

## NEW WHO at 20

**T**HIS TIME 20 years ago, screenwriter Russell T Davies was under pressure. His passion-project revival of *Doctor Who* was about to air, starring Christopher Eccleston as the ninth Doctor and Billie Piper as his companion, Rose Tyler. It was 16 years on from the BBC's original cancellation of the show, which to most of the world was a distant memory of wobbly sets and Daleks foiled by stairs. In 2005, TV was on a different planet. Could a series about a time-travelling alien in a police box really work in the era of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*?

"It all felt terribly important," Davies says now. "I'd loved *Doctor Who* all my life, and I think its return has now proved that it's invulnerable. But it didn't feel like that then. It felt very much last chance at the saloon."

There was a lot at stake. But Davies found himself oddly confident. "In that build-up to transmission, I felt like we had a secret weapon – and that was Billie Piper," he says. "Everyone knew Christopher Eccleston was a great actor, but knowing how good Billie was, was a terrific feeling. Because people came to criticise, people came to mock, and people came to scorn."

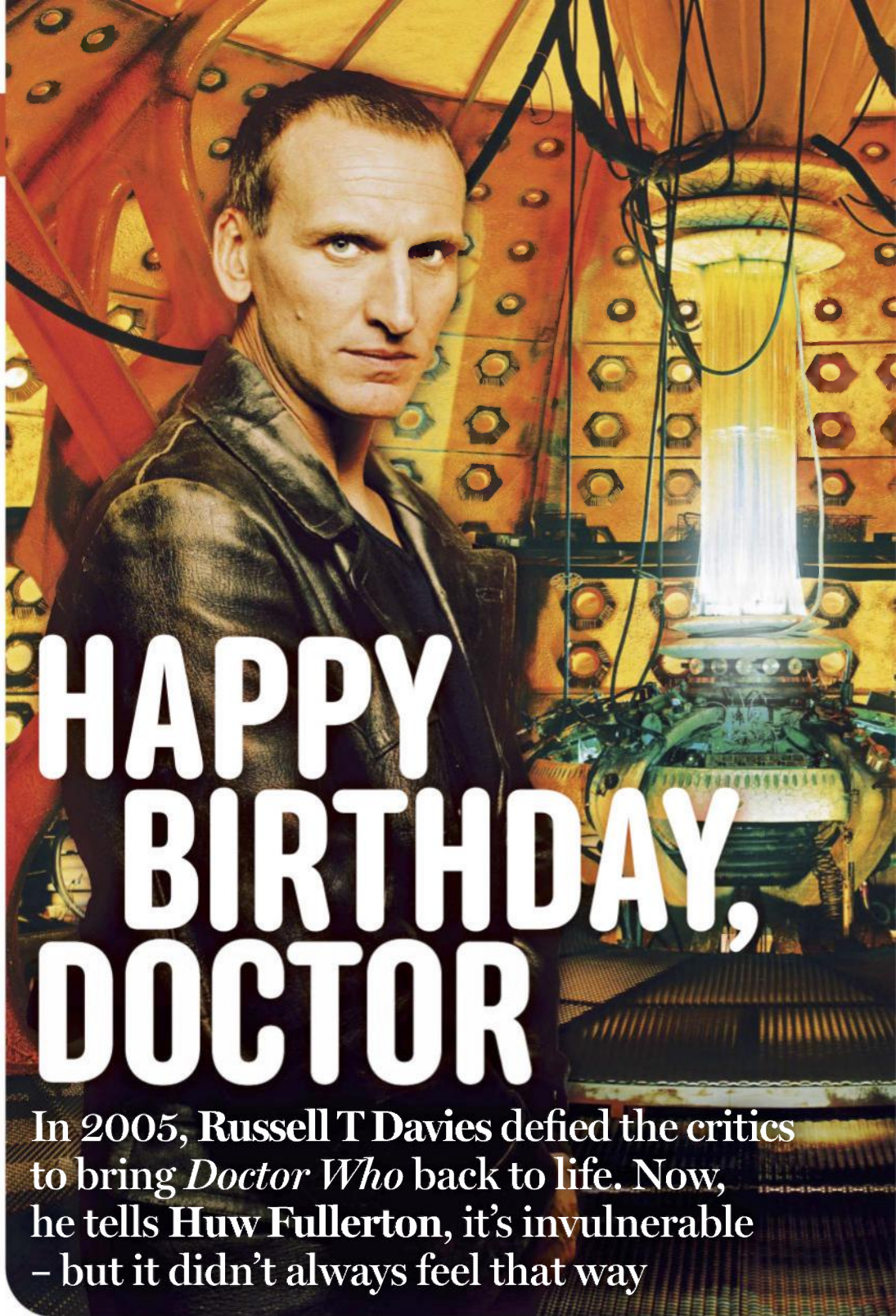
In the end, Davies's confidence was borne out. The *Doctor Who* revival became an overnight success, kickstarting a new era for the show that has spanned another two decades.

