





AMAZING GRACE

SHE KILLED THE DOCTOR AND SAVED THE UNIVERSE – THEN TURNED DOWN A TRIP IN THE TARDIS! **DAPHNE ASHBROOK** LOOKS BACK AT HER UNIQUE *DOCTOR WHO* EXPERIENCE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

AS DR GRACE HOLLOWAY IN THE 1996 *Doctor Who* TV movie, Daphne Ashbrook was catapulted into a world she had no idea existed. Not only did this British sci-fi show have a 33-year history at the time, but the “backdoor pilot” movie for Fox in the United States had a massive weight of expectation resting on it – with it having been seven years since the programme had last been in production, hopes for a new series were at a high. In this previously unpublished archive interview, Ashbrook discusses her on-set experiences...

Did you know much about *Doctor Who* before filming?

◆ Not originally. There was an education going on on the set. The very first three days of shooting in Vancouver were the series in Grace’s apartment. The owner knew about *Doctor Who*, so he had his computer booted up while we were there to rehearse, he was pulling stuff off the internet and saying “See...” That’s when I started to get a little bit of information. Then on the set, Paul [McGann] and Sylv [McCoy] and Philip [Segal, executive producer], and Geoffrey [Sax, director], they all started to just tell me a bit about it.

I still didn’t understand. I still did *not* understand. I still don’t. I’m still kind of like, “Okay, groovy.” I had a lot of fun, it was a great show. I loved the script, the character and everything. So I’m alright with everything that’s continued on. I’m very fortunate, actually.

Did production not tell you how big it was?

◆ No! I was so out of the loop. I read the script, I auditioned for it, I had a callback and then I got the part and was very excited, “Oh, I get to go to Vancouver.” When I found out that Paul was in it, I knew about *Withnail And I*. So it was

like, “Oh, okay, this is cool.” That’s about all I knew walking in. I’d shot several times in Vancouver, so I was thrilled that I was gonna get to be up there for a month and a half. It’s very beautiful. I think that’s part of the reason why so many people go up there to shoot, you’ve got every facade you need, pretty much. You can make it look like a lot of places. I mean, hell, they made it look like San Francisco, that ain’t that easy to do. But they did it.

Did you not question what it was all about?

◆ I liked alien stuff, I had done some of those shows. I definitely have a propensity towards stretching the imagination. I don’t think I even really understood that when I read it, it’s like, “police box”. “That’s cute,” you know. The whole regeneration thing, I like stuff that makes you kind of scratch your head and wonder. Some people said maybe they should’ve just started it fresh with no regeneration, but I *loved* that part. I think that’s the coolest part.

People were really trying hard – I know Philip and the writer [Matthew Jacobs] and the BBC were trying so very hard – to honour the show and keep the core. So I’m assuming that’s why that was not something that they considered. I really think it’s a very strange little puzzle piece in the middle of these two huge living, breathing things. There’s this whole many, many, many decades and then there’s the new one. Then there’s this thing which kind of bridges, I think, in some way the two versions.

You’re one of only a few actors to have been in both *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*...

◆ My experience on the set of *Deep Space Nine*, that was some heavy work. That was heavy lifting, there was a lot of dialogue. And they did not allow you to miss a syllable. And I mean a *syllable*. →

I was also physically restricted the entire time. I was supposed to be handicapped, so I had these fake braces all over me, made of plastic, and I had to wear the jumper. So for the bathroom you had to take everything off and every time you took everything off and we go and break they would be duct-taping me. I was nothing but duct tape by the end of that show.

So Doctor Who was an easier experience?

◆ Doctor Who was freedom, man! Yeah, I was in a nice comfortable outfit. It was cold and it was nighttime, but once I acclimated to the sleeping thing it was actually no problem at all. And the shoes... I was wearing flats. I mean, that's unheard of! You're usually in some kind of hideous shoe and you're running through the streets in the dark.

I had a nice warm jacket that I got to wear the whole time. The one thing – there is a caveat – the dress, the big blue dress... I was busting out of that thing and it was hard. They built that thing for me. They did a beautiful job. But yeah, it was hard to breathe in that thing. I got into opera because of that too. And then Paul was really into it. So he was always going, "Here, listen to this..."

