

THE  TIMES

MAGAZINE

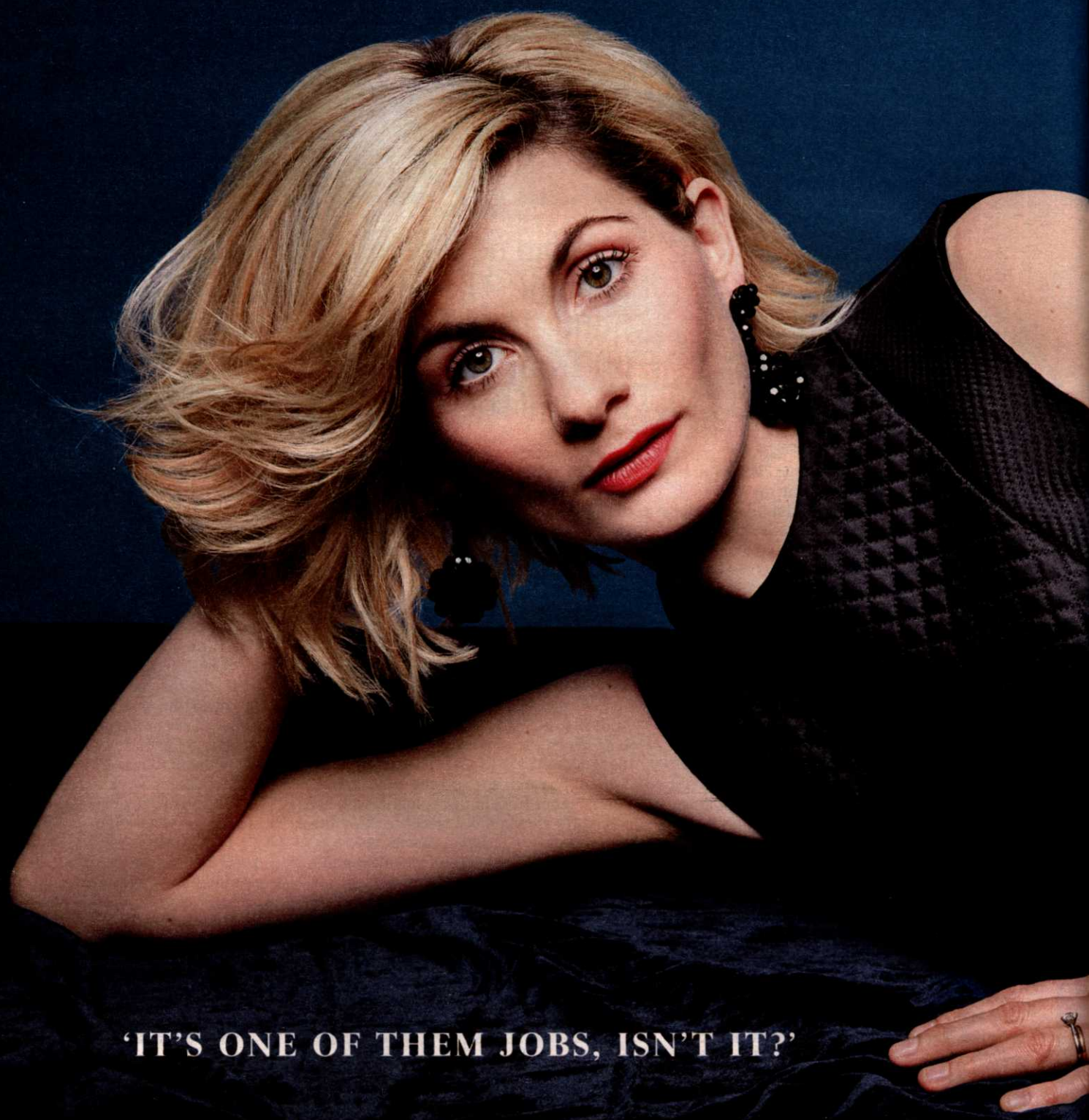
Supplement of the Year

08.09.18

The Doctor.
In a dress?

Jodie Whittaker,
Doctor Who's
new Time Lord,
struts her stuff





'IT'S ONE OF THEM JOBS, ISN'T IT?'

