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SFX



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**THE
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*AS VOTED FOR BY READERS OF DOCTOR WHO MAGAZINE IN 2023



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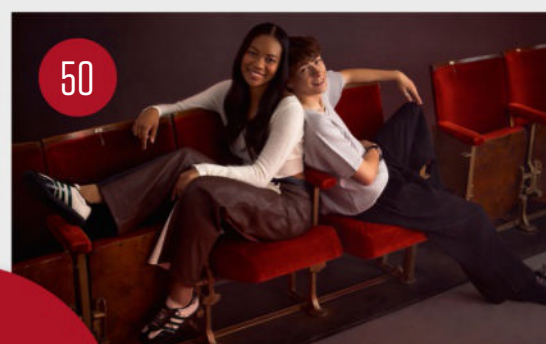
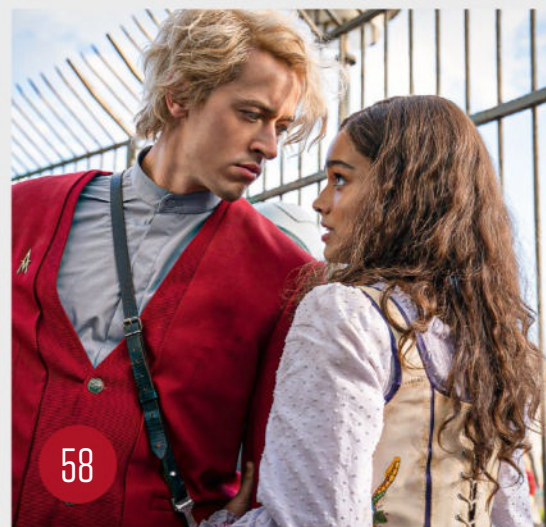
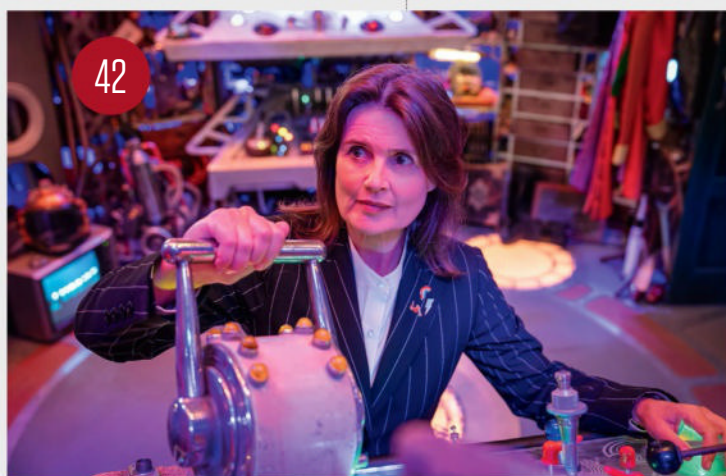
The first spots of Snow, if you catch our drift.

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When we watch it, we kinda feel like we're on drugs.

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GET IN TOUCH!

First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!



BITE BACK

Robert MacDonald Loved reading the retrospective article on *Ultraviolet* in SFX 370. I'd forgotten Philip Quast played a central role. Did he break into his Javert role from *Les Mis* mid-take? Mr Davenport is giving an excellent resting bitch face in the promo photo too... It's a shame the show wasn't given room to expand. Ah well, fangs ain't what they used to be...

DEVELOPING THOUGHTS

David Spragg, email In the details paragraph that starts all your game reviews you list the format/s the game is on, as well as the publisher. You don't list the developer, however, and yet that is who actually makes the game.

I appreciate that many people may not follow developers closely, but knowing who made a game can be a good indication as to whether it may appeal, even beyond the context of a review. People who enjoyed a previous game from a developer might be more inclined to try their new release, having an idea of what it might be like, whereas two games from the same publisher may be very different prospects. It's somewhat akin to providing the production studio information but omitting the director from a film review.

SFX: We try to keep stats short so they don't eat into the space for body copy, and reviewers of games will often mention a developer within. But we'll give it some thought!

GLAM HEADER DETECTIVE

Ian Smalley, email Re: *The Wicker Man* 4K review ("Slayed in flame"). Just wondering how many people apart from me and the reviewer recognised the reference to a 48-year-old film and album?

SFX: Cum on feel the punz...



No One Will Save You:
Brilliant film! Should have had a cinema release.

Iain Brooks



If it takes any longer to make Star Trek 4 they might as well start with the Next Generation crew.

@RichardCurry7

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SFX

DECEMBER 2023 | Issue 372

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Doctor Who © BBC Studios/

Bad Wolf.

Photos: Zoe McConnell/Alistair Heap.

Stock art: Getty

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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons

& Sons on behalf of Future.

Distributed by Marketforce, 5

Churchill Place, Canary Wharf,

London, E14 5HU

marketforce.co.uk

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ISSN 1358-5959

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SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) December 2023, Issue 372, is published monthly with an extra issue

in December by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK.

The US annual subscription price is \$171.60. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent

named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St., Jamaica, NY 11435, USA.

Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to SFX, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St.,

Jamaica, NY 11435, USA.

Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions,

Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH, UK

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed,

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"So you're just going to have an earbud stuck in you overnight?"



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Captain's Log



Doctor Who has – as I've often said – helped shape the life I know and love. Not only have I made wonderful friends because of the show, but it's inadvertently responsible for getting me into journalism and putting me on the path that led to editing this very magazine. It opened the doors to so many other shows, films, books, comics and worlds inbetween – it was my gateway to unashamedly loving many genres. While *Doctor Who* celebrates turning 60 this month, I didn't want to spend time looking *back* in this issue. We've been doing that all year and there's weighty tomes and websites (and apparently magazines?) slavishly recording such details in great depth. There's more Classic series stuff to come from us, but what I want to do right now is look *forward*: to new adventures, to a new era, to celebrate every little new morsel we possibly can. As ever, do be mindful of things you might consider to be a spoiler before the new episodes air – you have been warned!

But wow, what an issue this has been! A lot of love and very hard work has gone into bringing you the exclusive content and goodies inside (check out the downloads on pages 86 and 115). Please help support print publications by not sharing anything online that official *SFX* channels haven't already posted. We'd like to still be around to give you the same treatment for Ncuti's era – and what a ride that's going to be!

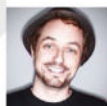
Here's to the next 60 years...

Darren
X

© BBC

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind



DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ In case it needs saying, writing about *Doctor Who* for this issue was an utter joy.

→ Loved the latest season of *Creepshow*, I could watch it all year round. I'm also really enjoying *Goosebumps*.

→ Great news for the writers – now, let's see the actors sorted too!

RANTS

→ Multi-million dollar productions with next to no publicity – what's the point?

→ I firmly debunk Ian's review of the "Time And The Rani" soundtrack on page 111.



IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ The long wait for more *Doctor Who* is nearly over! I re-read "The Star Beast" in preparation. Wonder if the TV viewers of 2023 will guess that it's **REDACTED**

→ New four-part Sky Arts documentary *Wonderland Gothic* (premiering at 9pm on 7 November) is essential viewing for anyone who dresses entirely in black.

→ Bit late to the party here, but fans of Stuart Gordon should check out *Naked Theater & Uncensored Horror*, a memoir by the late director (available from FAB Press).

RANTS

→ "Debunking" involves actually providing some evidence...



JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Had to psyche myself up for another *Star Wars* series, but *Ahsoka* was worth it – best thing they've done since *The Mandalorian* season two in my opinion.



ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

I'm not a diehard *Doctor Who* fan by any means, but by god am I looking forward to "Wild Blue Yonder". I do *not* know what happens, and I'm all the more excited for it.

RANTS

→ The first 20 minutes of *Cobweb* were good.

→ The first 25 minutes of *No One Will Save You* were good.

→ The first 6m 55s of *Evil Dead Rise* were good. I've seen it all before, horror filmmakers.



NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ A treat to see Charlie Higson talking about all things 007 at Topping & Co in Bath. Let's hope he gets a shot at another James Bond novel or two.

RIP

→ Sad to hear of the passing of David McCallum. So brilliantly alien in *Sapphire And Steel*, but forever The Invisible Man to me.



TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

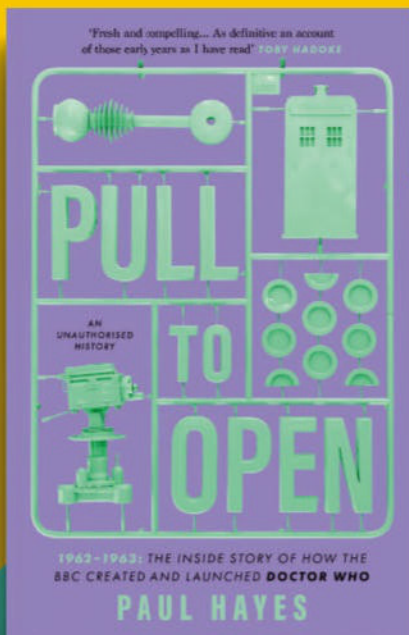
RAVES

→ Really enjoying the Apple TV+ series *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*. A clever tying together of all the film mythologies, with great new characters. Plus both Russells (Kurt and Wyatt) are excellent.

→ *Blue Eye Samurai* is a gorgeous, intense and very bloody adult animated saga, that's well worth watching.

TEN ACRE FILMS

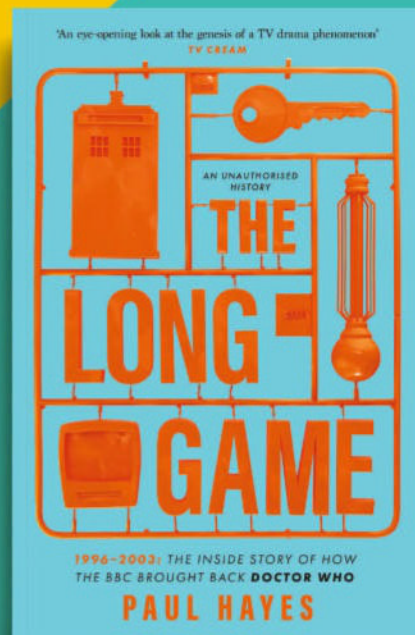
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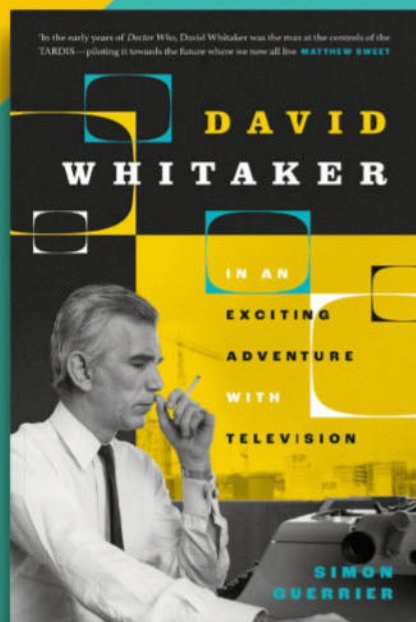
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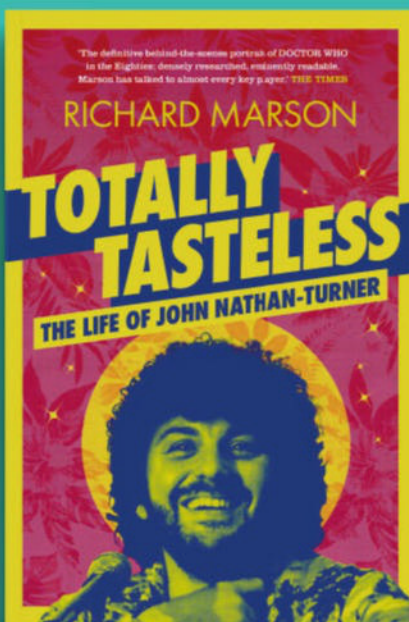
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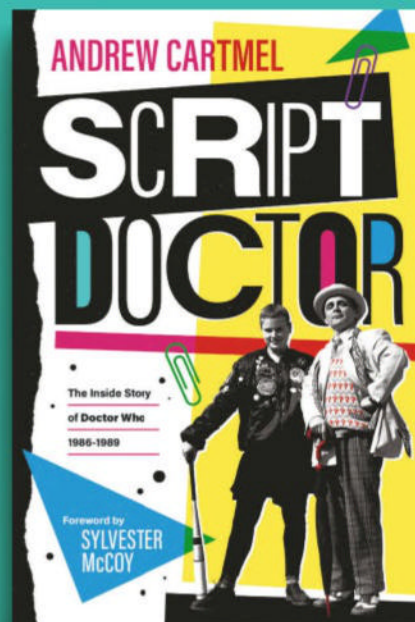
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15 RETURN TO BATTLEWORLD

Tom DeFalco's back for a new chapter in Marvel's epic *Secret Wars*

Highlights



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INVINCIBLE

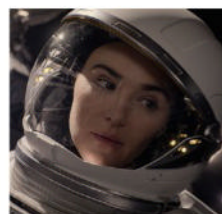
→ It's been a while, but season two of Robert Kirkman's Prime Video series is finally here.



10

THE ENFIELD HAUNTING

→ Catherine Tate in a new supernatural stage play based on real-life events.



12

FOR ALL MANKIND

→ Find out what's next for humanity as the alternate universe sci-fi continues.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Son Of A Gun

Robert Kirkman reveals what's next for 18-rated animated series **Invincible** WORDS: TARA BENNETT



WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST WTF moment that fledgling superhero Mark Grayson (Steven Yeun) experienced by the first season finale of *Invincible*? No question, it was finding out that his dad Nolan – the omnipotent superhero Omni-Man (JK Simmons) – is actually a first-wave alien agent for the barbaric Viltrum Empire. And, yes, that majorly sucks for Mark, and for Earth, as they collectively watched Omni-Man fly off into space and disappear.

The long-awaited “what happens next” for Grayson in Prime Video’s animated adaptation of Robert Kirkman’s Image comic is finally here, after an 18-month production delay. Kirkman promises Red Alert that it will have been worth the wait.

“We dive in right from where season one left off,” Kirkman says, referring to the emotional

fallout of Nolan’s betrayal of Mark and his wife, Debbie (Sandra Oh) – but also of Earth. “Nolan was the strongest superhero on Earth and was the last line of defence if something really bad happened, so he was absolutely essential to the functioning of Earth in this crazy superhero universe.”

At the end of season one, Mark was warned by Allen the Alien (Seth Rogen) that the Viltrumites are out there in the universe, and they’ll be coming for Earth. He then teased that the Coalition of Planets might be their saving grace. Kirkman confirms the Coalition will be a “huge part” of season two and beyond.

“It’s something that we’re going to get to see. There’s a glimpse of Thaedus, the leader of the Coalition of Planets, in our teaser trailer, and I’m super-excited that Peter Cullen is playing him,” Kirkman says, clearly delighted to have coaxed the Optimus Prime voice actor to *Invincible*. “Being able to work with an absolute legend is great. If you want a sense of authority in the galaxy, you can’t do better.”

The Coalition and its representation of many alien species will broaden Mark’s world, with

Um, sir?
You’ve still got
your anti-
snore thing on.





"You're a big man, but... you're out of shape?"

an array of new characters. One of them is the portal-hopping bad guy, Angstrom Levy. "Sterling K Brown was a big one, because I couldn't conceive of anyone else being Levy," Kirkman says of luring the actor.

"Then we happened to be working on the *Renfield* movie when we started casting season two, and from the minute I met Ben Schwartz, I was like, 'Would he play Shapemaster? Can we make that happen?'" Turns out they did, as Schwartz will voice the Martian who disguises himself as human astronaut Rus Livingston. Other new additions include undisclosed characters voiced by Chloe Bennet, Lea Thompson, Cliff Curtis and Daveed Diggs.

How all these new characters will impact Grayson and Earth is still hush-hush, but Kirkman does confirm that *Invincible's* two-season pick-up was a "godsend" and has allowed he and fellow showrunner Simon Racioppa to chart out the show's progression in a way they could not previously.

"Being able to plan two seasons at once, instead of just one, is killer," he says. "There's a giant gap between season one and two that was unavoidable because of the pandemic and all kinds of other factors. But we're not going to see that between season two and three.



“There’s a glimpse of Thaedeus, the leader of the Coalition of Planets, in our teaser trailer”

Theoretically, if we're fortunate enough to get season four, you're not going to see that between season three and four either, so that's really exciting."

Asked how they're pacing out the comic book arc of Grayson's story into a TV season equivalent, Kirkman teases that they've plotted out a "fairly steady progression" of Mark's development. "I love that there's a lot of 'three

steps forward and four steps back' situations when it comes to his growing and maturing. Season to season, I feel like as we adapt the comics, that's kind of built in."

So too are the big milestone moments in Grayson's life as a superhero and young man. "When we're trying to figure out what we're going to do with a season of *Invincible*, it starts with finding the finale," Kirkman says.

"What's really important to me, personally, is that we leave every season with this massive event where people don't know where they go from here, saying, 'I can't wait for it! This is insane!'"

Invincible is on Prime Video from 3 November.

SCI-FACT! In the 2011 film *Paul*, Simon Pegg's comic book fan Graeme wears an *Invincible* T-shirt at one point.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Stage Presence

A poltergeist comes to the West End in **The Enfield Haunting** WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



“IT’S NOT A GHOST story,” insists Paul Unwin, writer of *The Enfield Haunting*. “It’s a true story.”

Opening in the West End this month, the play is inspired by one of Britain’s most disturbing and enduring cases of apparent paranormal activity. In the late 1970s a North London council house was home to an alleged poltergeist. The family at 284 Green Street reported furniture and objects moving of their own accord. Daughter Janet was recorded speaking for hours in an unsettling growl, said to be channelling the spirit of a dead man. One photo even purports to show the girl levitating.

THEY’RE HERE

As Unwin tells Red Alert, his interest in these uncanny events was sparked by an encounter with writer and parapsychologist Guy Lyon Playfair, who originally investigated the case.

“My agent said, ‘You should go and see this guy, he’s extraordinary,’” says Unwin, who co-created *Casualty*. “I went to his basement flat in Earl’s Court, around eight years ago now. I was pretty sceptical, to be honest, when I walked in, but the atmosphere in his flat was slightly weird. He was a very intense man. We talked a lot about the world of the paranormal, poltergeists in particular, and moved on to the Enfield story as the afternoon went on.

“What really struck me was how he took no prisoners in terms of scepticism. It was ‘You either believe this or you don’t. I’ve spent

my life investigating these events.’ I definitely felt my understanding of the world had changed. At times I felt really quite uneasy.”

Lockdown saw Unwin return to the story. “I thought, ‘Actually, there’s something here’, and went back to my notes and my memory of that day. Could I do a play that was very intense, very dramatic, very theatrical and which didn’t necessarily give you the answer to what happened in Enfield but which certainly distilled some of it? I had to find the centre of the story. That took a bit of time.”

That emotional core is brought to the stage with Catherine Tate as Peggy Hodgson, the single mother

“It was the peak of Jimmy Savile and Peter Sutcliffe”

struggling to protect her children from the distressing goings-on. *Shameless*’s David Threlfall plays Maurice Grosse, the ghost hunter who takes on the case.

“They both said exactly the same thing: ‘We don’t want to do a ghost story.’ What they said they liked about the script was that it’s funny, and it’s moving, and it’s about characters. There is poltergeist activity in it and it’s about a lot of weird things going on. But it’s not a ghost story!”

“This is a lost family story. They’re in real trouble and the mother is a lioness. She’s trying to hold the whole thing together. Catherine is breathtaking in this part. Everyone thinks of her as a

Catherine Tate and David Threlfall in full ’70s mode.





comedian, and truthfully there are some funny moments, but her quality of emotion is just beyond what you can imagine with those kids. David, what he's revealing in this character, who's both the nicest guy in the world but also does something, I think, quite bad... It's quite emotional, it's quite charged."

For Unwin, the play is a chance to explore the darker currents of the 1970s while holding a mirror to our own times.

"That period I remember really well," he says. "It was the peak of Jimmy Savile and the awfulness of Peter Sutcliffe and those murders, and the long, weird, hot summer of 1976. So it really does look like something from that period, but it's also about now. We're in a time where what is true, what is real and what is collective fantasy is right back on our emotional radar. There's just this world of noise and bollocks. So it's a period play about a family in that time, but it really does talk about collective hysteria.

"It's about an embattled family.

It's not a posh house, it's not posh people. A real working class London family, who are under a lot of pressure. And the pressure does all this stuff to them. And then something happens which fucks their minds – and our minds as well."

If Unwin wants proof of the afterlife, he's still waiting. "I did say to Guy Lyon Playfair 'You're quite a lot older than I am, therefore you're closer to dying. It would be interesting when you do die to come back and haunt me, because that would really prove it.'"

Playfair died in 1918. "Nothing's happened," Unwin admits. ●

The Enfield Haunting is at The Ambassadors Theatre, London from 30 November. Visit enfieldhauntingplay.com.



NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- This deal is getting better all the time... Disney's **Star Wars: Lando** series now being retooled for the big screen.
- Gaspar Noé adapting William Burroughs's 1961 novel **The Soft Machine** as a movie.
- Jason Blum targeting **Spawn** for a 2025 release.
- *How To Train Your Dragon's* Chris Sanders directing **The Wild Robot** for DreamWorks Animation.
- *Romeo Must Die's* Andrzej Bartkowiak helming supernatural thriller **The Dire Wolf**.
- Miramax secure TV rights to the **Halloween** franchise after bid war.
- James Gunn reveals **DC Studios** movies set to be mostly filmed at Leavesden Studios in the UK.
- Blumhouse eyeing the **Friday The 13th** franchise for a "back to basics" reboot.
- Paramount Animation adapting the **Superworld** book series by husband and wife Yarrow and Carrie Cheney.
- Marc Webb replacing Scott Derrickson as director of Bermuda Triangle movie **Bermuda**.
- Spinning compasses ahoy!



► **SCI-FACT!** The events also inspired 2016's *The Conjuring 2* and 2015 TV series *The Enfield Haunting*.



Krys Marshall returns as astronaut Danielle Poole.



THOSE DISAPPOINTED by humanity's general apathy towards space exploration in 2023 should start watching *For All Mankind*. Its alt-history premise posits how the world might have been different if the USSR had landed on the Moon before the US.

With a fourth season arriving this month, the Apple TV+ series continues to weave together insanely rich stories about the people pushing for exploration with the grandeur of what progressive global space programs might look like in action.

In the season three finale, there was the ecstasy of North Korea, NASA, the Soviets, and private company Helios coming together to make Happy Valley – the first Mars colony – function.

Then there was the counterpoint agony of the terrorist attack that devastated the Johnson Space Center, taking the lives of space program vanguards Karen Baldwin (Shantel VanSanten) and former astronaut Molly Cobb (Sonya Walger). Plus, the surprise flash-forward defection of NASA engineer Margo Madison (Wrenn Schmidt) to Russia in 2003.

Executive producers Ben Nedivi and Matt Wolpert confirm to *Red Alert* that the new season picks up eight years after that terrorist attack, in 2003; expect a lot of alt-history changes to be revealed in their signature opening montage of historical, political, societal and pop culture milestones. In particular, that tentative alliance to make Happy Valley hospitable for human life is revealed to be a stunning success.

“We wondered what if that initial cooperation for survival kept going, and it spread back to Earth and made these Cold War rivals start to work together in a more simpatico way?” Wolpert says of the bigger impact of success on Mars. “Yet on the flip side of that, a big part of our show has always been that on one side, there’s progress. Then there’s the reaction to progress, the

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Noughties By Nature

For All Mankind season four gets messy

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

sort of blowback from progress, or the unanticipated consequences of that.”

Unsurprisingly, that means the commercialisation of space has arrived, which manifests in the idea of asteroid mining. Wolpert says John Huston’s adaptation of *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre* very much

inspired their approach to writing that arc.

“It’s about that gold rush feeling when there’s a treasure out there,” Nedivi says of what asteroids represent to all of the concerned parties on Mars. “It’s a resource unlike any resource we’ve ever had, and we can go and grab it. Trying to mine an asteroid, the impact that has both politically





Masha Mashkova and Joel Kinnaman blast off.



Toby Kebbell is the decidedly non-boffin-like Miles.



Tense discussions in the control room ahoy!

and economically on Earth is something we explore this season. That's something we're really intrigued with this year, in terms of the promise of this resource, but also the potential peril of it."

Back on Earth, Wolpert teases, Margo Madison's life in the Soviet Union will be a big part of season four, too. "We think of the Soviet Union as one of our new worlds

that we're visiting," he says of setting major stories there. "We were really intrigued by the idea of taking this woman, who from season one we have seen be in the room where it happens, and work her way up to *running* that room. She's used to making all these decisions, being the 'buck stops here' person. And now she has no voice, and no say in a strange land.

It was an intriguing place to take that character and see how she deals with suddenly not having any power, not having any agency – how does she overcome that?"

Not wanting to spoil the fates of some other fan-favourite characters, Nedivi just says that audiences should be prepared for how dramatically some have aged, and how others have changed trajectories. But to also expect new faces who will carry on the spirit of discovery.

"We wanted to open the show up this season, so we felt after this many decades of space travel, it

“We think of the Soviet Union as one of our new worlds”

would open up to new kinds of people," Nedivi explains. "The new character of Miles [Toby Kebbell] is really representative of that, along with Samantha [Tyner Rushing]. Those two characters represent the more blue-collar, everyday person coming to Mars, and how different their experiences are from the trained, elitist astronauts that have been

up there. The tension you start to see, even in episode one, explores that idea that the experience they were promised on Mars maybe isn't exactly what it ends up being."

With the *For All Mankind* alt-calendar gaining fast on our real-life calendar, Wolpert says they've got a

concrete ending in mind to close the series. "In the initial conversations about the show, we definitely mapped out an arc of how far we thought we wanted to go. But I don't think we're there yet," he adds. "It's a generational story, so it can keep going." ●

For All Mankind is on Apple TV+ from 10 November.



NEWS WARP HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Neil Gaiman confirms he's been hired to write season three of **Good Omens**. For now he's the only writer attached to the season.

→ Netflix renewing **Castlevania: Nocturne** for a second season.

→ **Vince Gilligan's** new sci-fi series for Apple TV+ will reunite him with *Better Call Saul's* Rhea Seehorn and already has a two-season order.

→ Live-action version of videogame **Cyberpunk 2077** in development, set to feature an all-new story within the world of the original game.

→ James Gunn currently writing the second season of **Peacemaker**

– and plans to begin production after he's wrapped **Superman: Legacy**.

→ Netflix commissioning a sequel to Roar Uthaug's 2022 Norwegian horror **Troll**.

→ **Paranormal Activity** heading to London's West End as a stage production with a script by Levi Holloway.

→ And 1996's **The Craft** could be on its way to Broadway as a musical version...
→ Gabrielle Ruiz returning as T'Lyn for **Lower Decks** season five.



➤ SCI-FACT! The first episode is titled "Glasnost", after Mikhail Gorbachev's concept of transparency with the world.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

➔ FROM WHOOPEE! TO 2000 AD and *Battle*, many children down the years have looked forward to receiving an annual in their Christmas stocking. Now Rebellion are reviving the tradition with the first *Treasury Of British Comics Annual*, which combines new stories with vintage strips such as a Brian Bolland-drawn *Spinball* episode from the 1979 *Action Annual* and the Dave Gibbons-illustrated "The Ghost Pilot" from 1975's *The Buster Book Of Scary Stories*.

"UK annuals were always a big part of my formative Christmases," recalls Simon Furman, who has written a special eight-pager featuring the first meeting between the Leopard From Lime Street and the Spider. "They were a mix of humour and action/adventure titles like *Buster*, *Whizzer & Chips*, *Lion*, *Valiant* and *Smash!* I was utterly immersed in the worlds of the Spider, Adam Eterno, the Steel Claw, Janus Stark and many more, so to contribute to *The Treasury Of British Comics Annual* is another big career bucket-list tick."

The teenage Leopard From Lime Street, who originally graced the pages of *Buster* from 1975 to 1986, may not appear to be in the same league as evil super-genius the Spider, who was a mainstay in *Lion* throughout the late '60s. "It's maybe not the most obvious match-up, but in his own recent strip in *Monster Fun* we've been trying to pit Billy against proper, super-powered villains instead of just crooks in a costume so as to

Shocking Filler

Rebellion's **Treasury Of British Comics Annual** revives retro festivities

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

give him a proper rogues' gallery," says Furman. "With this in mind, we wanted to bring him together with one of British comics' premiere anti-heroes and make him part of a pantheon of classic characters. For various reasons, the Spider was a good fit, playing – in a tongue-in-cheek way – into that thing of the Leopard being known as 'the British Spider-Man.'"

Emulating *The Leopard From Lime Street*'s original illustrative team of Mike Western and Eric Bradbury, David Roach has teamed up on "The Spider Vs The Leopard From Lime Street" with Mike Collins. "I wasn't sure if I'd have time to draw it all by myself and I knew Mike would be terrific at the action sequences in particular," says Roach. "It was a simple working relationship on this one – Mike pencilled it, and I inked it."

