

Sixth of One

Colin Baker. The Doctor who will be remembered by many readers of this article as the only actor to play the part indubitably to have been dismissed by his BBC employers. Even before this unhappy event his characterisation had proved one of the most controversial in the programme's history.

‘Change, my dear. And it seems not a moment too soon.’

Thus spoke the sixth Doctor as he confronted an incredulous Peri and a more accommodating audience in the final part of *The Caves of Androzani* on March 21, 1984. However, one could say that Colin Baker had been the Doctor for as long as seven months, as it had been in August 1983 that the BBC had presented him as the Fifth Doctor's successor.

It was thought in some quarters at the time that Colin Baker was the ideal Doctor of the BBC executives, thought to be reflected in his much-reported ambition to outlast Tom Baker's seven season tenure, and in the outlandish costume premiered at the January photocall, indicating the contrast between the sixth Doctor's outspoken ebullience and his predecessor's subdued – some may think even bland – character. One criticism of the Peter Davison Doctor had been that he, and the stories in which he appeared, lacked humour. The secret of success appeared to lie in the overstatement for which it was thought the public remembered Tom Baker (still the Doctor to much of the audience in 1983/4) and this was reinforced in Colin's first script.

‘I am the Doctor, whether you like it or not.’

The Twin Dilemma was a decisive break with what had been built up over the previous four seasons, but in a sense fulfilled it. The return to realism in *Doctor Who*, as opposed to the increasingly bizarre style of production advocated by Graham Williams, always had the potential to degenerate into pastiche. *The Twin Dilemma* seemed to fit this role. An egomaniac, over-theatrical Doctor, and a whining assistant, were pitted against a ridiculous-looking monster that not even the cast could take seriously. It was lucky for the production team that there were nine months between *The Twin Dilemma* and *Attack of the Cybermen* in broadcast terms, giving the new Doctor the opportunity of an early relaunch.

Attack of the Cybermen and *Vengeance on Varos* displayed many of the strengths and weaknesses of the previous two seasons. In the first case, a potentially good story was weighed down by continuity-based complexities, most notably the character of Lytton. In its new slot, the programme should have been avoiding confusing references to past stories, however good Maurice Colbourne's performance. *Varos*,

while deriving its plot from the then active computer/video games craze, suffered not only from the old cliches such as the final "whatever can we do to repay you?" scene, and the long-exhausted Doctor-helps-rebels seam, but also from poor pacing, the consequence of placing the majority of episodes in the season with writers who had no *Doctor Who* experience, despite the cruciality of mastering the new forty-five minute format.

'Finito TARDIS! How's that for style?'

The Mark of the Rani marked a return to an older style of *Doctor Who* story, based on science or pseudo-science and relating to a firm historical background - this time George Stephenson's period of employment as chief engineer at Killingworth Colliery, then in Northumberland. Viewing figures for this story increased by over a million (from 6.28 to 7.29) indicating that the straightforwardness of the dialogue (in contrast to Pip and Jane Baker's later contributions to the series) and the plot were appealing to viewers.

It was during the next story that the world of *Doctor Who* was turned upside down. *The Two Doctors* seems in retrospect a rather pedestrian effort, great fun being had by all as Patrick Troughton and Frazer Hines helped Colin Baker and Nicola Bryant through the padded scenes six-parter connoisseurs cherish. The story was overshadowed by events in the real world that made the major news programmes.

For *Doctor Who* fans the announcement of the postponement of season 23 carries the same kind of memory-enhancing effects as Kennedy's assassination does for others. various excuses were made by the BBC for BBC 1 controller Michael Grade's unexpected decision, eventually settling on the ludicrous "the problem is not just financial, it is also about scripts and resources," to quote from the letter sent by then BBC managing director Bill Cotton to DWAS co-ordinator David Saunders. Considering scripts and directors had been assigned, and location filming for the first story already organised, the story reported in the Merseyside Local Group newsletter, and subsequently in *DWB*, that the postponement was all part of a scheme to ruin *Doctor Who*'s USA distributor Lionheart Television, enabling the BBC to buy out the other two shareholders and thereby increase their international sales revenue, seems more plausible.

'You microcephalic apostate!'

Although heavily derided immediately following its broadcast, in retrospect *Timelash* stands on fairly firm ground as far as its plot is concerned. The acting was let down by two thespians: Paul Darrow (Tekker) and David Chandler (Herbert), one of whom was obviously cynical in his work attitude, and the other saddled with a part that only existed to supply an under used plotline about the inspiration for H.G. Wells's early writings. Colin Baker, however, showed his talent for lending dignity to material that did not reach its full potential on screen. This was to come in useful in 1986.

According to one version of the postponement myth, Michael Grade made his insidious decision after previewing *Revelation of the Daleks* which failed to match his

idea of a programme whose place in the schedules was at 5.20 pm and only at 5.20 pm. The story does perhaps contain needless gore, such as the destruction of Davros's hand and the impaling of Jobel. Despite this, or indeed because of it, the story reached first place in both the Marvel and DWAS polls.