There will be no Daleks, no Cybermen – and for the first time, a woman will be playing the lead role in Doctor Who. **Jodie Whittaker**, the 13th Time Lord, talks to Andrew Billen about the television event of the year

PORTRAIT Dan Kennedy **STYLING** Prue White



Jodie Whittaker, 36.
Dress, £795, Boss
(hugoboss.com); earrings,
£59, bimbaylola.com

Two days before we meet at offices near Broadcasting House in London, the new Doctor gave a talk at Somerset House about her favourite films. Jodie Whittaker looked out at the audience and there in the front row was a young fan dressed as the Doctor – not the last Doctor, Peter Capaldi's fustian, buttoned and booted rock star manqué, nor any of his 11 predecessors, but her Doctor, the newcomer who will materialise on our screens next month after that tantalising glimpse we were granted on Christmas Day. And the thing of it was, the child was a boy, and Jodie Whittaker, obviously, famously, isn't and never was.

"I am asked an awful lot about girls looking up to me as the first female Doctor," she tells me with some passion, "but just as important is boys looking up to women."

It's a year and a bit from the announcement that she would succeed Capaldi and, although she is a private person, she is unembarrassed still enjoying the fuss.

"It's one of them jobs, isn't it? You have to enjoy every moment of it or you're in the wrong field. I mean, it'll be nice when being the first woman doing something like this isn't such a moment, but it is also exciting to know that it won't have the same impact in the future. I'm just another actor playing the Doctor and the Doctor is an alien, so I'm as qualified as anyone else to play that role – which is woefully unqualified."

She has only one heart, I say, rubbing it in; the time traveller from Gallifrey has two.

"I only have one heart. I'm just human and boring. Of course I'm a woman, too, and, obviously, people respond to the character in some scenarios as a woman. There may be certain times where it has an effect, but I was asked once, 'Are you playing it as a woman?' And I thought, 'Oh my God!' I can't ever imagine David [Tennant] answering the question, 'Are you playing the Doctor as a man?'"

So, luminous in the light from the window sits the woman who will next month be the 13th Doctor – unless you count John Hurt's War Doctor (and let's not get into that). She is 36 and best known as the bereaved mother of the murdered teenager in ITV's *Broadchurch*, in which Tennant, the tenth Doctor, was a detective. She has mid-length blond hair, visibly dark roots and a Yorkshire accent in which she talks 19 to the dozen, maybe 20.

If I could time-travel and spy on my childhood, perhaps even go to Saturday, November 23, 1963 – 24 hours after JFK was assassinated and the day of the first *Doctor Who* – I wonder if I would find a little boy as open to the Doctor's eventual transfiguration as the lad at Somerset House. The only resemblance between the Whittaker I meet and the crosspatch Victorian Doctor played

She didn't dare tell her father that she was the next Doctor, because he's such a blabbermouth



by William Hartnell is her combed-back hair and black clothes (Diesel jeans and Converse T-shirt, in her case; in his, a Victorian frock coat). Obviously, 55 years on, I am fine with it. As the father of daughters, more than fine. It was, as Whittaker says, the obvious place for the show to go.

Perhaps not so obvious, actually, over that first coffee she had in the spring of 2017 with Chris Chibnall. Chibnall, writer of five *Doctor Who* episodes, had the previous year been announced as the show's new showrunner, in succession to Steven Moffat. He had, back in 2013, cast Whittaker as Beth Latimer in *Broadchurch*, which he wrote, and they had just finished the publicity round for its third season. Now, he told her, he was cancelling all other projects to concentrate on television's longest-running science-fiction series.

It is important to remember here that Whittaker, born in 1982, is of the No-Who generation. The BBC cancelled it when she was seven. It was revived for a single TV film when she was 14, by which time I doubt she cared less, and it flopped anyway. By the time the Doctor's spaceship, the Tardis, successfully

rematerialised on our screens in 2005 she was 23, performing at Shakespeare's Globe and about to receive nominations as cinema's newcomer of the year for her role in *Venus* alongside Peter O'Toole. Her only intimate connection with the show would come in 2010 when she was rejected for a cameo in Matt Smith's opening episode as the 11th Doctor.

It may well have been with some casualness, then, that in the café where she assumed they were just catching up, she joked to Chibnall, "Can I come? Can I be an alien? Can I play a baddie?"