Eccleston was succeeded by David Tennant, who recalls, "When I signed on, the first series of the new version hadn't even transmitted. I sort of signed up to be in a second series that nobody could really be certain would ever arrive. I could have appeared in a regeneration scene at the end of series one, and that could have been it. I would have been not even the George Lazenby of *Doctor Who*; if I can make a slightly obscure *Casino Royale* reference, I'd have been the David Niven of *Doctor Who*!"

**F**OLLOWING ECCLESTON AND Tennant's time, new Doctors – Matt Smith and Peter Capaldi – came in with Davies's successor as series boss, Steven Moffat, while third showrunner Chris Chibnall cast Jodie Whittaker as the first female Doctor in 2017. New mythology, monsters and fan-favourite episodes were born.

Today, Davies is back in charge, with Neuti Gatwa about to embark on his second series of adventures. He was just 12 years old when the Doctor was given a new lease of life in 2005, "probably being a nuisance somewhere in Boroughmuir High School corridors," he jokes. "Now, I've just done my first Comic Con and as much as it was intense, it was a really nice way to finally get close and personal with the fans. A big, beautiful family of all kinds of people."

"It's really special to have a character like the Doctor on our screens. He tries to leave everyone happier than when he first meets them and that's a beautiful trait. He inspires and repre-



**HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DOCTOR**  
In 2005, Russell T Davies defied the critics to bring *Doctor Who* back to life. Now, he tells Huw Fullerton, it's invulnerable – but it didn't always feel that way

sents a sense of curiosity, courage and compassion in all of us."

*Doctor Who* is a 20th-century show, successfully reinvented for the 21st. But perhaps more pertinently, it's also a 2005 show that's survived the changes in the TV landscape since then – the rise of streaming and the supposed "death" of traditional broadcasting. *Doctor Who* has become one of the biggest streaming successes for BBC iPlayer, with 36 million hours of New *Who* (specifically between 2005 and 2022) watched on the platform just last year.

The BBC tells RT there were over 70 million hours of *Doctor Who* watched in 2024, including its various spin-offs and iterations. So how does it keep going? "It's a constant battle," Davies admits. "It's different every single week – not just

on a different planet, but often a different genre, the cast keep changing, and that keeps people excited. And there's nothing quite like that on TV. There's nothing quite like that anthology-show imagination of *Doctor Who*, where it takes these wild leaps from one episode to another.

"Never, never, never, never would you have thought we'd be here 20 years later," he adds. "No programme would ever think that. It's astonishing. We were literally just hoping for a second year."

Amazingly, since its return not only did *Doctor Who* get a second series, it has managed to air at least one episode every single year since. So, let's step into the Tardis and take a trip back through 20 years of New *Who* and remember how we got here...

**THE INSIDE STORY**  
*Doctor Who* was relaunched on 26 March 2005 with stars Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper. RT celebrated with a cover enabling readers to open the Tardis and see inside



**NEW TENNANT**  
 David Tennant took over as the Time Lord in the 2005 Christmas special

# 20 YEARS IN 20 EPISODES

The best and most important *Doctor Who* adventures from every year since the 2005 revival – plus the showrunners' favourites!

## 2005 Rose

### Series 1 episode 1

In just 45 minutes, the New *Who* team had to prove that *Doctor Who* could work in the modern TV landscape – with a story about the Doctor saving London from mannequins! Thanks to a back-to-basics approach – and Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper, who played planet-hopping time-travellers like they were real people – they succeeded. The next 20 years all started here...