'We're going to...'

Amid the speculation concerning the series' future, Eric Saward wrote *Slipback* for the Radio 4 children's strand, *Pirate Radio 4*. This, apart from its derivative ending — the ship *Vipod Mor* travelling back in time to start the Big Bang, lifted from Steve Gallagher's Davison script *Terminus* — was probably Eric Saward's most original contribution since *The Visitation*, being witty both in characterisation and execution. Between March 1985 and September 1986 the production team seemed to be under the constant supervision of Grade and other senior BBC figures, although Colin Baker and John Nathan-Turner have denied this was the case. However the new series did have the air of one produced within severe restrictions.

True, there was a large amount of tabloid pre-publicity, and at first glance the season appeared extremely well constructed. Individual stories were to be rendered more exciting by the Doctor's third court appearance before the Time Lords. However, as the fourteen episodes progressed it became apparent to all but wishful thinkers that there was something seriously wrong.

Valeyard or Knacker's Yard?

Firstly the main storylines were hardly inspiring. Philip Martin's Sil plotline for episodes 5-8 was probably the most successful but, like *Vengeance on Varos*, they suffered from the worn dramatic clichés of Doctor-helping-rebels-against-monsters. Pip and Jane Baker's *Terror of the Vervoids* had an enticing premise — an Agatha Christie country house mystery in space — but withered on a vine polluted by the Bakers' excessively pompous dialogue (the series by this time lacked Eric Saward to regulate it), the miscasting of Bonnie Langford (not that she didn't try very hard to overcome her problematic persona) and the terribly outdated and embarrassing Vervoid costumes.

Just as important was the "Trial of a Time Lord" itself. It lacked the robustness to carry anyone but the most ardent **Doctor Who** fan, and its interposition with other plotlines caused at best confusion, weakening any tension that remained in the flat production. This particularly applied to the first four episodes, where the audience were presented with questions that were not answered for two months, such as the "bleeping" of the word "Matrix" every time Glitz mentioned it. Although the final two episodes were better, they suffered from the deficiencies of the rest of the season. Two episodes cannot explain the plot holes of twelve, although the writers made a valiant effort to get themselves out of the pit they'd dug.

'Carrot juice, carrot juice, carrot juice...'

One thing that can be said in favour of the twenty-third series is that most of the

performers acquitted themselves well. The Doctor was more restrained than before, perhaps making his character more endearing to a broader audience. Nicola Bryant improved tremendously, as less revealing costumes and maturer lines gave her a chance to act. The contributions of Nabil Shaban, Tony Selby and Michael Jayston can also be commended. Nevertheless they seemed to have little impact on the programme's ratings, hovering at the very low figure of about four million. Much of the blame for this, apart from the ramshackle season format, must lie in the scheduling. The A-Team had gained a great deal of television exposure in-between March 1985 and September 1986, whereas no *Doctor Who* episodes were shown, leaving B.A. Baracus and the rest in a commanding position. The Doctor was also affected by Michael Grade's decision to take TV-am's hype about the puppet Roland Rat saving the breakfast ITV franchise holder seriously enough to make the rodent the "hook" for Saturday evening's viewing. Instead, however, of gaining around seven million viewers as expected, the rat was a dismal failure who never got his claws into the top 100, *Blockbusters* wiping the floor. After all the publicity attendant on Michael Grade's "The jury is still out" statements, and the programme's ratings collapse following the introduction of more "humour" and a reduction on "violence" (presumably referring to gratuitous gore such as Shockeye's rat-based diet in *The Two Doctors*), the BBC hierarchy appear to have needed a scapegoat.

The news that Colin Baker was to be removed from the helm of the TARDIS first broke in an article written to accompany episode thirteen in the *Daily Mirror*, after a cryptic comment by Colin Baker on that morning's *Saturday Superstore*. It was confirmed by an official statement about three weeks later. In later interviews, Colin Baker was repeatedly quizzed about Michael Grade, the continuing tenure of John Nathan-Turner in the producer's chair, along with aspects of *Who* such as scripts. In all cases he generally displayed moderation, despite the wish of publications such as *The Sun* for him to do otherwise. Nevertheless he still felt ready to return to *Doctor Who* with his appearance in *The Ultimate Adventure* in 1989, in which he seemingly effortlessly succeeded in overlaying Jon Pertwee's stamp with his own.

Hopefully if he manages to appear at a meeting sometime this year you will be able to find out for yourselves whether his views have changed over the years.

MATTHEW KILBURN

Twenty-first century notes

The last sentence was an editorial addition, as the Oxford University Doctor Who Society had hopes of entertaining and being entertained by Colin Baker at a meeting in the 1990/91 academic year. This never came about.

I think that I might only have seen the Trial stories and possibly Vengeance on Varos since transmission at the time that I wrote this piece. The perspective of a nineteen-year-old in 1990 is difficult to recapture in 2010.