"And he was like, 'It's funny you bring it up, because actually I wanted to talk to you about whether you would consider auditioning for the Doctor.'"

It suddenly seemed a terribly good idea.

The part was not hers, however. The offer was to audition as one of an all-woman shortlist. The auditions were tough, "and rightly so". She was called back, but since she was filming the medical drama *Trust Me* in Glasgow, she had to record the extra scenes on her iPhone in her rented flat.

"When I found out I had the job, I burst into tears. It's a big deal, and I respond like that. I can cry with joy and I can cry with sadness. I can be really overwhelmed."

The Doctor has always, until now, been quite an emotionally inarticulate character. Does this mean ...

"There are no tears from my Doctor, no. That would be a huge statement."

To accept the job of Doctor is to swear an oath of omertà. She could tell no one, apart from her agent and her immediate family, although she kept the news from her father, because he is such a blabbermouth. Her first task, again conducted in secrecy, was to work on what she would wear, each Doctor being defined partly by their garb. She met the costume designer, who scrutinised the images with which she had bombarded Chibnall on WhatsApp.

"There were just hundreds. Well, not hundreds, but 20 or 30 pictures that I sent. One of them was a woman in cropped trousers, braces and boots, and a black and white T-shirt. She had kind of like messy hair that wasn't a particular length. It wasn't short; it wasn't long."

The new Doctor's look is largely an extrapolation from that. Every detail, apparently, has a meaning that will be revealed. So a skirt was out of the question?

"There'd be no reason, because it's not practical to run about in. Why would you wear a skirt or a dress? Why be cold?"

Her casting was made public in a short film on BBC One after the Wimbledon men's final last year. We saw her – or at that stage still possibly him – walking through a wood wearing a long coat over a hoodie. The reaction, when she removed it, was



Blazer, £750, and trousers, £430, Racil (matchesfashion.com); top, £270, lunamae london.com; earrings, £49, bimbaylola.com

surprisingly unreactionary. Theresa May was in favour. Colin Baker, the sixth Doctor and the first one to be fired (Hartnell had been eased out of the role on health grounds), said, "Well I never. The BBC really did do the right thing." A few fans swore never to watch again. The fifth Doctor, Peter Davison, argued that boys had lost a role model.

The teaser, however, gave us no clue to who her Doctor actually was. The day after the shoot, she was in the BBC's studios to film her regeneration scene for the Christmas episode. It was also Chibnall's first day.

"For us on set it was really emotional, because he's a huge Whovian and these were the first steps; this was him seeing what he'd written for the Doctor on screen, and I was making my very first appearance as the Doctor. I had, like, a moment: I was in somebody else's Tardis, I was in somebody else's costume and I was about to take over from 12 people, or 13, depending on how you want to count it."

Stills of the Doctor's costume had been released in November, but in that first scene she was still in Capaldi's weeds. The scant 60 seconds that followed at least contained one clue: when she spoke, she said, "Aw, brilliant!" in broad Yorkshire.

"In the audition process I always ask, 'What accent do you want me to audition in?' and Chris said, without hesitation, 'I want you to use your own voice.' It wasn't, 'I want a northern accent.' It was just, 'Use your own voice.'"

The way Whittaker sounds is how they speak in Skelmanthorpe, the village nine miles southeast of Huddersfield where she was brought up and where her elevation to the Time peerage was such big news that the butcher built a Tardis outside his shop. Locals call the village "Shat", from shatterers, the job they had in the early days of railway construction: shattering rocks. When a taxi picks her up at the station, the cabbie always asks if she is "a Shat lass". "Yeah, I am, yeah."

Her father ran a windows business. Her mother is a nurse. She went to the local comprehensive, Shelley College, and arrived at Guildhall School of Music and Drama hugely defensive about her education.

"I had a right chip on my shoulder. Particularly about Shakespeare because at 20, never having read it, I was just like, 'It's terrifying.'"

Now, though, could she play Hamlet?

"I'd be more interested in Macbeth, because I'm not cerebral. I move from here [she points to her stomach], not [tapping her head] from there."

