is scheduled for Tuesday at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater from 1 to 10 p.m., though the sale of "Doctor Who" merchandise, will begin at 10 a.m.

When "Doctor Who" first appeared on American television, it starred curly haired Tom Baker — so far the most popular of the five actors who have played the title role. American viewers learned there is something engaging about a character who, in the midst of some complicated pseudo-science fiction plot usually involving the coming of doom, remarks that he has "an

uncanny ability for the apt phrase." Through the years the series has exhibited unusual intelligence, wit and impressive special effects.

Fans of this BBC-produced series tend to possess strong opinions. Wrote science-fiction author Harlan Ellison: " 'Star Wars' is adolescent nonsense; 'Close Encounters of a Third Kind' is obscurantist drivel,

'Star Trek' can turn your brains to porridge of bat guano; and the greatest science fiction series of all time is 'Doctor Who'."

The Doctor is a 750-year-old Time Lord who travels through time and space in what appears to be a blue British police call box. It's actually a TARDIS for Time and Relative Dimensions in Space, which means the box (with its huge interior) is dimensionally transcendental. The Doctor's problem is that he can't seem to get the TARDIS to go where he wants it to go — such as back to 20th-century England, where his companions (there have

been 30 in 20 years, most of them women) would like to return.

The Doctor has fought a stupefying series of especially evil opponents, most of them quite ugly and frightening. Among them are the Cybermen, a bunch of huge robotic bullies, and the Daleks, a horde of mechanical killers that look like giant industrial vacuum cleaners. The shriveled, nasty leader of the Daleks seems to know one command only, which he offers in a high-pitched shriek: "Exterminate, exterminate!"

The villains are not always mechanical. Some are particularly slimy-looking. Others are short and squat or look like giant wasps.

The Doctor has always overcome these creeps, though not forever — The Master and Davros often reappear. The Master, an old-fashioned Dr. Moriarty-like villain, actually killed the Doctor — at least the version played by Tom Baker.

Baker, who'd been playing the character for six years, wanted to go on to other things (as had three actors preceding him), so he was recently replaced by Peter Davison.

The fans in New York spent the day watching episodes, browsing through merchandise and attending a question-and-answer session with



Fans of the British TV series "Doctor Who" gathered Saturday in New York to watch episodes, meet stars and shop for merchandise.

Doctor Who

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the actors — Jon Pertwee, the third to play the Doctor, and Elisabeth Sladen, who played companion Sarah Jane Smith. They persevered for 12 hours Saturday.

Sunday was to be much the same sort of day, but at 10 p.m. Saturday, Ron Katz, president of the 12,000-member, Denver-based fan club, announced the cancellation of Sunday's schedule. He said later this was because of a dispute over advance payment to union members of the Beacon Theater, an ornate, one-time vaudeville palace at 74th and Broadway.

Sunday, 100 people who hadn't heard the news waited outside the clearly closed theater. At one point, someone suggested breaking in. "I've got a sonic screwdriver," he said, referring to an all-purpose tool used by the Doctor.

Some of the disappointed expressed interest in using their Sunday tickets at the one-day Philadelphia festival.

The attendance at the New York festival was disappointing to the organizers, who blamed WOR-TV (9), a New York station (available on Rollins Cablevision in northern Delaware and Storer Cable in Dover) because it repeats the same 90 episodes.

The series also can be seen in Delaware on WHYV-TV (12). The series, with Davison in the role, returned to Channel 12 on July 4 as the result of viewers' protests when the series was canceled in December after almost three years. Channel 12 said it had insufficient money to purchase the show, so a special fund-raising effort was made in March. Fans of the series, including members of the Doctor Who Fan Club of America, donated \$32,000.

Katz said crowds at the other festivals have surpassed that in New York. "We're sold out in Philadelphia; we were 70 percent sold out in Tampa . . . and we've sold 4,000 seats in Denver," he said.

The 900 seem to represent what

Pertwee called "the average American fan — 28 to 32 years old, older than the English fans." This average fan is so knowledgeable about the show that Sladen was compelled to study "Doctor Who" minutiae before the tour began. "I can't bear the responsibility," joked Sladen, who wore pink pants and blouse with a bare midriff. "Who'd have thought that they would go crazy?"

For many, the appearance of Pertwee, an expansive theater actor with thick white hair and an aqualine nose, and the screening of one of his "Doctor Who" adventures, marked the first they'd seen of the man who was the third to play the Doctor. "In 1985, they're going to do a big campaign [to show] my episodes," made from 1970 to 1974, he said. "That's 180 programs. By the end of it, they'll be sick to death of me."