(inset, bottom) – is a favourite of Davies. "There's something I love about *Gridlock*. I think it's the first episode where I begin to conquer the notion of working in a world of special effects. And I think it's the kind of very strange story that only *Doctor Who* could have – stuck in a traffic jam for 23 years! It's also the first episode I wrote entirely in Cardiff."



## 2008

### The Stolen Earth

#### Series 4 episode 12

By this point, Tennant's Doctor had been joined by two spin-off series – *Torchwood* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures* – and in this episode, all three casts joined together to save the world from the Daleks. It was the kind of crossover the series hadn't pulled off before (or since), while a regeneration cliffhanger (inset middle) – a clever misdirect after Tennant had announced his departure – even made the headlines on *BBC News*.



## 2006 Doomsday

### Series 2 episode 13

Romance was barely an undercurrent in the classic series, but the revived *Who* made the Doctor an explicitly romantic hero – especially when David Tennant took over from Christopher Eccleston at the end of 2005. It was controversial, but effective – in this finale from Tennant's first series, his emotional farewell to Piper's Rose (inset, top) left not a dry eye in the Tardis.



## 2009 The End of Time

### 2009 Christmas special

With their final full series the previous year, 2009 saw actor Tennant and writer Davies sign off with a shorter run of specials spread throughout the year, culminating in Tennant's regeneration into a brand-new Doctor in two-part story *The End of Time*. By this stage, he was so popular that he was the face of the BBC's Christmas ident. Essentially, *Doctor Who* was the BBC. And now, they had to reinvent it... ▷

## 2007 Gridlock

### Series 3 episode 3

#### RUSSELL T DAVIES'S PICK

This episode – where the Doctor and companion Martha Jones (Freema Agyeman) are trapped on a planet of flying cars

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## 2010 The Time of Angels

Series 5 episode 4

### STEVEN MOFFAT'S PICK

The Weeping Angels (below) – monsters created by screenwriter Moffat for 2007's *Blink* – returned when he took over the series in 2010 and cast Matt Smith as his new Doctor. "The *Time of Angels* isn't my favourite episode or my pick for best," Moffat says. "But it was the very first episode I worked on as showrunner, and it gave me a moment of giddy hope that I might not make a complete mess of the best job I'd ever have. Every frame of it takes me back to those thrilling, strange, tormenting days when all my childhood dreams came true – and no one let me sleep."



and Arthur Darvill's Rory were zapped back to 1930s New York by Weeping Angels.

## 2013 The Day of the Doctor

50th anniversary special

Marking 50 years since *Doctor Who*'s debut in 1963, this anniversary special was the revived series' first real stab at a staple of the classic run, a "multi-Doctor" story – starring Matt Smith, David Tennant, John Hurt (as a "missing" Doctor) and Tom Baker, among others. The result was a huge spectacle that also served to tie the new and old series together – and a serious high point of the modern era.

## 2014 Dark Water

Series 8 episode 11

Following Matt Smith's exit at the end of 2013, the BBC cast a very different Doctor in Peter Capaldi. Often considered to have a darker tone, Capaldi's first series ended with a spooky Cyberman episode that terrified audiences. The story was also a glimpse at future possibilities, when Missy (Michelle Gomez, above) was revealed to be longtime Time Lord foe the Master – a hint that any actor could play the Doctor.



## 2016 The Return of Doctor Mysterio

2016 Christmas special

A key element of New *Who* has been its Christmas specials, which kicked off in 2005 and continued uninterrupted for 12 years. And even in a sparse 2016, the first year since the show returned when there wasn't a series on air, the *Who* team made sure this festive caper, where the Doctor teams up with a superhero, still arrived under the tree.

## 2017 The Doctor Falls

Series 10 episode 12

A modern *Doctor Who* finale follows a bit of a formula: big character returns, old monsters, usually a cast departure. Ten series in, it's harder to make that feel special, so it's impressive that this episode is still such a firm favourite with fans. Capaldi's Doctor takes his final stand against the Cybermen and the Master (John Simm/Michelle Gomez), in what was supposed to be both Capaldi and Moffat's grand finale. But they would both return for one last Christmas special before handing in the Tardis keys. ▷

## 2011 A Good Man Goes to War

Series 6 episode 7

This mid-series finale – which saw the Doctor recruit a misfit army to save his friend Amy Pond (Karen Gillan) – showed off the ambition of *Doctor Who* at this time. It all culminated in one of the biggest twists the series has ever had, involving Alex Kingston's character River Song – one of Moffat's other big additions to *Who* mythology.