She graduated in 2005 and was immediately cast in Ostrovsky's *The Storm* at Shakespeare's Globe. The next year came *Venus*, where she played O'Toole's dying

actor's unhealthy object of interest. That same year, 2006, she married the Hollywood actor Christian Contreras, whom she had met at drama school. They had a daughter three years ago, but have never revealed her name.

She was in two *St Trinian's* films, but it must be said that a light comic touch is not her obvious metier. She was *Broadchurch's* distraught Beth; Sophocles' death-bent heroine in *Antigone* at the National. In *Trust Me*, as a nurse pretending to be a doctor, she lived in constant fear of detection. For both of her most recent films she was nominated for awards. In *Journeyman* she played the wife of a brain-damaged boxer. When Paddy Considine as the pugilist hit her, I had to stop watching.

All this practice might, I suppose, make her a good fit for modern Doctors, whose wit barely masks their anguish at being a refugee from their home planet, their conflicts around their celibacy and their fear of losing their identity as regeneration approaches. Is that her Doctor?

"I think there are moments of anguish, but I feel that the way I enter into the role is with my eyes open and the lights on. You're five years old and you're in a dark cave and the light goes on and you see every colour, texture, shape. How exciting that would be! I wanted it to be like a lightbulb going on when the Doctor is regenerated and comes back, blown away by the beauty of everything and seeing it in things where it isn't always obvious; and knowing when to be scared, but using that fear to push yourself, not restrict yourself."

What about onboard romance? She will be joined on her voyages by three new companions, or "friends", as the show now prefers. Two of them are so young they are played by actors fresh from *Hollyoaks*, the third so old he is Bradley Walsh, the actor and game-show host. I assume the various age gaps will preclude the sexual tension that generated heat around the console for David Tennant's Doctor and Billie Piper's Rose Tyler.

"We are a friendship group in this season," she says firmly.

No one is fancying anybody else?

"No. But we all love each other."

And beyond that, because of the vow of silence, she can tell me very little about the nine months she spent filming her first season in Wales, except that it was the most fun she has ever had on set and also the hardest. At the season's wrap, she gave a little speech and attempted some of it in Welsh.

She gives the strong impression she thinks she failed at very little else on set.

The next afternoon, at post-production offices in Soho, I meet Chris Chibnall, the Frankenstein who has created her Doctor. A warm, jokey fellow from Formby near



With Andrew Buchanan in *Broadchurch* and below, with her husband, Christian Contreras



Liverpool, he reminds me much more of Russell T Davies, the cuddly Welsh genius who midwifed *Doctor Who's* rebirth in 2005, than his immediate predecessor, Moffat, the brilliant but abrasive Scot. He is, as Whittaker says, a true Whovian, born into the dull Jon Pertwee era in the Seventies but spending his primary-school years under the spell of the greatest of Doctors, Tom Baker. In 1986, aged 16, he appeared on the BBC's viewers' feedback programme, *Open Air*, as the representative of the Doctor Who Appreciation Society. It was the year Colin Baker lost his job. Chibnall was not impressed by the show's quality.

He is today. Although *Doctor Who's* ratings – including catch-up viewing over the following week – have dropped by around two million in the past two years, he has only praise for Moffat. "Steven," he says, "did some of the most extraordinary episodes of *Doctor Who* ever made, with two fantastic Doctors,

plus a shedload of amazing companions who are now huge stars around the world."

The idea that viewers might reject a woman Doctor was never apparently a worry for the BBC. He says if the corporation's Time Lords had not shared his vision of chromosomal change, he would have passed on the job.

"It was just accepted that when we reached the point where Peter [Capaldi] decided it was time to go, then we should go down this route. That was literally the only discussion. It wasn't even a discussion. I said what I thought, they said yes, and Charlotte [Moore, BBC's television chief] said yes."

And what's the advantage of having a woman?

"I don't think it's an advantage. It just felt the right moment. Every scene becomes new in a different way, but the Doctor does not really change character. All her lines could be read by a male actor, apart from one or two jokes. It's very hard to think of a long list of gender-based decisions and actions that the Doctor has made in 55 years."

So we come back to Whittaker and why she won the part. He remembers her reading for *Broadchurch* and how she just rang true, but getting to know her, he discovered she was not only a "great tragedian" but "a great comedian".

Which we haven't seen.

