

## A Personal retrospective of 1980s 'Doctor Who'

It seems very strange to be writing this article after what seems in some ways to have been a very brief decade. It can't, surely, be nearly ten years since the starburst title sequence and Peter Howell's rearrangement of the theme music heralded the start of the eighteenth season of 'Doctor Who' with 'The Leisure Hive', a story that, for all its faults, was strikingly different to what had gone before. The props may not have changed all that much, but Tom Baker was somehow more withdrawn, the incidental music had an altogether more sophisticated quality, and, of course, the titles and theme music had undergone a radical transformation.

Ah, yes. The decade suddenly lengthens considerably when I recall that there was another story in 1980 before 'The Leisure Hive'. 'The Horns of Nimon', with its numerous shortcomings (and I'm sure I needn't remind anyone of them) did have quite an effect on some children a few years younger than I was at the time. For months after the close of the story, the five-, six- and seven-year-olds could regularly be seen stomping around my school playground with their hands affixed to their foreheads, fingers pointing at an angle of 45 degrees, declaiming such gems as "Who dares disturb the Nimon?" or words to that effect. Unfortunately for their young fans, the Production Unit Manager on that story, a Mr Nathan-Turner, wasn't as keen on returning the Nimon as he was other creatures to have crossed the Doctor's path in the past.

The arrival of John Nathan-Turner as producer certainly sorted out the casual viewers from the fans, and indeed the hardcore fanatics from the regular 'Who'-watcher, among the nine- and ten-year-olds of my area. The rival attraction of the glossy, filmed 'Buck Rogers' on ITV, coupled with the revolutionary change in the programme's appearance, meant that only the hardened addicts were watching by about 'Leisure Hive' part three. I think the news that K9 would be departing was the last straw for many of my age group. I wasn't too bothered about this - while most of my contemporaries were only vaguely aware that at least one actor had played the Doctor before Tom Baker, I, as a 'Doctor Who Monthly' reader who wrote a synopsis of each story after it was transmitted to form a supplement to 'The Making of Doctor Who', knew that the series had survived in the past without K9. As we soon found out, it was shortly to do so without Tom Baker himself.

The news that 'Tristan' was to take over as the fifth 'Doctor Who' I think helped attract more viewers as the season progressed. I was quite fond of 'The Keeper of Traken' at the time until the sudden revelation of the Master as chief villain in the plot sent it above 'Full Circle' as my favourite story so far. The ending, as the Doctor and Adric left, was puzzling, leaving the advertised new companion, Nyssa, behind, and apparently criminally wasting the brief appearance of the Master. The problem was solved by the Master's regeneration - by its nature one of the few real 'horror' scenes in the series' history, and the 'dovetailing' into

'Logopolis', a superb end to the Baker era. It may be criticised as being incomprehensible to a large sector of the viewing public, particularly as, aside from the mathematics, it derived much from the programme's past, but I still find it an excellent send-off and the regeneration scene remains my favourite of the six.

1981 was the year in which there were the most 'Doctor Who' repeats transmitted in the 1980's. The fact that the BBC repeated seven stories - including four old ones in the BBC 2 'Five Faces' season - has to have been a factor in the ratings success of the first Peter Davison season. 'Doctor Who' is something of an acquired taste. The magnetism of several weeks of the Daleks, coupled by the format's originality, secured viewers in 1963 and 1964; they were held to the programme also by the fact that it was broadcast almost every single week of the year. In the era of nine-month gaps (1985-1988 being something of a special case) screening of repeats is vital to remind the public that the programme still exists. The lack of repeats since 1984 bears at least some responsibility for the low ratings that 'Doctor Who' has suffered since season 23.

1982 saw the Peter Davison era start in earnest, and saw - amid a fair amount of comment, including a 'Guardian' editorial - the translation of the programme to weekdays. While it worked in the short term, attracting a large number of viewers from the still at that time very popular 'Nationwide' which preceded it, the change of day from Saturday meant that the series was uplifted from what were popularly seen as its roots and, furthermore, lost part of its identity. The shifting from Monday and Tuesday, to Tuesday and Wednesday, to Thursday and Friday, to Saturday at 5.20 pm (too early for a forty-five minute slot acting as 'hook' to the evening's viewing) and then 5.45 pm (opposite 'The A-Team', a phenomenally successful programme which had built up its audience substantially during the eighteen-month hiatus), and thence to the 'death slot' against 'Coronation Street' for three years, has meant that the production team have for some time been unable to target the programme at a specific audience group. The ever-changing scheduling has meant that 'Doctor Who' is no longer sacred.

