

The Doctor spans space, time and the world

A global audience will tune in to the 50th anniversary show of 'Doctor Who.'

BY PATRICK KEVIN DAY

Matt Smith has traveled the distant past, the far future and the outer reaches of the universe as the iconic British science fiction character the Doctor.

But on Saturday, the boyish English actor will go to a rarefied space typically reserved for moon landings, the Oscars and epic sporting events like the Olympics. As part of a 50th anniversary celebration for the sci-fi show, Smith will be broadcast around the globe in a special TV movie: "Doctor Who: The Day of the Doctor."

The BBC is taking the golden anniversary celebration to unprecedented levels for a scripted television show. The movie, which also stars David Tennant, Jenna Coleman and Billie Piper, will truly be a global event Saturday as it will air in 75

countries at the same time. In the United States, the special will be shown on BBC America, but it will also be screened in movie theaters as well — also at the same time.

The cult hit about a time-and-space traversing alien Time Lord and his series of human companions originally premiered in England on Nov. 23, 1963 — indeed, its first episode was overshadowed by the JFK assassination. Since then, the series has been recognized by the Guinness World Record as being the "longest-running science fiction TV series."

Saturday's "Doctor Who" broadcast, however, will mark the final chapters for Smith's time in the legendary role. He'll have one more appearance as the Doctor, a role he's had since 2009. In the show's annual Christmas special next month, Smith will "regenerate" and pass the baton to a new Doctor, this one played by "The Thick of It" star Peter Capaldi.

"I'm going to miss it so much," said Smith in an interview. [See 'Who,' D8]



ADRIAN ROGERS/BBC/MCT
MATT SMITH, who is retiring as the 11th Doctor, appears with David Tennant in "Day of the Doctor."

TELEVISION REVIEW

A fun TARDIS trip back to the early days

ROBERT LLOYD
TELEVISION CRITIC

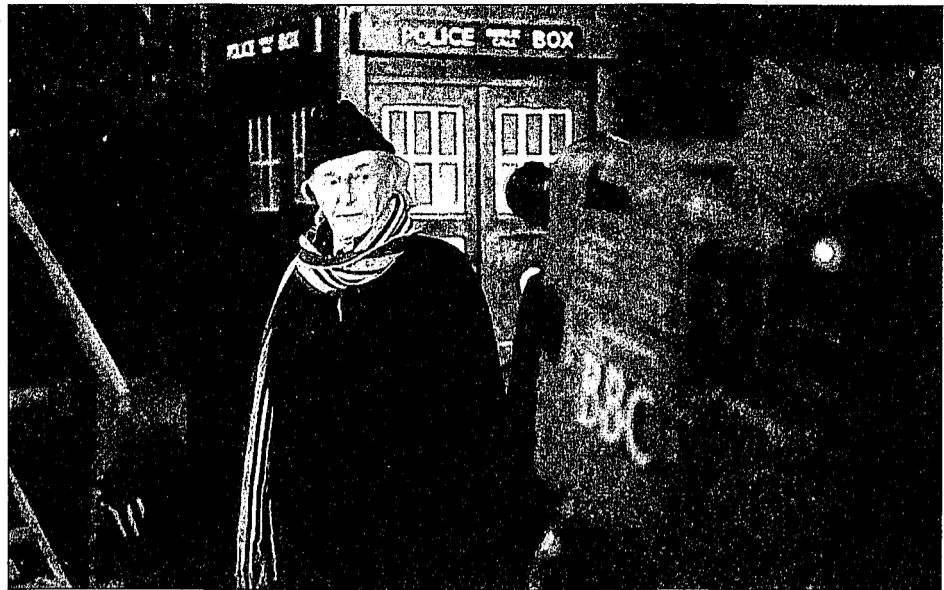
Had it come even a few years into its 21st century rebirth, the 50th anniversary of "Doctor Who," the BBC series about a space-time-traveling alien and the humans he corrals into keeping him company, would not be the worldwide event it is now. But event it is: Saturday's "The Day of the Doctor," in which beloved Tenth Doctor David Tennant will join beloved and current Eleventh Doctor Matt Smith, will air simultaneously in more than 76 countries (BBC America in the United States), with special theatrical showings in many.