"We haven't, and some of that is my fault because for five years she's been grieving on *Broadchurch*. But you've met her. She's lively. She's funny. She's a force of nature. She's the most entertaining person in the room. As soon as the take ends, she's messing about and having a laugh."

After her first audition – "She blew our socks off" – Chibnall's greatest fear was "confirmation bias", that he was seeing what he wanted to see from his friend. So he gave her those scenes she iPhoned from Glasgow.

"Did she tell you she constructed her own props?"

No!

"So there was one scene that was the archetypal Doctor defusing a bomb that's about to go off. I thought, 'I know she can do emotion. I know she can do the humour and the energy. Can she do the technobabble?' And she constructed a prop for herself. When the scene came back on the video, she was with a box with wires coming out of it. She really fought for this part."

When she got it, Piers Wenger, the BBC drama head, gave her the Talk – how once you are the Doctor, you are always the Doctor, and "all the terrible things" that could mean. Whittaker then turned to the society of extant ex-Doctors, of which happily there are still nine (only the first three, Hartnell, Patrick Troughton and Pertwee have permanently dematerialised), beginning on the phone to Capaldi, Tennant and Christopher Eccleston. ➤

"I think each of them gave her different pieces of advice, but I do know that all of them said that they wouldn't change it. They wouldn't swap it for the world."

Does the Doctor easily accept his new sexual identity?

"The Doctor is delighted to be Jodie Whittaker."

The angst has gone?

"Each Doctor needs to have their own journey. I think Peter's Doctor came into the world asking, 'Am I a good man?' and questioning his self-identity. Jodie's Doctor is definitely more outward-looking."

This season needed to look in that direction, too. In recent years, *Doctor Who* has frequently appeared immured by its own history. As a case in point, Capaldi and Moffat's last episode, like the show's 50th anniversary special, featured David Bradley as the first Doctor, Hartnell. It will have puzzled younger viewers, as much as casual older viewers sometimes got lost in the long story arcs of new recurring characters such as the Doctor's wife, River Song. Chibnall promises no more of her, no more Missy, no more Paternoster Gang. We start again with the four new friends and, as daringly, a new enemy in each of the coming ten episodes. No Daleks. No Cybermen. No Weeping Angels.

"I want this to be a recruiting year for *Doctor Who* to bring in that next generation of audiences."

Whittaker's Doctor will be for them, he promises, and if you only join her on episode five or episode nine, the tales will be comprehensible. It sounds a good way to address declining ratings.

What about onboard romance? She will be joined by three new 'friends'

"We haven't had any discussions going, 'You have to hit these figures,'" he insists, although he cannot rule out the possibility that others in the BBC have.

What about the rumours that the show will be moved from its traditional home, Saturday, to Sunday, thereby solving the scheduling problem of the behemoth *Strictly Come Dancing* shoving *Doctor Who* ever nearer children's alleged bedtimes?

"I think you want to be on the best night of the week. There are certain things that are above my pay grade, to be honest, but there are lots of great slots. Is there pressure on me for ratings? No. There's pressure on me to make a good show."

As for the pressure on Jodie Whittaker, she looked surprised when I told her that two of her predecessors had been sacked. She thinks things are more "organic" now, which is how she and Chibnall present the natural emergence of a woman Doctor. Both, I notice, refuse to take my bait that the move addresses a woke moment of gender fluidity. Similarly, while I may hear the beating drums of class war in Whittaker's northern vowels, Chibnall calls his new Doctor "classless".

