

A SWASHBUCKLING SWANSONG

After three action-packed series, showrunner **Chris Chibnall** is about to hand back the keys to the Tardis – but will he miss it?

THE RT INTERVIEW BY **ROBIN PARKER**

NOBODY IN TV cuts a more relaxed figure than a demob-happy *Doctor Who* showrunner. The heavy toll of years spent configuring their galaxy-spinning imagination with the hard reality of budgets and maintaining their role as custodian of secrets in the face of teaser-hungry fans dissipates as they hit the home straight.

As Chris Chibnall prepares for his swansong specials to air (one this week and another later this year to mark the BBC's 100th anniversary), he has more reason than most to celebrate: producing the behemoth during the pandemic nearly curtailed his and Jodie Whittaker's three-series-and-out plan.

"That we made *Doctor Who* at all during the past two years is a miracle," admits Chibnall, hitherto far less of a public face of the programme than his predecessors Russell T Davies and Steven Moffat. "There was a point around April/May 2020 where it looked like we'd have to call it a day after two series. If we hadn't already planned to leave after series three, there's no way I'd be staying on now after going through that experience."

Looking back on the time-and-space hopping adventure, he says he's "flabbergasted" at the team's efforts to tell

a story of scale. This being *Doctor Who*, of course, there was no let-up and a planned final trio of epic specials, culminating in the Doctor's regeneration this autumn, nearly fell at the first fence, with production and budget pressures forcing Chibnall to pare down *Eve of the Daleks*, which aired on New Year's Day.

"We had to ditch our original idea and I had to write a new script in just over a week," he reveals.

'I had to write a new script in a week. It's a constant treadmill'

"You can't just go, 'Right, we've got the series and then we'll do the specials.' You're constantly on this treadmill."

It's that treadmill that he'll miss the least: simultaneously writing, filming and in post-production on multiple episodes as well as planning the next season. When he pressed Moffat on how he managed to juggle working on *Who* and *Sherlock*, Moffat said he didn't know, but somehow *Who*

still took up all the time. "Steven told me, 'I miss the work, but I don't miss the workload.'"

HEADING EAST

As Dan (John Bishop), Yaz (Mandip Gill) and the Doctor (Jodie Whittaker) land in 19th-century China, they decide to dress appropriately – and soon encounter an old foe, the Sea Devils
Left: Chris Chibnall





That's where I'm heading towards."

Chibnall, now 52, wrote five episodes under Davies and Moffat before becoming showrunner, and was lead writer on spin-off *Torchwood* for its first two series from 2006. Did he know what he was letting himself in for? Is that why he imposed his own exit plan?

Partly, he admits. "Having observed Russell and Steven at work, I knew how exhausting the show was, and Jodie and I both have families. I didn't want to be showrunning *Doctor Who* in the year my children were doing their A-level and GCSE exams, which they are now. I owed it to my family – I hadn't seen much of them in recent years."

THE CHIBNALLS STILL watch *Doctor Who* as a family and he treasures a visual bookmark of his tenure: a photo of his eldest, aged five, in David Tennant's Tardis and another photo of him, now aged 18, on the set of Whittaker's ship. "It's been woven into our lives – probably a bit too much to be honest!"

It's been woven into his life since Tom Baker played the Doc. I feel the need to check: you have had fun in your dream job, haven't you? "Everything on *Doctor Who* is exciting!" he says. "You have to live in the moment and enjoy it, because you know you're never going to do anything like it ever again, whatever you do."

Nevertheless, the convoluted dovetailing plotlines of a few of his episodes took some effort to follow and that cost him some of the goodwill from casual viewers that greeted Whittaker's arrival: even the New Year special mustered fewer than five million within a week of its broadcast, a far cry from the 13.3m who tuned in to David Tennant's biggest Christmas special in 2007, at the peak of Davies's imperial phase.

If these figures, and the more vocal fan reactions, bother him, he's not showing it. Asked how much consideration he gives to fandom, he is blunt: "Absolute zero. That was the advice from both Russell and Steven." He had a vision for a three-series arc and delivered it – any other worries, such as whether *Who*'s weekly release pattern is an "outlier" in the streaming age – is above his pay grade.

