

HOOKED ON WHO

By BRYAN DENSON

Doctor who? No, no, luv, *Doctor Who*. On the telly. The funky low-budget science-fiction TV series produced by the British Broadcasting Corp. You know, the one with ridiculous looking sets and monsters. The one featuring a hero with more lives than a truckload of armored cats.

The TV program has its cult-like audience wearing enormous scarfs, imitating BBC accents, and watching every bloomin' episode on the edge of its collective seat.

What's more, old egg, these Whovians, as they are called, have kept the series alive for more than eight years in America by keeping PBS stations bumping.

Understand, *Doctor Who* is a serialized space opera. Its episodic morality plays feature a 750-year-old hero with two hearts and a penchant for dabbling in the affairs of monsters and villains of every stripe.

The doctor — six of them, actually, in the series' history — is a dry-witted chap who finds himself in unearthly predicaments and faces certain demise. Yet he always finds his way out of these dilemmas and moves on to new vistas.

The show is based on a time-travel motif, as one Whovian said, "They get to the future."

In production, *Doctor Who* has been "13 years in the making."

And here in the York area, where the first fan club rolled eight years ago, the program has spawned several fan clubs and continues to attract its loyal viewer.

There's much to be learned from the series, say, like professional wrestling. And John Bollinger, president of the Two Years Ltd. Fan Club, based in the Corp.

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Hill-Harrisburg area with many members in York County.

"They get hooked on it," he said. "They want to watch it together. And when you put them together they really act crazy."

But the various Doctor Whos are not Hulk Hogan. They are mild-mannered space swash-bucklers who bungle but survive, while wielding a generous splash of British wit in the tradition of the Monty Python comedy troupe.

Not all Whovians want to watch the show together, however.

"I don't relish the idea of sitting in a smoke-filled room with 50 other people," said Yorker John Knox, 38, who watches the show with his 9-year-old son, Alex, a dues-paying member of the local fan club.

Whatever the preference of the viewer, one can't contest the show's popularity. The numbers are simply too good. The syndicated program, composed of nearly 500 half-hour segments and 100 feature-length movies, reaches 110 million viewers in 60 countries. It is aired weekly by 181 PBS affiliates coast to coast in the U.S.

One figure, however, stands alone. The series turns 23 this autumn, making it older than *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which died after 23 years; *Gunsmoke*, dead at 20, and *Star Trek*, which lasted just three seasons.

The local statistics also are phenomenal.

One out of every 10 viewers of the show at the two community-supported area PBS affiliates, WITF-TV, Channel 33 (Harrisburg), and WMPT, Channel 67 (Owings Mills, Md.), contributes money to keep the show on the air.

"It's a cult classic," said Craig Brush, director of development for Maryland Public TV, which airs the show Sundays at 1 p.m.

"Relative to the size of our audience," he said, "the percentage of viewers of *Doctor Who* who contribute to it is greater than just about all of our shows."

The show is aimed at the Whovian faithful, Brush said. "It's not the kind of show you're going to get tons of people watching. From a public television standpoint, it's a very solid audience in terms of just raw numbers."

Whovians are very involved in the progress of the show. They help with publicity during PBS fund-raising drives and are a resource for the BBC's traveling exhibit on a two-year tour of the United States, said Brian Sloman, a BBC spokesman.

WITF's management, which airs the serials each Saturday at 4 p.m., notes enormous patronage by local Whovians.

You don't want to cross them up by airing an episode out of sequence, said WITF Program Director Tom Keck. If you do, you'll find your phone lines tied up by angry fans anxious to watch each episode as God and the BBC intended.



Photo by Dave Speicher

A gathering of local Whovians. Watching their favorite show are, from left, Charley Harber, Greg Starr, Keith Hobba, Robert Eberight, John Houbrich, Vince Zito and John Bollinger.

"It's really an incredible phenomenon," Keck said.

February Nielsen ratings show 7,000 households, approximately 8,000 people in the Southcentral Pennsylvania viewing area, watch the show each week.