It is the Olympic Games opening ceremony of science fiction.

As an appetizer to this main course, and a primer for latecomers, we are first being offered "An Adventure in Space and Time," a TV movie about the creation of the series and its first star, William Hartnell (David Bradley). Thanks to a neat narrative trick, the show has survived the first Doctor's retirement by 47 years. It premieres here Friday on BBC America, and anyone who loves the series will want to see it.

As a story about how the past became the present (which makes us, in relation to its characters, people of the future), it is very much in line with its subject, and has been made with much the same mix of enchantment and suspense.

Writer Mark Gattis has also penned episodes of [See 'Adventure,' D8]



HAL SHINNIE BBC

DAVID BRADLEY stars as William Hartnell, the first actor to play the title role in "Doctor Who."

Birth of the Whoniverse

['Adventure,' from D1]
"Doctor Who," both under show runner Russell T Davies, who revived the series in 2005 after a 16-year hiatus (not counting a 1996 TV movie) and current show runner Steven Moffat (with whom he co-created "Sherlock"). It's a fan's work — Gattis had unsuccessfully pitched the idea on the occasion of the show's 40th anniversary, two years before its return — made for fans.

Several of the actors, including Bradley and the excellent Jessica Raine (who plays producer Verity Lambert, a name hallowed in the annals of Whostory), have appeared in the series, as well, and here and there Gattis and director Terry McDonough apply a little sci-fi magic to their true-life tale. There are cameo appearances, calculated to quicken the heart, and lines appropriated from the series that underscore thematic resonances: Like "Doctor Who" itself, the film is a story of partnership and leave-taking. That these echoes may be obvious does not make them any less potent.

Certainly, you can watch with no previous knowledge of the show, for the affecting stories of plucky outsiders creating a national institution from humble materials,

'An Adventure in Space and Time'

Where: BBC America
When: 9 and 11 p.m. Fri.
Rating: TV-PG (may be unsuitable for young children)

'Doctor Who: The Day of the Doctor'

Where: BBC America
When: 11:50 a.m. (global simulcast) and 7 p.m. Sat.
Rating: TV-PG (may be unsuitable for young children)

and of an actor who finds the role of his life just as playing that role is about to become too much for him.

Nevertheless, there is a special, pleasurable appreciation in knowing in advance that Hartnell will be replaced by Patrick Troughton (who himself will be replaced by Jon Pertwee, and so on and so forth through the tumbling years) — so that when someone says, "No one's irreplaceable," we catch the irony.

Is it accurate? Did BBC drama head Sydney Newman (Brian Cox) really punctuate his sentences by exclaiming "Pop! pop! pop!" and did reluctant production designer Peter Brachacki (David Annen) really knock up a design for the time machine's interior in 30 seconds with a few pieces of hole-punched cardboard and a couple of spools of thread? I don't know. But some watching will.

Gattis preempts nit-picking with an opening announcement: "The following program is based on actual events. It is important to remember, however, that you can't rewrite history, not one line. Except perhaps when you embark on an adventure in space and time." And fade up on a blue police box in the fog.

Drama proceeds from the threat of cancellation, of firings, of managing personalities, and of Hartnell's increasing inability to handle the job. For a fan, there is a kind of added sensual thrill in seeing the early sets re-created, the electronic realization of Ron Grainer's opening theme, the invention of the groan of the TARDIS (a house key on piano wire) and the video effects in the opening credits.

No one was setting out to

make history, but they were making history all the same, and not only with the series. Lambert was the BBC's first female producer, Waris Hussein (Sacha Dhawan) its first Indian director — "the pushy Jewish bird" and "the posh wog," as they call themselves, out to prove themselves.

