The stakes couldn’t be higher for the new female-led version of the sci-fi classic

Story by STEWART CLARKE
Photograph by ANDREW H. WALKER
The "Broadchurch" star hasn't launched her journey through space and time alone; a brand-new team is at the controls of the TARDIS for the most anticipated season of "Doctor Who" since its 1996 reboot. New showrunner Chris Chibnall, who wrote several episodes in past seasons, acknowledges the challenge will be to satisfy the legions of existing fans while also enticing new viewers.

"Coming into the show, one of the questions we were asking was what does Doctor Who look like in the age of Netflix," says Chibnall, who's a student of and fan of the series. "That was a really key creative question because the show has always kept pace with the development of television." But he says the sci-fi series—which will premiere its new season on Oct. 1—is the perfect vehicle for adaptation to modern sensibilities. "The advantage Doctor Who has is that it is such an extraordinary idea, with such a brilliant, beautiful, inventive madness at its center in terms of the character of the Doctor, and the idea of going anywhere in time and space," he says. "If you can keep the humanity, keep the emotion, keep the madness, and ensure that the production standards are as high as anything on television—that felt like the show we wanted to make." In a practical sense, that means using anamorphic lenses, changing the aspect ratio to 1.37, and using modern sound and fighting techniques. The whole change is, Chibnall says, "designed to embrace the new, more cinematic world of TV and to ensure his partner's series "keeps pace with things like Black Mirror" or any number of shows on Netflix, Amazon and Hulu." He acknowledges, though, that viewers may not fully take in a different frame size. They will be focusing instead on Whitaker's performance.

The actress, who's filling the role most recently vacated by Jodie Whittaker, says her role as the Doctor started to take shape as shooting commenced. "I already knew: don't make too many decisions before you get on set because it's writing, and it's also in listening," she says. "It was for us (the cast) to just be open, and I think that plays into the Doctor that I want to play—it's kind of spaceboundlessness and within us all the ability to find a stillness in the tiniest detail." Whitaker took a lead in the form of costume—a Doctor Who wears cropped pants and a striped T-shirt—"which she later has a deeper meaning that will play into the story," he says. "There is a message to that..." He says that "there's every single little part of the outfit, every stripe, every lining, "she says. "Everything is a choice, and at some point you may know why." The inspiration for the look came in part from a picture Whitaker found online of a woman purposefully striking a pose in boots, pants and suspenders. "I love the image," she says. "It didn't lend itself to a man's outfit (for a woman's outfit. It was a beauty, and that's what I wanted to help create, more of a feeling than a costume." Chibnall also made the game-changing decision to have a group of friends for the Doctor—the terminology "companions" is out—rather than a single sidekick to allow for a diverse ensemble. "Train Cole plays Ryan, Mandip Gill plays Yasmin and Bradley Walsh plays Graham." The producers are eager to offer a way into the series for a wide audience, with various emotional touch points, because this is an important "reintroduction" for the show. "As so many of the others have been, this show will always attract more fans," she says. "I think having a set of characters gives the broadest audience access to the series." Chibnall says, "so that whoever tunes in has a character that they could connect to, who resonates with them, or they might know somebody like..."

As Whitaker initially thought she was auditioning for a "Doctor Who" spinoff, Walsh was similarly in the dark: "Best known to British viewers as host of ITV game show "The Chase," he previously worked with Chibnall on "Love & War." Chibnall and now exec producer Matt Strevens offered him the part of Graham, an older friend, over lunch and were "trying to explain it without telling me anything about it." Walsh says, "The conversation was 'We're going to start this journey, we're going to change the direction of what we want to do with this thing, and it's either going to be massive and brilliant or people aren't going to like it, but we're gonna really go for it. And I want, I mean..." Secrecy abounds on the details of the upcoming series, which is known for recruiting various guests stars including Carey Mulligan, Simon Pegg, Derek Jacobi, John Boyega and Andrew Garfield. Producers have confirmed, though, that there won't be any monsters from previous runs and that the program will continue to explore science fiction themes.

Chibnall wrote the first installment, "The Woman Who Fell to Earth," which introduces the new Doctor along with his new "companions" Malorie Blackman, Eddie Izzard, and "in an episode of 'Black Mirror'" actress Natacha Karam. "The Doctor is a time traveler, the Doctor sees everything," she says. "Every single little part of the outfit, every stripe, every lining..." Chibnall says. "Everything is a choice, and at some point you may know why." The inspiration for the look came in part from a picture Whitaker found online of a woman purposefully striking a pose in boots, pants and suspenders. "I love the image," she says. "It didn't lend itself to a man's outfit (for a woman's outfit. It was a beauty, and that's what I wanted to help create, more of a feeling than a costume." Chibnall also made the game-changing decision to have a group of friends for the Doctor—the terminology "companions" is out—rather than a single sidekick to allow for a diverse ensemble. "Train Cole plays Ryan, Mandip Gill plays Yasmin and Bradley Walsh plays Graham." The producers are eager to offer a way into the series for a wide audience, with various emotional touch points, because this is an important "reintroduction" for the show. "As so many of the others have been, this show will always attract more fans," she says. "I think having a set of characters gives the broadest audience access to the series." Chibnall says, "so that whoever tunes in has a character that they could connect to, who resonates with them, or they might know somebody like..."

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