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Dr. Who

Fanatical fans fuss over fifth 'Dr. Who' — Peter Davison

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Hey, what's all the fuss? It's 'Who,' that's what!

by Gordon Walek

It's one of those late winter days in Chicago, when the snow is gone, the ground is brown and the air is full of grit that gets under your fingernails and into your hair. Regardless of how good you look when you walk out into such a day, within five minutes you feel like you have driven a herd of cattle from Cheyenne to Dodge City. It's like the dust bowl.

West Belmont Avenue is particularly nondescript at this time of year, with Saturday morning shoppers hurrying from one discount store to another, and an anemic sun pierces a sky that is cloudless but more gray then blue. The detritus that has accumulated through the arctic months begins to surface and is whipped into a frenzy by an unforgiving wind.

So what's this throng of young people, six deep, stretching down the sidewalk and around the block? What brings them to Belmont Avenue on such a despicable day?

They have been waiting a long time in front of The New Fantasy Shop to see the object of their desire, and they will, if necessary, wait a lot longer.

THE NEW FANTASY Shop resembles most of the other storefront operations that line Belmont west of Central. It's not the sort of place that draws a crowd. Usually, you just walk in and shop around for whatever science fiction memorabilia suit your fancy.

On this day, however, ensconced in a cluttered back room, sitting on an old couch beside a coat rack, is one Peter Davison, a proper and modest British fellow who under normal circumstances could walk down Belmont Avenue, or even Michigan Avenue, without attracting attention.

Davison, however, probably best known to American television audiences as one of the veterinarians on the PBS series "All Creatures Great and Small," is the reason for the folks outside. They couldn't care less about "All Creatures." They want to see "Doctor Who."

You see, a couple of years ago, Davison replaced the venerable Tom Baker as the fifth actor to portray "Doctor Who" in the 20-year-old British Broadcasting Corp. science fiction television series. WTTW Channel 11 has been carrying the show since 1975, when Jon Pertwee portrayed a good-natured fellow who traveled through time and space in a police call box.

Back then, not many Chicagoans had heard of "Doctor Who," much less watched it, but in the late 1970s, with Tom Baker in the leading role, the program began to build a steady audience of faithful fans. Demanding fans, WTTW officials would later admit. The station estimates that about a quarter of a million viewers tune in to the show on Sunday nights at 11 p.m., even for reruns.

NO MATTER THAT on this day, none of the "Doctor Who" fans who had sat through Tom Baker reruns had any idea of when or where they might see the "Doctor Who" baton passed to the gentlemanly Davison. Channel 11, after all, had already paid for the rights to another year-and-a-half's worth of Tom Baker reruns, and even though the BBC was making the newer Davison episodes available for American distribution, it wasn't known when they might air in Chicago, or if WTTW would shell out the bucks for more shows.

No matter that Davison, 31, and his lovely wife, Sandra, were delayed in making their appearance at The New Fantasy Shop. No matter that cold grit was blowing into the faces of everyone waiting in that line. These folks were ready for the new "Doctor Who."

Most television luminaries — and Davison, who stars in two other comedy series in England in addition to his "Doctor Who" chores, is a luminary — travel in style when they are beating the drum for their shows. They usually don't make appearances at places like The New Fantasy Shop on West Belmont Avenue.

But there Davison was, his wife beside him, sitting in the back room of a store that was furnished in contemporary Amvets, giving interviews as though he were in the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles. Some junket, this!

Davison, in fact, was on a vacation — his bloody vacation, for God's sake — and stopped at the store only at the urging of owner George Breo.

Breo might be described as your ultimate "Doctor Who" fan. And for good reason. He makes money selling "Doctor Who" related merchandise, which is available in abundance at his store. He negotiated with Davison's agent for more than a year to get the doctor over here, and this blustery day was his reward.

BUT MORE ABOUT Breo later. Davison is the man of the hour. That he was chosen to play the good doctor by executive producer John Nathan Turner makes sense. Peter's been watching the show since he was 12.

"It was a very extraordinary idea for me when they suggested I do this," Davison said, looking more like the vet in "All Creatures" in his tweeds and saddle oxfords than his "Doctor Who" characterization in long coat and cricket garb.

"It terrified me, but it is not an opportunity you can turn down because it terrifies you. A great part of the show's popularity is that the device of changing actors has been managed and that has enabled it to go on for 20 years. It couldn't have done that with just one actor. But the show also has something of everything in it. It is an adventure, it's humorous and it's a great opportunity to do different sorts of stories. And the character is endearing."

While Chicago audiences are just beginning to get a look at Davison's "Doctor Who," the busy actor is undecided as to how many years he will toil in the science fiction format.

"I'm doing next year, which will be my third," he said, "and after that, I don't know."