Meanwhile, having previously revived *Black Beth* for several titles, including 2021 one-shot *Black Beth And The Devils Of Al-Kadesh*, Alec Worley has reunited with artist DaNi on another tale of *Scream!*'s Red Sonja-esque swordswoman. "The story's called 'Death Carries Roses' and it has Beth falling foul of a cryptic clue while hunting for a rogue wizard," he teases. "Conan is back and the entire genre feels like it's been revitalised for a new generation. I love feeling like I'm a part of that, as it's a genre I've always loved." ●

The Treasury Of British Comics Annual 2024 is out on 8 November.



Revel in your childhood (if you're of a certain age).

► **SCI-FACT!** Marvel's first crossover miniseries was 1982's *Cosmic Champions*, originally created to tie in with the 1980 Summer Olympics.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Pure
unlettered
artwork from
the first issue.



Between The Wars

Ahead of its 40th anniversary next year, Tom DeFalco returns to *Secret Wars* with **Battleworld** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

➔ FOUR DECADES AFTER editing the original series, Tom DeFalco is returning to *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars*, scripting *Battleworld*, a new miniseries that fits directly into the continuity of the 1984 12-parter.

"Editor Mark Basso asked me if I would be interested in doing a direct sequel – a sort of untold story," says DeFalco, who replaced *Secret Wars* writer Jim Shooter as Marvel Editor-in-Chief in 1987. "The challenge of crafting a tale that is directly tied into a story that is 40 years old and also relevant for today's reader – who may have heard of, but not read, the original *Secret Wars* – was too great to pass up.

"Mark and I wanted to do a story that would be accessible and, hopefully, entertaining to all readers, to fans of the original *Secret Wars* and the readers who

have never even heard of the original – and a story that will introduce new characters and concepts that will still be intriguing 40 years from now."

Initially conceived to coincide with Mattel's *Secret Wars* toy line, *Secret Wars* proved to be hugely influential, becoming one of the first line-wide crossover events as it tied in with titles such as *Avengers*, *Fantastic Four* and *Uncanny X-Men*. "Jim is a master craftsman and set some pretty high standards for me to try to match," says DeFalco. "The original story had it all: action,

angst and some incredible insights into the various characters."

Rather than taking the form of a contemporary continuation, *Battleworld* is designed to slip seamlessly between the pages of Jim Shooter and artists Mike Zeck and Bob Layton's maxi-series. "The one advantage is that the basic scenario is already established," says DeFalco. "As a writer and reader, you have some idea where you're going to start. After that, anything goes! You have to play against your reader's expectations and take them on a wild roller



The Human
Torch hangs
about with
Spidey.

coaster ride that they don't expect. We have twists and turns that no one will see coming."

Battleworld is told from the perspective of Spider-Man and his buddy, the Human Torch. "I have a certain familiarity with Pete Parker and have always enjoyed his relationship and interplay with Johnny," says DeFalco, who delves further into how Spidey first gains his alien costume, which in 1987 morphed into Venom. "How could I not? The symbiote has been around for nearly 40 years now and there's still plenty to learn about it."

While *Battleworld* promises new revelations about the mysterious Beyonder, DeFalco will be introducing some new villains. "Mattel produced a few action figures that did not appear in the original story, but we get to see them now," he explains.

Artist Patrick Olliffe follows in the footsteps of his predecessors, Mike Zeck and Bob Layton. "Pat is a gifted illustrator who can draw anything," he says. "He is also a skilled visual storyteller who is a master at sequential action and angst." ●

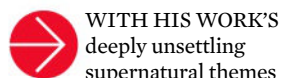
Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars: Battleworld is out 22 November.

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

A Monster Calls

HP Lovecraft's Great Old One confronts his past in **A Call To Cthulhu**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



WITH HIS WORK'S deeply unsettling supernatural themes and his controversial opinions, HP Lovecraft is not an author normally associated with a Young Adult audience. But Norm Konyu's latest graphic novel *A Call To Cthulhu* centres on the sinister leviathan that ranks as the American writer's most famous creation. But despite the Great Old One having first appeared almost a century ago, Konyu hasn't changed the beast much for a contemporary readership.

"Most horror stories are fairly timeless, but what does date Lovecraft's work is his heavy-going gothic style of writing, so I avoided that entirely," Konyu tells Red Alert. "His prose is difficult enough for an adult to work through, so it has almost no chance of being palatable to a younger audience. Something I did need to include was a bit about the man and some of his troubling personal views, as that should not be avoided."

Hailing from Canada but now based in the UK, Konyu first

discovered HP Lovecraft while at high school. "It was shortly after I devoured the work of Stephen King, as I'd read someplace of Lovecraft's influence on King, and not having heard of him before, I

sought his work out," recalls Konyu, who first embarked upon *A Call To Cthulhu* as an escape from a more demanding project.

"I was working on a longer graphic novel, which was taking a heavy toll with a seemingly endless number of panels stretching out ahead of me, so I wanted to do something to break that up," he continues. "While tidying my bookshelf, I came across some of my old HP Lovecraft books and thought it might be fun to illustrate some of

them without having to be a slave to sequential work."

The 48-pager is described as "part comic book, part art book and part children's storybook", and Konyu has drawn on several different artistic media. "The book started off as an artbook, gathering all those Lovecraft illustrations into a single volume," he explains. "But then I needed a narrative to bind them together, leading to the Dr Seuss-ian text that accompanies the illustrations."

"Then finally I needed to take us in and out of those sequences with a bit of a tale, so I brought the comic book pages in to accomplish that."

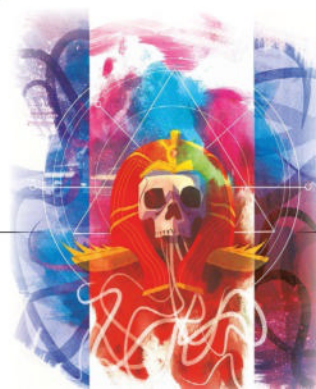
It begins with Cthulhu receiving an unsolicited phone call in the middle of night. "It's not the horror of a cold call from a telesales centre that we mere humans dread, but from someone who wants to vent at Cthulhu about the horrors of the world he inhabits, and about the sleep he had lost over the stories," says Konyu. "From there, we launch into some of those tales, and I skip through a number of Lovecraft's stories over the course of

A Call To Cthulhu. I've included a sort of glossary at the back to highlight each of the stories involved, so in a way, the book is a bit of an HP Lovecraft taster."

A Call To Cthulhu is out on 14 November.



Covert art, minus text, for *A Call To Cthulhu*.





Almost all of *Who* is on iPlayer!



Jo Whalley hosted a celebration.

Red Alert



Fancy some tasty Big Finish cover art?



Our Mr T with Steffan Powell for *Unleashed*.

SPACE AND TIME

Celebrating 60 years of DOCTOR WHO

◆ A new 30-minute behind-the-scenes series chronicling the making of *Doctor Who* has been filmed for BBC Three and iPlayer. *Doctor Who Unleashed* is hosted by Steffan Powell.

◆ It was confirmed that Neil Patrick Harris will play the Toymaker in an upcoming anniversary episode. A new trailer was aired before *Strictly Come Dancing* on 23 September, featuring new material from all three specials.

◆ *Doctor Who @ 60: A Musical Celebration* – a concert recorded in Cardiff on 28 September – is now available on BBC Sounds and was also filmed for a future release on iPlayer.

◆ Over 800 episodes of *Doctor Who* from 1963 to 1989, plus archive material, are now available on BBC iPlayer. These include *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, *Torchwood*, *Class* and *Doctor Who Confidential* and will have subtitles, audio description and sign language for the first time. Russell T

Davies said: “I’d like to thank the BBC for all the hard work to get this massive back catalogue under one roof, at long last. And we’re determined this won’t be a dusty museum – we have exciting plans to bring the back catalogue to life, with much more to be revealed!”

◆ A new archival website dedicated to *Doctor Who* has been launched at bbc.co.uk/doctorwho. It will include interviews, documents, audio and behind-the-scenes material. In addition, an estimated 25,000 prints, negatives, slides and digital images from the archives have been scanned at 8K resolution.

◆ Big Finish is releasing a new book, *The Art Of The Audio Adventures*. The hardback

coffee table tome features imagery from 100 of its covers and is available this month.

◆ Silva Screen will release soundtracks for “Revenge Of The Cybermen” and “Time And The Rani” on 24 November (see page 111). The latter also features demo versions of the 1987 theme. Both will later get vinyl releases.

◆ A new exhibition is now open in London until 3 December. *Regeneration At Riverside* is free and celebrates six decades of the series. As the name suggests it’s at Riverside Studios, where many of the early episodes were filmed.

◆ New *Doctor Who* figures will shortly be available from B&M stores. These

include a set of three figures from “The Deadly Assassin”, Daleks from “Remembrance Of The Daleks” and two new series Daleks.

◆ BBC Radio 2 documentaries *The Classic Years* and *The Modern Years* are now available, featuring new and archive interviews with previous Doctors and showrunners.

◆ Alex Pillai will direct block one of the second Ncuti Gatwa season, and Peter Hoar will direct block two.

◆ Composer Dominic Glynn is releasing a new EP, featuring reworked versions of music from “Survival”. *The Survival Remixes* is out 24 November. 🎧

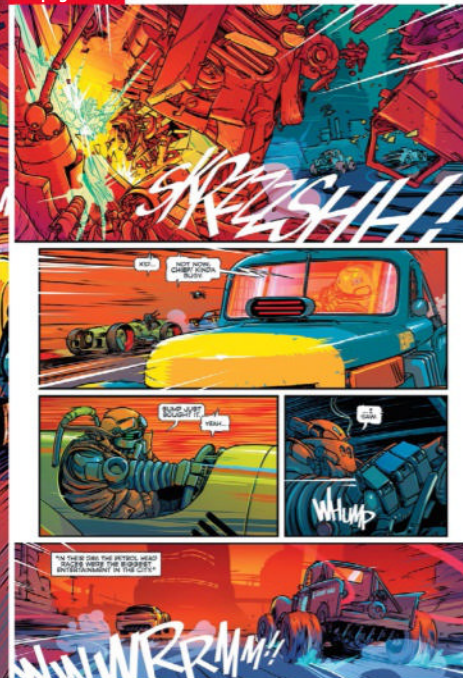
Doctor Who is on BBC One and Disney+ later this month.



► **SCI-FACT!** Dominic Glynn arranged the iconic *Doctor Who* theme for season 23 in 1986.



Vroooming hell!
Petrol Head
screams off
the page.


**CREATOR EXCLUSIVE**

Need For Speed

Rob Williams and Pye Parr are burning up the rubber in **Petrol Head**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



 **GROWING OUT OF** some artwork of robots and futuristic cars Pye Parr had put online, the post-apocalyptic automobile races of his and Rob Williams's *Petrol Head* bring to mind films such as *Death Race 2000* and *Mad Max*.

There's an environmental theme to the creator-owned five-parter. "In the book's world, the environment has become deadly to humans, so the survivors live in domed cities, and the city administrators run extreme sports events like the Petrol Head races to keep the population entertained," explains Williams. "Doing this with gas-guzzling cars and robots is pretty dysfunctional, so the Petrol Heads eventually get

shut down. Can the environment outside the city be saved? That's our key MacGuffin, as Petrol Head meets a young girl called Lupa, who might just have the key to the future of the human race in her backpack."

While Parr admires antique jalopies, Williams isn't a motorsport fan, drawing his inspiration instead from how Katsuhiro Otomo depicts vehicle movement in his classic manga *Akira*.

"I figured that if we could do that – and Pye is one of the few comic artists who can do that –

we'd have a thrilling, dramatic chase story," Williams tells *Red Alert*. "There's a real dramatic power to that, just making readers care about our underdog heroes and set a futuristic city after them on a deadly race through an incredible sci-fi landscape. You can feel the speed, the friction, the crunch and boom of the crashes. It's just a senses-bashing comic.

But, of course, all that only works if you care about the characters, and I think we have that here."

“One of the things I really wanted to capture in the race/chase scenes is the way cars move and sound on a track,” adds Parr. “How the weight shifts into the corners and your ears get pummelled as they go past, which was a bit of a challenge as comics are both silent and static.”

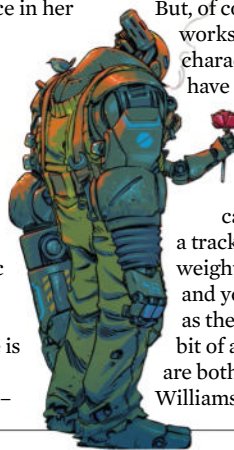
Williams also wasn't interested

in crafting a future-sport story. "That wasn't our goal, per se, but if people get excited about the races of the Petrol Heads and their individual rides and skill scores, then great," he says. "There's a fun bit in issue three where we go full computer game/action figures and list the attributes of two of the Petrol Heads and what their 'special moves' are.

"It's quite a fun idea where we're looking back on the Petrol Heads' classic races where they were designed and created to be marketed to the population of our future city, the O-Zone, so we get to be knowing, cynical toy creators."

Parr was in his element when it came to *Petrol Head's* future tech. "Rob's only stipulation for Petrol Head's look was that he had to be a bruiser and that his head was an engine, so that took a bit of getting right," he says. "The initial inspiration for the book came out of some posters I did to stop myself going mad in lockdown, so the aesthetic was set and I just carried on in that vein." 🖤

Petrol Head issue one is out on 8 November.



► **SCI-FACT!** McCallum voiced Alfred in animated features, beginning with 2008's *Batman: Gotham Knight*.

NEW AUTHOR

MARIANNE GORDON

MEET THE ACADEMIC PUBLISHING EDITOR BEHIND *THE GILDED CROWN*



Tell us about your protagonist.

→ Hellevir is a young woman with the ability to enter Death and bargain for souls with the being who resides there. When the Princess of the Chron dies and Hellevir must resurrect her, she finds herself in a world besieged by threats, assassination attempts, political intrigue and unexpected desire.

How do her powers work?

→ Hellevir can barter parts of her body – and treasures – in exchange for bringing back the dead. She's also one of a small group of people who can talk to spirits (such as of the hearth, the ivy leaf) and animals; her familiar is a raven.

How long did the book take to write?

→ I wrote it over the pandemic, when I felt trapped and useless; in hindsight, I realise I poured my anxieties into Hellevir, through her exploring my desire to be

proactive. She started as a character without much agency, but by her abilities became anything but useless.

Do you have to do much research?

→ Hellevir is a herbalist, so I enjoyed delving into hedge-witchery. Much plant lore forms the basis for our modern medicine; it's all just applied chemistry. I also found out a lot about horrific medieval medical practices (for example, hedgehog grease for a sore throat).

Any advice for budding authors?

→ Read as much as you can; reading is training, it teaches you what you like or dislike and what you want to emulate.

The Gilded Crown is out on 23 November, published by HarperVoyager.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

DAVID MCCALLUM 1933-2023

Closing Channel D

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



"THERE WAS THIS WONDERFUL enigmatic element which grew about Illya Kuryakin," said David McCallum of the role that made him a bona fide TV icon. "It allowed everybody to have their own image of Illya, because basically none of the stories ever told you anything. And that in a way became the success of that character."

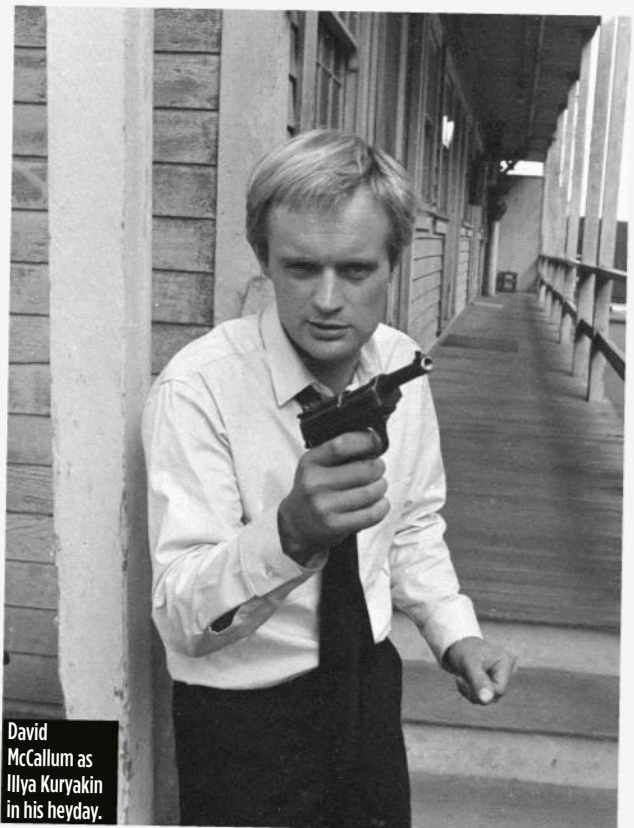
Born in Glasgow, the son of classical musicians, the enduringly boyish McCallum trained at RADA and acted on the radio before earning a big-screen credit on 1957's *The Secret Place*. A key role in *The Great Escape* raised his profile in 1963 before *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* made him a pop star tier phenomenon a year later: the "Blond Beetle", mobbed at public appearances and bombarded with fan mail.

As Russian secret agent Kuryakin, an intense, cerebral McCallum proved the perfect Cold War counterpoint to the Madison Avenue slickness of co-star Robert Vaughn's Napoleon Solo. Episodes were repackaged as theatrical releases and the pair reunited for 1983's *The Return Of The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* telemovie.

A prolific TV presence, McCallum's vaguely otherworldly vibe gave him an affinity for genre. Early appearances in *The Outer Limits* were followed by the lead in 1975's *The Invisible Man* and guest-shots in

everything from *The Six Million Dollar Man* to *Night Gallery*, *Babylon 5* to *SeaQuest DSV*.

Long based in the US, he returned to Britain for *Sapphire & Steel* in 1979, investigating fractures in time alongside Joanna Lumley. Cool to the point of callous, McCallum made the besuited Steel the rare TV hero who had no need or desire to be liked. It was a series he relished, however cryptic the premise. "It would be wonderful to do it all again just to explain who the hell Sapphire and Steel really were," he said in 2001. ●



David McCallum as Illya Kuryakin in his heyday.

HARRY BENSON/EXPRESS/GETTY

SHAWNA TRPGIC 1966-2023

American costume designer for *Firefly*, *Angel* and *Star Wars: Ahsoka*.

JOE MATT 1963-2023

American cartoonist best known for the four-time Harvey-nominated *Peepshow*.

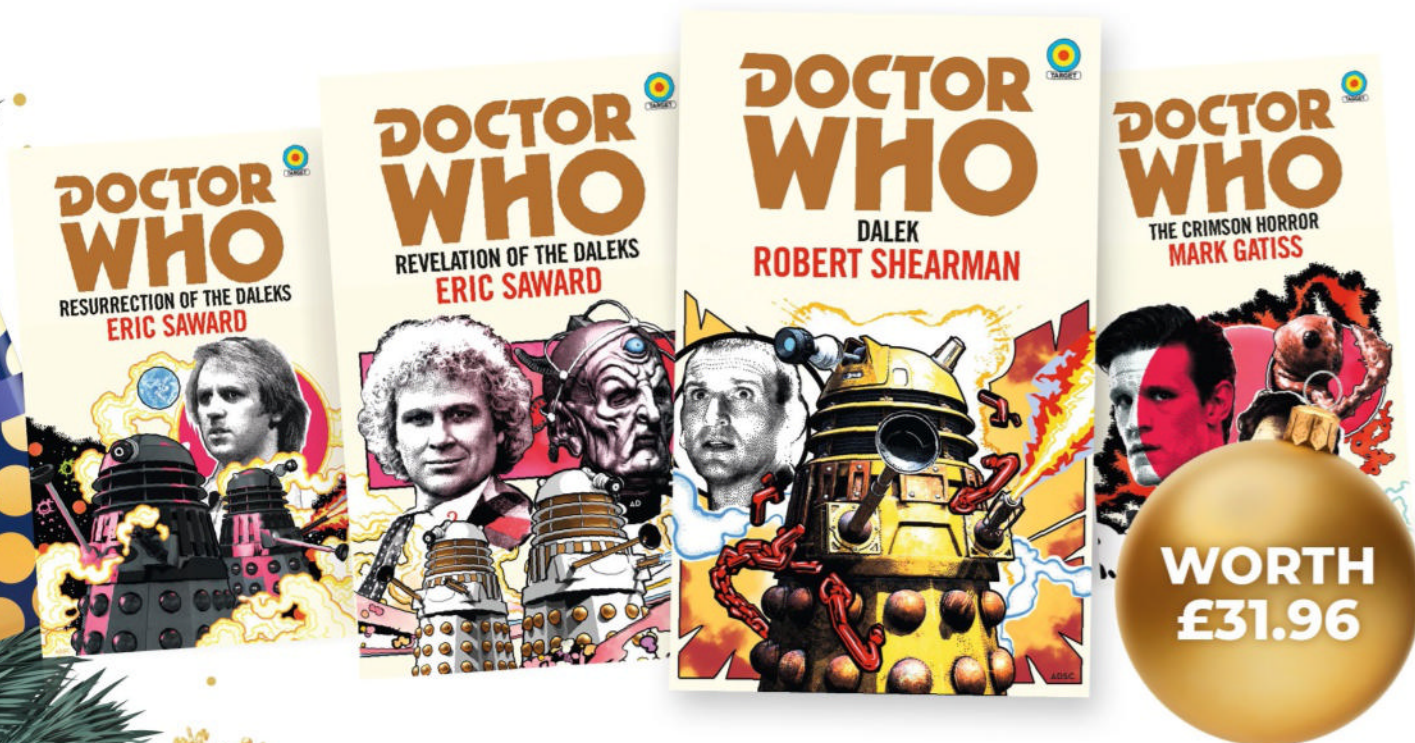
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RUSSELL T DAVIES



SPILLING



RUSSELL T DAVIES

THE T

RUSSELL T DAVIES
ON RETURNING TO *DOCTOR*
WHO – AND WHAT THE
FUTURE HOLDS

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

WE CAN'T TALK about the anniversary, the return of David Tennant, the future of the series, the spin-offs, before addressing one of the biggest comebacks in sci-fi history. Everyone

knows where they were on 24 September 2021 when the news broke that Russell T Davies was returning as *Doctor Who*'s showrunner.

To quote a certain Time Lord: "What? What?! WHAT?!" Davies had given up the reins in 2010 after a farewell tour to rival Cher. But now – like the ageless diva herself – he was back and spearheading the 60th anniversary specials. "The original press release just said that I was doing the specials," Davies tells *SFX*, "and I absolutely insisted on saying 'and future seasons to come'. Seasons plural, because I said the future would look insecure otherwise. So I was inserting those words into press releases myself."

He's a man who cares for, nay *loves Doctor Who*. He knows what fans think – he's been one his whole life. He knows how the machine works. But this time he's got an army and an international streamer behind him. This is RTD2 – but before we talk about the new era, we need to take a step back...

HE IS RETURNING

It's no wonder fandom was surprised – a return was something Davies said he'd never do. "That's automatic, though, in fairness," he counters. "Even though I'd been dying to do *Doctor Who* for years, ever since I left, I'd automatically say I'm not because someone's in the job. You'd sound like an idiot if you're on the sidelines going, 'I'd love to do it again!' Actually, if I did want to do it again I'd phone them up and say, 'Can I write an episode?'"

"The truth of it is that I've been inventing *Doctor Who* stories since I was five. So it's like



The Toymaker is back! Neil Patrick Harris stars.

A NEW MAN

Just how different is the Fourteenth Doctor?

◆ “I wouldn’t expect vast differences, because there’s no way you bring back one of the world’s most popular Doctors and make him be different! Outside fandom, my sisters would be sitting there going, ‘What the blinkin’ flip have you done?’ “So it doesn’t make much sense. But of course, you’re talking about one of the world’s great actors who doesn’t need me to feed lines and cues and subtext and meanings. You just hand it over to David, and of course he’s naturally all over it, of course he’s got new spins and new depths to it. When you get to work with someone like that, you don’t need to worry.”

second nature to me and that never stops. I don’t think of stories for my job, I have this job because I think of stories all the time. That’s what I do all day long, every single day.

“There are certain stories we’re telling in the season to come that have been playing in my head for years. Season one, episode one is a story I invented on the day I walked into Bad Wolf for our first meeting. I went, ‘Oh, that’s a good idea’. So there’s things I’ve been thinking about for 20 years, there’s things I’ve been thinking of for 40 years, there’s things I thought of yesterday. So what I’m saying is that it *never* stops.”

The question, then, might be why give up the job in the first place? Anyone that’s watched television since 2010 will already know the answer. “Oh, because I had other things to write. Also, it’s exhausting. It’s a properly knacker job. But look at what I did afterwards. I did loads of stuff.”

Aside from that understatement – look at those awards! – he’s been in demand to do other people’s “stuff” too.

“I got asked to showrun a British Marvel show, but [they said] ‘We can’t tell you what it is,’” he laughs loudly. “To this day, I watch them and I can’t work out which show that was going to be. Obviously planning to make a British Marvel show that I haven’t seen. Has that happened?”

But there was only one British show that held his heart(s): *Doctor Who*. Albeit with a difference. “If I’d gone back to the *old* show, with the old production methods, that would

have been a retrogressive step because of the learning from that. The whole point of moving on is the learning stuff,” he explains.

“So when the BBC made contact with me and said they were looking for streaming, and that it would have a bigger budget, part of the joy for me was learning how to work with a bigger budget.

“I know we’re not allowed to talk money but... all the shows I’ve ever worked on have one-third of the budget of this. I worked on one show with about half the budget. It’s fascinating, there’s an awful lot to learn. Phil [Collinson, producer]’s done *Gentleman Jack* with HBO, which is a good budget. Equally at the same time, Jane Tranter and Joel Collins [also producers] have done *His Dark Materials*, which is a bigger budget. So they’re learning how to make cuts and scale things down. So it’s very interesting. We’ve all come to it with a lot to learn, and a lot of passion, and that’s good.

“At the risk of sounding sanctimonious, but I really, really mean this – they were going to do this to the show anyway and I genuinely thought, ‘It needs looking after’.

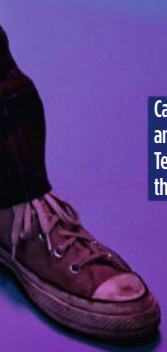
He chuckles. “Do you remember, before the Paul McGann movie materialised, there was talk of selling it to America, there were rumours there would be a rapping TARDIS. Remember that? People said the TARDIS would have a voice and it would rap.”

Potential spoiler for 2024! “Of course I’ve done that. I do it very well!” he jokes. “We were all terrified of an international version [in 1996]. So I had that instinctive terror of what →

The Meep from the first special, “The Star Beast”.



Catherine Tate and David Tennant. Do they ever age?





Jacqueline King, Karl Collins and Yasmin Finney.

might come. So it was *genuinely* a need to look after the show. Because it's a very odd show, it's very precise. Its rules are very strange and, like the British constitution, unwritten. We're just discovering how unwritten constitutions are deadly now... after 200 years of democracy we're realising how wrong it is.

"So I thought, I felt needed. I absolutely did. That's the coverline – 'I felt needed!' says Russell T Davies."

Fans needn't worry that he isn't going to stick around, either. "No, I'm planning season three now, there's plans for season four. Absolutely. Who knows? Who knows. I'm not getting any younger."

He chuckles when *SFX* asks if this basically makes him the new John Nathan-Turner, the producer of the last series of *Classic Who*. "I love JNT. I swear I would have given him a job. I would have made him part of the team. He'd be head of international sales, he'd be doing all that. I *mean* it. He would've absolutely continued."

"That's part of bringing Mel back, part of what we're doing with Bonnie Langford, was to right a wrong. I think, alright, she perhaps wasn't done brilliantly at the time. But I think memory has been a bit sour with her and a bit bitter over her character. I want to put that right and have a better Mel and a proper Mel, a Mel that John Nathan-Turner would be proud of. So he's very much mentioned in conversation a lot of the time."

THOSE WONDERFUL TOYS

Speaking of the past, Davies reveals that continuity did concern production initially. "It's been very interesting. How much of the past can we mention? Is it a blank slate? Can you mention Tegan? Can you mention Susan? Can you mention anything in the past? And they've [Disney] been incredibly open about it. We're living in a very fortunate age now where the history of shows is respected, and continuity's respected."

"That's helped, actually, if I can refer to a past enemy, as long as I can justify it, like bringing back the Toymaker. I wanted to do that because he's from the '60s and it was the 60th anniversary, it just all made sense."

"My lord, one of the most exciting days of my writing life was page one of 'The Giggle' script, when I realised how brilliant the

Toymaker was. I thought he'd be a good villain, that I'd have a laugh with him. I started writing the script and I thought, 'This is the best villain ever created.' So powerful. So funny. So dangerous, so evil. I love him!" Neil Patrick Harris, who plays Toymaker is, he says, "phenomenal. Absolutely phenomenal."

Any such concerns arose largely before the show's new global home on Disney+ was secured, he stresses.