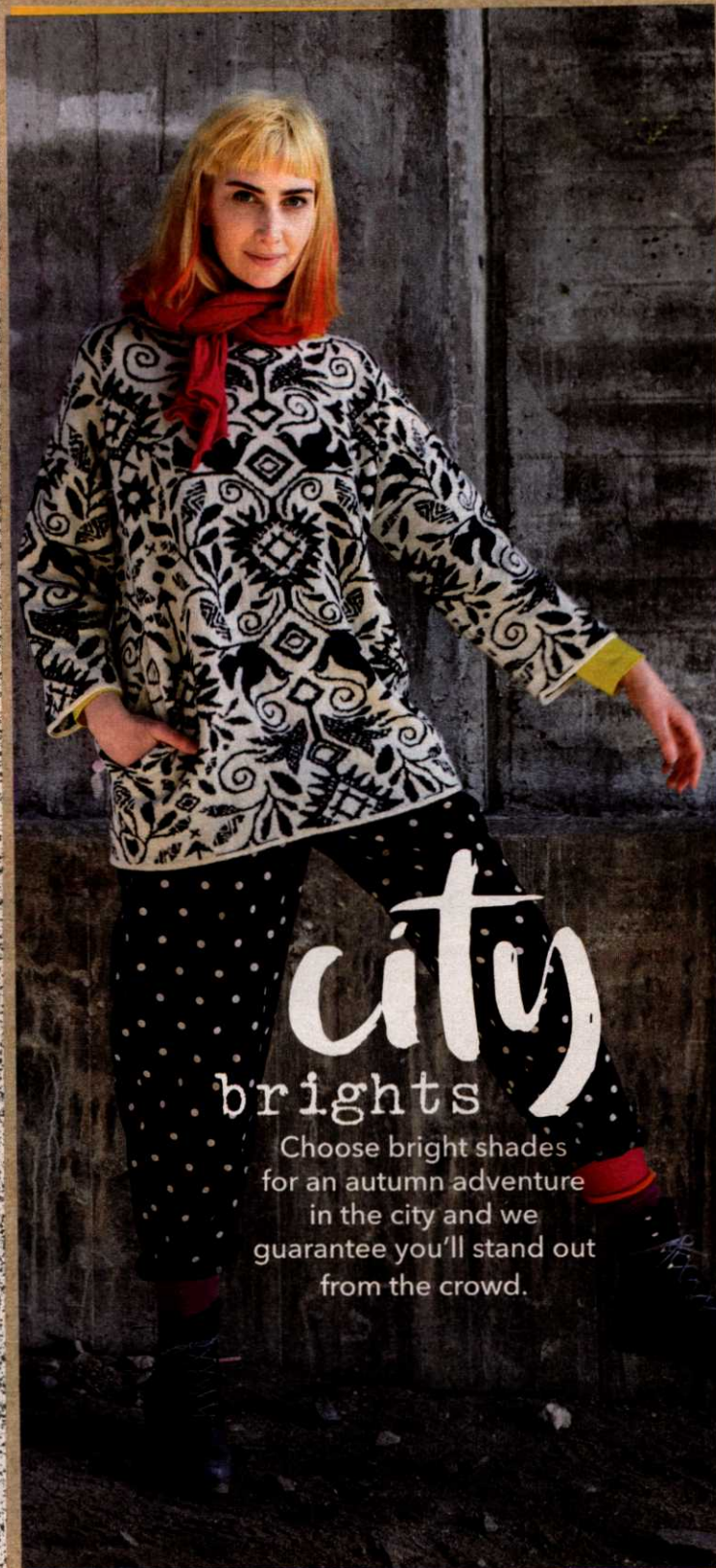
Yet, swirling around the Tardis in the time and space of 2018, these thoughts are surely there.

"We are in very divided times. I think this Doctor is a beacon of hope and unity and inclusion," Chibnall says. "Before the first take, the crew was all over the place and then Jodie did it, and they moved towards the monitor to watch it. They sort of looked to me and said, 'She's just the Doctor!' I hope that's what the audience, if they haven't felt it already, will feel by the end of the first episode."

I want to do my bit for Project Jodie, so the next day I go shopping. A 13th Doctor costume – coat, T-shirt, braces and "pants" – is available for import from America. It comes, inclusively, in every size from XS to XXXL, and it is, naturally, unisex. ■

Doctor Who returns to BBC One next month

Swedish design
with a green soul



city
brights

Choose bright shades
for an autumn adventure
in the city and we
guarantee you'll stand out
from the crowd.

WELCOME TO MY STORE AT 65-67 MONMOUTH STREET, LONDON

You can also visit our webshop, call 0800 056 9912 or e-mail order@gudrunsjoden.co.uk.

Free shipping, fast delivery and 30 day return policy!

UNITED KINGDOM | SWEDEN | GERMANY | NORWAY | DENMARK | FINLAND
IRELAND | USA | FRANCE | SWITZERLAND | AUSTRIA | NETHERLANDS