"DR. WHO" COULD BE MAKING HIS LAST TRIP — IN 2011

By Richard Last

Philip Hinchcliffe, producer of the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) long running science fiction series, "Dr. Who" took a crucial decision the other day. It was that, contrary to previous belief, all Time Lords are capable of only 12 regenerations. After that they will summarily shuffle off this mortal coil like any other humanoid inhabitants of the time-space continuum.

Not Immortal

To non devotees this will be so much gobbledegook. But loyal "Dr. Who" fans — and there were about ten and a half million of them in Britain and in other countries at the last count — will immediately grasp the point. It means that their favourite television character is not, after all, immortal. It could also mean that a future "Dr. Who" producer could be in big trouble around the year 2011.

Alone among producers of long running television series, Hinchcliffe and his predecessors have never had to worry about redundancy when their star decides to call it a day. Under the programme's ground rules, the omniscient Doctor has the power of renewing his physical shape whenever the current one wears out. All that is needed is a new actor, a transformation scene, a brief period of viewer adjustment, and Dr. Who is away on another lease of flourishing life.

So far the process has occurred three times and four actors have played the Doctor. The first was the veteran William Hartnell, best remembered for his roles in the films "Brighton Rock" and "The Army Game", who died in 1975. He was succeeded by Patrick Troughton, another well known "straight" actor.

Then for five years — the longest stint so far — Jon Pertwee, a comedy actor in radio shows, took over. Two years ago another search for a new Dr. Who produced the present incumbent Tom Baker.

Many Adults Watch It

"Dr. Who" began its career on November 23, 1963 as an unequivocal children's programme. Today it would be much harder to categorise. A recent BBC analysis revealed that rather more than half the audience are over 15 years' old. Sir Huw Wheldon, former managing director of BBC Television, is among its legion of adult admirers.

In the many twists and turns of its 13-year-old career the programme has embraced science fiction, science fantasy, straightforward, humour, social comment and "Gothic" horror.

Tom Baker as Dr. Who and Elisabeth Sladen as his assistant Sarah recoil from a spot of Sorcery directed against the Tardis, the doctor's time machine — a scene from one of the episodes in the long running science fiction series, "Dr. Who", on BBC Television.

Each producer and each principal actor has stamped his own image on the series. As Hinchcliffe points out: "The beauty of our formula is its almost infinite flexibility. Within certain agreed limits, we can do practically anything we like".

As originally conceived by Sidney Newman and Donald Wilson, two powerful names in British television drama, Dr. Who was a "cosmic hobo", a Time traveller from nowhere. Over the years his background has been filled out in some detail. He is, it appears, a "Time Lord", one of a race of super beings from the extra-galactic planet Gallifrey.

The Gallifreys' Secret

According to Hinchcliffe's immediate predecessor, Barry Letts, the gallifreys are "rather a stuffy, moralistic lot who have discovered the secret of Time travel and hold a watching brief over the well being of the Universe". Every Time Lord has his own Tardis (Time And Relative Dimension In Space), or Time travel machine, whose outward appearance can be changed to suit its surroundings. The Doctor's model, however, got stuck, which is why he always emerges from a police telephone box.

Through all the Doctor's amazing adventures runs a more or less continuous theme: the protection of the human race from "the most deadly peril it has yet faced". On Earth he is usually found warding off imminent invasion by extra terrestial forces; out in the vastness of Time and Space his superhuman powers are pitted against even wider ranging forces of evil.

His enemies have been legion, and as fantastic as the producer's imagination and the resources of the BBC design department could make them. By far the most popular are the villainous Deleks introduced in Episode 2 and brought back at intervals — with some reluctance — in response to viewer demand.

Super Adversary

Usually an entire race of malevolent beings — Daleks, Cybermen, Yeti and Zygons, to name but a few — is involved, but frequently the Doctor is up against one super adversary, a kind of Alberich to his Wotan. The best known of these was The Master, a fallen Time Lord, played by the late Roger Delado. Thanks to the regenerative process, he is about to be re-introduced (in his 12th and final incarnation), in the shape of another actor.

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Within this general framework successive producers have rung remarkable changes of style and emphasis. In the Hartnell and Troughton eras the Doctor was something of a free-booting adventurer. Barry Letts, who came in at the same time as Jon Pertwee, determined to embark on four or six-episode stories with a "message" and, incidentally, to revive the programme's waning fortunes after it was down to a viewing figure of three million and in severe danger of being axed.

Under his regime "Dr. Who" began to attract older audiences and more serious attention. In one story, "The Green Death", the Doctor overcame an epidemic of giant maggots—not mere "monsters" but the product of uncontrolled chemical pollution. Another ended in a philosophical confrontation between the Doctor and a demon (discovered at the heart of a primitive burial mound), about the rate at which Mankind should develop its technology.

Defender of human values

However fantastic his adversary the Doctor — like the giant Queen Spider in "Planet of the Spiders", — could generally be seen as the quasi liberal defender of human values against an authoritarian take over.

Paradoxically, it was Pertwee, the comedy actor, who gave the Doctor his "straightest" image. In trendy suits and possessed of a knowledge of wine, he was something of a 1970-ish dandy. Tom Baker, with his loping walk, college muffler and air of mockery, has turned him into a Bohemian.

At the same time the stories have turned towards "Gothic" fantasy and occasionally horror, involving the Doctor in cliff-hanging adventures with resurrected mummies and the intrigues of Renaissance Italy. But the pure "sci-fi" motivation is still strong and emerges in stories such as "Ark In Space", which imagined the human race put in cold storage while the Earth was uninhabitable.

What all the Doctors and all the producers and writers have in common, and what indeed lies at the heart of the programme's success, is that they take it seriously. Behind the outward fantasy there is always a strong interior logic: the scientific jargon however outlandish, must have a basis in scientific fact ("The 13-year-olds would be on us like a ton of bricks if it didn't", says Hinchcliffe).

The stories are played out with conviction, never for laughs; subsidiary actors who come prepared to "ham up" the villains are quickly reproved.

Toning it down a bit

Baker himself when he first took over the Doctor's role, upset some viewers with his too-jokey style and had to be asked to "tone it down a bit". He still seems a rather flippant superman after the earnest Pertwee, but the viewing figures have never been higher and once hit 14 million.

Altogether, "Dr. Who" has done pretty well by those who have been involved in the series. The BBC has benefited from sales to 33 countries, among them the United States of America, Venezuela, Thailand and Ethiopia. The programme is still playing in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, the Netherlands, Dubai and Hong Kong.

Terry Nation, the writer who invented the Daleks, lives in a country house on his half share of the royalties from toys and other merchandise. And Baker who was a "resting" actor working on a building site when the BBC spotted him, has become a celebrity. "Dr. Who", he says simply "has transformed my life".