Landing a cliffhanger or teaser that encourages a return the following week is, he says, tricky to navigate in the streaming era and he is personally "all for the box set" as a viewer. He also acknowledges that the competition in sci-fi and fantasy has never been greater.

But *Doctor Who* still has an ace ▷

◁ up its sleeve: “Unlike all those Marvel shows and films, *Doctor Who* never ends with a punch. That’s still an incredible thing.”

Of his alien creations, he’s proud of Swarm, Azure and Karvanista from last year’s six-parter *Flux*, as well as his debut season’s baddie “Tim Shaw”, and relished placing old favourites the Sontarans in the Crimean War. He’s dusted off another old foe for this Easter’s special. *The Legend of the Sea Devils* is, he promises, “a bank holiday action-adventure romp: Sea Devils on a pirate ship, sword-fighting the Doctor: what more do you want?”

There’s something of the old-fashioned repertory theatre that appeals to him in making the show. “It takes three weeks to film a standard episode and then you’re onto the next, and we’ve kept pretty much the same team throughout. You can go from a huge pirate ship to a space station or a cabin in the Crimea. What I’ll miss most is the constant delight at other crafts-people’s brilliant work.”

FOR SOMEONE WHO wrote all 24 episodes of ITV’s *Broadchurch*, Chibnall’s collegiate approach is striking, and his democratising of the writing team is one of his most significant legacies.

Where Moffat anchored his series to veteran writers like Richard Curtis, Frank Cottrell-Boyce, *Luther* creator Neil Cross and Chibnall himself, this most recent era has been full of new, diverse voices, from *Murdered by My*

‘Sea Devils, pirate ships, sword-fighting – what more do you want?’

Father writer Vinay Patel to *Sea Devils* co-writer, playwright Ella Road (see opposite page).

“There’s a swathe of amazing writers out there and it felt like I’d be doing the show a disservice if I didn’t bring them in,” he says. Some of the stories he wanted to tell – the Partition of India, the protest of Rosa Parks – demanded an authenticity, and a writers’ room shaped ideas, with Chibnall having final pass on each script.

Stories emerged both organically from a shared interest and from serendipity in fusing loose threads from different story ideas. “David Lynch has a great quote: ‘Plan vigorously and allow for the happy accidents.’ Everything on this show is that, times a thousand.”

He’s also taken the elasticity of the format further than most, layering in a Doctor origin story as audacious as it is divisive – a badge of honour for any *Who* showrunner, it seems – you’re not doing your job if fans all agree.

“You’re not carrying a vase across a room – you’ve got to get in there and say what you want

SPEAK OF THE SEA DEVIL

A classic monster resurfaces...

The Sea Devils haven’t been on screen in decades but, in their few appearances, they’ve made a big impression. Debuting in a 1972 serial simply called *The Sea Devils*, these amphibious antagonists were created as a cousin species to lizard-people the Silurians. Both races had lived on Earth millions of years ago, and now planned to remove the humans that had taken over their planet.

Third Doctor Jon Pertwee (opposite) saw the Sea Devils off until a decade or so later (barring one quick glimpse in 1973’s *Frontier in Space*). Then, the Silurians and Sea Devils teamed up for 1984’s *Warriors of the Deep*, facing off with the fifth Doctor, Peter Davison, in a story beset with behind-the-scenes production issues.

Despite the Sea Devils’ long absence, fans still love them, and after Chris Chibnall resurrected the Silurians in 2010, it was probably only a matter of time before the Sea Devils surfaced again.

Now, in 2022 they’ve had a makeover. Blue fishnet dresses are out and armour, tricorne hats and cutlasses are in, with the Sea Devils now turning to 19th-century piracy on the South China Sea. Expect plenty of sword fights and swashbuckling as Jodie Whittaker’s Doctor tries to find out what they’re up to this time...

HUW FULLERTON

about the show, the character and the world,” he says. “It’s one of the few drama series without a written bible, and every era contains a contradiction or left-turn from what has come before. Any future showrunner will ignore it or run with it.”

Davies is returning in time for the 60th anniversary. Which will he do, does he reckon? “Oh, I fully expect Russell to ignore it!” he belly laughs.