## 2012 The Angels Take Manhattan

Series 7 episode 5

The Doctor's companions don't always come to the nicest of ends in the modern show. If they're not lucky enough to get trapped in a parallel universe or mind-wiped, they might find themselves killed by a Cyberman or a bird. In their 2012 exit episode, Karen Gillan's Amy



**NEXT IN LINE**  
Matt Smith became the 11th Doctor in 2010, followed by Peter Capaldi (behind) in 2013

## THE STEVEN MOFFAT ERA

Regular *Who* scribe Steven Moffat took over from Russell T Davies in 2010, staying in the showrunner role for seven years with two Doctors – Matt Smith and Peter Capaldi.

"Those extraordinary days [*Doctor Who* plus *Sherlock*] are a blur to me now," he says. "I was working too hard and fast to properly remember any of it. I have a dim impression of panic, guilt and trying to cut down on sleeping so I could get more done. It didn't work."

"But you know what? When I told people I was a screenwriter and they asked if they'd have seen anything I'd done... boy, did I have one hell of an answer. Ah, those days, those amazing days – I wonder what they were like."

Moffat's second Doctor, fellow Scot Capaldi, also has fond memories. "It reawakened the child in all of us," he tells *RT*. "The revival of *Doctor Who* was, and is, one of the most welcome sights on TV."

"No other epic yarn is like *Doctor Who*," adds Moffat. "It's brand new and ancient at the same time. That's the Doctor for you: you've known him all your life and he's the new kid on the block. How do you live for ever? Simple. You don't age." HF

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## 2018 Rosa

### Series 11 episode 3

A key feature of both the classic and revived *Doctor Who* was seeing the Time Lord hobnobbing with real historical figures, but in the era of Jodie Whittaker's Doctor, trips to the past became more complex. In this episode co-written by Chibnall and Malorie Blackman, with Vinette Robinson, right, as Rosa Parks, the new Tardis team saw the realities of historical racism laid bare.



story in 2021 and 2022. Christmas specials returned in 2023.

## 2020 Spyfall

### Series 12 episodes 1 and 2

#### CHRIS CHIBNALL'S PICK

"The start of our second series was a two-parter," recalls Chibnall. "It was kind of James Bond-y with the Master [Sacha Dhawan] and Lenny Henry. It was an all-action romp set in America and on another planet and then in wartime France, with the Master pursuing the Doctor up the Eiffel Tower.

It was one of the episodes that felt the closest to what *Doctor Who* has always been like in my head, so I loved doing that."

## 2019

## Resolution

### 2019 New Year's Day special

After 12 years of Christmas adventures, the series switched to New Year's Day specials in the Whittaker/Chibnall era. This one – actually the only episode that aired in 2019 – saw Whittaker take on a battered Dalek, with sequels picking up the same

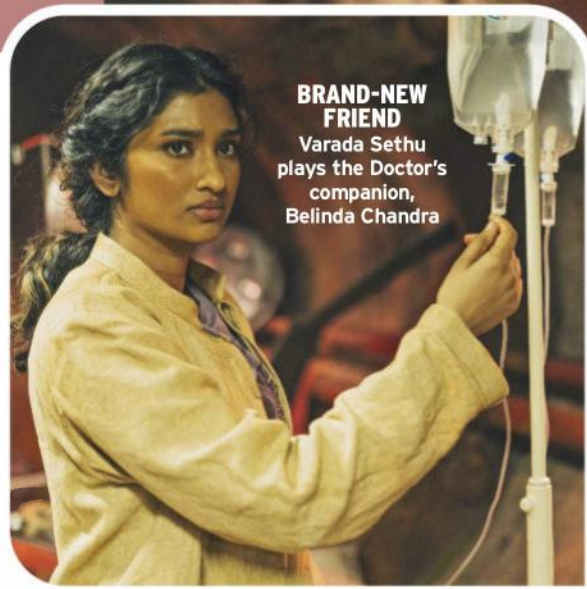
## THE CHRIS CHIBNALL YEARS

In 2018, *Broadchurch* creator Chris Chibnall took over the show, staying for four years alongside 13th Doctor Jodie Whittaker – the first woman to take on the lead role.