"It's not great numbers," Keck said, but the support from viewers is outstanding. Sixty-six people pledged \$4,500 during a recent fund-raiser, which amounted to 2.6 pledges per minute, "which is very good."

Most of the local viewers are men, 18-49.

"There's a lot of kids and a lot of men between 35 and 49 — maybe they're kids at heart," said Keck.

The show first aired on WITF in 1978, but was discontinued in 1982.

"From a lot of pressure by the viewers we picked it back up again (in October 1985)," Keck said. "For the longest time I didn't have it because it never did that well for us, so I resisted repurchasing it. I'm glad I did."

As for the future?

"I'm virtually sure we'll continue to run *Doctor Who* next year unless we can't deal at all with Lionheart," Keck said.

Lionheart Television International Inc. distributes the show. And there is only one way WITF won't pick up the show — if Lionheart doubles its price.

From kiddies to cult

Doctor Who premiered in England on Nov. 22, 1963, the day

before John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Designed as a science fiction program for children, the broadcast was intended to run just six weeks.

Twenty-three years later, the new season, featuring a sixth doctor, is in production. Half the season, in TV nomenclature, is already in the can.

"My original idea was to have an irascible, absent-minded, unpredictable old man, running away from his own planet in a time machine which looked like a police call box on the outside but was in fact a large space station inside, and which he didn't really know how to operate so he was always ending up in the wrong place and time," said Sydney Newman, head of BBC drama in the early 1960s.

"We called him Doctor Who because no one knew who he was, where he came from, what he was running away from, and where he was headed."

Over the years the show has featured six doctors. The latter five have been regenerated from the previous doctor — each in a special show Whovians proudly say they have seen X number of times. In the best Hollywood

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tradition, the doctor flails about in dramatic death throes.

Accompanying the various doctors are a number of "companions," who provide the counterpoint any good narrative deserves when the lead character must think aloud for his viewers.

Most of the companions have been women. The latest sidekick, Perpugilliam "Peri" Brown, is played by Nicola Bryant, an Englishwoman educated in this country and playing an American.

Establishment of an American role led some to wonder whether the BBC was selling out to the highly supportive U.S. audience.

"In no way do we try and pander to any market," said John Nathan-Turner, *Doctor Who's* producer. "And if you're about to say 'What about the latest companion being American?' my answer to that is, if anything, I suspect that could do damage to our popularity here."

Featured in every episode are many villains and monsters who, quite obviously, try to foil the good doctor. The most notorious monsters are the Daleks, appearing in every reincarnation of the doctor.

The original doctor was William Hartnell, who begat Patrick Troughton, who begat Jon Pertwee, who begat the most

popular doctor of all, Tom Baker — who played the part from 1974 to 1981.

Baker dragged a 17-foot long scarf about the ground as if he were a marsupial of some sort, giving credence to his self-professed Bohemian nature. He dressed like a disheveled, mid-'60s Bob Dylan.

The Boho look carried over to the fans, many of whom wear the lengthy scarves dragging at their feet, striped jackets with wide lapels, droopy hats, plaid vests, and long overcoats.

The serials in which Baker portrayed the doctor are the ones being aired locally.

Baker has been described by the BBC as looking like "a fugitive from the Marx Brothers" with his "halo of curls and a smile like a piano keyboard." What the 6-foot-3-inch actor looks like, of course, is an anemic Gene Wilder.

He is perhaps the funniest of the doctors and loves the American audience supporting him so vigorously a full five years after he quit playing in the series.

"They are definitely much more extravagant and outgoing and devotional than the British," he said, "who would rather be mugged than hugged."

Laughing, Baker hoped the enthusiasm generated by his appearance on the show might "wash over the areas of the United States and Los Angeles where I might actually work

here."

Peter Davison, the fifth doctor, was incarnated from Tom Baker, and Colin Baker, no relation to Tom, replaced Davison.

Written into the story line of the series is an endless possibility for new regenerations and, thus, the show conceivably could continue as long as TV itself.