Before we come to his successor, it’s worth remembering that Chibnall’s desire to shake things up kicked in with his casting of the first female Doctor. Having worked with Jodie on *Broadchurch*, what planted the seed?

“Firstly, she’s one of the greatest actors of her generation,” he declares. “But I thought – and I’d been guilty of this – the parts she’d taken didn’t necessarily demonstrate her energy and physicality, her humour and her clownlike qualities.”

In her audition, he recalls, she “brought the Doctor in with her straightaway”. Her idea of the Doctor fused Christopher Lloyd as Doc Brown

in *Back to the Future* with Madonna in a trouser suit. Having spent most of *Broadchurch* sobbing on screen, she pleaded: “Can I please not cry?” Chibnall says, “I promised her she wouldn’t be crying for a long time.”

HIS WRITING LEANED into a childlike quality shared by actor and character – “like she’s in a cave and the lights come on, at every moment” – plus a pragmatism and love of engineering and science that have inspired young female fans. Having planned an emotional journey of discovery for Jodie’s Doctor over three series, he promises her story will wrap up “in a really huge, fun, action-y, mad, heart-breaking way. There’ll be a lot of laughs and tears in that final episode. You want to do everything.”

That final special is also part of the BBC’s centenary plans, so expect a “celebration” of the broadcaster within the story, he teases. “There are some treats – Easter eggs and kisses to the past.” (What can he mean? The Daleks blowing



AMPHIBIAN FOE

Doctor Who's costume designer Ray Holman adjusts a Sea Devil mask, newly created but closely honouring the classic design sculpted by John Friedlander in the 1970s. Top: Jon Pertwee's Doctor fending off a Sea Devil, photographed by RT's Don Smith on set in October 1971

up Alexandra Palace? The Master posing as Mary Whitehouse? Start formulating your theories now...) After all, he says, the BBC is something worth celebrating.

"I have no idea why you would want to bash the BBC," he says. "Look at the amazing drama and entertainment they still pump out – *The Tourist*, *Time*, *Strictly*... Everybody likes to attack it until we have a pandemic or a massive war and then everyone asks, 'Can you tell us the truth, please?' and the BBC does that. We should never take it for granted."

He is eager to see how Davies remodels the show, and some of his production team are staying on for the 60th anniversary. "Everybody should have a big smile on their face. Russell is one of the elite showrunners and *Who* is very lucky to have him, especially off the back of *It's a Sin*, one of the greatest shows of all time. For

him to have incredible ideas and passion for it, to want to take it forward again – that's fab. Nobody has a greater love for *Doctor Who*."

What did he learn from Davies? Launching into a passable impression of Russell's jaunty Welsh lilt, he recalls being told of a *Torchwood* ensemble cast scene, "I just want to know what everybody in this scene thinks."

Chibnall elaborates: "Everybody in that room needs to have a distinct point of view and it needs to be there in that scene. For Russell, as a humanist and a character writer, nobody's ever neglected, nobody's ever denied their moment. A tiny note opens up everything."

Would he dare impart any new-found wisdom to Davies? "The same as he gave me: enjoy it. I've absolutely loved it. It's such a privilege. Few people have done it and you're standing in the footsteps of those people across 60 years now."

So you'll be pitching him *Who* stories then? He laughs, a hoot as garrulous as the best of Davies's. "Absolutely never again! Clear red line, final script. I never expected to come back after working with Steven, really, and I'd turned it down a couple of times after that. I never thought I'd be offered the job and built into that is why I wanted to keep it to a very specific three-series thing."

"Supervising teenagers' revision is taking up my time now and there's lots of other things to write! I will happily sit back and watch. For all that it's been gorgeous all along, now it's like, 'Oh I remember this. This is what real life is like!'"

NEW TO WHO

"I could indulge my wildest ideas," says writer Ella Road

When *Legend of the Sea Devils* co-writer Ella Road got the call from *Doctor Who* last summer, it was fittingly all hands on deck. "We chatted on the phone, and they said, 'Are you in? We need someone immediately,'" she tells RT. "I was like, 'Yeah, cool. So, what's the story I'm writing?' They said, 'We don't have a story. We want you to come and make it up.'"