Were you aware there was a chance it might be optioned for a series?

◆ I think I knew, yes. I did know at the time that they were hoping it would be sort of a backdoor pilot, which I've done a lot of, so I know what that means. I don't think they were originally thinking that I would be part of it though. I really don't.

I think my understanding of it was that Yee Jee [Tso, as Chang Lee] was gonna possibly be the companion. Actually during the shooting of it, somebody from the BBC did come up and say, "Do you think you might be interested if this got picked up?" And I said, [shouts] "Yes!" Scared him to death. I think I hugged him and he gasped. But yeah, I would've loved that.

Isn't the character of Grace caught up in legal issues?

◆ It must be one of those weird "owned by Universal" [things]. Then I heard the writer owns this character. I don't even know that that writer has been asked, "Would you mind releasing this thing? So we could do some audiobooks?" In the end, somebody has to be interested enough to actually pick up the phone or whatever and figure it out.

Eric Roberts gave quite the performance as the Master...

◆ He went for it, man. He went all the way. We were shooting for three weeks, I think, before he ever came on the set. So we had a rhythm already, we were all on nights together. Any kind of length of time you become this little unit when the rest of the world is asleep. Then



Eric walks in three weeks into it and he was the outsider. Must've been really fun for him! He just was with a completely different energy, and he was also playing the bad guy. All of that, I'm sure, helped in some weird way for what we had to fulfil. So yeah, it was a little interesting. [Laughs]

With Sylvester as well, you got to work with two Doctors...

◆ He's the sweetest human being I've ever met. And I was aware. I even knew it then. Once they explained everything to me, I was aware that this man had a series and he was coming out here to give his series away. I watched him before I knew him, before I really got to know him, and I really was watching for anything that was like, "This is it" and there was nothing. He was having a good time. He was thrilled to be there.

You discovered far more about how big The Movie was after watching the documentary on the DVD many years later.

◆ Oh my god, I'm so glad I didn't know any of this because I would have had a heart attack. The mountains that were moved to make this thing happen. I just was impressed and humbled and amazed at the work, seven years of slogging away and almost no, yes, no, and all the different versions of things and trying to



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Eric Roberts, Paul McGann and Daphne Ashbrook.

find the right Doctor. Oh my god, it was just intense and it educated me. It really was probably the best education I've gotten as far as what I did [laughs], what I was involved with back in '96.

My auditions weren't on there. I was brilliant! That's all you need to know. And looked *fabulous!* [Laughs]

Your memoirs are called *Dead Woman Laughing*. Is there a *Who*-related reason?

◆ I think it's kind of funny and catchy, but honestly that title came up because I was laying on the cloister room floor and I'm dead.

They're shooting this thing and I start to get the giggles and I cannot stop. We were pros. We laughed a lot, but we were always there on action, cut, we were *pros* during that shoot, we did not screw around, Paul and me. So here I am now mucking up the shot. I'm laughing and

“I did know at the time that they were hoping it would be sort of a backdoor pilot”

I'm supposed to be dead. So it's not good.

We've been through a lot, this is towards the end of the shoot. It's like, “Don't screw around, get this thing done” and I'm laughing. I've been dead many times, and I have laughed many times while being dead. So I said something like, “Dead woman laughing, oh my god” and Paul said, “That's the name of your book,” and I never forgot that. So when the idea came up to do a book, *Dead*

Woman Laughing is perfect, because I've died so many times!

What did you think of the finished film?

◆ The first time I saw the film was at the Directors Guild [premiere]. I warned everyone around me, “I may not be able to stay in the room because I'm not going to watch it.” I got up as soon as I was about to kill Sylv, and I went out the room, drank wine, and waited for everyone to come out.

Then I watched it a couple of weeks later by myself, and I was like, “Oh my god,” I thought I suck and it's awful. A decade later, I watched it. And I was like, You know what? I did okay, I did alright. I was okay with that and it was much easier to go to conventions and go “I did what I could, Grace was kind of cool.” ●

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