Taking Who on the road

It is a day for rest. After six weeks on its American tour, the two-man crew of the BBC's

traveling *Doctor Who* exhibit finds itself parked atop one of North America's cheesiest entertainment venues: an amusement park and ski resort in Vernon, N.J.

Thousands of youngsters in all manner of colorful dress noisily ride various gut-wrenching amusements and chow down on popcorn, cotton candy, and salmonella dogs.

The following day will bring hordes of Whovians to the exhibit. But for today, mountains and a cool breeze.

Far removed from the traditional Yank action below them

at the park and a stone's throw from his baby, the *Doctor Who* exhibit, is Brian Sloman, the big boss of the project.

Already this day he has gladhanded a local PBS executive and posed for pictures in front of the exhibit.

For the last hour and a half he has been hammered with questions, one right after another, about *Doctor Who*.

The 33-year-old BBC spokesman has answered each question in triplicate and seems genuinely pleased his interview-

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FEMALE 12-Under (2), 13-15 (3), 16-19 (3), 20-29 (4), 30-39 (4), 40-49 (3), 50-59 (2), 60-Over (2)

Special Instructions: Awards will be based upon order of best times/age group and not by order of finish/heat. All females will run a separate heat.

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The Daleks pursue each reincarnation of the doctor.

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er knows next to nothing about the program.

"As an entertainment piece, it's probably the longest running show in the world," the Englishman explained. The popularity "is staggering."

Slovan has been a traveling emissary for the BBC during the last six weeks, driving the plush mobile home from town to town, promoting the show, and selling loyal Whovians T-shirts and other memorabilia.

At each location, he schmoozes the local PBS honchos who air *Doctor Who*, and, with his 21-year-old sidekick, Dan Sheehy, sets up and operates the Doctor Who exhibit.

The 48-foot long trailer contains a Doctor Who's Who of monsters and other characters from the show's many episodes.

Just inside a police call entrance is a mock up of the Tardis — which initiates the majority of the doctor's time travel adventures.

For a buck, the kiddies can walk into the Tardis and through a trailer, standing inches away from 18 familiar monsters, villains and heroes.

Slovan, a former newspaper

reporter, BBC radio and TV publicity man, and self-employed ad agent, is no sideshow pitchman. His sing-song English cadence is not directed at selling the show.

His love is the BBC.

"A lot of Americans see it as a rather quaint small television production company for Britain," he says. They see BBC programming as a collection of "quirky comedies such as Monty Python ... I don't think they realize the BBC is a way of life, the very fabric of Britain."

This is the last of Slovan's soapbox. He runs a 30-second pitch for the *Doctor Who* exhibit on his VCR, watching as a 10-year-old boy dressed in a huge Whovian scarf says of the show on wheels, "It's better than Disney World."

"I think that's overstatement," he said, laughing heartily. "The kid's obviously never been to Disney World."

But while he is candid about the exhibit's popularity and the show's existence, he shrugged when asked his opinion of *Doctor Who*. No one, he very politely explained, is going to pin him down on that one.

He admitted, however, that most dedicated American Whovians are far better versed in the nuances of the show than he is.

The traveling exhibit was Slovan's concept, one he admits earns him a handsome living and gives him an opportunity to fulfill his dream of continuing work with the BBC.

He was in advertising in Bournemouth, U.K., in 1976, on a hiatus from the BBC, when he came to the states to stage promotions at department stores for the Bicentennial. Here, he met the future Mrs. Slovan, a resident of Philadelphia. They were married in 1979 and moved to England.

When their daughter, Laura, was born in 1984, they moved back to the states, which put the reins on his work with the BBC.

He entertained hopes of working again for the BBC and, thus, arrived at the concept for the exhibit.

When BBC Enterprises gave the go-ahead for his proposal to take the exhibit on the road, Slovan pulled out the 1973 bottle of Dom Perignon champagne he'd been saving.

Designed as a science fiction program for children, the broadcast was intended to run just six weeks.