The four previous Doctor Whos left the show of their own volition. By American standards, that there have been five succeeding stars in a continuing series is remarkable. As you may have noticed, most prime time network shows don't last anything close to 20 years.

"I'M SURE that if 'Doctor Who' would have started on American television, it would have been canceled here after three episodes," Davison said. "The fact that it's successful 20 years later maybe says that the powers that be shouldn't cancel American programs quite so quickly as they do. Lots and lots of the best series need nurturing, and I think that's the great advantage British television has over American."

Yankee viewers soon will make their own judgments about Davison's doctor, but he sees the character as a unique one.

"I wasn't cast because I could do a pale imitation of Tom Baker," he insisted. "I've tried to take characteristics from the other doctors because I had to start somewhere. But I am slightly more naive than Tom, and a bit more vulnerable."

One hopes Chicago's "Doctor Who" fans appreciate the vulnerability, because they screamed to get it. Even to the point of boycotting Channel 11's March fund-raising drive because they suspected the station was balking on buying the Davison episodes.

BREO EVEN ORGANIZED the United Doctor Who Network of Chicago, an umbrella organization of local "Doctor Who" fan clubs — including the Celestial Intervention Agency, Emissaries of the White Guardian and Eyes of Harmony — to pressure WTTW into getting the new shows. Breo figures he spoke for about 1,000 "Doctor Who" fans in the area.

Anyway, Breo and his pals penned a critical letter to WTTW programming director Richard Bowman in early March, accusing the station of dragging its feet in coming up with the new episodes and saying "Doctor Who" fans

(Continued on Page 4)

Cover photo by Scott Sanders

Herald photo by Scott Sanders

Peter Davison, who is probably best known for his portrayal of a bungling veterinarian in the PBS series "All Creatures Great and Small," is the fifth actor to play Doctor Who during the last 20 years. The popular British Broadcasting Corporation production is aired in Chicago at 11 p.m. Sundays on WTTW Channel 11.

Herald photo by Scott Sanders

Fans, right, who waited several hours in subfreezing temperatures in front of The New Fantasy Shop on West Belmont Avenue to get a peek at their television hero, Dr. Who, don't go away empty-handed as British actor Peter Davison, above, springs from the modest police call box that transports the character through time and space. The science fiction program has entertained English audiences for the last 20 years.

Fanatical fans making a fuss over fifth Dr. Who

(Continued from Page 3)

would boycott the pledge activities, from which WTTW derives most of its operating revenue. It should be noted that during the last two years, "Doctor Who" fans, many wearing the flowing scarves that Baker fancied, helped answer WTTW phones on Sunday nights during the fund-raising drives.

Bowman fired off a response, denying most of the allegations, but that did little to lessen the outcry.

"The thing that bothered most of us fans," Breo said, "is that Channel 11 was very noncommittal about everything. They said they were negotiating, but didn't say when things would cement. I think basically the only reason they did decide to buy them was because of the action of the fans."

A LOT OF "Doctor Who" fans called the station to complain, charging WTTW could have picked up the episodes a long time ago.

That assertion repeatedly irked Richard Turner, WTTW's director of information services and advertising. Breo also now acknowledges that assertion was inaccurate.

"Lionheart (Television International, which syndicates the series) chose to do a market-by-market release in this country," Turner noted. "They finally responded to our inquiries from July 1982 as to when the new episodes would be available. On March 1, they agreed to meet with us and discuss the acquisition of the new Davison episodes."

Not surprisingly, the price for the new "Dr. Who" segments were considerably more than the Baker episodes because of the increased popularity of the show. But by the end of the month, Channel 11 had come to terms with the syndicator, and the Davison series was ready to roll.

Turner agreed that "Doctor Who" had evolved into a hit for his station, although he said it was not the blockbuster some of the fans claim it is. The program draws fewer viewers than "Sneak Previews" and less than half the audience that tunes in for, say, National Geographic specials.

THE FIRST Davison episode was aired April 24 and will continue on Sunday through June 13, when the station will rerun some old shows starring Jon Pertwee as "Doctor Who." The Pertwee shows will conclude in September and be followed by Tom Baker reruns through July 1984, when a new set of Davison episodes will be available.

All's well that ends well, the saying goes. But some "Dr. Who" fans aren't so sure. Breo, just back from England, where he was working out a merchandising agreement with the BBC for "Doctor Who" items ("we're keeping a hand on the fan pulse") is pleased the new shows are available, but he isn't sure the hard feelings have been smoothed over.

Fan club members will be back at WTTW for the next pledge period, if they are welcome, he said. "I may be talking through my hat because they may be very happy to have our support," he noted. "But there may be a few ill feelings down there."