

GLOBE

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# TELEVISION



The  
return  
of  
**Doctor Who**

The beloved British TV classic  
receives a bold new makeover

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# The Doctor returns

The space journey continues as a new high-tech Doctor Who returns to primetime

By Rebecca Caldwell



Space-trucking: British film star Christopher Eccleston assumes the Doctor Who role, with Billie Piper on board as his latest traveling companion

What's the longest-running science fiction TV program? No, it's not *Star Trek*, despite its many spinoffs that continue to boldly milk the franchise where no branding has gone before. In fact the endurance record belongs to British cult favourite *Doctor Who*, which ran from 1963 to 1989 before going on hiatus, a lengthy break that ends this week when a 13-episode run of the latest incarnation of the series begins Tuesday on CBC.

It's a new beginning that will be scrutinized closely by *Doctor Who* fans in Canada — although perhaps not as closely as it was in the U.K. where the show is an institution. (This is a country that issued a postage stamp in the 1990s featuring a Dalek, a favourite

*Doctor Who* villain shaped like a life-sized salt shaker and intent on exterminating everything in its path.) After the first episode was leaked on the Internet a few weeks before broadcast, the show became front page news with reviewers weighing in.

Written and co-produced by Russell T. Davies (best known for creating the excellent British *Queer as Folk* series), the new *Doctor Who* begins with Rose, an extended re-introduction of the mysterious Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) and his new companion, Rose (U.K. actress and

one-time pop star Billie Piper), a shop girl for a downtown London store.

In the series opener, Rose is rescued by the Doctor when the mannequins in her store suddenly spring to life — it's all part of a dastardly plot by an alien with plans on destroying the earth through controlling everything made of plastic. Stylish and undeniably modern, the show still retains the fun-yet-dark and dangerous feelings of the old series. This is truly a *Doctor Who* for the 21st century.

Sure, some nostalgics might complain that the folksy elements of the show are no longer intact. It's true that the days of the show's low production values that usually resulted in aliens looking like they were papier mached

**Doctor Who**  
Tuesdays  
8 p.m.  
CBC



Punky: Billie Piper is a former U.K. pop star

together out of a pile of dirty laundry and extra car parts and covered in spray paint are gone. The interior of the TARDIS, the doctor's amazing larger-on-the-inside-than-it-is-on-the-outside spaceship, for instance, has had a much-needed renovation, although it's a compromise. It still looks like a 1950s British Police phonebox on the exterior, but the interior is now cavernous and gloomy, looking more suitably like an alien spaceship.

The biggest change of all, of course, is the Doctor himself. The secret of the show's longevity is that it allowed for different actors to play the lead role: The Doctor, a debonair two-hearted adventurer Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey had 13 lives and physical incarnations during which he travelled through space and time defending the weak, stemming alien invasions, and, generally, righting wrongs. (He had a soft spot for Earth and visited the planet, or at least the U.K., frequently; each of his personae

was usually accompanied by a human, or at least humanoid, and often a comely female.)

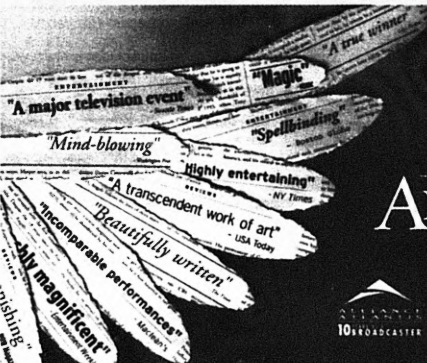
Through the years the doctor has been portrayed by a variety of thespians: William Hartnell, the original Doctor Who, the grandfatherly intellectual; Patrick Troughton, the clownish mop-top; the chivalric Jon Pertwee; Tom Baker, the witty charismatic iconoclast who pretty much defined the character; clean-cut do-gooder Peter Davison; gleefully acerbic trouble maker Colin Baker; Sylvester McCoy, the umbrella-carrying pixie; and Paul McGann of the TV-movie fame.

The casting of Christopher Eccleston as Doctor No. 9 is a daring one. Not only does he not have the plummy accent of his predecessors but his outfit — black leather jacket and black trousers — makes him look more like a mobster extra who has wandered off the set of a Guy Ritchie film than the dashing Doctor.

Although Eccleston has said in interviews that while he has fond memories of watching the show as a child, he turned down an earlier opportunity to audition for the lead role in a *Doctor Who* movie. "It was a very firm no from me, because really it hadn't resonated with me for a long time ... I remember Troughton, I remember Baker and I remember Pertwee and I enjoyed it, but to a certain extent for a kid from a council estate, they were a little bit foppish," he said.

The new-look *Doctor Who* is part of a plan to make the show more meaningful to today's audience, who might respond to a character more anti-hero than quaint gentleman explorer. Even a timelord needs a makeover now and then. "I hope to a certain extent with my *Doctor Who* that we can address that," says Eccleston, "so if we can hint at the social fabric of the country in the backgrounds [the viewers] come from ... that would be great." ■

Meet the Time Lord. Eccleston's Doctor Who is dark and edgy compared to previous versions



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