

Radio Times



In the swim?

Peter Davison, Robert Glenister and Sara Corper, still trying to keep their heads above water in BBC1's returning comedy series 'Sink or Swim'.

Inside: Peter Davison – on the crest of the wave

He's one of the busiest around, but you would never guess from his unassuming manner that Peter Davison is an actor. For the next few months he will be all but hogging the television screen – first as Brian, the well-intentioned but disaster-prone anti-hero of the comedy series *Sink or Swim*, then in his familiar role as the lady-killing vet, Tristan Farnon, in the third series of *All Creatures Great and Small*; and after that, in his long-awaited début as the fifth and dishiest Doctor Who. Even though he is officially 750, the Doctor won't look a day over 30. Two hearts can make an amazing difference.

Emerging from the *Doctor Who* studio in distinctly loud, striped trousers and a beige frock-coat with lots of unidentified extra-terrestrial foliage in the button-hole, Peter Davison looked a trifle out-andish, but was in every other way refreshingly down-to-earth.

'Right now I'm getting a bit more than my fair share of work – I'm very lucky. But these things are never permanent. Straight after my first television part [as a space cowboy in *The Tomorrow People*] I was out of work for 18 months. I just took a job as a filing clerk – that was no hardship. The only problem I foresee next time I'm unemployed is that it will be much more difficult for me to do an ordinary job because people recognise me. I think I'd be forced to "rest" and draw the

dole with dignity.' Doctor Whos tend to stay in the same body for an average of four-and-a-half years, so it's unlikely to be an immediate problem.

The second series of *Sink or Swim* finds Brian and his sex-obsessed brother, Steve, very much where they left off – penniless, disorganised and bickering, with Brian's earnest and ecology-minded girlfriend Sonia still trying to open their cloddish Northern eyes to the sublimity of meditation, ginseng and saving the whale.

'I've got right inside Brian's skin now and I'm very comfortable in the part,' says Davison. 'Brian is convinced he missed out on a lot, not having been brought up in London where it all happens. He wants to experience things and improve himself, but he's hopelessly naïve.'

Most of the laughs come from the contrast between him and his forthright, cynical young brother, who believes that most issues in life boil down to how satisfactory your sex life is. Apart from the abrasive, sparring affection they have for each other, they are a pretty hopeless pair – comic because they are sad. *Sink or Swim* was a welcome new departure for Peter Davison; the gauche, unlucky Brian is the exact antithesis of Tristan, with his devil-may-care charm.

With episodes of *Sink or Swim* and *Doctor Who* in production simultaneously,

Peter has found himself playing one role in the morning and the other the same afternoon. Is this at all confusing?

'No, not really, they're so very different. But I'm glad they're not actually going out at the

Sink or Swim, Thursday 8.30 BBC1

Add the heart-throb Tristan to the clumsy Brian, throw in a dash of flamboyant Doctor Who... and you should come up with Peter Davison, a very busy actor about to embark on a new series of *Sink or Swim*. He talks to Nicki Household

The life of Brian

same time, or people might be forgiven for thinking there's only one actor in the world! I'm still feeling my way as Doctor Who – it takes time to get into a part like that. And I like to begin by playing any character very straight and letting an identity emerge almost by itself. There'll be a lot of me in him, I expect, but I also want to blend in aspects of other Doctor Whos. He'll be crotchety sometimes like William Hartnell and occasionally a bit baffled like Patrick Troughton, who was my own favourite as a child.' He says the best advice he has had to date came from a small boy on *Pebble Mill*, who said Davison's Doctor Who should be 'like Tristan, but brave'. 'That's more or less where I've pitched it.'

Allowing the character itself to 'take over' a part is a technique that he believes has worked well for him. 'I had no real idea what Tristan Farnon was going to be like at first. I started him off quite bland, but he very quickly came to life. I wasn't so used to the ways of television in those days and I remember waiting for someone to comment on my perform-

ance. Tristan was first seen waking up in a car with a terrible hangover. I played the scene and then waited for the director to make encouraging noises, but there was total silence. Finally he said quietly, "All right, everyone, we'll go on", and I assumed I had been appalling. The same thing happened after my very first *Doctor Who* scene, but these days I know what that silence means. It means, "You're doing OK, carry on." In that way, television is completely different from the theatre, where everyone tells everyone else how marvellous they are.'

Peter Davison's experience of the theatre is limited to three years in rep after the Central School of Speech and Drama (where he went after leaving his secondary modern school in Woking with three O-levels) and, just recently, a production of *Barefoot in the Park* at the Churchill Theatre, Bromley, in which he co-starred with his American actress Sandra Dickinson. Sandra was the glamorous alien Trillian in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in which her husband



Peter Davison in a trio of starring roles... 'Right now I'm getting a bit more than my fair share of work – I'm very lucky'



A bespectacled Peter Davison as Brian with Sara Corper (the earnest girlfriend Sonia) and Robert Glenister as Brian's brother Steve

made an incognito cameo appearance as an intergalactic space animal. 'No, there's no spirit of competition between us,' he says, 'but I don't know if my male pride could stand it if she were getting more work than me!'

They live in what he describes as 'a nice, ordinary modern house' near his parents in Woking, and have four cats. 'Three of them are quite ordinary, like me; the fourth is a Persian Chinchilla which I married with my wife. We're both very keen on cats - they're so independent.' His ordinariness he continually stresses. 'My natural accent is sloppy

South London. I still slip back into it with old friends, even though I had what was called Received Pronunciation drummed into me at drama school. Most people would call it "talking posh". These days I adjust my speech automatically according to who I'm with. In an interview and on the telephone my accent is very "received" because I'm trying to create a good impression.'

He is the son of an electrical engineer and the family (he has three sisters) lived in Streatham before moving to Woking when he was ten.

After his 18 months as a filing clerk in a tax office, Peter

spent nearly two years playing a single part in the drama series *Love for Lydia* and then went on to spend three years in *All Creatures Great and Small*. 'By playing the sum total of two parts in five years I managed to miss out on building up a career slowly.

I'm particularly grateful to Tristan, because a lot of his confidence rubbed off on me. A few years ago I was very shy. I still am, really, but being known makes life a lot easier. People accept you and you don't have to keep breaking the ice. When you've been on the box, everyone is your

friend. But otherwise acting is an ordinary job like any other - I wouldn't want to make too much of it.'

Being a modest chap, he didn't mention the hundreds of fan letters he gets from ladies who fancy him as Tristan Farnon. As bespectacled Brian he is a little less glamorous, but he'll find it hard to avoid being a fanciable Doctor Who. Past Doctor Whos have had to get used to signing hundreds of autographs an hour and addressing the well-informed members of university Doctor Who societies. So the charming busy Peter Davison has got even busier days ahead. ●