"Obviously, that was written before the streamer was decided. Bear in mind, a lot of this went into production. It could have been Netflix, it could have been Amazon. It could've been anyone – you could say any name there that we went to. It's our job to go to every single streamer in the world. All of them were very interested. So I'm writing this knowing that no matter where it went out it would go to a bigger audience – [so] do you have to explain who the Toymaker is?"

"I've got to say, in a science fiction setting, a great cosmic villain called the Toymaker played by a big star kind of makes sense anyway. Spider-Man could swing into an apartment tomorrow and meet the Toymaker and you'd go, 'Oh, it's that kind of villain.' So he makes sense enormously."

"There is a flashback. Let's say it. There is a flashback to Michael Gough [the original Toymaker], which is wonderful. It's funny; when I handed in that script my agent went, 'Ooh, I remember the Toymaker – played by Michael Gough'. So there's a very powerful memory of him. She's not a science fiction fan at all."

"So where we thought there'd possibly be resistance to old characters and old continuity and adventures, there's been none. As long as there's some nice clarity to it. They will ask, 'Who's this, who's that?' But they know equally that fans will come on board for that. It's been lovely. It's been really lovely." He does a knowing laugh. "And other characters: dot dot dot," he grins.

UNLEASH THE BEAST

Famously, the first special, "The Star Beast", began life as a Marvel comic in 1980. What made Davies want to revisit it?

"I don't think I gave it much thought, it just popped into my head," he shrugs. "The whole point of the story is that the Doctor meets Donna Noble again. So therefore it has to be on Earth, so therefore she's going to come across something alien and so therefore it's handy if she comes across an alien. She's not going to come across an invading army, that's going to ruin the story. So it very quickly starts to narrow →

GREAT BIG TEASE

What to expect from the specials

THE STAR BEAST

◆ "A lovely, exciting family film, very Pixar-based, even before Disney got involved with this. I was going for that. It's like a Bank Holiday film. It's lovely and exciting and fun. The astonishing thing is how it looks like the third act of the Donna Noble story. You'd have sworn I was always dying to write this final sequence of events. Which I wasn't. It wasn't that until I came to do it."

WILD BLUE YONDER

◆ "Weird. It's weird. That'll do. The most astonishing barricade you'll ever see."

THE GIGGLE

◆ "It's absolutely epic. It's slightly over the hour-long running time. It's the only one that we've had to push over an hour. They're like 55, 56 minutes; this is one hour, one minute."

"It's so full! It's mad. I *absolutely* adore special three. It's David's last episode, obviously, it's no secret. That's part of the fun. And my god, we go for it. And Donna's last episode, Catherine's last episode. We absolutely go for it. You get to the special, you get halfway through, it's 30 minutes in and you can't believe it's only been 30 minutes. So much happens in it."

THE FESTIVE SPECIAL

◆ "It's very Christmassy. I wonder what day it'll be on...?"





The Toymaker dances in Broad Street, Bristol.



Kate Lethbridge Stewart (Jemma Redgrave).



"Oh, hi. Just wondering if you stock balloons...?"



Yasmin Finney as Rose meets the Meep. (Yes, Rose.)

THE LORES OF TIME

You can't rewrite history, not one line... or can you?

◆ Given that Davies established a new *Who* mythology sans-Gallifrey prior to the 2005 series, how beholden does he feel to the lore that's been established since he left?

"Oh, quite beholden actually. I'm very well behaved in that sense... I feel completely free to make up my own stuff. But I think it's very interesting that the only piece of *Doctor Who* lore that's never been held aloft and run with is Paul McGann having a human mother.

"None of us can deal with that. None of us cope with it and it's never been mentioned since. I find that really fascinating. That's not a hint that I'm going to engage with it at all. It's amazing, isn't it? Everything else gets kind of absorbed.

"Let's stare that question right in the eye. I'm not going to unwrite my good friend Chris Chibnall's work on 'The Timeless Children'. I'm not going to deny what he wrote. I'm going with it. It's absolutely fine. It's canon, it happened. It was transmitted. You cannot unwrite things, that would be absolutely rude to a great colleague and a lovely friend."



The Toymaker, last played by Michael Gough.

itself down. 'The Star Beast' is very much *ET*. It's a traditional story. So to find that pattern pre-existing in *Doctor Who* with [writer] Pat Mills and [artist] Dave Gibbons attached... We're in an age of comic book adaptations, little knowing – that was a Marvel product then – that we'd be under the same banner as Marvel. But it's a great story. I was 16 years old when that was published and I've always loved it. To this day you can say 'The Star Beast' to a fan and they'll know what it is. There's not many properties you can do that with."

But it also brings its own complications for some fans: how can this version exist when it's already been a comic?

“With the build-up to these specials, there's been a lot of invention going on online”

"But that doesn't bother me for a second," Davies insists. "It's how there are two different versions of 'Human Nature' – and there *are* two different versions. And yet I don't think I've ever seen anyone stand in the town centre and sob because the television version has made the book not exist. They don't. We're very clever. We balance all these different versions," he chuckles.

When we meet in a Cardiff hotel in September, he says they're delivering the final version of second special "Wild Blue Yonder" the following day. "It has taken an awfully long time to make," he considers. "It's funny, it's one of those episodes where everyone sat there saying, 'Oh, I don't know how to make this' and guess how we made it? Green screen."

More laughter. "Nothing changes, really! There's almost a danger of building it up too much. It's a very great story. It won't surprise you that much. It's great, it's absolutely thrilling. I love it to death – I shouldn't underplay it, should I? But if I fall into this pattern of going, 'It's the most unusual thing you've ever seen,' you'll sit there and go, 'Oh, I've seen that before.'

"With the build-up to these three specials in people's minds, there's been a lot of invention going on online. But I did say right at the beginning, these are," he says, banging the table with each word, "three. Separate. Stories.

"It's very important to say, actually, you're not watching a three-part story. You can tune in for any one of these episodes and start from

The Fourteenth Doctor's sonic screwdriver.



It's only the blimmin' new Doctor, Ncuti Gatwa!

person who was last on the list was probably Phil [Collinson], because he was producing *Nolly* for me. I was thinking, 'Well, I don't want to take the producer off my lovely show being made in Manchester.' What a weird business position to be in!

"Daily, I was telling him all of our plans. I think he just snapped and went, 'Oh god, can't I produce it?' and I was like, 'Oh alright then,'" he roars with laughter. "No! He's one of the nation's top producers. I did wonder if he'd be interested. There was a great moment when I told him I was going back to *Doctor Who* and he literally walked into my hallway and fell onto his knees," he laughs again.

"I partly assumed he'd think, 'Oh, I've done it already'. Once we asked him – once we begged him – to do it, he raced. That was a great day. Of course, taking it to [production company] Bad Wolf was automatic as well. It's literally named after a *Doctor Who* thing. It is weird how it all fell into the right place. The fact that they made *His Dark Materials* in

Cardiff, and most of all because they were coming to the end of that. So these vast studios were empty as we came along. The timing of it is really quite strange."

WHO'S THE MAN?

That all feeds into the bigger picture, with work now much further ahead on *Doctor Who* and the show being seen in more countries than ever before.

"What thrills Disney, actually, not just the BBC, is to make it annually," Davies says. "That's quite a rare thing for streamers as well. So that's *absolutely* the plan.

There are plans for spin-offs. Not the ones you read about online all the time.

"But there are... it's taking us a while to get into the groove of production. There are big plans and equally, they're not too big. I look at some of those [other] franchises and frankly, I think you're spreading yourself too much. We've got to see how successful this is. There's also a certain amount of caution. I love it, I think it's brilliant, I'm so happy with it – who knows? Who knows how it'll go down in those 204 countries. So we'll see." 🗿

The late Verity Lambert, original *Who* producer.



"You might find yourself revisiting a few..."

a seizing of sonics. Not series 14, not season 40 – controversial! Davies chuckles at our geekery. "What fun that is, to be controversial." At this point Murray Gold walks over and says hello. "Go away," he tells his returning composer. "Time is money, I'm selling the show. I love you, darling!"

This is, we say, a nice segue into getting the old band back together, which almost feels like a pipe dream. "We all worried," Davies admits. "We worried since the day we agreed to do it, because that's part of making the show, but the

scratch. It's more of a mini-season. That's what it is, it's a mini-season. I like that."

There is, of course, a full new season, with Ncuti Gatwa's Doctor, to come in 2024. "That's where the Disney launch will really be starting," Davies explains. "Disney love these specials, are dropping them and going to support them, but the massive Disney launch starts in **REDACTED** with season one.

"Because I think people are beginning to ask, 'Why is there no big Disney push behind this?' That's coming in **REDACTED**.

"Ooh, we're not supposed to say **REDACTED**, are we? Next year, season one. Yes, we're calling it season one."

We'll let you catch your breath – we imagine there's a collective gasp, a clutching of anoraks,

COUNTDOWN

Nine new episodes a year: Davies explains the change

◆ "The numbers have gone down over the years, partly because it's so expensive. I don't think we could make more episodes a year. But equally, I think spin-offs will allow more episodes per year, but it's early days. We need to work out production-wise how and when – plus our studios are full, we

filled it with *Doctor Who*. Some of our sets are standing sets, not just the TARDIS. There's some sets we're always going to keep coming back to, which I love. So we're gonna work out how to make it, which we are doing. That's on its way, *genuinely* on its way."



DAVID TENNANT

LET'S GO

DAVID
TENNANT
IS BACK AS THE
DOCTOR. WE STILL
CAN'T BELIEVE IT,
EVEN THOUGH WE
SPOKE TO HIM
OURSELVES

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

A full-page photograph of actor David Tennant. He is positioned on the left side of the frame, leaning forward and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark blue overcoat over a patterned vest and a light-colored shirt with a tie. The background is a deep blue, curved tunnel-like structure with glowing white lines that create a sense of depth and motion. In the top right corner, there is a small black rectangular box containing the text "DAVID TENNANT" in white capital letters.

DAVID TENNANT

ROUND AGAIN

WHEN *SFX* catches up with David Tennant at Bad Wolf Studios in Cardiff, it's the day after his birthday, and he's still a young fanboy at heart(s). "I'm going around taking pictures of everything I can," he laughs. "I'll probably have my phone confiscated as I leave..."

A little bird tells us that he grabbed a few selfies with the Wrarth Warriors on the set of "The Star Beast", the first of three anniversary specials being released this month. "Oh, always!" he says, scoffing jovially. "Oh, of course. That's day one..."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. This is April 2023. It's before episode title reveals, before trailers and Toymakers, and we're still in the time (Lord)-honoured tradition of everything being a secret. What we *do* know is that Tennant is indeed back, back, back! But he's *not* the Tenth Doctor. No, he's not even the Meta-Crisis Doctor. He's the Fourteenth Doctor – officially. But did he ever think he'd ever be playing *any* Doctor again?

"I think it would be disingenuous to pretend I wasn't entertaining that as a possibility, because there's precedent for it," he admits. "I've done it for the 50th anniversary of *Doctor Who*. I suppose I might have been called back for a subsequent anniversary if I was still able to get in the suit and run around."

"What I *didn't* imagine is that I would be back as the Doctor for any length of time. I suppose I imagined I might drop in on somebody else's Doctor, as I had with Matt [Smith] on the 50th, to be part of a celebratory guest cast."

"So no, I don't think I ever really imagined I'd be back in the way that Catherine [Tate] and I got to enjoy for these three episodes."

WHO AM I?

Three special episodes, and a brand new Doctor – but probably not the one you were expecting – with an old enemy, some familiar faces and an opening story that long-term *Who* fans will probably recognise.

"I couldn't believe, when I saw the first script, what it was adapted from," Tennant says of "The Star Beast". "Because, of course, I recognised that immediately as a child of the '70s and the '80s. I knew exactly where the source material lived and it was a deep joy."

THIS INTERVIEW
WAS CONDUCTED
PRIOR TO SAG-AFTRA
STRIKE ACTION



"This is becoming something of a habit."

He's talking, of course, about the 1980 Marvel *Doctor Who* comic strip of the same name from *Doctor Who Weekly*.

"It sort of makes perfect sense – Russell as a long-term fan, and also that particular story, the way that it captures that particular world of *Doctor Who* is sort of the world of *Doctor Who* that Russell is known for, I think," he considers.

"The way the Doctor interacts with a family in modern-day Britain and the make-up of that family, and how the extraterrestrial hits the domestic. It sort of makes sense actually, as a starting point for a Russell T Davies *Doctor Who* script. So after my initial surprise, I was duly thrilled, I think it's fair to say."

As a lifelong fan of the series, Tennant's no stranger to the Meep or the Wrarth Warriors that pursue him.

"I certainly have very vivid memories of those old Pat Mills/Dave Gibbons stories," he recalls. "As someone who grew up with *TV Comic*, where the *Doctor Who* comic strip – which was sort of what I got it for – never felt like it truly captured the spirit of the show," he



Whatever's happening, it's not a good thing.

says politely, before adding, "It sometimes felt like it wasn't perhaps the most carefully produced piece of work. Then suddenly, Marvel Comics takes over and you had this world-class comic book artist beautifully creating these alien worlds and stories that are so brilliantly written."

"So they were absolutely reminiscent of the TV show, but also had their own kind of reality that was so creative and exciting, that I think it was a really big moment when *Doctor Who Weekly* started with those comic strips."

The story isn't the only familiar thing, of course – we recognise those teeth *and* that face... "Well it did feel *weirdly* comfortable,"

Older and...
wiser? The
Fourteenth
Doctor.



You can't
park a TARDIS
there, pal.
Regulations.



"It's alright,
it's just
the toast
burning."

Tennant says of stepping back into the character. "It did sort of swing back to life quite easily. I think I wondered if it might feel like more of a reach than it did. But at the same time, I think I was happy for this version of the Doctor to have new elements or a different flavour, because I'm 15 years older, and that's

sort of okay. Having said that, it was wanting to make sure that he moved as quickly and was able to jump around just as much as 15 years ago. I didn't want that to be in the reviews: 'You can see the joints creak.'

"But besides that, I was quite happy to let it be filtered through 51-year-old me. Having said that, the whole point in being back is that it would be a slightly peculiar thing to have reinvented the character or done anything particularly differently.

"So it's still recognisably the Doctor that I was before, without a doubt, and that indeed is part of the story. The Doctor has found himself regenerated into a form that he recognises. That's a puzzle. So I can't suddenly have a long beard and a funny hat and an Atlantic accent. That would be counterproductive to the story we're trying to tell.

"Part of the point of the story is the Doctor is a version of himself that he recognises. If it was me playing the part in a completely different way, it would be a different story, I suppose. It's got to feel very reminiscent of the Tenth Doctor even though it's actually the →

GREAT SCOT

New Doctor, same voice, different waistcoat. Why the tartan?

◆ "We just kind of found the material. It wasn't that it was tartan, so much as it's the colours that are in it because it's very reminiscent of the brown and blue stripe that I had." He stops. "We're going quite deep here," he deadpans. "It's very reminiscent of the brown and blue striped suit that I had

before, but it's in a check pattern. As soon as we saw it... We were just going through a book of fabrics and it pinged as being, like I said, the same but different. That suddenly just made sense. So that's where it came from. I don't even know if it's classed as a tartan. I'm not sure. I haven't checked either

way. So I'll leave that up to you! [It probably is - Scottish Ed.]

"I've met a couple of people fully kitted out in immaculate versions, and they're getting details that I thought nobody would even notice. It hasn't even really properly been on telly yet, so I don't know how they manage it!"



Director
Rachel Talalay
with Mr
Tennant.

Fourteenth.” Does that mean they have the same personality? “Interestingly, when we came to what the costume might be, there was a debate about, ‘Is it exactly the same costume? Is it a completely new costume, or is it sort of the same but different?’ That’s sort of, I would say, the same for all of it, from my point of view,” he says of his take on the similarities between the two Doctors.

“I think a dedicated viewer will know that I’m wearing a costume that’s actually quite different to the one I wore 15 years ago. The casual viewer will see exactly the same clothes, I suspect. That’s probably a good way of talking about the entire experience of coming back to it, I think.”

A NEW WHO

We can’t, unfortunately, talk about the entire experience – that would just ruin things, wouldn’t it? But we can ask about some of the new/old, ahem, new things. Like his new TARDIS set, for example.

“I saw it in construction, because all my scenes in the TARDIS were kind of the last thing I did. So when I arrived in Cardiff, it was a building site. I would pass by the studio where it was being built every few days and see it sort of lurch up and then in the final week suddenly there were 400 people on it, painting and banging and clicking and connecting things.

“It’s magnificent,” he stresses. “I have to say I’m very, very thrilled to be the first person to fiddle with it.”

Then of course there’s Neil Patrick Harris – now confirmed, months after our chat, as playing the Toymaker. “Oh he’s very good,” Tennant enthuses. “I mean as an actor, extraordinary, because he’s not just an actor. He’s also a singer and a dancer and a magician. He’s one of these people who’s not a triple threat, a quadruple threat, he’s a quintuple threat.

“What’s brilliant about who he plays in this is that he gets to exploit all of his skill set. So he was very entertaining on set with it, because he has to do quite a lot of different stuff, and he does it with such flair. It was great. He was a joy to behold.”

There’s also the matter of another Doctor about to explode into life... “I have managed to admire, from afar, a little bit of Neuti,” Tennant



Donna Noble
(Catherine
Tate): she’s
baaack.

reveals. “I’ve been sneaky. I’ve been sniffing around the studios today, and I may have crept on set at one point. *God*, he’s good casting. It’s very exciting to think about what’s gonna happen to the show when he takes over.”

But before the show regenerates once more, we ask him to consider what the most significant change in the series has been since he first played the role.

“It’s just a bit bigger,” he shrugs. “It’s no secret that [multiple production companies] are involved and that allows us to tell stories on a slightly bigger scale, it allows Russell to write stories on a bigger scale. The studio set-up they’ve got here in the Bad Wolf Studios is breathtaking. I mean, it’s just *vast*. When I first did *Doctor Who*, we were in a little warehouse in Newport where the roof leaked. It feels like we’ve come quite a long way.

“The essentials are still the same – they’re just the same as they were in 1963, and that’s why I think the show is as tenacious as it is. It’s got a central concept that is kind of indestructible.

WHO’S WHO

“Having said all that, it’s nice to see it have the resources which means it can compete globally with Marvel and *Game Of Thrones* and all these other high-end shows.

“It’s a joy to see this little show that used to be done in a tiny studio in Lime Grove thriving. We did some incredible things on these three episodes that I was involved in, that were certainly not something we could have afforded to have done 15 years ago, and certainly not something that they would have managed with William Hartnell 60 years ago.”

Aware we’re treading perilously close to spoiler territory, we’re keen to know what it is

“I’ve got a
bone to pick
with you,
Doctor...”



“It’s unlike any script that’s ever been written for *Doctor Who* in the 60 years it has existed”

about these three specials that particularly stands out as new, exciting or innovative to their leading man.

“I think what is remarkable about them is that they are... certainly two and three are scripts unlike anything I’ve seen on *Doctor Who*,” Tennant suggests. “After 60 years, to be reinventing something as radically as Russell is managing to do I think is absolutely remarkable,” he laughs.

“The first special actually has some things I’ve never seen them do as well, but it’s more recognisably the kind of *Doctor Who* that Russell has always brilliantly done – again on a sort of scale that we’ve never seen before, and



Neil Patrick Harris as the mysterious Toy Maker.

The Doctor with Yasmin Finney as Rose (!).



Never not looking iconic stepping out of the TARDIS.



that's the great unexpected joy there.

"But then the second of the specials, I mean, there's not a script written for this show before now [like it]. It's unlike any script that's ever been written for *Doctor Who* in the 60 years that it has so far existed.

"It's a completely new type of storytelling. It's just unrecognisable. I think that's pretty remarkable after 60 years.

"Things done in the third special take *Doctor Who* to a place it has never gone before. That's the thing – Russell wrote so many stories already, you think he would have exhausted his creative piggy bank, but he just seems to be on fire, it seems to be pouring out of him, it seems

to be that there are endless new ways to tell stories about a Time Lord in a wooden box. It's great!"

He laughs when we ask the inevitable question for someone leaving the role of the Doctor: does he think he'll ever play him again?

"I think it would be disingenuous to imagine that I might never be asked again because history would indicate that it was always a possibility. So I'm not going to say never because I don't think anyone would believe me.

"That doesn't mean I know that I ever will. But I suppose until I can't run down a corridor it's always a possibility. But I promise to have no plans."

If Patrick Stewart can run down a corridor as Jean-Luc Picard at 82, we're not taking any excuses from Tennant.

"Oh, how nice. Maybe that should be my goal, to have one last outing as the Doctor at 82. I've got 30 years to wait."

Now that it's committed to print, the fans obviously will hold him to that... "If I can still do it in 30 years' time I'll be thrilled to do it."

Enough of 2053 – how's he planning on celebrating this month, as a fan?

He considers for a moment. "Maybe we should have a street party. What day of the week is the 23rd?" It's a Thursday this year, we tell him. "Is it? That's not the right day of the week. Can we change that?" A Bank Holiday weekend for the 60th? "Well if they can have one for the Coronation, they can have one for this..."

There is one thing his fan gene would like, however. "I'd like a fully-realised PlayStation 5 game where my kids could play as me as the Doctor. Except they wouldn't! They'd be like, 'No, we want to be Jodie!'" ●



DOCTOR WHO PRODUCERS

SPECIAL

DELIVERY

THE PRODUCERS OF *DOCTOR WHO* DISCUSS
WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE NEW EPISODES

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

WHEN WE SIT in executive producer Phil Collinson's office – adorned with Dalek movie posters – with fellow series producer Vicki Delow, the pair joke about being like presenters Richard and Judy as they decide where to be on the sofa. As they settle down for a conversation about the upcoming *Doctor Who* specials, we note that watching over them from above, with giant eyes, is an early prototype of the Meep's head... Ulp.

We should probably talk about the Meep in the room.

Phil Collinson: You can imagine going from that comic strip into the script to, “How are we going to make the Meep?” Simply the amount of time, the amount of pages of dialogue it had, and how much it had to interact. It was just bonkers. The prep for it was mad.

Vicki Delow: It was. I'd never done creatures before, like this, practical creatures. So I didn't realise there's a performer, and there's the stuff that comes with the performance and stuff that comes with the creature. There's the building of the creature. It blew my mind a little bit.

What was it like when you first saw it finally come to life?

VD: Aww. Neill Gorton, who runs Millennium [FX], came in and did this whole thing where he got the performer to hide behind a bin and then called it out, in character, and oh my god, it was lovely. She was able to move a lot better than we imagined. She had to be very tiny and to be in a crouching position. The performer's very small anyway, but she had to also crouch and she had this big head on, and the animatronics that controlled it all. So it's quite a feat.

PC: It was the first time we went, “Oh my god, it will actually work.” There were two iterations of the Meep; we filmed with a person in a suit, running around acting, doing the whole thing in a version like that [points to the prototype]. Then we had a chap on set who was doing the voice and acting opposite David and Catherine. Then we've replaced the voice subsequently with Miriam Margolyes. But we did that way after we'd finished filming.

Then we've also done significant VFX work to make the ears and eyes move and the mouth lip-sync with Miriam. So it's been one of the most complicated creatures *Doctor Who*'s ever tackled, genuinely, since 1963. [Laughs] It's no accident that Beep the Meep never appeared in the show because it's just the most complicated bonkers. Because it plays such a massive part of the story, we couldn't have even afforded to



Producer Vicki Delow recently did *His Dark Materials*.

imagine it being a completely CGI creature. That's a feature film.

You weren't tempted to say, “Can we try ‘The Iron Legion’ instead?”

PC: Well no, because it was the first script really, we weren't going to be the ones who said no to the first script. It was one [Russell had] always wanted and it just fitted so beautifully with the story with Donna's return, with [Yasmin Finney's character] Rose.

When you see it, it is gloriously apt. The way that Russell adapted that comic strip's story, retained all the best bits of it, but made it fit the story of the return of Donna and her family, it's so clever. So we weren't going to say no. We've never worked together before, but we're cut from the same cloth because we're both a bit like, “Well, let's have a challenge then because it's boring without one.”

Apart from the Meep, what were the big challenges you were facing?

PC: It was the ambition, I suppose. Vicki's just been producing *His Dark Materials*. I'd come off the back of a period drama for BBC One and HBO called *Gentleman Jack*. So we've both been making big telly, but nothing really prepares you for this job. It's the nature of it, the episodes changing all the time is the main issue.

VD: It's the weight of responsibility as well. We had a responsibility to bring it back and bring it back in an incredibly ambitious way, and we feel that every day when we're trying to figure out how to do it.

David and Catherine are back. To what extent will this feel like a return, and to what extent does it feel different?

PC: In a sense it's what *Doctor Who* does every time the main character regenerates – it completely reinvents itself. This show feels very different to the show that was transmitted the last time it was on. It is bigger, we're spending more money on it. So that brings us



Executive producer Phil Collinson, huge *Who* fan.

elevation in terms of production value and size. But it's the same show – it's got the same music, the TARDIS arrives. Those two actors are so brilliant that they literally just step back in. What I love about it is you feel comfortable with them. You don't have that little episode where you think, "Do I like this Doctor?" There's a certain amount of introduction to do but we kind of cover it. It's amazing how quick you get it. She absorbed the power of the TARDIS into her brain, she became half Time

Lord, and he had to wipe her mind. That's kind of all you need to know, and now you're off.

Crucially, you're not going to watch it and think, "Oh, this feels a bit old-fashioned," because it's very much modern, faster, bigger, brasher. There are things that blow up in the same way that they always do, but probably bigger.

VD: What I hope is that people will watch the two of them and they'll be their guiding lights through it. Those that have watched the show

before will remember, and everything they loved about them, they'll bring with them into our era. But also those who haven't watched it will see these two great characters and think, "Oh, I really love them and want to see what's going on with them", and therefore come with us as well.

PC: I suppose for a bigger audience they are a very good reintroduction into Russell T Davies's version of *Doctor Who*. They are the very best comedians, they're brilliant at playing that, and he writes a lot of comedy in the scripts. They're brilliant at turning on a

“We had a responsibility to bring it back in an incredibly ambitious way”

sixpence and breaking your heart, and he breaks your heart at the end of these episodes. So it is like bringing back the best in order for you to move something forward.

How much of *Doctor Who* “legacy” can be expected from these episodes to celebrate the 60th anniversary?

PC: Obviously, for fans Beep the Meep is a big thing that goes right back to early fandom – the '70s and the beginning of that time when it felt like *Doctor Who* started to turn from being a show that people watched into being magazines and toys and whatever, so there's definitely that in the first one.

I think with David and Catherine, as I say, they're very cleverly looking back but also looking forward. Then in special three, there's tons of nostalgia. There's UNIT, there's a fantastic big baddie coming back who looks right back to the very early days of the show, and he's completely reinvented. It does feel like a massive celebration.

Having said all of that, we all feel like the best way of celebrating something is making it feel brilliant and relevant today. It's definitely a very forward-looking show. There'll be all sorts of stuff going around the anniversary as well, other things that celebrate, so there's enough in these three specials. There's definitely enough for it to feel like we're celebrating the →

WHO IS THE MEEP?

◆ “The Star Beast” draws on an eight-part 1980 Marvel comic strip from *Doctor Who Weekly*. Written by 2000 *AD* co-creator Pat Mills and drawn by Dave Gibbons (later of *Watchmen* fame), it sees kids in a northern town taking in a cuddly alien furball after its spaceship crashes on Earth. But is everything

what it seems? And why are the fearsome Wrarth Warriors pursuing him? SPOILERS!

The Meep popped up in four more strips in the '90s (most notably 1996 sequel “Star Beast II”), plus a Sixth Doctor audio (2002); producers Big Finish also adapted “The Star Beast” in 2019.





At least the Toymaker always makes an effort.



Watch out for the Warth Warriors in special one.

whole history of the show without it being all five Doctors coming together to defeat the Master or whatever.

Was that a very conscious decision?

PC: It's all definitely about wanting to look forward, but as I think Russell does so brilliantly, it's not looking forward without forgetting where you came from. Because you just can't with this show. He flies around in a blue box and, like I say, the enemy they face is someone who goes right back to almost the genesis of the show – so it's definitely there. It's just not multi-Doctors. I love multi-Doctor shows. But we don't need to do it, it's been done.

Are there any breathtaking moments you can speak about?

VD: I can't talk about the one I really want to talk about! There was one rehearsal that we did for something that blew my mind. I really enjoyed all the night stuff that we did for special one, "The Star Beast".

PC: There's a massive battle in a steelworks and on the street that was huge and a lot of fun to do. We've got a brand new headquarters for UNIT. We built this amazing UNIT set, it's a

skyscraper, a part of the London skyline. In a Marvel Universe kind of way, we were trying to create that kind of thing for *Doctor Who* now. UNIT is part of London and people know what it is and the fighting of aliens, it happens now. We built this amazing set for it, and the way they are brought into that set in special three is by a helicopter. So we helicopter them in and the TARDIS gets dropped down and it's just massive.