"I was absolutely over the moon," he said.

Surviving by his 'wit'

Two elements have contributed to the success of the *Doctor Who* show in America: wit and plot. Despite the sci-fi nature of the series, special effects are not its strong suit — not by a long shot.

"We've never been a show that's about special effects," said producer Nathan-Turner in a recent TV interview. "It's always been a kind of narrative line about the doctor and his sidekicks and the culture that they happen to be dealing with."

The special effects used early in the series' history were poor, and the show's budget has never been spent paying for *Star Wars* technology.

The newer programs are slicker than the older ones but not nearly as tight as American productions, said Scott Stauffer of Abbottstown, a 27-year-old restaurateur.

"The older ones are corny, the monsters are hokey," he said. "They're not fancy with monster making or special effects." But Whovians are more attracted to the show's imaginative plot than its special effects, he added.

Fan club president Bollinger said he knew not to expect high technology when he began watching the show eight years ago in Camp Hill.

"I knew it was British," he said, "I knew not to expect anything with special effects. What engrossed me was the character development."

The doctors are believable, he said. They make mistakes and then try to hide them.

"The doctor screws up and he tries to cover his butt when he screws up," said Bollinger. This is quite the opposite of *Star Trek* character Capt. James T. Kirk, played by William Shatner.

"He'll try to blame somebody else, he always covers up," Bollinger said of the doctor. "It makes him more appealing. It makes you root for him more."

"In my opinion — and it's certainly the opinion of the BBC — it's the humor of the show that's given it its longevity," Slovan said.

"He's hysterically funny sometimes," Stauffer said of the doctor.

He described a little known episode when the doctor was being chased on a bicycle by "an evil sadistic ball." In the dry-witted British tradition, he

is at the height of his ordeal when he passes a barbershop quartet singing *Chattanooga Choo-choo*. As he rounds a bend on his bike, the doctor rings the bicycle bell.

Although the doctor appears calm in the face of an immediate and ugly death, he is not quite the smooth operator James Bond is, said Deborah Babs Shankman, a Chevy Chase, Md., actress and freelance writer of *Doctor Who* magazine stories.

She remembered a scene from a Tom Baker episode called "The Power of Kroll." He is surrounded by loin-clothed savages threatening him with spears, knives and other sharp instruments. Baker holds out a "jelly baby," the British version of a jelly bean in the shape of an infant.

"If you don't take me to your leader I'll kill you with this deadly jelly baby," the doctor says.

One of the savages stares menacingly and says, "All right then, kill me." To which Baker replies: "I don't take orders from anyone."

The morality of the doctor is reminiscent of long-gone American children's shows like *Howdy Doody* and *Soupy Sales*, said Ms. Shankman. That's the reason so many people in their 30s watch *Doctor Who*, she added.

The personality of the doctor is equal to the story line of each show, said Slovan. But, unlike many American TV shows, cash has never been the reason for its success.

In fact, he said, "The lack of cash has forced greater creativity ... and has given it its charm."

The doctors' intellect and wit have carried the show. "Doctor Who uses his mind," said 22-year-old Kirsten McGhee, a York College English major.

The show has avoided being tied down to a format limiting its longevity. Unlike the *Star Trek* TV series, *Doctor Who* can grow and grow.

"Star Trek was very limited," said Shawn Miller, a Whovian from Lewisberry. "(NBC) was pretty much tied down to the basic format it started with."

Not so with the many regenerations of the doctor.

Each, as he regenerates from the Hollywood-esque death throes of his predecessor, has been forced immediately to take on many of the doctor's characteristics while bringing his own personality to the role.

Colin Baker, the most recent doctor, said in a TV interview he hoped to bring to the role the traditional arrogance, wit, and honesty, "plus a lot of stuff original from myself."

He also brings a genuine interest in space.

"I have this desire to be off this planet and see it," he said. "Because it's had this extraordinary effect on a lot of people."

"I would love to see that green-blue ball in the sky." ■

Bryan Denson is a *Daily Record* staff writer.

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