It was still sacred enough in 1983 for the BBC to sanction a twentieth anniversary special, 'The Five Doctors', after the Twentieth Season proper. I was slightly dissatisfied with the 1983 stories: 'Arc of Infinity' didn't work as an opener, fusing 'The Deadly Assassin', 'The Three Doctors' and 'The Keeper of Traken' into a cocktail handy for some fans, but failing to deliver for this one; I liked 'Snakedance' as tying up the loose ends from 'Kinda' and rescuing the Mara from the shadow of that awful snake, and 'Enlightenment' as a very intelligent and truly fantastic story; but 'Mawdryn Undead' failed for me because of its undue dependence on the show's history, with its use of the regeneration concept, resurrection of the Brigadier, and so forth. 'Logopolis' drank the blood of 'Doctor Who' past and gained life; 'Mawdryn' was well... undead. 'The Five Doctors' lay somewhere between these two, reminding me now of many of the protracted TARDIS scenes



during this time, such as Tegan's (supposed) leaving scene in 'The Visitation' - all a little too cosy and domestic.

That year also saw my discovery of 'fandom'. Having heard of DWAS, and having made up my mind to join, I at last found the address (they were a much more secretive organisation in those days) in an issue of 'Frontier Worlds' - a successful, but now defunct fanzine - I had bought at 'Forbidden Planet' at a visit to London the year before, or, to be more precise, in a send-up of the Dr Who Appreciation Society newsletter, 'Celestial Toyroom', rechristened for this occasion 'The Incestial Boysroom'. I recommend it to every (ex-)DWAS member totally fed up with their organisation skills... I was already buying the early 'Dr Who Bulletin', and the contrast between it and 'CT' was immense. 'CT' claimed to be a 'news' publication, but its advertising:copy ratio was heavily biased towards the former, stories rarely being developed beyond one-liners. 'DWB' started as a reaction to this incarnation of 'CT'; it was only when 'CT' got its act together that 'DWB', over the next year, took to its glossy, sensational format which has elevated its circulation to several thousand.

I don't think that I was alone in drifting through the 'Doctor Who' of 1983, 1984 and into 1985 in a state of near-euphoria. Things may have been wrong with the world, such as the African famine, but 'Doctor Who' was an institution, bowed and scraped to by BBC presenters, and seemed likely to go on forever. Seven million viewers per episode may not have been the highest or most healthy audience figure, but the success of the programme in America would guarantee the existing twenty-six episodes a year at least, and nothing could go wrong, could it...?

Good old Michael Grade changed all that. Suddenly 'Doctor Who' was an out-of-date children's series, only fit to be smirked or mocked. Most non-fans I knew thought the programme was finished. Although I think that there was little doubt that the show would rematerialise on our screens, there were a few nervous moments during that eighteen-month postponement, some of which were justified, such as the 'fourteen episode' rumour, and some of which weren't, such as the story that Colin Baker had been sacked and wouldn't be in the new season. This rumour, as later events proved, unfortunately had a good deal of substance.

My feelings have always been somewhat ambivalent towards Colin Baker's Doctor. I was quite warm towards his portrayal, but sometimes I think he went too far over the top in his use of what can perhaps be called 'cultivated outrage'. Somehow his 'alienness', while of similar manner to Tom Baker's characterisation during his first two seasons, albeit with more arrogance, seems to have deterred the audience enough for his viewing figures to drop by nearly three million in the first six weeks of the twenty-second season. The forty-five minute episodes, all to some degree badly-paced, probably also share the responsibility. Perhaps, after an eighteen-month gap between seasons and a badly structured, fourteen part 'epic', which caused viewers to switch off after episode one, very few would have been

surprised had 'Doctor Who' not survived Colin Baker's dismissal.