Murray Gold's music's going, and then there's a huge sequence upon this helipad that's surrounded by greenscreens and it's the biggest special effects I've ever done. Then to see that translated into what it's turned into now on screen is just amazing. This is my favourite show in the world. So to be part of making it even bigger, it's just a massive thrill, all of it.

VD: I've thought of one: filming on the TARDIS for the first time. Honestly, I watched this show as a kid. You never imagine you're actually going to be working on the thing that you watch on the telly. It's amazing. It's amazing.

What was the thinking behind the new TARDIS interior?



Sylvia Noble (Donna's mum) and Shaun Temple.

PC: Well, it's bigger, a lot bigger.

VD: It's sort of like a cathedral. It takes your breath away, both on screen when it first appears because of the way we've shot it, but also, when you walk into it, you feel it. You physically feel it. I know that's a bit overdramatic, but you do. When you walk in, you physically feel it.

Not much is known about the second

WHO IS THE TOYMAKER?

◆ This powerful eternal being (played by Michael Gough) debuted in 1966 story "The Celestial Toymaker", abducting the TARDIS crew to his realm and forcing the First Doctor's companions to play a series of dangerous games. Only one of four episodes still survives. He was originally set to return in 1986. Graham

Williams's Sixth Doctor script "The Nightmare Fair" had the Toymaker plotting world domination using an arcade game that feeds on human souls, from a base inside Blackpool's "Space Mountain" ride. When the series was axed, the script was shelved. It was later novelised, and adapted for audio by Big Finish.





Everyone loves a Toymaker, don't they?



Oh dear... Donna's not happy. As usual.

episode, "Wild Blue Yonder". Can you talk about that without spoilers?

PC: It's hard to do. It's genuinely unlike any other episode of *Doctor Who* I have ever seen, and I've seen them all. And that's bloody hard to pull off after 60 years of the show, but it honestly is.

VD: It's creepy.

PC: It's just got an atmosphere and a horror all of its own. So that is unlike anything I've ever seen before. It genuinely is. That is the episode that we would really love to not spoil, actually. It feels honestly groundbreaking, not just in terms of *Doctor Who*, but in terms of production, in terms of the way we've made it.

Virtually every shot is a VFX shot. It's a feat all of its own, and once it's transmitted you'll be able to write reams and issues, and there are so many things we're going to be able to tell you about how we made it and how we did things. It's the most fascinating piece of drama I've ever made.

The making of it, the post-production of it, the taking all the actors through it, just every bit of it. There's definitely been moments where I've woken up in the middle of the night and thought, "We're not going to do it. This is a disaster. What are we even doing this for?"

Episode two, in a way, feels like what we've come back to do. We've come back to break



Ruth Madeley (Shirley) was in *Years And Years*.

ground. We've come back to make this show in a way it's not been done before. We've come back to make the sort of drama that people will stop and talk about at the watercooler or online. It's exciting and groundbreaking, and no one's worked like this. The way we made episode two, it's a roller coaster and it will be amazing.

VD: It was terrifying for us to make! We learned so much from it, that episode above anything else. It taught us how to prep for this show in a way none of the others did in some ways. The one thing I will say about all three specials is each one will make you feel different. So each one will give you a different emotional response, not the same.

They're all completely different. They all have things that you'll talk about forever. They all have things that make you either cry or laugh or whatever; that one should terrify you utterly, if we've done our job properly. ●

Doctor Who is on BBC One in the UK and Disney+ worldwide this month.

HISTORY

REPEATING

SFX GOES ON SET FOR THE
FILMING OF A BRAND NEW
DOCTOR WHO SERIES
**TALES OF THE
TARDIS**

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

NOTHING QUITE prepares you for walking into the *actual* TARDIS – but that’s taken to a whole new level when “your” Doctor and companion are there, in costume, creating brand new canonical adventures.

It’s a surreal, giddy moment for *SFX* in Studio 1 at Bad Wolf in Cardiff on Thursday 28 September – now you know why Sylvester McCoy and Sophie Aldred were at the Radio 2 concert, fact fans – as we step aboard the Remembered TARDIS...

“It’s a mash-up of loads of different TARDIS sets,” writer Pete McTighe explains. “There’s bits of the Davison console, bits of the Eccleston/Tennant console, bits of the Jodie TARDIS. There’s even bits of Ncuti’s TARDIS in there. That’s incredible, the way that they’ve collided all these tiny pieces into one set.

“The set decoration is astonishing, there’s loads and loads of little Easter eggs of props from the show that are relevant to the stories that we’re seeing, but also plenty of other stories as well.”

This new six-part miniseries is, producer Scott Hancock explains, “designed to help new fans access the whole archive of *Doctor Who*,” as 800 episodes from the Whoniverse arrive on BBC iPlayer this month. “It’s a format where we get to reunite beloved cast members and characters in a very special version of the TARDIS that celebrates every era of the show.”

FULL CIRCLE

Fans of the expansive *Who* box sets will already be familiar with the concept. “Russell told me it was inspired by the short films for the Blu-rays, which is amazing,” McTighe says. But while these six dramas will accompany new omnibus editions of Classic Series stories, they’re far more than just introductions.

“It’s not just a simple intro and outro,” McTighe explains. “It’s actually a story that moves the characters on. Russell’s written this amazing piece for ‘Earthshock’, which is dealing with Adric’s death, which never happened in the show. So you get 10 minutes of Peter Davison and Janet Fielding really immersed in that event and what it meant to them and how it changed them. It’s great. We’ve never had this stuff before. It is 100% canon.”

The focal point of the new *Tales Of The TARDIS* series is a smaller set than your regular Time Lord fare – built as a circular/domed construct raised slightly above the floor. It has the now-traditional Police Box doors as an entrance; everything else around the entrance shell is painted green to allow for VFX later. The actual doors themselves rest up

Maureen O’Brien and Peter Purves reminisce.



BACK TO THE FUTURE

Russell T Davies talks *Tales*

Can we confirm that *TOTT* is canon?

◆ **ABSOLUTELY!** Good god almighty! What the flip?!

You know what fandom’s like!

◆ Well, it’s going out on the iPlayer. So some fans will be completely justified in saying, if it hasn’t been transmitted on BBC One, then it’s not canon. I mean, welcome to your life. I have nothing to say to you. [Laughs]

Is this part of an intention to build out an existing universe?

◆ There are bigger plans behind this that we can’t talk about yet. Eventually *TOTT* will begin to make more sense as the series next year unfolds, you will see. But it’s really a lovely thing to do for the 60th. [Chuckles] It’s very last-minute. I thought of it about two months ago. It’s been like, “Oh Christ. Let’s do this.” I did think we hadn’t done enough for the 60th and we made this.

I’ve had one of the greatest weeks of my entire career taking the cast members out for dinner every night and talking to them and every single night, we’ve been sitting there saying how we wish that John Nathan-Turner was still alive. [See page 26.]

It’s interesting, because what we’ve learned is, even to do a small spin-off like *TOTT* has been thrilling and has energised the entire team. What’s nice about that is it’s given a lot of staff a chance to step up and be promoted. Scott Hancock’s our script editor and he’s become the producer of this. Joshua Thomas, who’s directing *TOTT*, is my assistant. He’s directed short films before, so he’s now pulling up. So the more product we have, the more everyone can advance and learn and get promoted.

against a nearby wall, removed to allow for filming. A large camera track runs almost the length of the studio, directly to the famous time machine’s entrance. The whole thing is sat metres away from a large set from the next series – spoilers!

Inside, it’s a treasure trove of various different TARDIS sets from over the years from floor literally to ceiling. The set dressers have gone to town with items from every era of the series, but each episode of *TOTT* has Doctor-specific nods. So here we see Ace’s baseball bat, a forum poster from “The Happiness Patrol” and a kite from “The Greatest Show In The Galaxy”.

“Anytime somebody stepped into the set, and just had a look around, I had to clear the floor,” director Joshua Thomas recalls later. “I had to give the actors some time to absorb the history that was in there, and the items that they picked up.

“One of my most fond memories was when Wendy [Padbury] came in. She walked in and immediately was just taken aback. She stood there and had to take a deep breath, walked over to one of the consoles and went to place her hand on one and then immediately retreated and hesitated. I went, ‘You can touch that. You can touch anything in here’. She said,



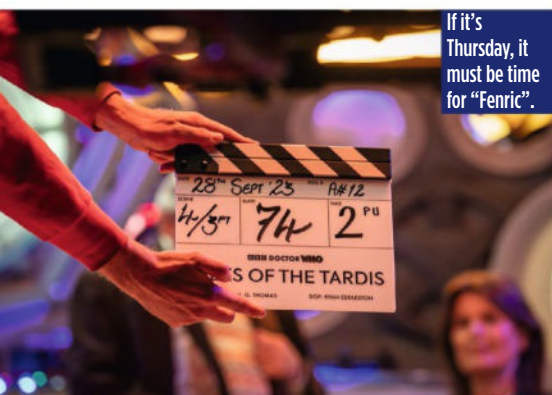
“I had to give the actors some time to absorb the history that was in there”



Maureen O'Brien as Vicki takes it all in.



Jamie (Frazer Hines) is back at the controls!



If it's Thursday, it must be time for "Fenric".

'I wasn't able to touch the console back in the day. This is unbelievable that this is here.' I said, 'Well, this is your time to do that'. She put her hand on it and her eyes started welling and it was a breathtaking moment. She just seemed so overwhelmed with emotion by everything that we were doing. That was when it hit – it was just really, really special to watch.

"Maureen [O'Brien]'s reaction was quite breathtaking," he adds. "She stood in this really picturesque moment, under the console that hovers over the top of the set, and did this 360 spin, hand on her heart and just looked at it in awe. It was just beautiful. Everybody watched her as she took it all in and everybody just took a deep breath. It was magic. It was really, really quite sweet."



Nicola Bryant (Peri) is happy to be back, too.

Returning memories was definitely something that was at the forefront for the writing team, too. "The Mind Robber" was really the scene that I've wanted to write for 40 years," McTighe says. "It's all about Jamie and Zoe getting their memories [which were wiped by the Time Lords] restored – and they're back for good by the end of this tale, which means that they can then pop up in the parent show or wherever, again, because it always seemed so

unfair and cruel to me that happens. So we've undone that.

"A big part of [it] is Jamie remembering the Doctor and his love for the Doctor. So he finds the Second Doctor's original recorder. There's a real moment there with that. I wanted to use props from the past as kind of a talisman throughout these," he explains. "For 'Fenric', obviously the chess set is really crucial in the story and also in this new drama. I was really →

specific about making sure Sylvester was wearing his darker season 26 jacket, because I just wanted it to tie closer into the original story. I specified that we had a kite from 'The Greatest Show In The Galaxy'. I was just trying to think of things that were really identifiable from that era."

Ahead of us there are people *underneath* the set, on their knees with torches, working on fittings for people above to bring in a miniature model of Jodie Whittaker's console, which serves as a focal point for the proceedings.

"That's the crystal campfire," McTighe explains. "Russell created that for 'Earthshock', which was the first script that was written. So we've all kept that because it's a great little device. It's cute."

There's laughter in the studio as the first scene is blocked out. A few feet away, the actual Seventh Doctor sits holding his question mark umbrella. By the time we get to scene 68 take one, McCoy gurns like he's regenerating in *The TV Movie*. 68/2: They nail the scene and hand in hand he and Aldred dance together. They go again for sound reasons. "It wasn't me who was creaking," McCoy jokes about his chair.

There's a familiar voice – Russell T Davies has turned up for filming. "Look, isn't it lovely!" he beams. By scene 69/1, Davies is singing a made-up theme tune for *TOTT*.

SET SECRETS

While the crew set up for another take, we have a look around the studio. There are more "Happiness Patrol" posters (we want one please, Bad Wolf!), fresh celery in a glass, a blue Metebelis crystal. While we're doing that, Aldred's searching the TARDIS for a very specific prop. As soon as we hear *that* familiar sound, we know she's given Sylvester McCoy his spoons...

Ever the showman, he plays them across Aldred and himself, hitting his head and then covering his eyes with them. He has the crew in the palm of his hand as laughter ripples round the studio. The pair are on fire and you genuinely want to applaud after each take.

"Sylvester, he's an absolute showman and brought an energy to the set that everybody fed off," Thomas recalls later. "When he brings out the spoons at the end, I mean, we could have rolled camera on him for hours. It was just magic, and seeing them run around trying to fly the TARDIS was just really special for everybody, him with his umbrella and in costume."

Back on set, McCoy's having a ball. "And somewhere else the whisky's getting cold," he ad-libs, covering his mouth. "In-flight lighting" is activated, the pair run around pulling levers – McCoy gives the console above him a big thud with his broly. The director shouts cut and people actually do applaud. The Seventh Doctor is released from shooting, with another →

SEVENTH HEAVEN

Sylvester McCoy on returning to *Doctor Who*

What's it like being back in the TARDIS?

◆ Great! Yeah, I missed it really... That was really nice.

This sets up more adventures – is that something you're up for?

◆ Is the Pope Argentinian? He is – the answer's yes! We all love *Doctor Who*, all of us who have been in it really. David [Tennant]'s come back to do it as well, we kind of can't get away from it. We're still doing it, Sophie and I, Colin and Peter and Paul and all at Big Finish. It never goes away, thank god.

What did you first think when you saw the Remembered TARDIS?

◆ Oh, I couldn't remember! No, it was pretty. It was like a lumber room with loads of stuff that you put in and then come back later, you pick up things and remember, "Oh, I remember that." It's chaotic, but fascinating and good fun. And dirty. [Shows filthy hands]

How does the scale of the Whoniverse now compare to your days?

◆ [Laughs] When we made it, we made it on peanuts. We used to sometimes think they got *Blue Peter*'s sticky-back plastic and stuck the set up – the wobbly sets. This is quite extraordinary. I'm full of envy for them working on something like this. They're so lucky. But I mean, we did it back then and it seems to still be magic. Because people are still watching it all these years [later], they're going back. They haven't thrown us aside – the audience, anyway.

Which of your other stories would you recommend on iPlayer?

◆ I suppose it would be "Remembrance Of The Daleks", which was very successful. It was about something as well. You have to watch it to find out what it was about. "The Happiness Patrol" was fun. Although I was in a way disappointed because originally – I heard this afterwards, I wish I'd heard it before – the director was going

to do it as film noir in black and white. I think that would've added to it a lot. I wish they had, because it had that film noir feeling about it. I suppose they could fiddle about with it nowadays.

Did you ever imagine in 1989 you'd be talking about the 60th anniversary?

◆ No, not really. I was there for nearly the 30th anniversary. But even that was astonishing. I thought that was it, really. But thanks to the fans, the fans have brought it back. Steven Moffat was a fanboy, Russell's a fanboy. And they're the ones that brought it back. The BBC weren't gonna bring it back. These guys did. The fans demand it. It's a crown jewel.

Your stories did pave the way for the new series, though!

◆ It was really partly because the script editor, Andrew Cartmel, and myself were completely ignorant of the history of *Doctor Who*. He was Canadian, and I had been working in the theatre. I hadn't seen it since maybe the first couple of episodes of Tom Baker's, way back then. So I had a distant memory of it. We knew nothing. So in a way we were blessed because we didn't have that baggage to think, "Oh well, we can't do this because..." We looked at it fresh, read it and did it. It was only later Steven Moffat told me that we had done something quite different. And we hadn't noticed!

How do you think the show has changed in 60 years?

◆ It's changed because it got younger and in a way it became even more successful because of that. But I regret it in a way, because what I loved about the early Doctors was we had a superhero who was not Superman, or Mr America, he wasn't muscular. He used his brain, not his brawn, but he was also a wise old man.

In the old Anglo-Saxon society that we live in, we do not respect the old, like Latin societies do, Indian society. You go to Asia, they respect the old. Having an old Doctor meant that young people would get a hero, an old man hero. That's the negative thing as far as I'm concerned. But that's only a very personal thing.

Has it changed? No, it hasn't really changed. It keeps changing and not changing, it's like a Gordian Knot of visuals and creatives. Writers are all affected by what they saw when they were young.

Because I noticed that certain things coming out in the Chris Eccleston [era] were echoes of what we'd done, the baby and loads of other things. And then Matt Smith's fez, I did that first – and danced with the mop. I was on the set and I just improvised and they kept it.

Were the spoons in your eyes earlier a stage direction?

◆ No, no, that was just me farting around...



McCoy with Sophie Aldred in the original series.





"What happens if I press *this*? Ah. Oops."

round of applause and he's given a bouquet of flowers that's almost as big as he is.

The returning actors have all loved the experience, the team say. "The funny thing is you talk to the cast, and they say that when the show came back in 2005 they were expecting almost to be ghosted, in a way," Hancock recalls, "because there was a new shiny version of the show and people wouldn't be interested in the old stuff."

"But what they've discovered, actually, was all these new viewers, new kids, new families, discovered the back catalogue. So you'd have people cosplaying as Sarah Jane or Peter Davison and everything like that. So this is just another way now, with the archive going on iPlayer, of introducing a new generation to what *Doctor Who* was and helping them fall in love with all these established characters all over again."

But these are characters that have grown too. "Colin in his new suit was really quite something," Thomas says. "When we were in fittings, I feel like he was expecting something closer to what he was originally in. Our plan

going in was no, he needs to have something that shows that he's a Doctor that's distinguished as well, that time has passed and he's grown and learnt as well, in his own adventures that we've not seen. Seeing him in the fittings and putting it on, he was really grateful that we had made that choice. I think it empowered him to deliver the beautiful performance that he did. I think that was a really great moment."

Hancock adds: "It feels so absolutely right. It's just as colourful as it was, but older and wiser, just like the character. It's stunning."

There have been other surprises for former *Who* crew too. "The cast come in for fittings a few days before we bring them to the set that they'll be shooting on. They just fall in love with this smaller-on-the-inside version of the TARDIS, that's just really intimate and full of details. Then we discreetly do the, 'Do you want to go to stage six?' where we have our massive upcoming TARDIS, which obviously no one knows..."

"It's lovely walking them over to the stage going, 'What do you think the new TARDIS is



Clyde (Daniel Anthony) and Jo (Katy Manning).



TARDIS DATABANK

Who, What, When!

THE TIME MEDDLER

by Phil Ford

Maureen O'Brien
and Peter Purves

Filmed: 29 September

THE THREE DOCTORS

by Phil Ford

Katy Manning
and Daniel Anthony

Filmed: 30 September

VENGEANCE ON VAROS

by Phil Ford

Colin Baker
and Nicola Bryant

Filmed: 27 September

THE MIND ROBBER

by Pete McTighe

Frazer Hines
and Wendy Padbury

Filmed: 25 September

EARTHSHOCK

by Russell T Davies

Peter Davison
and Janet Fielding

Filmed: 26 September

THE CURSE OF FENRIC

by Pete McTighe

Sylvester McCoy
and Sophie Aldred

Filmed: 28 September



“We’ve got an entire archive to exploit and there are so many brilliant characters”



“Of course I can get this off again. Probably.”



Ace (Sophie Aldred) sets off for new adventures.



Zoe (Wendy Padbury) gives Jamie a talking-to.

going to be like?”, and they all have different ideas. We’ve got in the habit of shutting the door. So they literally step in through the police box door and their reactions, every single time... We’ve had people burst into tears. We’ve had swearing, massive smiles and just awe, actually,” Hancock grins.

“It’s *Doctor Who* on an absolute other level, an absolute other level. It’s been thrilling to invite them back to play these roles, but also show them where the show is going into the future as well.”

“All the actors had such a great time,” Thomas enthuses. “I was really blessed after each shoot day to get calls and messages, emails, even postcards from each of the cast members who had just said, ‘I had an absolute blast every single moment of that day.’”

“They fed off the crew, the crew fed off them. It really was one of those rare occasions on set where we all felt incredibly blessed to have the opportunity to do this, and I think everyone took every moment of those shoot days, and just put their all into it, and I think it’s reflected on screen.”

All of this presumably bodes well for more trips in the Remembered TARDIS. “I’d love to see Polly come back, and Leela. It’d be amazing,” McTighe says. “The great thing about this is if they work, and people love them, theoretically you could go on making these for years. That would be incredible if we could – if every year we could pick a little ‘best of season’ and do these. Not to say that’s gonna happen. But it would be good.”

Hancock agrees. “We’ve got an entire archive to exploit and there are so many brilliant characters, because it wouldn’t have to necessarily be Doctors and companions. You could have, say, Simon Williams pop out to help recall ‘Remembrance Of The Daleks’ or any number of people.”

Thomas is on board too. “Hopefully we get to do more and bring more companions and Doctors back together and other people, villains. We could do so much with this set, and we could tell so many more stories.” ●

Doctor Who: Tales Of The TARDIS is on BBC iPlayer as part of the Whoniverse Collection.



Louis McCartney
(Henry Creel)
and Patrick Vaill
(Dr Brenner)

THE HAWKINS HORROR SHOW

STRANGER THINGS

IS COMING TO LONDON'S WEST
END – AND ITS STORY WILL
BE “INTEGRAL” TO THE
SHOW. *SFX* GOES
BEHIND THE SCENES
TO FIND OUT MORE...

WORDS:
JACK SHEPHERD



Oscar Lloyd (James
Hopper Jr), Isabella
Pappas (Joyce Maldonado)
and Christopher Buckley
(Bob Newby).

WHEN THE DUFFER BROTHERS, the creators of *Stranger Things*, asked scribe Kate Trefry to write a stage play based on their Netflix series, her reaction was a natural one:

“What the hell are you talking about?” After all, the world of Eleven, the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer was developed for television, and recreating the horrors of Hawkins on stage seemed an impossible task.

Yet here we are two years after that meeting, and Trefry’s talking to *SFX* between rehearsals for *Stranger Things: The First Shadow*, a prequel heading to London’s Phoenix Theatre.

“Everything about it is extremely different,” says Trefry, also an executive producer on the series, comparing her experience writing the stage play – based on a story by herself, the Duffers, and acclaimed playwright Jack Thorne – to the show.

“I wrote my original draft with little regard for the stage because I just know how to write the show, so I wrote the show. We’ve been working backwards to figure out how to bring it to the stage, but that’s why they tapped me to do it; because it’s more important that it feels like the show than anything else. It’s canon and it really is part of the show.”

The idea for doing a play originated with co-directors Justin Martin and Stephen Daldry, the Oscar-nominated filmmaker behind *Billy Elliot*. The duo had previously worked with Netflix on royal drama *The Crown*, and after the →

PORTRAITS BY CHARLIE GRAY/NETFLIX

streamer showed interest in entering the theatrical space, they searched for an idea that could work on stage.

"The thing about *Stranger Things* is that the world is inherently theatrical," Martin tells *SFX* during a lunch break amid intense rehearsals. "There are great characters, but it's also got a really great heart." The difficulty Martin foresaw was translating the show's horror elements to the stage, but it was a challenge he was eager to take on. "There's a feeling of safety sitting in seats in the theatre," he says. "I felt really excited to see what's possible."

The creative team knew they had to keep the tone of the series intact, including a few healthy jump scares, and needed a writer who knew the Upside Down inside out. "Kate is a phenomenal writer who, having not done theatre before, created this amazing script, which really pushed us and challenged us to be better directors," Martin says.

CREEL LIVES

He calls the first drafts "brilliantly impossible" to put on stage; for instance, the TV series often cuts from one set of characters to another, then back again, which is a tricky effect to achieve in theatre. However, rather than asking Trefry to rewrite the story, the directors instead tried to bring her ideas to life without too many compromises. "She really has written two episodes that form a holistic story, an act one and two," Martin adds.

Speaking of story, not much is known about what's going to happen once the curtain rises. *The First Shadow* takes place in the '50s and features teenage versions of Joyce Maldonado (played by Winona Ryder in the TV show), Jim Hopper (David Harbour) and Bob Newby (Sean Astin) in Hawkins. Their lives are seemingly disrupted when Henry Creel (who will one day become the evil entity Vecna) and his family move into town.

"This is first and foremost a story about Henry, a love story about Henry and this girl he meets," Trefry says. "But while it's about Henry, we spend a lot of time with our other



characters, weaving in and out of his orbit. Sometimes unwittingly, sometimes knowingly."

Creel was introduced in the fourth season and *The First Shadow* picks up on story threads left dangling from those episodes. In fact, Trefry was a writer for both the fourth and the upcoming fifth (and final) seasons, giving her, as she puts it, a "master view" of the series.

This enabled her to craft a new, standalone prequel story that adds new context to both seasons. "It's in conversation with the seasons prior and the season to come," she says. "It really informs everything that you have seen and will see."

Martin calls the play "integral to what season five is going to be," adding that *The First Shadow* was conceived around the release of the second season in 2017, and since then, the seeds of the play's story have been planted in the show.

"There are referential sequences and imagery and callbacks and flashbacks to the events of the play in [season] five that will still make sense to you if you don't see the play," Trefry says, "but you'll have a deeper understanding of them if you do."

The First Shadow depicts a "traumatic event" that reverberates through these characters for the rest of their lives. The meeting of Henry and the villainous Doctor Brenner plays a

significant part. "No one will ever guess how it leads to this crazy place," she says. "But Henry is an agent of violence and chaos who gets dropped like a little grenade into this small town and affects everybody around him."

While some of Creel's origin story has been told, Trefry emphasises that the version of events seen on screen may not be reliable; we were, she notes, told what happened to the Creel family by Henry himself. "The play is a different perspective," she says. "We're reaching back into Henry's past to understand why he is the way he is."

Creel's not the only character we come to understand a little better in *The First Shadow*. The play presents Hopper, Joyce and Bob in a new light, and writing them as teenagers was an interesting challenge.

"They are different to who you know from the series," Martin explains, "but only inasmuch as they become those people. They go on a journey through their lives and the play sets them off on those journeys that they will wrestle with to become who they are. It's been fun finding where certain things come from."

The adolescent Hopper has "hypermasculine daddy issues", while his relationship with Bob is somewhat similar to the relationship between Steve and Dustin. Joyce, meanwhile, was tricky to write. "She's

BRAD TORCHIA

Kate Trefry
with the
Duffer
brothers.



PORTRAITS BY CHARLIE GRAY/NETFLIX



Ella Karuna Williams
(Patty Newby) and Louis
McCartney (Henry Creel).

defined by her children and this manic, obsessive streak of mystery-solving,” Trefry says of the adult Joyce. “We had to ask what she was like before having her boys, so I had fun rooting her out. To me, she always seems a little out there, really determined, and quick to believe. She’s always fighting for what she believes in and what she loves, but she’s also a loose cannon.”

“You fall in love with those characters in a way that you never fell in love with them before,” Martin says. “The thing about what the Duffers have written with the world and those characters and their interrelationships, they are so rich. Being able to play with them and find out more about them has been a joy.”

There are also a few new characters in the play, and although both Martin and Trefry are reluctant to go into too much detail for fear of spoilers, they both point to Patty Newby – Bob’s sister – as a highlight. “She’s just getting more interesting every day as we continue rehearsals,” says Trefry. “She’s a very dynamic, very unusual female character who’s really complex. She has an edge that you don’t necessarily expect.”

MONSTER MASH

Of course, this wouldn’t be *Stranger Things* without a sense of time and place. Whereas the TV show is steeped in ’80s nostalgia, the play takes place at the tale end of the ’50s, and you can expect music from the period, while Martin also implies that some of the characters, presumably Hopper’s father, are still dealing with the fallout of the Second World War.

However, despite the setting, the aesthetic of *Stranger Things* remains in place. Trefry describes their approach to keeping the story feeling like *Stranger Things*, incorporating familiar Spielbergian elements such as focusing on a gang of teenage outsiders, and using nostalgia as a tool rather than a means to an end. “We keep the tonal landscape of the show,” she says. “It’s unbelievable.”

When it comes to the staging itself, the designers, as of speaking to *SFX*, are working hard on making Hawkins and its hidden laboratories a reality. “They originally said it’s like 10 shows wrapped into one,” Martin says gleefully. He adds that the most apt theatrical comparison, scale-wise, is the ongoing *Harry*



Co-director
Justin Martin
(left)...

...co-director
Stephen
Daldry.

MANUEL HARLAN

Potter stage play *The Cursed Child*, with the illusions department being brought over from that show to *The First Shadow*. “It’s really been an opportunity for us to push what they can do even further, and they’ve really gone for it,” Martin says. “There are some things I’ve never seen on stage. It’s like *Harry Potter* on crack cocaine.”

To be a true *Stranger Things* story there also needs to be monsters, and whatever mysterious creatures the creatives are cooking up, they promise these beasts will be terrifyingly real. “What we don’t do is abstract,” Martin says. “It’s frightening and exciting and exhilarating and surprising. It’s funny – in the rehearsal room, without any lights, it suddenly works and you’re feeling a bit frightened. We’ve got an astonishing team working on it.”

While the technical side is an important aspect of the play, the focus for everyone involved remains the story. “At the end of the day, if the story at the centre doesn’t work, then you’ve got nothing,” Martin says. “It’s balancing the emotional nature of the story with a very technically complicated show, so the technicalities never overwhelm the human story.”

To fulfil that promise, the casting has to be impeccable, and Martin tasked his casting director with the challenge of “finding the next Ben Whishaw or Andrew Garfield”. “They went out and they did it,” he says. “There are proper rock stars in the cast. In 10 years time, these kids will be winning awards.”