"We've got to stick together, haven't we?" Gattis has Lambert say. "Make our little show work — that'll teach them."

The cast is uniformly fine, but Bradley, whom the wider world will recognize as Argus Filch in the "Harry Potter" movies, has the added burden of playing a famous face. He is perfectly, one might almost say inevitably cast, notwithstanding that Hartnell, when he died in 1975 — nearly a decade after leaving the show — was four years younger than Bradley is now. (The difference is massaged by having someone say, "He's not as old as he looks.") He brings a note of triumph and tragedy to the tale, and in his learning to take the series seriously, and to care, anticipates the journey of "Doctor Who" itself, from low-budget diversion into something rich and strange, ambitious beyond its original charge and meaningful to millions.

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'It's like being in the Beatles'

['Who,' from D1]
interview earlier this year.

The 31-year-old actor was a relative unknown before replacing Tennant in the title role. Since 1963, only 11 actors have played the Doctor, with Capaldi being the 12th. It's the kind of opportunity that can make or break a young career, but Smith has proved himself capable of the task.

His tenure on "Doctor Who" coincided with the arrival of a new show runner, Steven Moffat, and also the show's newfound popularity in the United States thanks to BBC America and binge viewing on video streaming services like Netflix.

"Smith's Doctor embodies a more conservative idea of Britishness than either of his [most recent] predecessors," said Dr. Piers Britton, associate professor of visual and media studies at the University of Redlands currently teaching a course on "Doctor Who." "He embodies an England where everyone wears tweed jackets and drinks tea. It's interesting how that's caught the American imagination."

Smith, who admitted never watching the series before the role, now signs his checks "Matt Smith — The Doctor." But it's not easy being an instantly recognizable icon.

"I try to be as much like the Doctor as possible for little kids," Smith said. "But sometimes people don't realize you may have done it five times that day." He mentions how strange it is when people just walk up and take his picture without even trying to speak to him.



BBC

JENNA COLEMAN, with Matt Smith, was surprised by the show's popularity.

"It's like you [the actor] don't even exist," he said.

Smith's days as the Doctor may be numbered, but he's likely going out with a ratings bang. The average global audience for the series is about 77 million, but the combined audience for this 50th anniversary special could hit 100 million people, according to Brad Adgate, analyst at ad firm Horizon Media in New York.

"It speaks to the popularity of this franchise across borders," said Adgate, who became a fan of the show when he was introduced to it by his daughter, a sign of the character's cross-generational appeal. "And because it's an event, they'll pick up people who may not know what a TARDIS is, but will want to share in the experience."

Smith has not elaborated on his reasons for leaving the role behind, other than to say

"when it's time to go, it's time to go."

Like every actor who has piloted the TARDIS — the police call box vehicle that propels its occupants through space and time — Smith brought his singular personality to the role.

"I think what he brought back to the role is the absolute nuttiness of the Doctor," said Moffat, who had originally planned to cast a middle-aged actor before he met Smith. "You put him in a normal situation and you realize he's an absolute lunatic."

Despite almost universal disappointment over his departure, Smith believes that change is the secret to the franchise's longevity.

"I'm one-eleventh of this character," Smith said. A new actor "is like a new coat of paint on the TARDIS. It's what keeps the show moving forward and how it's lasted 50 years."

For Coleman, who joined the series just last year and will continue with Capaldi, watching the show explode in worldwide popularity has been a shock.

"We were in Bristol filming the Christmas special and there were hundreds of people there at the set screaming at you," Coleman said. "It's like being in the Beatles."

And while Capaldi's turn in the spotlight is just beginning, Smith is already moving on to other ventures. He appears in Ryan Gosling's directorial debut, "How to Catch a Monster," and around the time that his final "Doctor Who" Christmas special airs next month he'll be on stage in London, starring in a musical version of "American Psycho."

"I'll take each step as it comes," Smith said.

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