



Visiting the Future

Starburst feature by Timothy Robins

Doctor Who may encompass all of Space and Time but when it comes to recording an episode there is precious little of either. Visit a television studio and you'll find space is invariably at a premium and time is always of the essence.

AT the invitation of Producer John Nathan-Turner I had dropped in to watch rehearsals for the current season of *Doctor Who*. "Rehearsals are in the morning and afternoon, recording from 6pm onwards," Kate, my guide through the labyrinthian corridors of the BBC Television Centre, informed me.

It was 2.30pm when I was ushered onto the studio floor. Rehearsals were well under way. Shuffling forward from four, large, green pods, which lurked behind me like refugees from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, I tried to manoeuvre myself into the best position to watch the afternoon's proceedings.

It wasn't easy. Cameras glided about the floor and the action often shifted to corridors hidden from all but the eyes of the cameras and the people sitting up in the gallery, the nerve-centre of all television productions. Later, I discovered two monitors on the studio floor. These displayed how the scene would look when recorded.

Today's rehearsal and recording session was for the third story in the current season. The story is a six-part adventure with all but the fifth part scripted by television science-fiction veterans Pip and Jane Baker. The two writers now sat behind the director Chris Clough, his vision mixer and production assistant, high up in the gallery. Here a wall of TV monitors gave camera-eye views of the events on the studio floor.

In keeping with the traditionally erratic scheduling of television, the last two parts of the story had been recorded first. I was therefore watching scenes from one of the earlier parts which follow on directly from the second story.

For us, that second story has yet to be screened but for the cast and crew it was already a distant memory. Sil, Kiv and their kith and kin had made way for the Vervoids. Nicola Bryant had stepped aside for Bonnie Langford, and the bizarre environs of Thoros Beta had been replaced by the interior of a spaceship. The latter provided the day's sets and scenes.

Three main sets had been assembled. To my left twisted a three-walled tunnel. Little more than four feet high, its walls were a riot of tubes and cables. It was obviously some sort of service duct. To my right was a cabin. Although containing a bed and shower room it was so small it looked like it had been built into a wardrobe. On the far left, taking up most of the studio space, was a large composite set comprising a recreation room, an adjoining room and various corridors which led to different sections of the ship.

The recreation room set was the focus for most of the afternoon's rehearsals. At one time or another Bonnie Langford, Colin Baker and Honor Blackman could be seen working out there. Their exertions involved aerobics, sit-ups, wall-bars, an exercise bike and a treadmill.

At the moment it was Bonnie and Honor's turn. Bonnie radiating the charm and charisma that will win her the hearts of this season's viewers, did aerobics – without music which will be added in post-production. Dressed in a purple jogging suit, Honor Blackman did a series of sit-ups. The scene was rehearsed five times. Honor looked as fit and as glamorous as ever – certainly capable of laying waste any of her *Avengers* adversaries of some twenty-five years ago.

"Things should get pretty hectic soon," Kate whispered, "Try not to make any noise."

As if in reply a voice, the speaker hidden from my view by a wall of cameras, shouted: "Quiet please everybody! Okay from the top!"

Behind me, where the props were stored, someone dropped something heavy and metal and very noisy. "Didn't you hear what the man said?" scolded Colin Baker. "Sssshhhh . . ."

Colin had been sitting chatting to John Nathan-Turner. Now he eyed up the day's motley collection of set visitors. I was standing among some lucky winners of various magazine competitions for which a set visit was the prize.

As Bonnie and Honor's scene ended,

Colin strode over wearing his new patchwork coat which displayed a ginger tom cat on its lapel. "Everything's going very well – not that you care." We did, of course, but there was no time to protest as Colin engaged in what seems to be his favourite pastime – playfully intimidating people. "Hello!" He made a bee-line for the smallest and youngest of the group of prize-winners. Towering over the little girl he asked "Are you a Dalek?"

"Colin's very good with the visitors." Kate told me.

Colin Baker was soon called away to enact a scene with Bonnie Langford in the small cabin set. It was interesting to see that, even this close to actual recording, the performers were still making small changes in the delivery of lines or in their movement about the set. Bonnie made a perceived improvement in a scene where Melanie picks up a shoe. "Not bad for a geriatric," she complimented herself.

Colin Baker wondered why more use wasn't being made of an 'Eagle' comic that was lying on the studio floor. The Cabin already had a mounted page from Dan Dare on its wall. "I thought the comic was a rather good in-joke myself," said Colin, and then demonstrated that there is more than one way look quizzically at a handful of silver seeds.

It was now Colin's turn in the recreation room. "The *Doctor Who* Workout Book!" he exclaimed, pummelling a treadmill underfoot. "Work out what I'm doing and you win the book!"

The atmosphere on set seemed casual and fairly relaxed. By the time I left, at 4.30pm (when everyone broke for tea) things had not noticeably become hectic. Despite the large number of crew – who far outnumbered the cast – talk was kept to the minimum, an indication of the team work and total professionalism required by television production. There was no time for histrionics and nervous chat was conducted in hushed whispers. The result was that, between scenes, those in front of the cameras tend to stay as far apart from each other as possible. Some looked heavenward as if for divine inspiration – but for the moment neither the producer nor the director were giving any.

Leading me from the producer's box John Nathan-Turner pointed me in the direction of the nearest BBC canteen. "Okay, that's your lot, hope you enjoyed yourself. There's the cafeteria." I left, doughnut and official 'Doctor Who' visitor badge in hand. ■

Right: Colin Baker as the Doctor
Below: Taking a nap in the studio