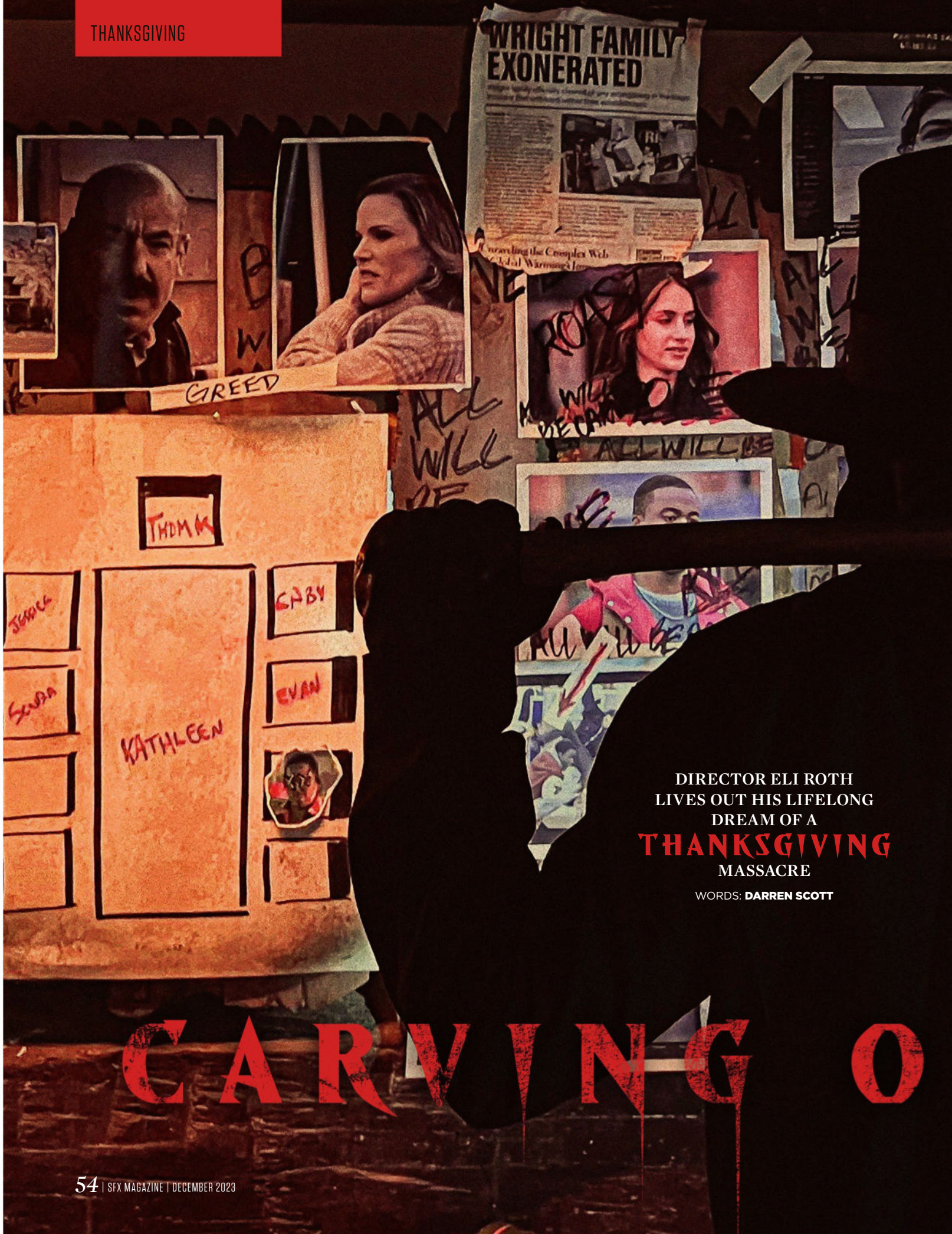
It sounds like *The First Shadow* could end up being another West End break-out. After all, stranger things have happened... ●

Stranger Things: The First Shadow previews from 17 November at the Phoenix Theatre, London.



Michael Jibson (Victor Creel),
Louis McCartney (Henry Creel)
and Lauren Ward (Virginia Creel).

THANKSGIVING



DIRECTOR ELI ROTH
LIVES OUT HIS LIFELONG
DREAM OF A
THANKSGIVING
MASSACRE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

CARVING O

THE NICE THING ABOUT MAKING A holiday movie is you have a very clear deadline," director Eli Roth jokes as he takes time out from the edit of *Thanksgiving*, his seasonal slasher. Not that he hasn't had long to make the movie – it's actually something he's been thinking about since he was 13 years old.

"My best friend Jeff Rendell [writer of the film] and I would just ingest every single horror movie we possibly could. We started getting to see R-rated films during the ['80s] golden age of slasher movies and the VHS boom. Every few months you knew that a horror movie was going to come out because a holiday was coming up. We saw *Halloween*, then *Silent Night*, *Deadly Night* and *April Fool's Day*, *Mother's Day* and *My Bloody Valentine*... To us the most obvious one was Thanksgiving.

"We kept saying, as if there was this giant committee that decided what movies got made," he laughs, "When are they going to make a Thanksgiving-themed horror film?" →

OUT A NICHÉ

Jump forward to 2007 and a request from fellow filmmakers Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino... “When Quentin and Robert came to me and said, ‘Do you want to do a fake movie trailer for *Grindhouse*?’ we thought, ‘We’ve been talking about the kills in *Thanksgiving*’ – we had all these deaths ready to go! We just threw them in the trailer.”

Turning that fake trailer into a full-blown movie wasn’t without its challenges, however.

“Well, that *was* the challenge,” Roth stresses, “because you want to stay true to what you loved about the trailer. But then you find you’re just connecting scenes between the trailer, between those kills. So it was very difficult. Jeff and I, for a long time, had absolutely no idea of how to make the movie. Every time we sat down to write it, we were like, ‘How do we write to get to that kill?’”

“The whole point of *Grindhouse* was that it was a love letter to exploitation movies. The trailer was a joke, it didn’t have to make sense. Nothing had to add up. So you’re just getting the best parts of an exploitation movie. It’s just kill after kill after kill after kill and it’s ridiculous and absurd. You can’t stretch that out to 90 minutes and expect it to have the same impact, or expect people to take it

“Instead of rebooting the same stuff, try and give people a new mythology”

seriously. We didn’t want to make a joke movie. We wanted to make a real movie.”

The friends eventually landed on a unique solution which allowed them to move past their self-imposed limitations.

“We said, ‘Alright, let’s operate under this premise. Let’s pretend that *Thanksgiving* was a real movie that was made and came out in 1980.’ It was so offensive that every single print was destroyed the day of release, it was pulled from the theatres and every print was burned, every copy of the script destroyed. The crew all disappeared.

“The only thing that survived was one copy of the trailer that one person saved and that’s been floating around corners of the internet. So this movie is the 2023 reboot of what the filmmakers thought that film might have been. This is the modern version, rebooting the 1980 film *Thanksgiving*.

“Once we said that, we thought, ‘Okay, we can have a few of the kills, a few of the ones that we love, that we always wanted to do. But we

Addison Rae putting in some good screaming.



“Have you seen Donald Trump’s latest hair?”

don’t have to be slavishly devoted to recreating the trailer.”

Those worried about the more gruesome deaths being erased shouldn’t worry – it seems that Roth and Rendell only went bigger.

“Every time you do one of those kills that you shot before, it has to be as good or better, because otherwise, what’s the point?” Roth explains. “I don’t want people to watch and go, ‘It’s better in the trailer.’ So if you couldn’t top what we did in the trailer, you had to do something different. Part of the fun was it freed us up to come up with all-new kills.”

A dream decades in the making, Covid gave the director a wake-up call about making sure he actually made it a reality. “I thought, ‘Whatever happens, I can’t leave this world without having made *Thanksgiving*.’”

But that’s only part of why it’s taken so long for this film to reach screens.

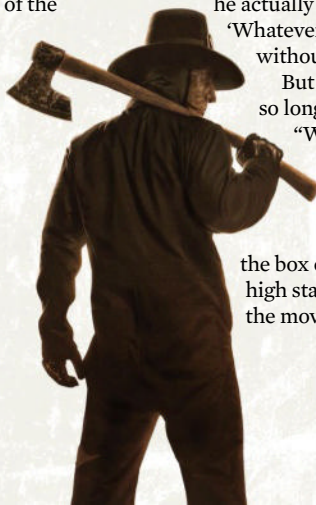
“We wanted to get the script right. I mean, James Cameron spent 14 years making *Avatar 2*, we spent 16 on this. So this, by that logic, should make \$3 billion at the box office,” he laughs. “We had such high standards and high expectations for the movie. We wanted to make a great

modern slasher film. I remember the first time I saw *Scream* in the theatre and you just go, ‘Holy shit. That was amazing!’ That’s what I want, to do that for the next generation.

“Instead of rebooting the same stuff, try and give people a new mythology and new killer, a new slasher. You’ve got to earn it. It’s not enough to just pick a holiday and a mask. It’s one of those classic whodunnit guessing-game slasher films. The kills have to be incredibly satisfying. It has to be really scary and really fun. We’ve had a couple of screenings where there’s screams, applause, cheers, people thinking we’ve gone too far...”

“It’s going to have some of those classic touches and things that you love, but I want to freak people out in ways they’re not expecting. I want to give them kills they don’t see coming. I want them to go, ‘I thought I was going in for this, but oh my god, that was insane.’ That’s the fun of the film.”

Fun was high on the agenda during production too, with Roth laughing as he describes some of the most out-there moments. “The parade was so insane because you just have extras running around screaming... It’s the same moment from the trailer, the decapitated turkey, but there’s something else





Nell Verlaque learns about phone addiction.



Lizzie (Amanda Barker): oh dear.

I do, where we had to cover these two girls in blood. The absurdity of us spraying blood on these kids with their parents [watching], and then laughing and them screaming at the top of their lungs...

"It's one of those times I can't believe we're actually doing this as a job. There are some other moments that we had that were so nuts, but I can't say it without really revealing too much about the plot. There are a couple of scenes that are just completely insane. But everybody was sticky after this one."

Already set to be immortalised as an action figure, the killer from *Thanksgiving* is more rooted in fact than you might imagine. "In our research, we found that the first Governor of New Plymouth Colony who came over on the Mayflower was named John Carver," Roth laughs. "So when history hands you a gift like

that... okay, it's not just someone in a pilgrim outfit, it's John Carver, who was the first governor, this real historical figure."

Of course, with a masked slasher movie there's another element you have to get right – the mask itself. "It was a lot of testing," Roth says of the process of bringing a new face to the pantheon of horror. "I had some ideas, drew some concepts. It makes sense for the world of the story, in the context, because this is the mask that has to be given out to everyone in town, because it's a mask of John Carver."

"So it's someone using a mask in a perverse way that makes it sick. It's the context of putting that on and then picking up an axe that makes it scary. That was the trick – it couldn't just be the world's most terrifying mask. That doesn't make sense for the story. So it was kind of a tricky balance. But I felt like we really

found it. We found something that looks unique."

With the key pieces in place, it's no surprise that Roth would like to see the kills keep coming in future holiday seasons.

"Every shot, we're like, 'Oh, the *Thanksgivingverse*' – we joke about it," he says excitedly. "Look, if you give people a rich mythology, and a great killer, and a great backstory, and a good mask, the story can go in any number of directions."

"Part of what we spent so long on was coming up with the backstory, the mythology, the reason and the potential suspects for who could be doing this. I have a million different ways I could take the story. I love it. I could spend the rest of my life making *Thanksgiving* movies."

BLOOD BATH

As with *Cabin Fever* and *Hostel*, Roth's been giving *Thanksgiving* the "making of" treatment. Not only were the cast all given Hi-8 handycams – to give it that retro feel – and allowed free rein on set, the director filmed material on VR. "Something will take off at some point, and I will have 360 footage that I'll cut so that you can feel – whether it's this year, whether it's five years from now, 10 years, I actually did this on *Borderlands* as well – you will be able to feel like you were there at the shoot with us."

As for the present, the inevitable question about a director's cut of *Thanksgiving* has already been raised.

"We're discussing it now," Roth reveals. "The R-rated cut has everything I want. So you can always add more gore, but I don't feel stifled in any way, it's the far end of the hard-R spectrum, so what you're going to see in the theatres is my director's cut."

So it seems there really are no leftovers this *Thanksgiving*. ●

Thanksgiving is in cinemas from 17 November.

THE HUNGER GAMES

PRODUCER
NINA JACOBSON
AND DIRECTOR
FRANCIS LAWRENCE
EXPLAIN HOW
THEY FOUND
THEMSELVES
BACK IN

THE HUNGER GAMES

WORDS: TARA BENNETT



THE HUNGER GAMES

REBEL



Rachel Zegler and Tom Blyth are the film's two leads.



With its final image of Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) holding her baby and wistfully looking on as her family plays in a meadow, the big-screen era of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy came to a close in 2015 on a hopeful note. The four-film franchise was an unlikely global sensation, considering its core themes of oppression and the sobering costs of war. However, Lawrence's bold heroine, who becomes the spark of defiance against an autocratic regime, ignited the global box office.

"It was humbling to see how much stories that we tell can resonate and last, and what they can mean to people in such different circumstances," *The Hunger Games* producer Nina Jacobson tells *SFX*. "What they see and how it moves them was an incredible experience the first time around. But honestly,

that's because we did faithful adaptations of Suzanne's books."

It was Jacobson and her production company Color Force who secured the film rights to those books, and then shepherded them to the screen with director Gary Ross and then director Francis Lawrence for the final three instalments. "She's writing about these big ideas, and we're just trying not to screw them up," Jacobson says. "I feel first and foremost a responsibility to Suzanne, who entrusted me with these books. I feel fiercely loyal to her and servicing the ideas that she explores."

And that's why *The Hunger Games* film franchise has remained dormant since the release of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part II* in 2015. Despite Lionsgate exploring original spin-off ideas for new instalments, both Jacobson and Lawrence were vocal that they would not be. "I knew there was a writers' room of some kind, but I honestly had zero interest," Lawrence confirms to *SFX*. "Unless

Suzanne was championing it, I really didn't have any interest." Until the late summer of 2019, when the director got a phone call from Collins herself...

Over the ensuing years, the two kept in touch, checking in with one another. "We always texted each other if *The Hunger Games* ended up on *Jeopardy*, or something like that," he laughs. But this call floored the director.

"She said, 'I'm almost done with the *Hunger Games* book! And I'm like, 'What? Are you serious?'" he remembers. "She told me she was inspired not long after *Mockingjay*, and started working on it. She kept it really quiet." In that call, Collins sketched out the basics: that it was a prequel set 64 years before the first book, featured only one crossover character, and there was a musical element to it.

In the early days of 2020, Lawrence and Jacobson were invited to Collins's agent's office to get their first look at *The Hunger Games: The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes*. "We had to sit in a locked room and read the

THE HUNGER GAMES

Coriolanus Snow with Dr Volumnia Gaul (Viola Davis).

Lucy Gray Baird and Snow have a lovely lie.

Peter Dinklage as games master Casca Highbottom.

Director Francis Lawrence on set.

manuscript," he says. "I just fell in love with the story and with the ideas. I was in, and Nina was too."

The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes is set during the lead up to the tenth anniversary of the Hunger Games. The Capitol is still digging out after the war, finding its citizens less engaged with the games in general. The war has wrecked the life of 18-year-old Coriolanus Snow (Tom Blyth) whose once esteemed family has hit financial dire straits. He's desperate to stay afloat by mentoring for

the games, where winning results could earn him a scholarship to university and a path back to respectability. As an impressionable young man, Snow finds himself exposed to various philosophies, including those of powerful figures like head gamemaker Dr Volumnia Gaul (Viola Davis) and games architect Casca Highbottom (Peter Dinklage), and passionate tributes like Sejanus Plinth (Jose Andres Rivera) and musician Lucy Gray Baird (Rachel Zegler).

Asked if he was surprised that Collins decided to pull back the curtain on the tyrannical President Snow's origins, Lawrence says not exactly. "We always thought it would be really interesting to go more toward the Dark Days and the origins of it all," he says, recalling speculative ideas they bandied about back in the day. "So I'm not surprised that she went back toward that direction.

"When done well, I think it's fun to see the origins of things," he adds, addressing the hotly debated topic of whether prequel stories are inconsequential. "Actually, my worry was, are people so trained to think of Snow as the antagonist that we're gonna have a hard time getting people behind him in this movie?" he says. "But Snow is a very different person in the beginning of this movie than he is in the other movies. We have to create a human being that we can get behind and sort of root for. Part

of the fun of this movie is, at what point do you stop rooting for him? What's really interesting is, for people that have seen it, they're kind of hungry for him going dark, and they *like* him going dark. So that's been really fun and satisfying."

THE GAMES ARE AFOOT

After such a chilling performance by Donald Sutherland as President Snow in the previous films, Lawrence says it was essential to find an actor who could suggest the future psychopath to come. They found him in Juilliard-trained Tom Blyth (*Billy The Kid*).

"There's a charisma he has that's very important," Lawrence says. "And specifically, an intelligence behind the eyes. There's a control that he has that Donald has too, which I think was the key. Tom and I spoke about this, and there was never an intention from either of us to ever try to copy or emulate Donald's voice or mannerisms. Tom had to do his own thing, but there had to be a little bit of connectivity."

In this story, it's through the more malleable Snow that Collins explores the "state of nature" debate (as discussed by the likes of 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes), which asks who we believe we are as human beings. "Suzanne was interested in exploring the allure of authoritarianism," Jacobson says. "The first →

"Trying out this new look. What do you think?"



Francis Lawrence and Rachel Zegler rehearse.

movies really resonated with people who are willing and able to defy the state, and put themselves at risk for larger ideals. For this movie, it explores how we got there, and how we are getting there ourselves – which is incredibly timely.”

Lawrence continues, “Philosophically, Snow is a young man pulled in all these directions. Somebody like Gaul is leading him toward that Hobbesian point of view. She believes that human beings are savage by nature and need to be ruled with an iron fist. While characters like his cousin Tigris [Hunter Schafer] and Sejanus are pulling him into [the idea] that we’re all really deserving of rights and freedoms.

“Then characters like Lucy Gray are even more romantic in [believing] that we only need love, nature, art,

and we’d all be great.” As the female tribute from District 12, Lucy also represents the musical element that Collins teased Lawrence about from the start. “I didn’t really understand what she meant until I read the book. Then I got it,” Lawrence admits.

“What I discovered is that Suzanne is a big country music aficionado. She knows a ton about it and was really inspired by the kind of country music you’d find in West Virginia in the ’20s and ’30s. I also fell in love with that sound, and got really, really excited, especially for District 12, of the idea that we could have that kind of sound in the movie.”

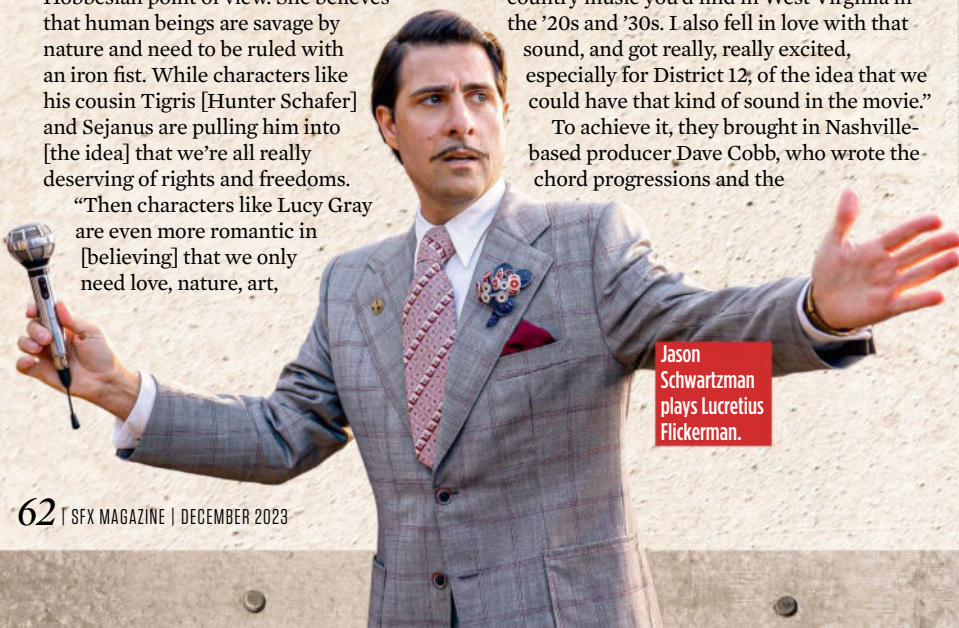
To achieve it, they brought in Nashville-based producer Dave Cobb, who wrote the chord progressions and the

melodies for Lucy’s band, Covey. “When we cast Rachel, she came in and worked with Dave on some pre-records. But when we shot the film, Rachel did it all live. Anytime it’s acapella, or even when she’s with her band in The Hob, and through a PA, she sings live.”

The musical elements did present a challenge to Lawrence. The films have always used lullabies or specific songs like “The Hanging Tree” to make emotional points, but those performances have been dialled back.

“It was very important to me in the creation of the screenplay that there always has to be some story happening,” he says of the music-orientated set-pieces. “You shouldn’t take a break for songs. You can’t have a musical break and watch her sing for a while and nothing is moving forward narratively.”

Because Covey and Lucy are far more theatrical than Katniss ever was, Lawrence made a point to frame their performances in a way that didn’t turn *Songbirds And Snakes* into an outright musical. From Lucy’s first performance in The Reaping, Lawrence says they worked to make that clear. “That was the one where we had to modulate how we get in and how people react, so it didn’t feel like we’re



Jason Schwartzman plays Lucretius Flickerman.

PANEM PENITENTIARY



Production Designer Uli Hanisch points the way.

Production designer Uli Hanisch on creating the proto-arena for the games

By the 10th Hunger Games, Panem is growing weary of the annual event. As such, Hanisch was tasked with retroactively establishing the look of the early games, and then reinventing them in one movie. For the arena interior, he secured the UNESCO World Heritage site Centennial Hall in Wrocław, Poland, and for the exterior entrance, Berlin's Olympic Stadium, where Jesse Owens once raced as Hitler watched on.

"Obviously, [the Capitol] have problems still being interesting to the audience," he says of the cultural context. "It's unclear how the [games] were even before – like the first night of them. It was almost clear that it was a very short and brutal spectacle. The one question we never found out [an answer to] was: is there anything else happening in this arena? It seems like it's the only event taking place there, so it's an abandoned place, which is in a bad state. It comes from the past of Panem, so it's old, but it can't be too old.

"The most important part was the decision to find a closed arena instead of an open one. In the novel, it's described as an open arena, so when we started to look we were looking in any kind of direction. The more we were looking at various options and references, the more we had the feeling that a closed arena is a stronger location, because it's more like a prison.

"We should not forget that [the tributes] are imprisoned and that they are not supposed to be able to escape. A closed arena is much more intimidating than any open arena where you can see the clouds and the sky and the birds. It's a much better idea to have this dark, sinister and intimidating arena."

"Let the games commence!"
The arena.



suddenly breaking into song," he explains. "She's a performer and she's doing something irreverent, and it's not turning into a musical."

The antithesis of Lucy – but equally influential on young Snow – is Gaul, who is essentially the first Snow of Panem. As the Head Gamekeeper, she cooks up diabolical dangers for the tributes to face in the games, all done without empathy or compassion. "She's a strange character," Lawrence says. "She speaks in weird little riddles sometimes, and rhymes."

When initially discussing the role with Davis, Lawrence admits he used an unusual performance reference to explain how he sees Gaul. "My weird reference to Viola – and I remember being very nervous talking to her

about this, but she totally got it – was the Gene Wilder Willy Wonka. He has this joy in the creativity, but there is this underlying sinister quality to him.

"The underlying sinister quality is her belief system. But the truth is that she finds real joy in crafting all these things that might be able to be used in the games as horrible punishment permutations. She totally got it, and that kind helped spring the look for her in terms of hair, make-up and wardrobe."

FULL CIRCLE

Production began in 2022 with Jacobson, Lawrence and their whole team – many returnees from the earlier films – using locales in Germany and Poland that were the actual backdrops for Hitler's fascist regime to tell Panem's story. The first day of the shoot was in the arena set, which Lawrence found surreal.

"We had designed the opening sequence in the arena and the games, and I remember going onto a soundstage at Studio Babelsberg with all the newly cast tributes," he says. "They had all come in but I'd hardly even met most of them in person. They were standing in the circle. That was when I was like, 'Oh wow. Here we go!' I was back in *The Hunger Games*."

It was an experience shared by franchise newbie Zegler, who also started her journey with Lucy by shooting the games. "Rachel's first day on set, I remember she flew in from

England," the director says. "She landed and had a rehearsal for that same sequence. So her first day was getting walked into the arena and starting what we call the bloodbath."

Now Lawrence and Jacobson wait to see if those who loved the original films will return to see how Snow became the villain they loved to hate. Jacobson is confident that they will. "We took our time to get the scripts right," she says. "It was about keeping the fire of resistance, and wanting this movie to feel as fresh, specific, original and defiant of norms in the marketplace as the other movies did."

Jacobson says that was really important to the entire creative team, because they treated *The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes* as likely their last story in this world.

"I love these movies, I love Suzanne's writing and the ideas that she explores, so I will always be hoping that she is writing another book," Jacobson says. "I know that she certainly knows the whole history of this world, and a million details and dimensions that nobody else does. I don't doubt that she has more stories in them.

"But I also really appreciate that she doesn't write them unless she has something to say. So until then, I'm with every other fan, just hoping that she continues to tell those stories." ●

The Hunger Games: The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes is in cinemas from 17 November.

Hunter Schafer as Coriolanus' cousin, Tigris Snow.



SCOTT PILGRIM RETURNS

— BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW HIM.
THE SHOWRUNNERS BEHIND
NETFLIX'S NEW ANIME
SERIES TALK EVIL EXES,
FANDOM WORRIES, AND
THEIR ALL-STAR CAST

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

GAME

OW!



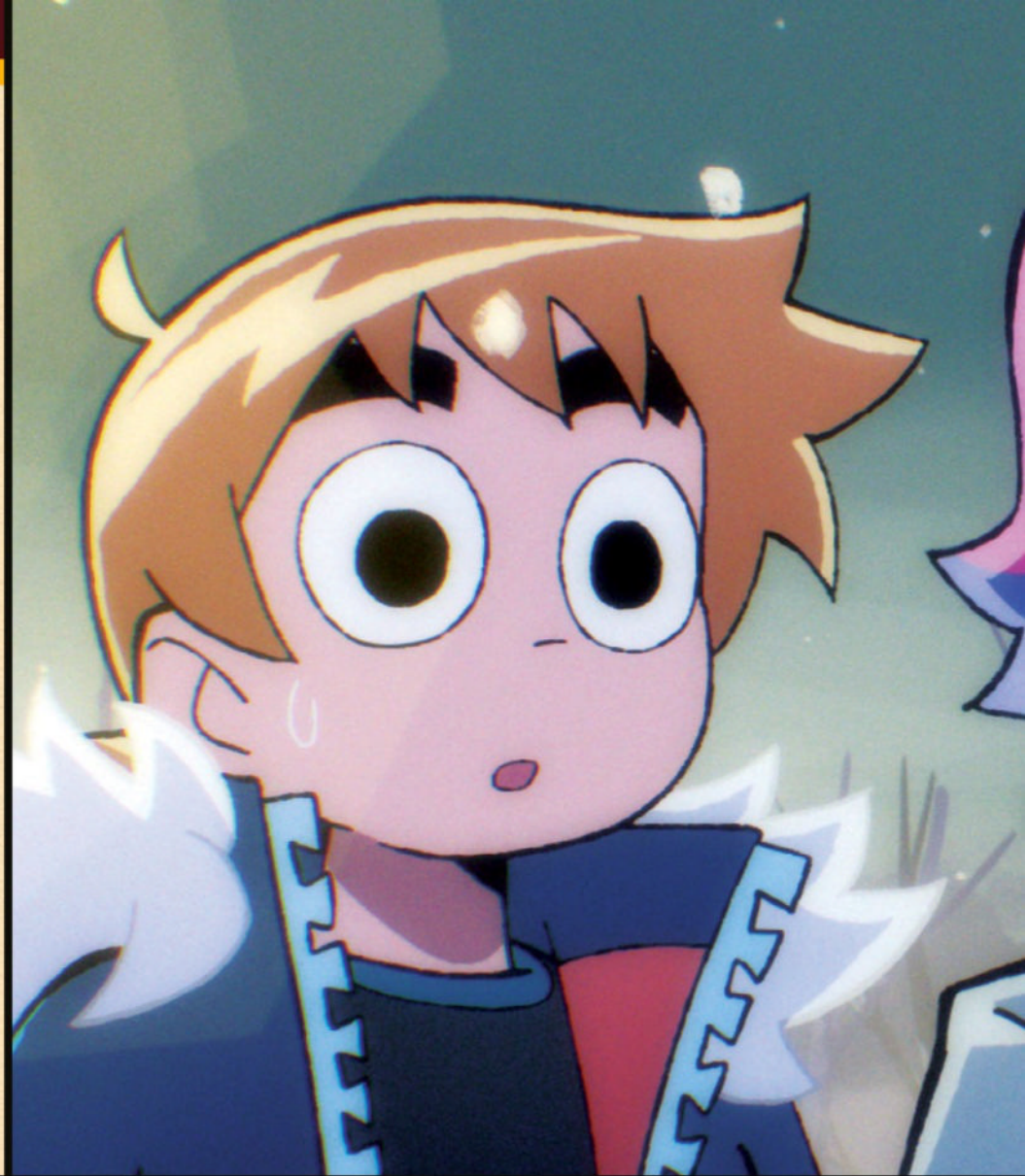
SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF STARTS inside a dream. The eponymous dorky 23-year-old's sleep has been intruded by a mysterious woman with colourful hair skating through subspace. He wakes up next to his cooler roommate Wallace Wells, who wants Scott to move out or find a job. Scott instead goes to band practice, where his girlfriend, Knives Chau, watches him play bass in awe.