"Running *Doctor Who*, you really are 'running' a million miles an hour," Chibnall says now. "Each episode is a new world, new characters, new monster. It's exhilarating, exhausting, amazing. The best job."

"It was one of the biggest gifts I've ever been given, playing the Doctor," agrees Whittaker. "There's no right or wrong way to play that character. And the most exciting thing was that, as a woman, I got to play that part! I hope the show continues to celebrate change."

"Regeneration is literally built into the show, on and off screen," adds Chibnall. "Some people get frustrated that it doesn't stand still, but that's why it's so enduring. It can constantly surprise. And if there was any young girl aged five upwards who saw Jodie and could suddenly see themselves in the Doctor, that's all I ever wanted to do." HF



**BRAND-NEW FRIEND**  
Varada Sethu plays the Doctor's companion, Belinda Chandra

## NEW SEASON PREVIEW

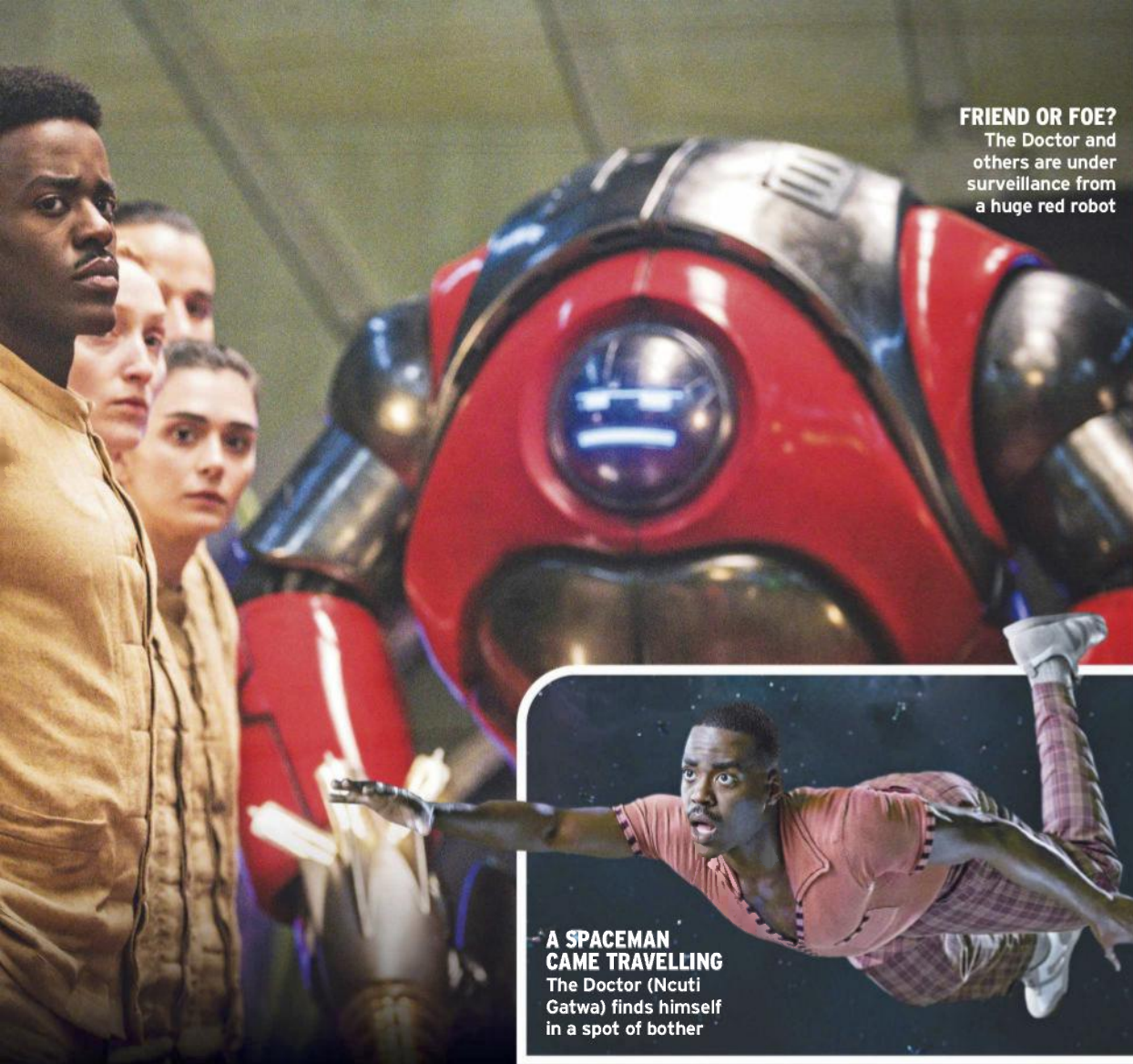
# ROBOTS, CARTOONS & AN INTERSTELLAR SONG CONTEST

