

Dr. Who visits limbo

Future of series full of questions

By Tom Walter
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Who?

Doctor Who, that's who.

The Doctor, as friends and fans call him, is a 750-year-old interplanetary Lone Ranger from the planet Gallifrey whose main existential problem is an on-again, off-again existence on Mid-South TV screens.

He's not human, but finds it convenient to assume a human form. His species has been able to conquer the normal laws of physics, so Dr.

Who travels to other planets and also in time.

What?

No, no, he isn't Prince Mon-go's brother. *Doctor Who* is a British science-fiction series that gets low marks for its cheesy special effects but high marks for its stories and characters.

When?

The series has been on the air in Great Britain since 1963 and in syndication to public TV stations since the late 1970s. Mississippi Educational Television began airing it in 1981, but stopped showing it at the end of May.

Where to?

The series may end up on WKNO-TV Channel 10, which hasn't carried the series before.

Why?

It attracts young adults, an audience Channel 10 wants.

How?

Money. Channel 10 has negotiated a price of \$10,250 for 41 episodes — \$7,000 less than the distributor, Lionheart International Television, wanted.

Trouble is finding support. So far, no one has shown seri-

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ous interest in supporting it.

Doctor Who now is unavailable anywhere in the Mid-South. METV began running the show in June 1981 and stopped at the end of May. Arkansas Educational Television had run it for about five years before dropping it last September.

Lionheart says between 190 and 200 PBS stations carry the show. The most recent study by Lionheart, in 1986, estimates its core audience at 250,000. The series is shown in 60 countries, with an estimated audience of 110 million.

But no longer in the Mid-South.

There have been seven Dr. Whos since the show began, but that's all explained away: The people on Gallifrey have 12 regenerations; they're the same on the inside but their outer features change.

The program doesn't take itself too seriously, and Dr. Who uses wits more than muscle to subdue the bad guys.

The special effects, particularly on the early programs, are laughably bad. Fans call them "BBC special effects," according to fan Sylvia Cox, a member of Paradox, a Memphis club dedicated to British science-fiction.

She said the special effects' ineptitude actually helped the low-budget series, forcing it to concentrate on telling good stories filled with interesting people.

"It's come under criticism in recent years," she said. "People feel the writing suffered and they maybe tried too hard to make it glitzy to appeal to Americans, and didn't pay enough attention to the story lines or characterizations."

Jeff Scarpace, president of Paradox, agrees that people don't watch *Doctor Who* for special effects.

"I think what does it are the stories, and the character of the doctor is one of the most interesting in science-fiction. There's an air of mystery about him, and there's his eccentricity. You never quite know where the character is going to end up next. He doesn't know either, because his time travel machine doesn't work as well as it should."

Doctor Who runs in a variety of ways. Original episodes are a half-hour long, but Lionheart packages three to five and sells them as movie-length programs. That's how METV has been showing them in recent years.

But METV wasn't getting enough original episodes. Lionheart wants stations to buy 52 weeks' worth of programs each year, but the BBC makes only a few new episodes a year. (There are 536 episodes available through Lionheart.) METV has shown some episodes six times.

"Lionheart doesn't bring down the cost, whether you air it the first or the sixth time," said Rocky Madden, manager of programming at METV. "There just are not 52 new programs available each season. You're getting mostly repeat programs."

METV wants to wait until more original programs come into syndication, then look into putting the series back on the air. In the meantime, fans may have to rely on WKNO.

The problem there isn't so much raising the \$10,250 for the first 41 episodes. That's a special deal that director of broadcasting Milt Davis Jr. has negotiated with Lionheart; the syndicator normally wants \$21,200 for a year's worth of shows.

Davis suspects the station would be inundated with protests if it ran just the 41 episodes and took it off the air for lack of an underwriter.

"It's become more important to us because it's no longer available in the market," Davis said. "If we're successful, we'll look to getting a 52-week package, and that means we will have to find a way to keep it on the air each year."

The final question, then, may not be who, but how.