Later, at a party, he meets Ramona Flowers, the skater girl from his dreams, and the next day orders DVDs from Netflix because Ramona's a delivery person for them. The two go on a date, sparks fly, and Ramona goes to watch Scott's band Sex Bob-Omb play a concert; the whole thing's ruined when one of Ramona's seven evil ex-boyfriends, Matthew Patel, crashes the gig.

So far, as expected. The first episode of Netflix's new anime adaptation of Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novels sticks faithfully to the source material (apart from the added inclusion of Netflix DVDs). But then, something happens at the end of the series' opener – something that no one familiar with the novels or Edgar Wright's cult classic film or the videogames will expect.

While *SFX* has been barred from going into specifics about what this climactic, surprising moment entails, we can say that this single event upends the series in a shocking, viscerally exciting way. This isn't *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* any more.

For co-showrunner BenDavid Grabinski, who previously wrote episodes of the *Are You Afraid Of The Dark?* revival and directed *Happily*, remixing the core Scott Pilgrim story was "99% of the appeal" of working on the project. "Having people not know that we were doing something mostly new, and then just really embracing that while trying to stay within the same voice and tone of the other Scott stuff, that was the whole fun," he says.



The enigmatically named Sex Bob-Omb.



Indeed, the opening episode is something of a Trojan horse, luring in long-time fans and then completely upending things. It's a startling creative choice, compounded by the fact that *Scott Pilgrim's* creator, O'Malley, serves as the other showrunner. In essence, the author is deconstructing and rebuilding his own story – and if it hadn't been for this approach, it's unlikely another *Scott Pilgrim* adventure would have ever taken off.



Scott's got a thing for Ramona Flowers.



SCOTT PILGRIM GETS ANIMATED

WORKING WITH SCIENCE SARU

The Japanese studio Science Saru – best known for its distinctive method of meshing hand-drawn and digital animation styles – animated the series. “We tried to stay out of what they were doing because everything they were doing was brilliant,” says Grabinski. “We didn’t have to guide them towards anything. In terms of the aesthetic, it was just a bullseye from day one.”

“For instance, Gideon [leader of the League of Ramona’s Evil Exes], his lair in the first episode is not something from the books or the movie. We wrote two sentences on a page of what we thought it was. I remember sitting in a conference room when some of the team were visiting from Japan. They presented their designs for Gideon’s lair, and I immediately knew that our job was not to tell them what’s cool. Ever! It’s so much better to get out of their way. There’s such a cinematic look to it.”

“They’re the best in the world,” O’Malley adds. “Their character designer and the animation director, these Japanese guys who have been doing this for a long time, I can’t overstate how respectful they were of my work without me ever asking them to be.”

“They were tearing apart the books, different versions of the books, they were going through my Instagram, finding my more recent art and analysing how I draw.”

“It was very humbling because they’re way more talented than I’ll ever be. Given that the scripts get pretty wild, they still were very faithful to the books in a way that I think will make the fans super-excited.”

“One day, late 2018, early 2019, Netflix approached me saying, ‘Would you like to revisit *Scott Pilgrim* in anime form?’ They said the amazing animation studio Science Saru might be interested,” O’Malley tells *SFX*. “I was like, ‘Hell no!’”

O’Malley had no interest in retreading the story, which he first wrote 19 years ago, for the umpteenth time. A few months later, however, that all changed. He was out eating with Grabinski – the two being friends and fans of each other’s work – when O’Malley mentioned that someone had once again brought up the idea of making a *Scott Pilgrim* anime. That got Grabinski thinking, and he quickly started reeling off ideas that had O’Malley rolling around the restaurant in hysterics.

“Almost everything I mentioned over that dinner is in the show,” Grabinski says. “There are a lot of twists and turns, and most of them came together extremely quickly, just in that conversation. That was not a meeting with the goal of doing a show, but Bryan went back to Netflix and said, ‘Hey, I know what the show wants to be, and I know who I want to do it with.’ And now, years later, we have a show.”

“That dinner will become legend among certain fans,” O’Malley adds with a smile.

There are two scenes Grabinski pitched that proved to be core linchpins for the series – one of which is the end of the opening episode, while the other comes in episode four (again, no spoilers here).

To really make the moments work, though, the medium in which the story was being told had to be right, and anime seemed the best way of reintroducing the *Scott Pilgrim* universe to the world. After originally being suggested by Netflix, Science Saru – the Japanese studio best known in the West for animating episodes of *Adventure Time* and *Star Wars: Visions* – quickly came aboard.

“I had done my best work on the book, and we did our best on the film and the videogame, and they’re all unique, and they all tell the story in their own way, and we wanted to be able to do that with the anime,” O’Malley says.

“With all the years of hindsight that we have and the culture that has accrued around *Scott Pilgrim*, which didn’t exist back then, we found ways to make the series silly and fun and meta without being too meta and without breaking *Scott Pilgrim*. We wanted to see how far we could stretch it.”

Stretch the *Scott Pilgrim* story the showrunners certainly do. There are self-→

SCOTT PILGRIM TAKES OFF AGAIN?

THE SHOWRUNNERS ON WHETHER A SECOND SEASON IS ON THE CARDS

With the series going off-piste from the worn *Scott* slopes, there's a question of whether this new version of the story will continue into a second season. "We have not thought about anything past this," Grabinski says. "This season is a story that has an end. But I love this world, the cast and the characters. If Bryan and I sat down one day and started brainstorming and thinking of other stories to tell, and the cast wanted to do it, then great, but I put 10,000% of my brain into this season and I think it has a great ending."

O'Malley, the man behind the entire *Scott Pilgrim* universe, concurs. "I didn't want this to end in the middle - I hate it when that happens in a show or a movie. We wrote something that comes to a full stop. I really look at it like a beautiful piece of jewellery that we all got to work on together, and we're just trying to make it great."

Scott takes on Matthew Patel (Satya Bhabha).

referential moments aplenty, including knowing nods for those people who grew up loving *Scott* and *Ramona*, yet the series shines most brightly when going in deep - deeper than any other version of the story - on its side characters. Wallace Wells, Knives Chau and *Ramona's* seven evil exes all get extended screen time. Better yet, they're all voiced by the actors who previously portrayed them in the zippy 2010 film adaptation (Wright also serves as an executive producer on the series).

FRIENDS REUNITED

Looking back, the film's cast is a *Who's Who* of actors who would come to dominate pop culture - Michael Cera, Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Kieran Culkin, Anna Kendrick, Brie Larson, Aubrey Plaza, Chris Evans, Jason Schwartzman - and having them return for the series (alongside a handful of well-known guest voice actors) gave O'Malley the confidence to play with the lore even more.

"We knew what having the cast back would mean for the audience that grew up with them," he says. "It refocused our priorities. We really

wanted to use that cast to the fullest. It was BenDavid's brainwave to find a new way that we could combine characters in completely different ways that we've never seen before, and that was so fruitful and so much fun."

"I love the movie and I've seen the movie a billion times," adds Grabinski. "But if you're going to tell this story in one movie, it's going to end up being mostly from *Scott's* perspective. The thing I was most excited about with this series was treating it as an ensemble, or finding ways to spend more time with characters in ways you don't expect. We had opportunities to really look at the story and the journey that we're putting everybody on from different perspectives."

You would think that convincing the A-listers to take part would be a difficult task - after all, not many casting agents have Captain America (Evans), Captain Marvel (Larson) and *Star Trek: Picard's* Borg Queen (Alison Pill) on speed-dial. Not only that, but Grabinski and O'Malley made it even harder on themselves by deciding that they needed everyone back, or no one at all: "It didn't make sense to mix and match," Grabinski says.





"Oh no, boys, please don't fight over me..."

CAPTAIN JACKASS

CHRIS EVANS RETURNS AS THE VOICE OF LUCAS LEE, RAMONA'S MOVIE-STAR EX. EVANS HAS SAID THAT SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD WAS ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE FILMS TO WORK ON



Knives Chau, Julie Powers and Ramona have a goss.

"There were some characters that would have been really hard to recast, and that one, there's such a specific voice that he brought to the role," says Grabinski. "I had so much fun writing him. I truly can't imagine anyone else doing that part except for him. He just has such a great take on the character. And he was so prepared. He knew everything, like it was down to a science. The guy can do two takes of a line that are perfect, just immediately. It was really exciting to have someone come to a character that much later and to have a bunch of stuff that's new, not from the movie. It felt like we had a time machine from that movie set to the recording booth."

“We didn’t know if the cast would say yes, and then they did. And that’s it. It was just insane”

Luckily, none of the actors batted an eyelid when the offer came – and, unfortunately for *SFX*, hoping for a fun story about O'Malley chasing a post-*Succession* fame Culklin around Hollywood with a job offer, there were zero difficulties getting everyone to sign on. "I wish there was a big adventure to gathering the cast," Grabinski says. "The story is very simple: we didn't know if everyone would say yes, and then they did. And that's it. It was just insane."

When the actors stepped into the vocal booth, something akin to magic happened. The showrunners say that each individual took the task very seriously when they needed to, and less seriously when they didn't. In other words, they understood the assignment and delivered performances far beyond

expectations. "It felt like a passion project across the board," Grabinski says. O'Malley concurs: "I feel like they've lived with those characters for so long, even if they hadn't thought of them or been in that headspace. It was really fun to bring them back to life that way."

As well as the returning cast, the series borrows from Scott Pilgrim's past in other ways, too. Anamanaguchi – the chiptune band who soundtracked the videogame – created new music for the series. In fact, the whole thing feels like an amalgamation of everything that came before.

"We're building on top of the work everybody else did, [but] my goal was that the series had to be emotional," says Grabinski. "It's super-funny and exciting, but if it didn't have emotions, and if there wasn't some joy and sadness, and if you didn't kind of go on a journey with these characters, then it would just be flippant, and I don't think either of us wanted to do that."

Of course, with the series' story being such a drastic change from the beloved source material, there is a chance some fans may be annoyed or disappointed.

O'Malley knows very well how much pressure comes from having a rabid fanbase – but doing another retelling of the same story was simply not an option for him.

"I knew when we started that I could not put myself through years of trying to perfect my old work, and I knew I had to do something that resonated with me now, all these years later, with all these different experiences."

"Hopefully no one will burn my house down! But, ultimately I just had to do it my own way. I hope that the fans love it, because I wrote it for them. Like, I fucking love them, and I want them to be happy."

Grabinski counts himself among the fandom. "There's not a single thing in our show that doesn't come from a place of love for the world, the characters, the tone and everything about it. It does a lot of stuff people aren't expecting, and maybe not what they think they want from the show, but my hope and expectation is that people will watch it and be stoked." ●

Scott Pilgrim Takes Off is on Netflix from 17 November.



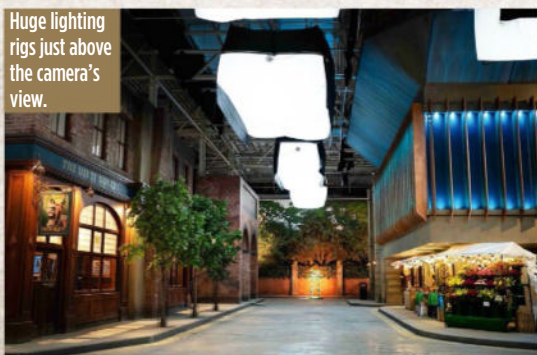
G

OOD OMENS HAD A CHANGE of location for its second season, but hopefully you didn't notice. Because Whickber Street in Soho upped sticks from an airfield in Hertfordshire to a furniture warehouse in Bathgate, Edinburgh. It's the kind of nonsensical geographical shenanigans that could only make sense in the crazy world of film and TV, and production designer Michael Ralph was the man in charge of rebuilding and expanding the show's vast central set.

"I wish we could have built more in season one than we did," says Ralph, whose previous work has included *Primeval* and *Dickensian*. "We built the ground floor of everything and the facades of all the shops. But we didn't build anything higher than that, because we were out on an airfield in a very, very difficult terrain and weather conditions, so we really couldn't go much higher. Visual effects created the upper levels."

But with season two the set has gone to a whole other level... literally. "What happened was that the rest of the street became integrated into the series's storyline," explains Ralph. "So we needed a record shop, we needed a coffee shop that actually had an inside, we needed a magic shop, we needed the pub. To introduce those meant we had to change the street with a layout that works from a storylines point of view. In other words, things like someone standing at the counter in →

Huge lighting rigs just above the camera's view.



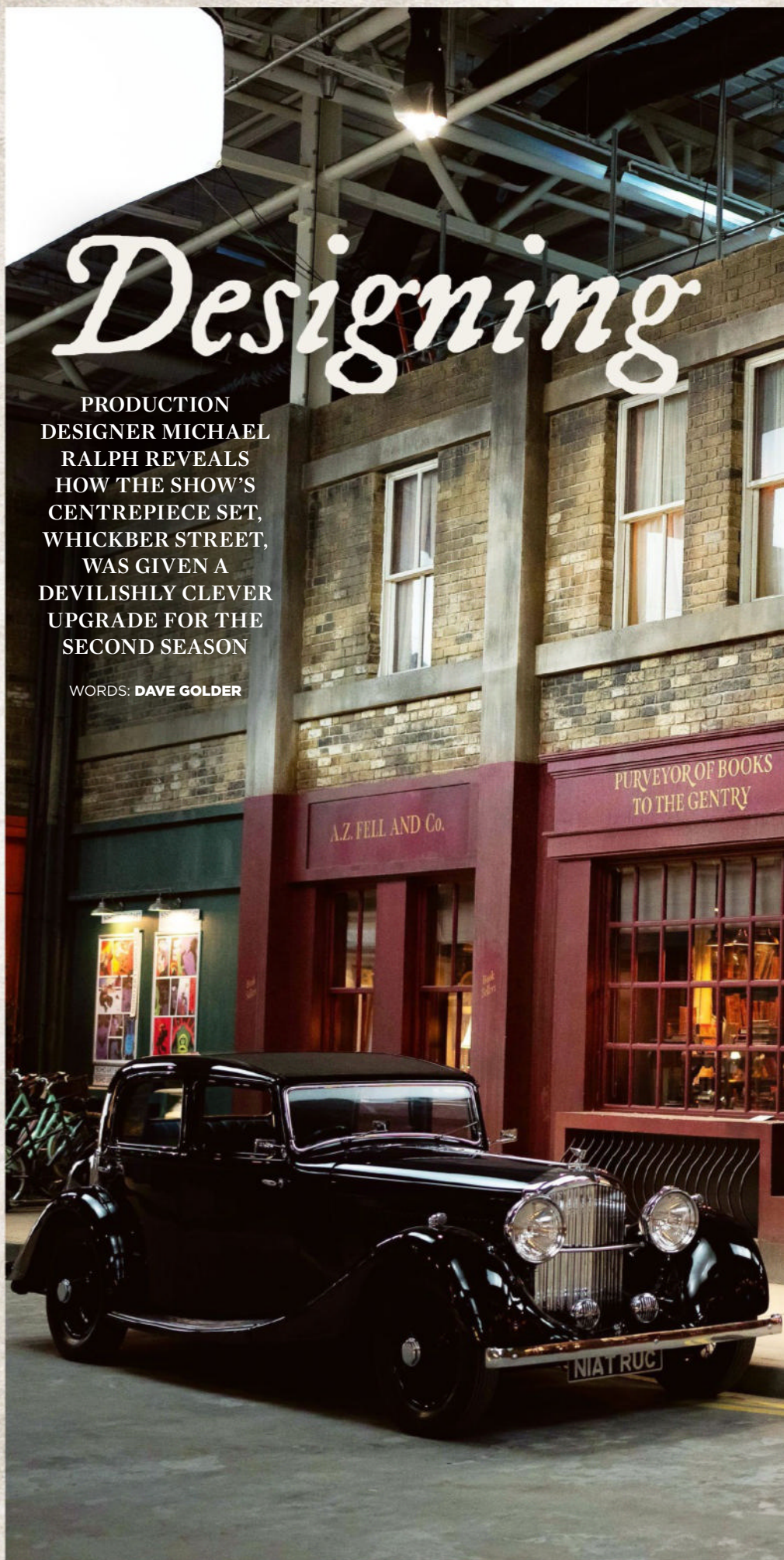
The coffee shop now has an interior space.



Designing

PRODUCTION DESIGNER MICHAEL RALPH REVEALS HOW THE SHOW'S CENTREPIECE SET, WHICKBER STREET, WAS GIVEN A DEVILISHLY CLEVER UPGRADE FOR THE SECOND SEASON

WORDS: DAVE GOLDER



Good Omens



Invisible Columns And Thin Walls

"The new studio is Pyramid Studios in Bathgate – it used to be a furniture warehouse. And unfortunately – or fortunately, because I accept these things as not challenges but gifts – right down the middle of that studio are a series of upright columns. But you'll never spot them on screen. I had to build them in and integrate them into the walls and still get the streets between them. And it worked.

"There's all sorts of cheeky design values to those sets. Normally a set like this is double-skin. In other words, you do an interior wall and an exterior wall, with an airspace in between. But really, the only time a viewer notices that there's that width is at the doors and the windows. So I cheated all that. I ended up with single walls everywhere. So the exterior wall is the interior wall, just painted. All I did was make the sash windows and entrances wider to give it some depth as you walked in."

the record shop had to be able to eyeball somebody standing at the counter in the coffee shop. They had to be able to eyeball Aziraphale sitting in his office in the window of the bookshop. But the rest of it was a pleasure to do inside, because we could expand it and I could go up two storeys."

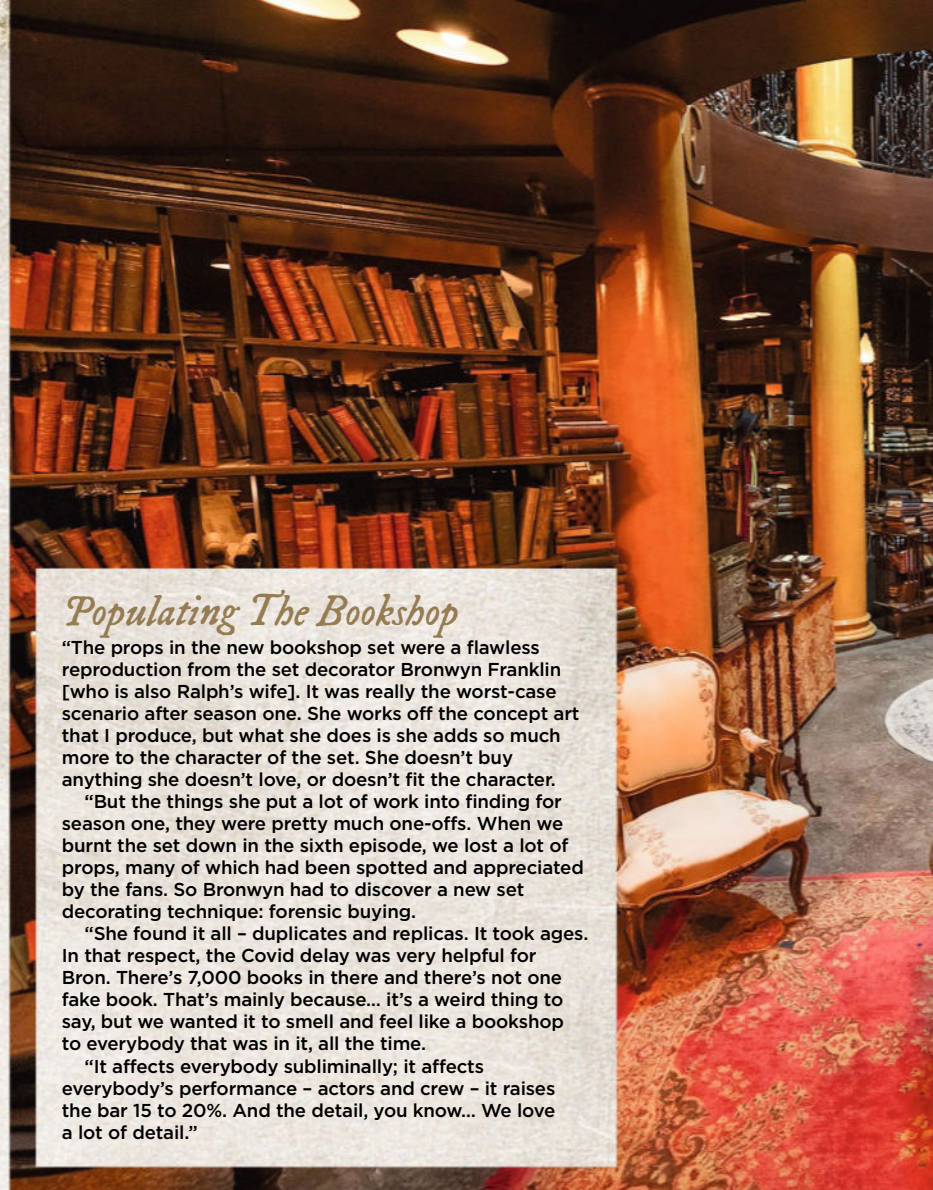
For most of the set, which is around 80 metres long and 60 metres wide, the two storeys only applied to the shop frontages, but in the case of Aziraphale's bookshop, it allowed Ralph to build the mezzanine level for real this time. According to Ralph it became one of the cast and crews' favourite places to hang out during down time.

But while AZ Fell & Co has grown in height, it actually has a slightly smaller footprint because of the logistics of adapting it to the new studio.

"Everybody swore to me that no one would notice," says Ralph wryly. "I walked onto it and instinctively knew there was a difference immediately, and they hated me for that. I have this innate sense about spatial awareness and an eye like a spirit level.

"It's not a lot, though – I think we've lost maybe two and a half feet on the front wall internally. I think that there's a couple of other smaller areas, but only I'd notice. So I can be really annoying to my guys, but only on those levels. Not on any other. They actually quite like me..."

Good Omens is on Prime Video.



Populating The Bookshop

"The props in the new bookshop set were a flawless reproduction from the set decorator Bronwyn Franklin [who is also Ralph's wife]. It was really the worst-case scenario after season one. She works off the concept art that I produce, but what she does is she adds so much more to the character of the set. She doesn't buy anything she doesn't love, or doesn't fit the character.

"But the things she put a lot of work into finding for season one, they were pretty much one-offs. When we burnt the set down in the sixth episode, we lost a lot of props, many of which had been spotted and appreciated by the fans. So Bronwyn had to discover a new set decorating technique: forensic buying.

"She found it all – duplicates and replicas. It took ages. In that respect, the Covid delay was very helpful for Bron. There's 7,000 books in there and there's not one fake book. That's mainly because... it's a weird thing to say, but we wanted it to smell and feel like a bookshop to everybody that was in it, all the time.

"It affects everybody subliminally; it affects everybody's performance – actors and crew – it raises the bar 15 to 20%. And the detail, you know... We love a lot of detail."



Every note is handwritten, with relevant content.

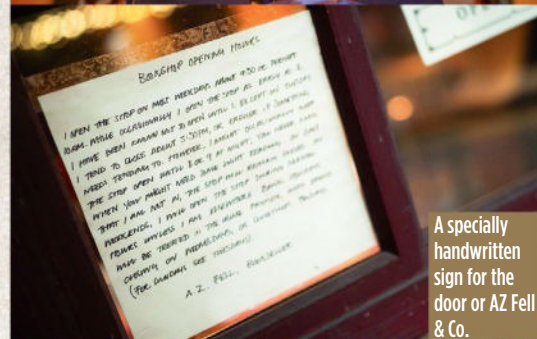
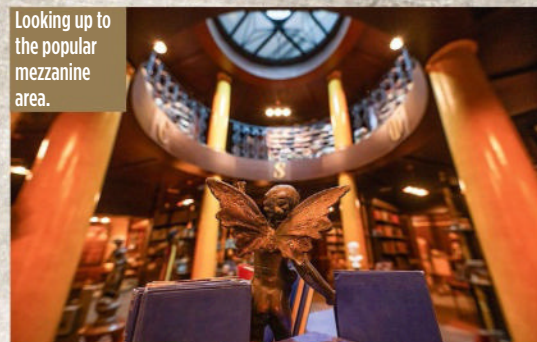
The sheer amount of detail is staggering.

We're sure Azi knows exactly where everything is.





Looking up to the popular mezzanine area.



A specially handwritten sign for the door or AZ Fell & Co.

Production designer Michael Ralph had to consider which shops could be seen from inside other shops – as specified in the script – when redesigning the Whickber Street set.



Aziraphale's Inspirational Correspondence

"There's not one single scrap of paper on Aziraphale's desk that isn't written specifically for Aziraphale. Every single piece is not just fodder that's been shoved there, it has a purpose; it's a letter of thanks, or an enquiry about a book or something."

"Michael Sheen is so submerged in his character he would get lost sitting at his own desk, reading his own correspondence between takes. I believe wholeheartedly that if you put that much care into every single piece of detail, on that desk and in that room, that everybody feels it, including the crew, and then they give that set the same respect it deserves."

"They also lift their game because they believe that they're doing something of so much care and value. Really, it's a domino effect of passion and care for what you're producing."



A Terry Pratchett-style hat (with a badge bearing the catchphrase of *Discworld's* Unseen University's Librarian) hangs on a hatstand in AZ Fell & Co.



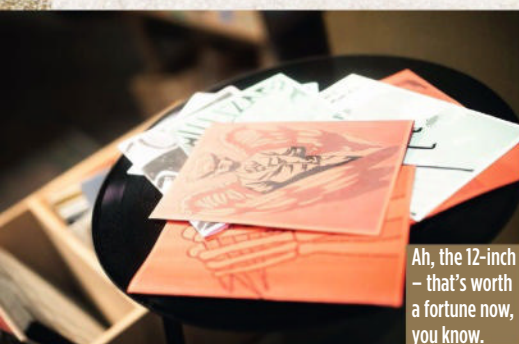
DESIGNING GOOD OMENS

Alternative Music

"My daughter Mickey is lead graphic designer [two of Ralph's sons worked on the series too, one as a concept artist, the other in props]. They're the ones that produced all of that handwritten work on the desk. She's the one that took on the record shop and made up 80 band names so that we didn't have to get copyright clearance from real bands. Then she produced records and sleeves that spanned 50, 60 years of their recordings, and all of the graphics on the walls.

"I remember Michael and Neil [Gaiman] getting lost following one band's history on the wall, looking at their posters and albums desperately trying to find out whether they survived that emo period."

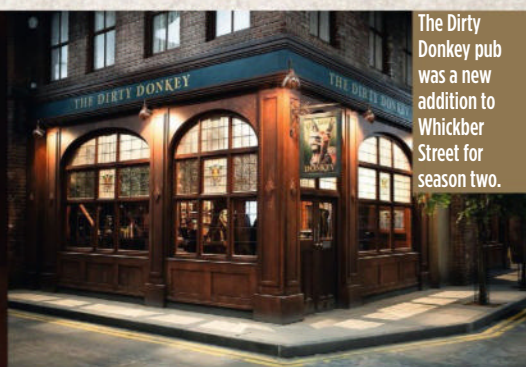
Every single record and poster is fictitious.



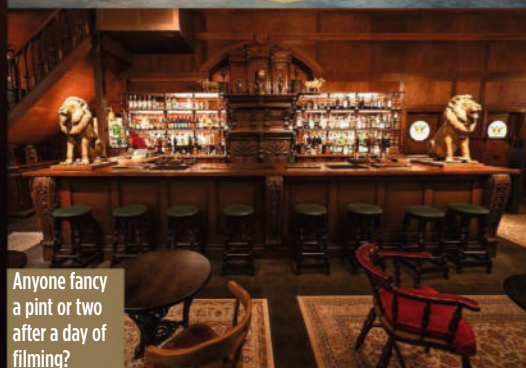
Ah, the 12-inch – that's worth a fortune now, you know.



You can toast Terry Pratchett's portrait in the Dirty Donkey pub.



The Dirty Donkey pub was a new addition to Whickber Street for season two.



Anyone fancy a pint or two after a day of filming?