2025 isn't just an anniversary year – it also brings a second series of *Doctor Who* for Ncuti Gatwa's incumbent Time Lord, now accompanied by new pal Belinda, played by Varada Sethu. "Belinda challenges the Doctor in ways he hasn't been before," Gatwa tells *RT*. "She has absolutely no desire to be in the Tardis and really wants to get back home. Which is hilarious!"

## 2021 Flux: Village of the Angels

### Series 13 episode 4

*Doctor Who* was almost brought off the air by the Covid-19 pandemic, with filming restrictions making it impossible to make the show as usual. However, instead of calling time, the crew found a workaround, creating a linked mini-series for Jodie Whittaker's incarnation of the Doctor. Of the five instalments, Maxine Alderton and Chibnall's horror-based Weeping Angels adventure, set in a "cursed" English village in 1967, stands out as the highlight.



**FRIEND OR FOE?**  
The Doctor and others are under surveillance from a huge red robot



**A SPACEMAN CAME TRAVELLING**  
The Doctor (Ncuti Gatwa) finds himself in a spot of bother

"This Doctor has been used to using his charm or the mystery of his life to win people over, but none of that works on Belinda. And she challenges the way the Doctor has been used to doing things, as she's equally headstrong. They push each other's limits." In other adventures, the Doctor will face 1950s cartoons coming to life and some seriously scary new monsters – as well as an outer-space version of the Eurovision Song Contest, airing the same

night as the real competition. "It's just wilder swings than ever, really," showrunner Davies says. "Episode three is absolutely terrifying and we're still working on the finale right now, which is astonishing. But the episode I keep going back to and rewatching, is the Interstellar Song Contest. It's terrific in all sorts of ways." HF  
*Doctor Who returns to BBC1/iPlayer on Saturday 12 April*



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 ■ The Doctors in their own words: Christopher Eccleston, David Tennant, Matt Smith, Peter Capaldi, Jodie Whittaker and Ncuti Gatwa  
 ■ Russell T Davies,

Steven Moffat and Chris Chibnall on the making of *Doctor Who*.



## 2022 The Power of the Doctor

**BBC centenary special**

Jodie Whittaker's exit, like Tennant's over a decade earlier, was stretched out over a year of specials, ending in a final clash with Sacha Dhawan's Master. Released to coincide with the BBC's centenary, it was also the series' strongest callback to the early years, featuring the return of old companions and "classic" Doctors. And in one final twist, Whittaker regenerated into a familiar face...



## 2023 The Star Beast

**60th anniversary specials episode 1**

Before Ncuti Gatwa took over the role, David Tennant had a little revival as the Doctor, returning for a trio of specials to mark the show's 60th anniversary. With Russell T Davies back at the helm and popular companion Catherine Tate (left with Tennant) also back in this first special, it was a nostalgic reunion that culminated (in the third special) with Tennant's symbolic handover to Gatwa – a new torchbearer for the show.

## 2024 Boom

**New Series 1 episode 3**

**NCUTI GATWA'S PICK** "It's tricky... I'm yet to see my second series, so I can only speak on my first, but I think I would choose *Boom*. I just loved Steven's scripts so much and I felt he wrote the Doctor in such a mysterious, dark way. Filming his scripts always felt slightly theatrical." Interestingly, returning writer Steven Moffat has admitted the plot – which sees the Doctor trapped on a landmine – was inspired by a similar scene in the 1975 *Doctor Who* serial *Genesis of the Daleks*. Perhaps, *New Who* and *Classic Who* aren't so separate after all... HF