Instead the world was treated to the appearance of Sylvester McCoy on the scene and a new look for 'Doctor Who'. I think more of my age group gave the programme a chance in 1987 (no nylon sycamore leaves stuck to monsters this year!), at least for 'Time and the Rani'. Unfortunately this season had all the appearance of being written at speed, with no time to actually think through the direction that was being taken. Thus there was a succession of good ideas gone wrong, such as 'Paradise Towers', which, had the background been sketched in more firmly and the temptation to do the whole thing in a 'high camp' style been suppressed, could have been a brilliant satire on urban society, and 'Delta and the Bannermen', consisting of an offbeat first part and a second and third part which went totally off the rails, the Doctor becoming not just secondary, but superfluous. I still think it could have been an excellent 'Screen One' or other one-off production, but the script was misplaced in 'Doctor Who'. After a season of such mixed quality, the forthcoming set of stories for the silver jubilee did not fill me with much confidence.

Nevertheless I received a pleasant surprise as the twenty-fifth season unfolded. It was much better than the previous two years, and for the first time in more than a decade there were new developments, as opposed to consolidation, of the ongoing subplot concerning the Doctor's identity. This theme has, of course, continued into the twenty-sixth season. Can the Doctor be a contemporary of the founders of the Time Lord race, Rassilon and Omega? Can Lady Peinforte in 'Silver Nemesis' have been right when she implied the Doctor was more than just a Time Lord? These are just two of the questions that have been raised in the two most recent seasons.

There is also a conscious move to make 'Doctor Who' more relevant to the times in which it finds itself. 'Political' issues, absent from much of the 1980s, have reasserted themselves. The racism subtext and the anti-thatcherism of 'Remembrance of the Daleks' and 'The Happiness Patrol' may have been suppressed in production, but there is little doubting the ecological concern voiced in 'The Curse of Fenric', or the commentary on the revival of social Darwinism in the 1980s in 'Survival'. There have been greater attempts at improved characterisation, notably the attempt to give greater depth to Ace in the latter two stories, who has travelled a long way from the caricature encountered back in 'Dragonfire'. The 'Doctor Who' of Ian Briggs and Rona Munro, and perhaps also of Steven Wyatt, is one much more in tune with my outlook as we enter the 1990s.

It would be an incomplete retrospective of the decade without a brief mention of the sole producer for every season in production in the 1980s, John Nathan-Turner. One could write several books about this man and 'Doctor Who'; he himself already has done, and may write more. I think that he has made many mistakes; the change of title sequence and music in 1980 was too radical, too alienating for many regular viewers; his obsession with the series



past, while pleasing in the short term, ultimately resulted in overkill. His choice of Bonnie Langford as companion was an interesting gamble, but Miss Langford was sadly hamstrung by her media image. Despite these errors, it should not be forgotten that Nathan-Turner successfully kept the programme in the public eye via his knack for publicity and presided over at least four moderately successful seasons.

On the creative side, the three script editors of the decade (excluding Douglas Adams and Antony Root) have all brought a distinctive flavour to the stories which they have supervised. Christopher H. Bidmead, in season 18, was probably right in trying to make the programme more 'serious' after a year under Douglas Adams but I feel he was wrong in trying to tie the programme down to 'Hard science'. While good, scientific stories have their place, attempting to place 'Doctor Who' on a purely scientific foundation, as Terrance Dicks complained while writing 'State of Decay', begins to appear somewhat petty. 'Doctor Who', with its reliance on time travel and regeneration, deals in meta-science, and it is easy for Bidmead to forget this. Eric Saward was an advocate of the "rattling good yarn" but not all the stories which he edited achieved this status; many suffered from poor structuring, viewer's patience being tested by such as the interminably long TARDIS scenes, which Andrew Cartmel, his successor, has found superfluous. Cartmel had a shaky start, with 'Time and the Rani' I suspect owing little to his influence and the rest of season 24, as previously stated, being of uncertain direction. However, he has attracted several good, new, young writers to the programme, such as Wyatt, Briggs, Ben Aaronovitch, Kevin Clarke and Rona Munro, whom I hope will continue to contribute under the new production regime anticipated.

The 1980s have been an exciting decade for 'Doctor Who', with four Doctors, various crises, and much doubt over the programme's backstage stability, coupled with the increasing impact of 'the fans' on the way the series is viewed, by both the BBC and the press. Hopefully the 1990s will offer a securer future for the programme, and consequently more enjoyable - as long as everyone is kept on their toes.

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