Get yourself a (real) classic film poster in the shop.

Wonder if any of these will somehow go "missing"?

The Anansi Boys Connection

Ralph reveals that *Good Omens* season two used the state-of-the-art special effects tech Volume (famous for its use in *The Mandalorian* to create virtual backdrops) for just one sequence, but he will be using it extensively elsewhere on another Gaiman TV series being made for Prime Video.

"We used Volume on the opening sequence to create the creation of the universe. I was designing *Anansi Boys* in duality with this project, which seems an outrageously suicidal thing to do. But it was fantastic and *Anansi Boys* was all on Volume. So I designed for Volume on one show and not Volume on the other. The complexities and the psychology of both is different."



The magic of Volume, used in the opening sequence.



So much cool stuff in the new Magic Shop.

It's A Kind Of Magic

One of the new shops in Whickber Street for season two was Will Goldstone's Magic Shop, which is full of as many Easter eggs as off-the-shelf conjuring tricks, including a Matt Smith *Doctor Who*-style fez and a toy orang-utan that's a nod to *Discworld's* The Librarian. Ralph says that while the series is full of references to Gaiman, Pratchett and *Doctor Who*, Michael Sheen never complained about a lack of *Masters Of Sex* in-jokes. "He'd be the last person to make that sort of comment!"

Ralph also reveals that the magic shop counter was another one of his wife's purchases, bought at a Glasgow reclamation yard.



ANJLI MOHINDRA

The star of *The Lazarus Project* loves escape rooms – but can she escape a time loop?

Words by Ian Berriman /// Portrait by Simon Ridgway

She's appeared in more grounded dramas such as *Bodyguard* and *Vigil*, and in the near future we can expect to see her making her breakthrough as a television writer – *The Goddaughter*, a drama about Sikh suffragette Sophia Duleep Singh, is in the works. But it's Anjali Mohindra's sci-fi roles that *SFX* readers hold most dear. For some, she'll always be Sarah Jane Smith's "schoolgirl investigator" neighbour Rani. This month she returns to our screens as Archie, the kick-ass, banter-spitting ex-MI5 agent in *The Lazarus Project*. We caught up with her on set to talk time travel, Elisabeth Sladen, and geeking out.

Series two involves proper time travel. Does that mean we'll see Archie meet her younger self?

➡ I will encounter myself in different time periods, but in a very strange way. When you go from series one to series two of any show, you get to inhabit it in a different way. People know that Archie is very good at her job, and very dedicated to it. Now we get to see what happens when she's pushed to a certain place emotionally, or facing heartbreak. The time travel allows us to explore her seeing herself in a different time, from a completely different perspective, and seeing her process her loss in a deeper way.

So we see more vulnerability? Because Archie usually seems pretty bullet-proof, psychologically speaking.

➡ 100%, and that's been fun to play: seeing who's behind that mask. George did the thing she wished she could do: bring back a loved one. She's had to live with the notion that she couldn't have made Wes call for a Code Black and go back and rescue [dead boyfriend] Ross. Yet George does do that and gets Sarah back. There's an unravelling behind the scenes – it wasn't explored in the script, but her saying, "I could have saved him. Maybe I didn't love him enough."

Sarah is brought into the fold as a Lazarus agent this year. Does that provide a different perspective?

➡ Yeah, her presence makes us all question things. And Archie's having to really face whether she believes the Lazarus Project is for the greater good. This organisation where she was like, "I believe in this – I wanted a job that puts humanity at the heart of everything" – now seems corrupt. So maybe she *should* have used it to get Ross back.

This series you've got resets to the checkpoint, but also true time travel on top of that. It must be confusing.

➡ Just as you thought you understood the rules of the game, someone's got the cheat level out. A lot of us cast are quite cerebral – we all enjoy thinking outside of the box. It isn't a script where you can read it and be like, "Right, I know what I'm doing." You have to wrap your head round it. It feels like a good mind workout – and a bit of a mindfuck!

You returned to the role of Rani recently for audios of *The Sarah Jane Adventures* – how was that?

➡ So much fun, really rewarding. It was such a lovely trip down memory lane hanging out with Mina Anwar [Rani's mum] and Danny [Anthony, as Clyde]. We haven't seen each other as much as we'd hoped, but it was like we'd never left.

Working with Elisabeth Sladen on the TV show must have been a good foundation for a young actor.

➡ I cut my teeth on that show. We were so lucky to get that opportunity to work with her. She really took us under her wing and had so much joy to share, and so many little anecdotes and tips – like to keep your private life private. She was really adamant that we protect ourselves. She was like, "That's your stuff. No one gets access to that."

You've had lots of sci-fi roles. Is it a genre you have a special affinity with?

➡ It just keeps happening! I wouldn't have said I was a big sci-fi person growing up. It doesn't dominate my watch list. But I'm thrilled, because I love it. I'm a bit of a nerd myself.

What do you geek out about?

➡ I love maths, I love patterns. I like having to use my brain to crunch things. The cast all did an escape room – I booked it – and I had to have a word with myself to let other people have a go, because I will just dominate the space. I managed to bite my fist and let people crack things, then jumped in and saved the day a couple of times. We were on the last challenge, and had four minutes to get out. And because I'm an over-thinker, I made the last thing more complicated. I said, "But what about *this*?" and added a dimension that didn't need to be added. Luckily we managed to realise that I wasn't right and escaped in the nick of time... ●

The Lazarus Project is on Sky Max and NOW in November.

BIODATA

From
Born in London;
raised in West
Bridgford,
Nottinghamshire.

Greatest Hits
Rani Chandra in
The Sarah Jane
***Adventures*,**
shapeshifting
punk rock singer
Charlie in
Legends Of
***Tomorrow*, the**
queen of the
Skithra in *Doctor*
***Who* episode**
"Nikola Tesla's
Night Of Terror",
robotic assistant
Beatrice in *The*
***Peripheral*,**
Archie in *The*
***Lazarus Project*.**

Random Fact
When it comes to
her writing, Anjali
Mohindra has the
same agent as
Russell T Davies
and *Sapphire &*
***Steel* creator PJ**
Hammond.

“Elisabeth Sladen really took us under her wing and had so much joy to share”

THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

MAKE WAY FOR THE

BELT UP! AS **THE TOMORROW PEOPLE** MARKS ITS 50TH

FREEMANTLE MEDIA/SHUTTERSTOCK



THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

HOMO SUPERIOR

ANNIVERSARY, WE REVISIT OLD JAUNTS WITH CREATOR ROGER PRICE WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**



DOCTOR WHO may be marking a significant anniversary this year, but so is its competition from the other side, *The Tomorrow People*: its 50th.

Produced by Thames Television,

this teatime kids' show saw confused teens discovering new abilities, including telepathy and the ability to teleport, or "jaunt". Considered the next stage of human evolution, they were referred to as Homo superior.

Over the course of eight series and 22 stories, these young heroes (aided by biotronic computer TIM) took on the likes of shape-shifting robot Jedikiah, evil god Soggoth, ameboid aliens disguised as jumpsuits and your actual Adolf Hitler from their secret base the Lab – all without striking a blow in anger, thanks to their code of non-violence.

EVOLVING THE IDEA

The man responsible for the madness was producer/writer Roger Price. As he tells *SFX* in a Zoom call from his home in Canada, the seeds of the idea were sown around 1952, when Price (whose father was working for Farouk I, the recently deposed king of Egypt) was attending a German-language boarding school in Switzerland.

"I would have died for them, and they probably would have for me," he says of his schoolfriends. "They were Germans and I was British. The war had been over for seven, eight years. Before that, our fathers had been trying to kill each other. I thought there was an insanity back then which these kids were nothing to do with."

"I thought we may be the next stage of human evolution – a superior kind of human being to these bumbling, stupid adults. My proof for that was the fact that the adults' heads didn't stick out at the back, and ours did – that's where our extra bit of brain was. But all

12-year-old boys' heads stick out at the back! Kids come up with the stupidest ideas sometimes..."

The road to a commission, however, began when the adult Price, a jobbing director on magazine programmes and documentaries, was working on *Junior Points Of View*, and dedicated an edition of the BBC show to children slating the network's output. This did not go down well with the head of the Children's department, who later collared Price at a function.

"She and her acolytes – her yes ladies – pinned me into a corner and were having a good go at me. Finally I said, 'Your programmes are patronising, and seem to be irrelevant to children. They're not concerned with the things children are concerned about, which is teachers and parents hitting them and things like that. She said, 'Well, if you think you can do any better...' I said 'Fine, give me a time slot and a budget and I will!'. She just went 'Huh!' and walked off."

Left behind as his interlocutor stormed off was a man "looking like Smiley from the John le Carré books – a bit shabby and nondescript", who'd been eavesdropping. "Did you mean that?" this well-spoken figure asked. "I said 'Yes.' 'Well, let me introduce myself: Lewis Rudd, head of Children's for Thames Television. Could we do lunch?'"

THE DEEP END

At the resulting meeting, Price drew on the idea he'd first conceived of as a boy. "He said, 'What we need is an answer to *Doctor Who*.' I said, 'Well, *Doctor Who* is an old man, so what about kids with superpowers, who are the next stage of human evolution? And he said, 'Yes, I like that. Can you do me a pitch document?' So I did."

Price recalls phoning up for an update while on holiday in Scotland, and finding Rudd had moved on, leaving the concept to be pitched by a new head of Children's whom he'd had no dealings with. "I was put through to Sue Turner and she said, 'Well, we tried to persuade ITV to put up the money for a pilot, but they didn't want to do that. So I tried to get a six-part series, and they didn't want to go for that either... They want to go straight for a 13-part

TRIVIA

- ▶ Roger Price didn't coin the term Homo superior. It appears in Olaf Stapledon's 1935 novel *Odd John*, and was also used by Magneto to describe mutants in *The X-Men* issue one (1963).
- ▶ Similarly, the term "jaunting" was previously used for teleportation in Alfred Bester's 1956 novel *The Stars My Destination* (aka *Tiger! Tiger!*).
- ▶ Future stars who received early screen credits in guest roles included Nicholas Lyndhurst, Keith Chegwin, Peter Duncan and (most embarrassingly...) Peter Davison.
- ▶ Series four introduced Mike, drummer for Flintlock, a real-life pop band who later appeared on the show. The group cracked the top 40 just once: "Dawn" (written by actor Mike Holoway) peaked at number 30 in June 1976.
- ▶ Elizabeth was mostly absent during season six, with it explained that she's working on diplomatic missions for the Galactic Federation. In reality, actor Elizabeth Adare was pregnant.
- ▶ In the 2013 *American* revival of *The Tomorrow People*, the father of main protagonist Stephen Jameson is named Roger Price.



Trapped on an alien ship in "Into The Unknown".



Nicholas Young and Mike Holoway suit up.

series! When I got back from my holiday I went to see my boss and he said, 'Have you ever written a drama series before?' I said, 'No!'"

Talk about a baptism of fire... Wisely in the circumstances, Price was paired with an old hand: Brian Finch, a regular writer for *Coronation Street*. "Everybody seemed to be on my side and pushing. We wrote the 13 episodes, I went to Thames and we started making them, and it became a big hit."

Besides Price and Finch, only one other writer got a look in; Jon Watkins (later to create sitcom *No Place Like Home*) contributed series four's "Into The Unknown". Was that because it was difficult to find people on the

AMERICAN DREAM

The series nearly went international

The Tomorrow People was infamous for production values charitably described as, ahem, economical, but that nearly wasn't the case: at one point, the Head of Children's from American broadcaster ABC met with Price and discussed making the series as a co-production.

"They wanted to come in on the deal and basically pour tons of money into it," Price explains. "Instead of having one fifth of the budget of *Doctor Who* we'd have had about five times the budget of *Doctor Who*!"

"Tail up, I went straight to Thames management with this news, from a lunch in London, and the response was chilly. It was [posh voice], 'We don't want some damn Yank standing around telling us to say sidewalk instead of pavement.' I couldn't understand it – we would have had five times the budget.

"It's a pity, because it might have been great. Or it might have been awful, because I've learned since that some Americans interfere a lot!"



Alien "cuckoos" in "The Blue and the Green".



A young Keith Chegwin appeared in 1975.



The Ambassador in "War Of The Empires".

right wavelength? "Well, Thames said that, but I suspect it was because they got [the scripts] for nearly free, because I was on staff," Price laughs. "There was one other writer, and it didn't do well. Whereas I seemed to be able to write the most outrageous rubbish and it still got ratings!"

Price remains proud of the messages the series imparted to young viewers. He holds up a mug he was sent by a *Tomorrow People* fan, with a dozen sentences under the heading "I learned everything about life by watching *The Tomorrow People*". He reads them out. They include: "Violence is never the only solution", "Power should always be used for good", "Authority does not imply intelligence" and "Open your mind."

Principal among these messages was pacifism, with the *Tomorrow People* always seeking other ways to resolve conflict. Price admits adhering to this sometimes created storytelling challenges, but is scornful of how the writers of the 2013 US revival "could not or did not want to manage it". He then sets out the philosophy behind his continuing distaste for on-screen violence.

"There already was then a tendency to portray violence as a way – sometimes seeming to young minds the only way – to solve a problem, and it is far worse now. This can have two effects on the subconscious. One is to use →

THE SCIENCE STUFF

What links *The Tomorrow People* and *Crash*?

Just as '60s *Doctor Who* tapped the expertise of Dr Kit Pedler, *The Tomorrow People* picked the brains of computer scientist Dr Christopher Evans. Listed as "Scientific Adviser" in the end credits, Evans worked conveniently close to Thames Television's Teddington Studios.

"He had a fair bit of input," says Price. "He picked me up on any science mistakes I might make. He was working on trying to get computers to talk in [governmental laboratory] the National Physical Laboratory, which is literally a few hundred metres away from Thames Television. But we met at Granada.

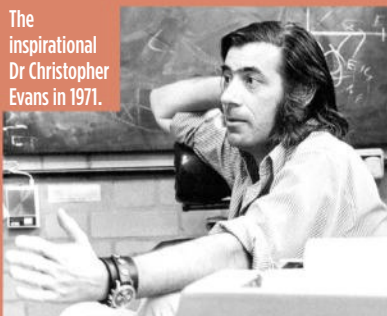
"He'd published a book called *Mind In Chains*, and was being interviewed about it," Price says, recalling how the two met. Evans's 1970 anthology collected stories by the likes of Brian Aldiss, Theodore Sturgeon and John Sladek.

"The interviewer hadn't read it, so I was feeding questions to him. Chris Evans said, 'Why aren't you doing the interview?' I said, 'Because I'm the director - I have to be in the control room.' So we became friends, because I was about the only TV person he came across who'd actually read the damn thing! He never succeeded in getting computers to understand human speech," Price adds, "but he was 40 years ahead of his time in doing that."

An interesting figure, Evans (who died in 1979) was also a close friend of JG Ballard - and an influence on the SF writer. In his autobiography, Ballard paints a striking picture of a "hoodlum scientist" with a "Byronic air".

Circa 1968, the two collaborated on an idea for a play featuring a reconstruction of a car crash. It was never mounted, but Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash* explored similar themes, and the author modelled the appearance of its protagonist Vaughan on his old pal.

The inspirational Dr Christopher Evans in 1971.



violence. But more common in the case of the vast majority of people, who know they are not capable of serious violence, is to diminish their self-confidence and self-concept.

"Almost every kid knows he cannot use violence against an adult, so the vast majority learn to hide their feelings," he argues. "This seems to be leaving the field clear for those people who are either the most well-muscled or shrill. I don't think there is any more violence now than there was a century ago, but seeing so much of it in entertainment is, I think, reducing people's confidence to even speak up and say what is right."

Not that Price wanted to preach to his audience, aware that if you lecture kids they're likely to switch off - figuratively and literally. While his aim was "trying to improve the self-concept of the viewer", he wanted to do so subliminally. "You never say 'This is what we're doing' or they go 'I'm not being got at!' Whereas most kids' shows will come straight out [Watch With Mother voice]: 'This is good for you! Pay attention, we're going to teach you how to tell the time.'"

“TV can, through comedy and drama, make kids feel better about themselves”

"Teachers are probably the best people to teach kids - they've got a face-to-face relationship with them. Parents are the best people to raise kids. But if they're not doing a good job, and screwing up the child, you need to point that out to the child indirectly and say, 'It's not your fault. It's their fault.'"

"In my opinion," he continues, "what matters if you're in the business of making children's programmes is to make the children who have watched the show feel better about themselves at the end of it. Not necessarily have learned to behave or learned to eat. A lot of children's TV is exactly that: 'Eat your vegetables' stuff. That's not the concern of TV. Teachers teach, parents raise and mould, and TV can, through comedy and drama, make kids feel better about themselves."

Price is also justifiably proud of how multi-ethnic his young cast was, with the *Tomorrow People*'s ranks including gypsy boy Tyso, Japanese girl Hsui Tai and two black characters. "It was the first TV show in the world to have a black superhero [Stephen Salmon's Kenny]. It was the second TV show in the world, after *Star Trek*, to have a black heroine [Elizabeth Adare's Elizabeth]."

"Going back all that time, you did not see black people on British TV. A little while later, the black newscaster Trevor McDonald became an iconic person in British television.

Gypsy lad Tyso Boswell (Dean Lawrence). Cheeky!



Lives are at stake in "Worlds Away".



Peter Davison leaves little to the imagination.



Michael "Mr Bronson" Sheard played Adolf Hitler.



But I was certainly the only person using black kids in a kids' show."

Asked which story he's most proud of, Price plumps for 1977's "The Dirtiest Business", an unusually hard-hitting two-parter centred on a Russian *Tomorrow Person*, who ends up dying when the KGB detonate an explosive device implanted in her brain.

"It was about the world of espionage and the evil that can be done by people in that world. It was probably the first show for kids which showed a kid being deliberately killed, and how far those who serve a ruling hegemony will go."

Price is surprised Thames let him film the scene. "I had many doubts, but felt it was



Egyptian shenanigans in "Revenge Of Jedikiah".



Nicholas Lyndhurst pre-*Only Fools And Horses*.

important to be truthful and realistic about life's problems. Sometimes horrible and terrible things happen. I feel it is important to acknowledge that for all younger viewers."

At this point we simply *must* address the phrase "Homo superior". David Bowie's 1971 single "Oh! You Pretty Things" includes the lyric "Gotta way make for the Homo superior". Did Price hear it and think "I'm having that"? Turns out they'd actually met.

"At Granada I was working as a director on various things, and one was a pop music show, which David Bowie was on. I was setting up *The Tomorrow People*, and an agent suggested that I should see her star little boy Peter

Vaughan-Clarke [Stephen], who was in Manchester playing Peter Pan in the pantomime. He was at the theatre the following day and could take lunch with me.

"David Bowie needed to be comforted about things that were upsetting him, so I took him along to the lunch, which was Peter's audition. Then Peter had to leave, because they were doing matinee. David Bowie watched him go and said, 'Oh, he's a pretty thing.' Obviously we talked more about *The Tomorrow People* and Homo superior."

As the song was written in early 1971, Bowie expert Nicholas Pegg has suggested this took place after an 18 January 1971 recording for Granada's nightly magazine show *Six-O-One Newsday*. However, lining up all the dates is tricky. The series began filming in April 1973, so a 1972 audition would make more sense. And while a Peter Pan panto did run in Manchester, it began in late 1972.

Tomorrow People expert Andy Davidson instead plumps for a 21 June 1972 edition of *Lift Off With Ayesha*.

Price mulls this over. "It's very possible that Bowie had already written the song and that was why he latched

TIME FOR CHANGES

Quick! Pre-order the new novel!

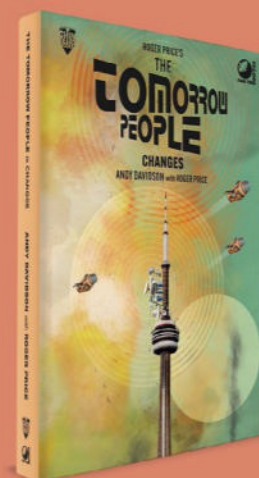
The 50th anniversary year has already seen the publication of a collection of strips from kids' comic *Look-In*, and there's plenty more for fans to look forward to.

In the spring, publishers Chinbeard Books and Oak Tree will launch a range of monthly novellas, variously written by Gary Russell, Nigel Fairs, Rebecca Levene & David Derbyshire, Joseph Lidster and Iain McLaughlin. Before that, 4 December sees the release of a new novel, *The Tomorrow People: Changes*.

It's centred on Gabriel, a teen pop sensation who's won legions of fans over the last decade, but grown weary thanks to a weight upon his shoulders: according to the blurb, Gabriel, who was rescued from the ruins of a city devastated by alien invaders, was responsible for unleashing "terrible consequences" upon humanity due to a "moment's hesitation".

The book is based on a detailed treatment written by Price for a potential reboot series, requested by Netflix several years ago – which would have tied in with previous iterations of the concept. "It's set in the '60s," Price explains, "and in the present day, and two or three alternative timelines. It's the origin story of the Tomorrow People at the same time as being set in the here and now. So it's a little complicated, but it's kind of fun."

Andy Davidson, author of *Tomorrow People* "viewing guide" *Jaunt*, fleshed out Price's treatment into novel form, and the show's creator is impressed. "When he sent me the manuscript my response was, 'I'm humbled – I could never have written anything this good!'"



COVER ART BY ROBERT HAMMOND

on to me, if I casually mentioned developing *The Tomorrow People*. Actually that makes more sense."

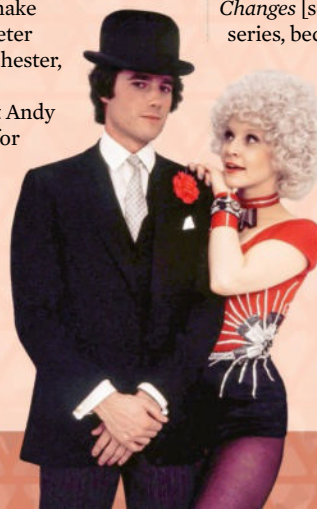
What is certain is that the two met, and had a connection. "David Bowie gave me some valuable thoughts, because he was fascinated by it. His song may have been inspired by the idea, or my show may have been inspired by some of the things he and I talked about after Peter was gone." Choose your own truth!

The Tomorrow People has returned to our screens twice: in the '90s, Price acted as executive producer on a three-season run starring former *Neighbours* star Kristian Schmid; in 2013, Robbie Amell toplined a one-season revival for The CW. Could it happen again?

Price is certainly keen. "It might come back. *Changes* [see above] may well turn into a TV series, because we're talking to other people as well. I would love it to come back.

To have adults, years later, still affected by something you made for them when they were children is incredibly moving!"

We're told to expect "more surprises to come" for the *Tomorrow People* brand... Follow @AUK_Studios on Twitter for updates, or go to aukstudios.uk.



NAOMI ALDERMAN

Tomorrow's world: the British author tells us about her new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Annabel Moeller

IT WAS AN ARTICLE, SAYS NAOMI ALDERMAN, that set her writing. Specifically an essay published in *The New Yorker* in 2017, in which reporter Evan Osnos detailed how some of America's wealthiest people are preppers, putting a percentage of their vast resources into creating well-appointed bunkers and boltholes where they can, if the worst happens, ride out The End Of The World As We Know It.

"I think a bunker is a stupid fantasy," she says. "It's a psychological, emotional fantasy that 'I can make sure I'm always fine whatever'. That's not the kind of planet we live on. Unfortunately, you can get really terrible news on a random Tuesday afternoon, but the thing that you were always terrified of happening never happens. That, I'm afraid, is the type of universe we live in."

Not that this prevents the billionaires of Alderman's new "protest novel", *The Future*, from planning to escape the breakdown of civilisation. Irony underpins the novel. Clearly modelled on today's Silicon Valley chiefs, these are hyper-capitalists driven to win, even as their own monopolistic practices destabilise the planet.

Nevertheless, Alderman says she can understand the instinct to hedge against what's coming. "As a very anxious person, I feel that I'd like to be able to control everything," she says, "and a lot of that has gone into my characters."

One of the most curious facets of the tech industry is that, over two decades after the dotcom boom, and in an era when we're seeing the downsides of digital technologies on a daily basis, so many within the sector talk in evangelical, even utopian terms about what they do. This is a *Star Trek* vision of the future, where everything will inevitably turn out alright in the end. "I've watched a lot of *Star Trek*, and I really *hope* it is going to come out right," says Alderman.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

To understand what we're going through at the moment, she says, it helps to think about the printing revolution which followed Johannes Gutenberg's invention, circa 1440, of the movable-type printing press.

"It was a huge information revolution," she says. "Subsequent to that, we had 350 years of bloody war over the Reformation. In the end, it all settled down, but the truth is, when we come into contact with loads more information than we've ever seen before, and people's weird opinions that we've never had to deal with before, it's very disturbing. And when we feel disturbed, we then get aggressive – and here we are."

BIODATA

From **London**

Greatest Hits
The Power (2017) won the **Women's Prize for Fiction**. Alderman's other novels are *Disobedience* (2006), *The Lessons* (2010) and *The Liars' Gospel* (2012).

Random Fact
The Future started out as a novel about a pandemic. When Covid came along, Alderman decided "nobody wants to read that now", and rethought it.



Just how bad here can be, says Alderman, became clear to her as early as 2004, when she came across the proto-neo-Nazi website Stormfront. "I remember looking through this site as a Jewish person going, 'This is hilarious.' And then inside something flipped and suddenly I went, 'Oh, no, this is actually really quite deeply disturbing.'"

So how do we get away from here? In part, *The Future* suggests, we need to start thinking about collectivism. It's a mark of how much ground the book covers that it subtly advances this argument in part by revisiting the biblical story of Lot's daughters as a way to talk about the lives of hunter-gatherers. "When you actually learn about what the hunter-gatherer lifestyle was like, one of the things you have to understand about humans is that we are always going to be unhappy if we're not part of a band," Alderman says.

WATCH WORDS

Education, the sector in which her parents worked, is a recurring theme in Alderman's life; Open University courses are, she says, "One of my favourite things". She studied PPE at Oxford, where she was a contemporary of former PM Liz Truss. But her experience of Oxford was coloured by family trauma and surviving being groomed by a paedophile as a child – by scholar Sidney Greenbaum, who died in 1996. "It was brilliant that he died," she bluntly says. "That was the nicest thing he ever did for me."

With the help of therapy, Alderman has not just survived but flourished. As well as writing novels, she's worked extensively in the tech sector (she co-created the app *Zombies, Run!*). As part of a Rolex-sponsored programme, Margaret Atwood mentored her during the writing of *The Power*, recently adapted for Prime Video. Alderman conveys a restless energy but, judging by the way she leans in when she talks, has the knack of staying in the moment.

We finish by talking about one of Atwood's abiding themes: the environment, concern for which is also important to *The Future*. "We're already living in a science fictional world in that in the '30s and '40s, people were writing science fiction and imagining a sort of barren, sterile world, a world in which you could tell during your lifetime that the environment around you had changed," she says. "We're in it now – we're in the predicted bad future."

Which may sound bleak, but then again – and here's perhaps the most important idea in *The Future* – what lies ahead has yet to be decided. ●

The Future is published by 4th Estate on 7 November.

“As a very
anxious person,
I feel that I’d
like to be able
to control
everything”



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THE EXORCIST: BELIEVER

If you go down to the woods...



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 111 minutes

► Director **David Gordon Green**

► Cast **Leslie Odom Jr, Lidy Jewett, Olivia O'Neill, Jennifer Nettles**

⚡ **While his two follow-ups** had their issues, David Gordon Green's 2018 take on *Halloween* got most things right, resulting in a satisfyingly gnarly slasher, well-grounded in character. Which makes it all the more surprising – and deeply disappointing – that his revival of another classic horror franchise is so calamitously misjudged.

In truth, William Friedkin's 1973 classic about the possession of young Regan should probably never have spawned a "franchise" in the first place, being a perfectly hermetic tale. Either you repeat the same old tricks (vomiting, shaking furniture, levitation) with another girl, or you take a divergent path – in which case, why not just make a different film?

Green's big idea is – hold on to your hat – to double the number of girls, with 13-year-old friends

Angela (Lidy Jewett) and Katherine (Olivia O'Neill) going missing after wandering off into the woods one afternoon. Found several days later in a barn, they have no memory of the missing time. It's not long before they begin to show the familiar signs of demonic possession...

The film has a frustratingly low-key opening. Taking time to establish a realistic milieu is all well and good, but slow burn is one thing, downright tedious is another. And doubling the number of victims doesn't really bring any benefits. You can't help feeling that the motivation is simply to create a "spare" who can be discarded if so required.

The film's one big coup is the return of Ellen Burstyn in the role of Regan's mother, Chris MacNeil – although she's not particularly well-served. Naturally, she's not the only touchstone from the past, with Green ticking off vomit, the C-bomb, Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells" and a rotating head (one which finally answers the much-asked question, "Wouldn't you die if your head performed a 360?").



What's missing? Firstly, a plausible explanation. The incident which seems to bring on the dual possession is simply the kids mucking about with candles – hardly the sort of thing which could open a gateway to another realm. Secondly, to a significant degree: organised religion.