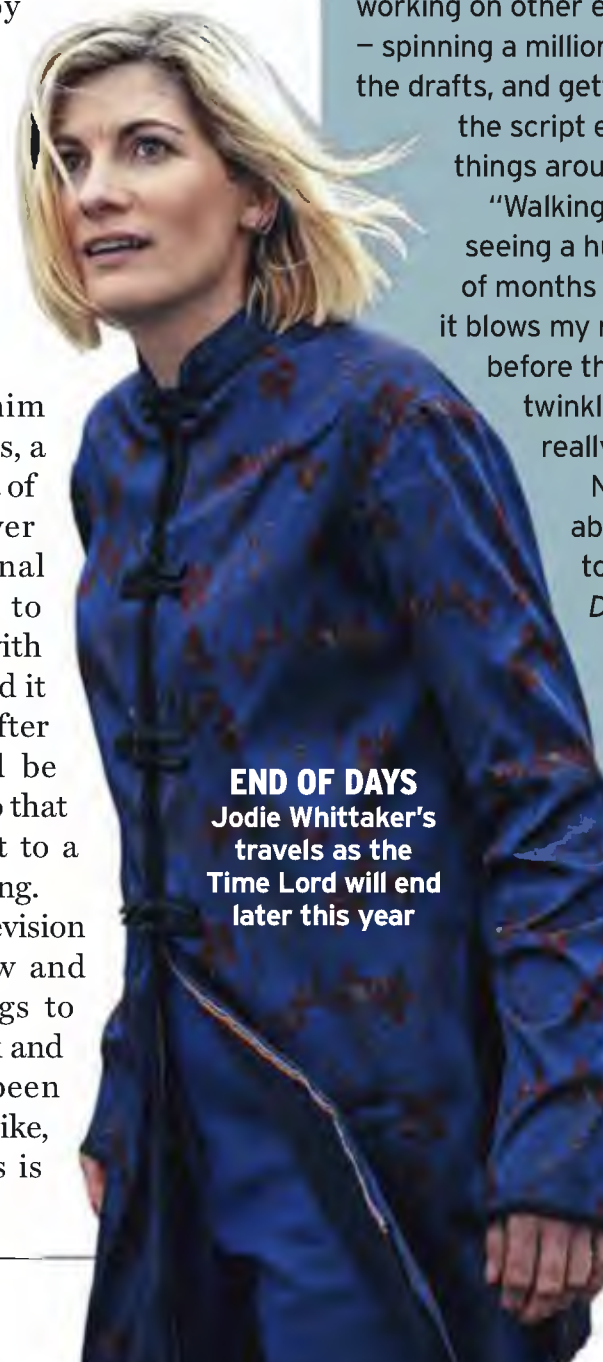
That was a Thursday – by Monday Road was in Cardiff workshopping ideas with Chris Chibnall, creating vast sci-fi concepts out of thin air. Not bad for a first TV credit (her second, on Amazon's *Ten Percent*, comes out later this month). In 2019, her dystopic-future play *The Phlebotomist* was nominated for an Olivier Award and later adapted for Radio 3, and among other stage work (including charity workshops), it helped get the

30-year-old writer on *Doctor Who's* radar. "On this, I definitely had an opportunity to indulge some of my wildest ideas," she says. "Often the sci-fi that I work on is much more grounded. *Doctor Who* has this beautiful, playful energy. Chris [Chibnall] was busy working on other episodes at the same time – spinning a million plates. But I was writing the drafts, and getting notes from him and the script editors, and then turning things around very quickly."

"Walking into a warehouse and seeing a huge ship set just a couple of months after that initial call – it blows my mind that a few weeks before that, it'd just been a little twinkle in my eye. It was a really amazing experience."

Now, with the episode about to air, is she ready to see the reaction of *Doctor Who's* famously particular fan base?

"Of course there's a pressure – I really don't want to screw up this thing that everyone loves," she admits. "But it takes more than a village to make a TV show. I've done my small part, but it's been made by hundreds of people, creating on a huge scale." HF



END OF DAYS

Jodie Whittaker's travels as the Time Lord will end later this year