It takes some nerve to make an *Exorcist* film that isn't firmly centred on Catholicism, but that's the route Green takes here. With the church authorities unwilling to get involved, the local priest's involvement is minimal. The rather more significant presence

“Believer might even be the worst entry in the *Exorcist* series”

of Dr Beehive, a practitioner of the African-American tradition of rootwork, may cause cynics to wonder whether there was a sense of embarrassment about centring the film on a religious tradition no longer considered suitably “diverse”. Who wants to see another dusty old white guy splashing holy water about, right?



The on-screen rationale comes in the form of some vaguely hippy-dippy platitudes about “faith in each other”, but this abjectly fails to convince – particularly when it comes to Katherine’s parents, who are Baptists, yet don’t so much as bat an eyelid at seeing their daughter tied to a chair while any old passer-by reads out religious texts.

This includes, most laughably, the Fieldings’ nosey neighbour Ann (Ann Dowd), a one-time novitiate whose introduction comes when she complains about taking in the bins. Oh, the gravitas.

The face-off which ensues is a messy and muddled spectacle.

Of one thing we can be absolutely certain: William Peter Blatty, writer of the original novel and screenwriter of the 1973 film, would have been appalled. For Blatty, the whole point of Regan’s possession was that it was an attempt to destroy the faith of the attending priests. As Father Merrin speculates in *The Version You’ve Never Seen*, “The point is to make us despair.” But Angela’s father, Victor (Leslie Odom Jr), needs no such encouragement, dismissing religion as myth.

It’s quite something to say, given the (thoroughly justified) rock-bottom reputation of *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, but *Believer* might even be the worst entry in the series. At least John Boorman’s 1977 sequel was *about* something, even if his premise was misguided.

Believer, by contrast, is infuriatingly wishy-washy. We were looking forward to another two instalments, but you leave the cinema having lost faith in Green’s judgement. **Ian Berriman**

i The film’s end credits identify the entity responsible as Lamashtu, a female demon from Mesopotamian mythology.

EASTER EGGS

Four of the more subtle references



Barking Mad

Early on, Victor photographs a couple of dogs fighting. This echoes a moment from the opening of the original film, where Father Merrin sees two dogs fighting in the desert close to the statue of Pazuzu.

Author! Author!

Victor contacts Chris MacNeil for help because she wrote a non-fiction book based on her experiences. The version of Chris in the 2016-2017 TV series was also an author – although of a cash-in novel, *The Devil In My Daughter*.



The Purple One

It *could* just be coincidental, but the scarf which formerly belonged to Angela’s late mother, Sorenne, is purple – the same colour as the stole worn by Father Merrin during the original film’s exorcism.

Sofa, So Good

Though it’s unrecognisable, the couch in Chris MacNeil’s house is the same one that was in her Georgetown home in the 1973 movie. After the film wrapped, Ellen Burstyn took it home and had it reupholstered – she still owns it today!

CINEMA

CAT PERSON

Littered with problems



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 118 minutes

▶ Director Susanna Fogel

▶ Cast Emilia Jones, Nicholas Braun, Geraldine Viswanathan, Isabella Rossellini

Based on Kristen Roupenian's viral-hit short story of 2017, which explored the uncomfortable and occasionally sinister romance between a young woman and an older man, *Cat Person* takes a sharp look at gender dynamics and then literally sets it on fire.

As well as being a terrible film, this adaptation is a spectacularly squandered opportunity, with its buzzy subject matter and a stellar cast whose work has accrued Oscars, Emmys and BAFTAs. It puzzlingly dials up the horror elements, making Nicholas Braun's Ben the embodiment of bad vibes

in his pursuit of Emilia Jones's stupefyingly careless Margot. She meets him while working at the concession stand in the cinema and is intrigued by what one can only assume is his height, since the towering Braun plays him in full Norman Bates mode from the off.

The pair's dates have the chemistry of a prostate examination, which makes the plot machinations to bulk this short story into a nearly two-hour film entirely unconvincing. Fans of the story, fans of the horror genre, and fans of three-dimensional female characters are all underserved. Despite some stylish visuals, *Cat Person* is about as clever and subtle as a Tinder profile written by a paralytic-drunk mate. **Leila Latif**

i 2019 horror *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies* was based on a spec script by Kristen Roupenian, who was credited for "story".

"What's the weather like up –"
"DON'T."



TIME ADDICTS



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 92 minutes

A pair of potty-mouthed Melbourne drug addicts have a high old time when they snort some crystal meth that sends them bouncing back and forth into the recent past and the near future.

Coming across like a swarier but less inventive episode of *Misfits*, this micro-budget flick's temporal logic doesn't bear close scrutiny, but it uses its limited locations well (most of it's set in one house) to create a scuzzy black comedy with a surprisingly sweet ending.

Dave Golder



THE JESTER



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 90 minutes

This killer-clown feature grew out of a popular series of short films by director Colin Krawchuk. In it, a pair of sisters and their friends are stalked around a small town on Halloween by a murderous orange-suited jester.

Gorehounds may find the film's focus on creepy atmospherics rather than kills disappointing – it's far tamer than the likes of *Terrifier 2* – but the cast are solid, and Krawchuk's script makes a decent fist of attempting to actually be about something.

Will Salmon



SUITABLE FLESH



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 99 minutes

As much about the evils of medical malpractice as those of unthinkable elder gods, this is a depressingly backward-looking psychosexual cheapie.

After meeting a patient suffering from the delusion that his father wants his body, Dr Beth Derby decides she does too... albeit in a different way. If the body horror doesn't make you cringe, the sex scenes will.

The original HP Lovecraft source material is credited, but Stuart Gordon's adaptations are the more obvious reference point. This won't be as well-remembered. **Sarah Dobbs**



HOW TO SAVE THE IMMORTAL

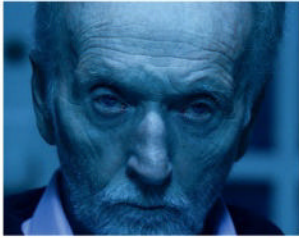


▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 76 minutes

Drybones is an immortal seeking a wife. Barbara is a strongwoman who refuses to marry. A king wants her for himself, but accidentally pushes the two together. Weirdly, a talking loaf also gets involved.

This Russian animation rolls out basic storytelling with occasional flashes of something interesting (like an Escher homage). Small kids may giggle at the silly characters, but an uneven dub – dull one minute, screeching the next – flattens the experience. **Jayne Nelson**



SAW X

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 118 minutes

▶ Director Kevin Greutert

▶ Cast Tobin Bell, Shawnee Smith, Synnøve Macody Lund, Renata Vaca

❖ **To borrow a bit from** another iconic horror movie villain, let's play a game: name the killer in the *Saw* movies.

Did you say Jigsaw, or John Kramer? Well, you're wrong. According to him, he's not a killer: his traps always give his victims the chance to escape. There have always been some moral gymnastics required to accept his reasoning, and here, in the franchise's tenth film, the filmmakers are basically doing triple backflips.

Set somewhere between *Saw* and *Saw II*, this mid-quel sees Kramer taking out his frustrations on the fake nurses and anaesthesiologists of a fraudulent Mexican clinic that claimed it could cure his (eventually fatal) cancer.

Making him the protagonist is a bold choice: sure, Kramer always claimed he helped people, but the previous films never tried to make him the hero the way this one does.

Then again, almost two decades after the first one, coming up with an original direction for a new *Saw* film is a tough brief. At least it covers all the basics: plenty of traps, buckets of gore, a creepy Charlie Clouser score, and Tobin Bell giving it his all.

Simple enough to be accessible to new fans but familiar enough for the diehards, *Saw X* is neither the best nor the worst of the *Saw* films, and right now, maybe that's enough.

Sarah Dobbs



THE BYSTANDERS

Angelic Upstarts

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 3 NOVEMBER**

15 | 98 minutes

▶ Director Gabriel Foster Prior

▶ Cast Scott Haran, Seann Walsh, Andi Jashy, Georgia Mabel Clarke

❖ **Cinema and television have** always loved guardian angels (see *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Highway To Heaven* and so on), but those that look over us are given a hipster spin in Gabriel Foster Prior's feature debut. It's a dazzlingly original SF romcom that refashions your Clarences and Jonathan Smiths into Bystanders: protectors plucked from the real world (usually loners and losers, who won't be missed) who are then given powers to change the destiny of their given subject.

Newbie Bystander Peter's inaugural project is Sarah, a fresh-in-London indie girl working for hip media label Smut Records. But with Peter eyeing up a Bystander of the Year gong, he decides that this "middle class girl from Kent" isn't all that much of a challenge, and so swaps subjects with his Bystander buddy Frank (a surprisingly non-irritating Seann Walsh).

Enter Luke (Andi Jashy), a weed-smoking unemployed gamer, prone to wiping his arse with a sock and guzzling ketchup straight from the tube. It's up to Peter to then turn Luke from zero to hero – a tall order given that he's never worked a day in his life. It won't come as a surprise that Peter manages minor miracles, even somehow securing Luke a date with Sarah.

“A dazzlingly original SF romcom”

There's a real inventiveness to the visuals here (the parallel dimension of the Bystanders is in colour, while the real world is rendered in black and white) which manages to camouflage the fact that the movie was made on a tiny budget. Playing like an SF version of *Rye Lane*, *The Bystanders* has enough imagination to suggest that Gabriel Foster Prior is headed for the big time. **Steve O'Brien**

i The director had to sleep in stoner character Luke's bedroom for the shoot, surrounded by Pot Noodles and bong.



THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE BARN

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 1 DECEMBER**

15 | 100 minutes

▶ Director Magnus Martens

▶ Cast Martin Starr, Amrita Acharia, Townes Bunner, Zoe Winther-Hansen

❖ **From Trollhunter to The Ritual**, the icy mythscapes of Scandinavian folklore have provided a rich seam of inspiration for modern horror.

Here the legendary menace is a little more whimsical: a barn elf, a gnome-like bugaboo who sets himself against an American family who've relocated to Norway – “the happiest country on Earth” – with plans to transform the murderous munchkin's home into a boutique hotel.

The title promises some enjoyably lurid, self-aware fun, but while this is clearly reaching for the breezy spirit of *Gremlins*, it proves a muddled blend of broad humour and axe-swinging scares. Presented as crass tourists (“Ever seen a moose on a sign before?”), the family simply irritates, while the elf himself is a cartoon-shallow antagonist, his lore barely explored.

Unveiled too soon, the creature has nothing left to show us, and not even an army of brother elves staging a home invasion in the final act can make the pint-sized threat feel genuinely engaging.

There's one strikingly brilliant image, thrown away in the opening scene: a baby's pram with a bear trap nestled inside. It's the kind of blackly inventive humour this movie needed more of. **Nick Setchfield**



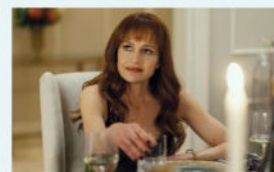
"I have some very bad news... the soup's off."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

🍷 Roderick reminds someone that Lenore Usher is his favourite.

🍷 Upwards of three people engage in a sex act.



🍷 Carla Gugino gets a jazzy new wig.

🍷 A character tells their romantic partner that they never loved them anyway.

🍷 Mark Hamill "fixes" one of the Usher's problems.

🍷 A character seems unbothered by the gruesome death of a family member.

🍷 A raven stares ominously down the lens.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

The ends of an era



UK/US Netflix, streaming now

► Creator Mike Flanagan

► Cast Bruce Greenwood, Mary

McDonnell, Henry Thomas, Rahul Kohli,

Mark Hamill, Kate Siegel

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 Throughout his five horror shows for Netflix, Mike Flanagan has avoided producing straightforward adaptations, instead using novels for thematic inspiration. *The Haunting Of Hill House* came first in 2018, a tribute to Shirley Jackson. That was followed up by love letters to Henry James, Stephen King and Christopher Pike. Now Flanagan takes on the most iconic figure in horror fiction: Edgar Allan Poe.

His latest series takes its name from his 1839 story of the same

name, reimagining its macabre look at family and insanity in a very modern context. The Ushers are pharmaceutical billionaires who've made their fortune peddling dangerous medications to an unsuspecting public.

The family is headed by Roderick (a superb Bruce Greenwood), who has six children by five women – but as we're shown in the opening montage, they've all recently died in a series of "freak accidents", leaving Roderick and his twin sister Madeline (Mary McDonnell) as all that remains of the Ushers.

In a crumbling mansion, Roderick recounts the whole tale to investigator C Auguste Dupin (Carl Lumbly); we learn how each Usher met their grisly end, and

what Roderick did to set these terrible wheels in motion. His children – heir apparent Frederick, wellness entrepreneur Tamerlane, heart surgeon Victorine, gaming mogul Leo, PR head Camille and feckless socialite Perry – are an utterly vile selection of humans, so there's no shortage of reasons for people to want them dead.

But it becomes apparent that something supernatural is happening, tied to a mysterious woman called Verna (rearrange the letters for a spoiler!) and an incident that happened one New Year's Eve back in 1980. Even knowing the fates of the Ushers, the programme still has the power to surprise – Camille and Perry's deaths are particularly gnarly.

But even though this is Flanagan's most violent series, it's also by far his most fun. Despite the series working its way through the Usher clan (at the rate of around one per episode), the finale still finds creative ways to further torture the despicable patriarch, proving a potent mix of all Poe's eerie romance, compelling mystery and stunning cruelty.

With a move to Amazon imminent, it's unclear if a change of platforms means an end to annual October delights from Flanagan. Seeing him take on horror's master of morbidity with such panache makes that too scary a thought to bear. **Leila Latif**

i Bruce Greenwood replaced Frank Langella mid-production; he's only 12 years older than Henry Thomas, who played his son.

THE BURNING GIRLS

There's a lot at stake



UK Paramount Plus, streaming now

Showrunner Hans Rosenfeldt

Cast Samantha Morton, Ruby Stokes, Rupert Graves, Conrad Khan

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Samantha**

Morton takes the lead – beautifully – in this adaptation of CJ Tudor's 2021 novel of the same name. She plays Jack Brooks, a vicar with a shady past who moves to a little English village to start afresh after a controversy that possibly involved some kind of exorcism.

Her teenage daughter Flo (Lockwood & Co's excellent Ruby Stokes) starts hanging around with a weird local lad (Conrad Khan), and the villagers are a bit of a weird bunch, but there are bigger issues afoot: fiery ghosts!

Burned at the stake for being Protestants 500 years ago, two

young girls haunt the village, apparently wanting something from Jack and Flo. Chapel Croft is also still reeling from the disappearance of two teenagers in the '90s and so, intrigued, Jack starts investigating a rogues' gallery of suspects in what is ultimately a satisfying whodunnit.

The real draw here is Morton: her performance is BAFTA-worthy, never falling short of perfection. Whether she's lying in bed talking to God or telling someone she'll "fuck them up" if they hurt her daughter, she's absolutely stunning throughout.

“This might have worked better as a straight drama”



“Does that crowd seem to have pitchforks?”

What doesn't work as well are the scares. There are only so many times someone can wander around an old building in the dark before it gets boring – and while the two shrieking ghosts are effective, we see them far too often, lessening their impact until they randomly disappear from the plot.

The supporting cast are watchable (particularly Rupert Graves, letting rip as a card-

carrying bastard), but there's no denying that this is Morton's show. It's a shame to see her working so damn hard, only to be let down by listless tension building and predictable jump scares. Sadly, this might have worked better as a straight drama rather than a supernatural tale. **Jayne Nelson**

i Mary I (nicknamed “Bloody Mary”) killed an estimated 312 Protestants during her five-year reign; 280 of them were burned.

BODIES

Same corpse, different year



UK/US Netflix, streaming now

Showrunner Paul Tomalin

Cast Amaka Okafor, Stephen Graham, Jacob Fortune-Lloyd, Shira Haas

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **When four**

London cops in four different time periods (late Victorian, Second World War, present day and near-future false utopia) all stumble across the same naked corpse, none of them realise they've also stumbled across a headscratcher of a time paradox that could lead/has lead to London being destroyed in a nuclear explosion. Well, it's a little above their pay grade, to be fair.

Based on a graphic novel by the late Si Spencer, *Bodies* is an ambitious, often elegant-looking time travel mystery that merges four interlinking storylines in

surprising ways, even if the actual plot, once you've unravelled it all, is fairly formulaic time-loop shenanigans. Hell, even the nuclear explosion feels like a nostalgic wave to *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

The mash-up of contrasting periods is quite striking, with a grittily realistic present day, a *Ripper Street*-ish 1880s and a noir '40s, but let down by a rather bargain bin, humdrum future that's never explored in any depth. Some bold splitscreen work cleverly evokes the project's graphic novel roots.

The acting is top-notch, with Stephen Graham magnificently tying everything together through all the time zones (after a masterfully low-key introduction), while all the featured bobbies in each era are strong, interesting



“Ah, yes, I can explain. Actually, I can't.”

characters whose lives and plights you're happy to follow – even if Shira Haas's future cop, DC Maplewood, is lumbered with a distractingly ugly hairdo. There's also an unusual storytelling structure – not just the various time periods, but a real change of gear for the last two episodes – that keeps things intriguing.

But as science fiction, it's fairly derivative, cheesy and contrived.

Disappointingly, too, the one image that should be the show's leitmotif – London under a mushroom cloud – is weirdly kept to a bare minimum. If you can live with all that, however, there's plenty to enjoy on this twisty-turny journey.

Dave Golder

i Israeli actress Shira Haas (DC Maplewood) will be playing Marvel superhero Sabra in *Captain America: Brave New World*.

STAR WARS: AHSOKA

A Thawn in their sides



UK/US Disney+, streaming now

► Showrunner Dave Filoni

► Cast Rosario Dawson, Natasha Liu

Bordizzo, Mary Elizabeth Winstead,

Ray Stevenson

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 Throughout the media rounds for *Ahsoka*, cast and crew assured the world that prior knowledge of *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels* wasn't needed to enjoy the show. That's true – but only from a certain point of view.

While Disney+'s latest jaunt to the universe George Lucas built is a fully functional continuation of the post-*Return Of The Jedi* story started by *The Mandalorian*, there's no question that showrunner Dave Filoni has made a live-action follow-up to the aforementioned animated shows that made his name. Alas, if this is

your first encounter with Purgil, the Nightsisters of Dathomir and the World Between Worlds, you'll find yourself asking more questions than an over-enthusiastic Padawan.

Of course, if anyone's the spiritual heir to Lucas's empire it's Filoni, and his knowledge of and affection for the veteran franchise shine through in the trademark sweeps and dissolves, the beautifully choreographed lightsaber duels, and the spectacular space battles.

He also makes a concerted (and literal) effort to transport the storytelling beyond the confines of the saga's traditional galaxy – even if the ultimate destination, Peridea, doesn't feel particularly far, far away.

While returning Rebel general Hera Syndulla (Mary Elizabeth

Winstead) is less a character than a plot device unleashed to expose the naive ineptitude of the nascent New Republic, Rosario Dawson (as Anakin Skywalker's eponymous former apprentice) and Natasha Liu Bordizzo (Mandalorian Rebel Sabine Wren) add depth to characters who debuted in animation.

Baylan Skoll (played with impressive subtlety by the late Ray Stevenson) is up there with the most intriguing and enigmatic Force-wielders we've ever seen, and the strategy-obsessed Grand Admiral Thrawn justifies the long-building hype surrounding his imminent return. *Rebels* voice actor Lars Mikkelsen deserves extra kudos for delivering a suitably chilling performance, despite a costume that looks like middling cosplay.

Although it gets plenty right, however, *Ahsoka* doesn't quite hang together as a whole. The first half of the season is unnecessarily ponderous, fooling no one as it pretends that the return of Thrawn (long ago spoiled in trailers) is anything but certain.

It also falls into a trap that has done for Marvel on numerous occasions, by functioning more as a bridge between *The Mandalorian* and future projects – including the Filoni-directed theatrical movie that's set to bring this era of *Star Wars* to a close – than a story in its own right.

Most frustratingly of all, the season wraps up without telling you anything you couldn't have guessed when it started. Sure, you've probably already dived into Wookieepedia to find out the relevance of those freaky statues on Peridea, but obscure lore from a pair of animated TV series shouldn't be seen as *Star Wars'* latest new hope.

Richard Edwards

i Former *Farscape* and *Stargate SG-1* star Claudia Black plays Klothow, one of the Dathomirian witches on Peridea.



ROBODOC



UK Icon Film Channel,

streaming now

► Directors Christopher Griffiths,

Eastwood Allen

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 Running

at close to five hours, this crowd-funded documentary (subtitled *The Creation Of RoboCop*) is almost three times longer than the movie that inspired it. That could easily feel like overkill, but as *RoboDoc* explores Paul Verhoeven's violent masterpiece in minute, bloody detail, the extraordinary depth of the dive becomes one of the series' biggest strengths.

As does the independent nature of the project. If this were a studio-backed Making Of, it's hard to believe that the impressive assortment of talking heads – every inch of *RoboCop's* end credits is represented, from lowly behind-the-scenes technicians to director Verhoeven and star Peter Weller – would have been quite so candid. The filmmakers' love for the subject matter also shines through in their compulsion to share *everything* they've learned about the movie – no piece of information is too obscure.

Indeed, in terms of anecdotes, trivia and behind-the-scenes material, the constantly entertaining *RoboDoc* feels like the ultimate treasure trove for fans. Admittedly, the title could have done with more work, but seeing as most of the cast and crew rolled their eyes at “*RoboCop*” in the mid-'80s, we'll let it slide. Note: a Blu-ray release (featuring interview out-take bonuses) is due on 18 December. **Richard Edwards**



"I am...
AHSOKA!"
"Bless you.
Tissue?"

UPLOAD Season Three

Double trouble in paradise



UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

Showrunners Greg Daniels

Cast Robbie Amell, Andy Allo, Allegra Edwards, Zainab Johnson

EPISODES 3.01-3.08 Season three of *Upload* has an ingenious solution to the fact that, by the end of season two, it began to feel like a show pulling in two different directions. There was the zany, hilarious stuff set inside the virtual afterlife of Lakeview, then the less funny plot stuff in the real world concerning the corrupt company behind Lakeview: Horizen.

Lead character Nathan Brown's digital consciousness had been extracted from Lakeview and downloaded into a cloned body so he could help expose Horizen. Which was all well and good, but it felt like mission creep was turning into mission sprint. The

solution? Create another digital Nathan for Lakeview.

It also pulls off the seemingly impossible cast of redeeming Ingrid, Nathan's formerly odious fiancée. It's fun watching the manipulative and self-seeking Ingrid start to be humanised. Then there's the fact that Nathan's head may explode if he stays in his clone body too long.

It holds together well, with the usual bizarre imagery and weird characters in Lakeview providing the big laughs, while the conspiracy plot keeps you hooked. And while it looks like all the plotlines are heading for a neat and tidy series finale, instead we get an audacious finale twist that resets just about everything, *The Good Place*-style. **Dave Golder**

i Author William Gibson cameos in episode five, as an automated virtual warning about the dangers of reading books.



Shirt: £10, from Matalan. Smiles: models' own.

GEN V Season One

School Of Shocks



UK/US Prime Video, streaming now

Showrunners Michele Fazekas, Tara Butters

Cast Jaz Sinclair, Chance Perdomo, Lizzie Broadway, Maddie Phillips

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 When a TV show uses the phrase "tag team cockspllosion" you can kinda guess we're in *The Boys* universe. This second spin-off from Amazon's super-gross superhero splatterfest centres on a university for teenagers who've gained powers as a result of their parents plying them with the drug Gen V when they were still in their nappies.

Some are studying to be caped crimefighters, while the less gifted (and less social media-friendly) are encouraged to become media stars. So for Marie Moreau (Sinclair), whose blood-manipulating powers, parent-

murdering past, lack of a mobile phone and (possibly worst of all) really dark skin all make her unlikely to score high on the public popularity-meter, her aim of becoming the first black woman

in *The Seven* is going to be a titanic struggle. Especially as the school has a deep dark secret that the spectacular suicide of its star pupil threatens to blow wide open.

At times it's all a bit *The Boys*-lite. It doesn't have the same crazed energy, and some of the wackiness feels a tad contrived, with gross-out moments that often come across like a little kid using swear words they don't

“Some of the wackiness feels a tad contrived”

understand. Some of the effects look a little cheap, the action scenes aren't quite as polished, and there's some clunky plotting.

But there's a lot to enjoy here, including some delicious satire, a range of loveably quirky, morally dubious characters and a hellish amount of jaw-dropping twists. It all dovetails marvellously with the parent show, with loads of clever cameos and one superbly gratuitous one (Soldier Boy), and the final few minutes of the finale will leave you reeling multiple times. Plus there's also a sweet, warped and ultimately tragic love story.

Most crucially, though, like *The Boys*, *Gen V* makes woke look totally f***king awesome.

Dave Golder

i Haley Joel Osment cameos as the lead of a TV series called *The Mesmerizer*, as previously seen in the *The Boys*.



"Wow, Mac OS 14 looks really gnarly, dude."



HELLRAISER: QUARTET OF TORMENT

Has such sights to show you

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1987-1996 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

▶ Directors Clive Barker, Tony Randel, Anthony Hickox, Kevin Yagher (as Alan Smithee)

▶ Cast Doug Bradley, Andrew Robinson, Clare Higgins, Ashley Laurence

➤ **The suffering of the *Hellraiser* franchise is legendary, even in a genre prone to sequels of diminishing returns. This beautifully scrubbed-up set wisely concentrates on the first four films, before things really went off the rails and the series was consigned to its own Hell: the direct-to-video market.**

Clive Barker's 1987 adaptation of his novella *The Hellbound Heart* remains as compelling as ever, its combination of kink and

melodrama making for a uniquely alluring film. Pinhead (Doug Bradley) might be the nail-studded face of the franchise, but he's an enigmatic presence here, with murderous lovers Frank (Sean Chapman) and Julia (Clare Higgins) the true villains.

Tony Randel's sequel *Hellbound* is messier, but also more enjoyably schlocky. The film also manages to add tantalising layers of backstory to Pinhead without undermining his fundamental mystery.

The same cannot be said about *Hellraiser III: Hell On Earth*. Pinhead undergoes a radical personality shift, from morally blank enforcer of metaphysical torment to indiscriminate killer – a decision that robs him of all his intrigue. The new Cenobites are laughable, too, with one

slaughtering people using the height of '90s technology: CDs.

And so to *Bloodline*, the weirdest of the four by quite some distance. The film starts in the future and in deep space, before travelling back in time to the 1700s and the origins of the Lament Configuration puzzle box. There's some evocative imagery here, but by this point the series has drifted a long way from Barker's seedy and sensual explorations of desire.

➤ **Extras** A packed set, with all four films benefiting from heaps of new or previously unseen material. Both versions of *Hell On Earth* (theatrical/an unrated cut with standard-def inserts) are included, as is a newly discovered workprint of *Bloodline*. The differences from the theatrical version are notable, with swapped around scenes and a different score, but the transfer comes from a swampy, timecoded VHS that's a chore to watch. Despite this, it's a fascinating curio for completists.

There are 10 commentaries. Most are archival, but genre expert Kim Newman and unit publicist Stephen Jones provide a lively track for all four films, joined on *Bloodline* by screenwriter Peter Atkins, who's pleasingly frank

about the film's shortcomings. The new features are solid too. "Power Of Imagination" (58 minutes) sees lecturers Sorcha Ní Fhlainn and Karmel Kniprath delve deep into the first movie and Barker's literary work. *Hell Was What They Wanted!* is a feature-length (85 minutes) chat between authors George Daniel Lea and Kit Power, particularly focused on *Hellbound*.

Another horror author, Guy Adams, provides two featurettes: "That Rat-Slice Sound" (12 minutes) celebrates Christopher Young's scores for the first two films, while "Flesh Is A Trap" (18 minutes) is a visual essay about body horror, which also features Adams getting a tattoo. Now there's commitment.

Sex and *Hellraiser* go hand-in-leather-gloved-hand. "The Pursuit Of Possibilities" (41 minutes) explores the series' LGBTQ+ themes, while "The Beauty Of Suffering" (28 minutes) delves into the intersection between the

“Clive Barker's adaptation of his novella remains compelling”

movies, sex work and the goth and BDSM subcultures. Elsewhere writer AK Benedict celebrates the Lament Configuration (22 minutes). Finally, a previously-unseen EPK (electronic press kit) for the first film offers period interviews with Barker, Andrew Robinson, Clare Higgins, Ashley Laurence and special effects artists (totalling 24 minutes).

There's also stacks of archival material from previous releases: interviews with the likes of Sean Chapman, Doug Bradley and Paula Marshall; a feature on industrial pioneers Coil's rejected soundtrack for the first film (18 minutes); 2015 doc *Hellraiser Evolutions* (48 minutes), which goes into the troubles the later sequels faced; plus deleted scenes, trailers and image galleries. This is *Hellraiser* Heaven.

Will Salmon

i As scripted, Frank says "Fuck you" before he's ripped apart. Actor Andrew Robinson changed the line to "Jesus wept."



FROM BEIJING WITH LOVE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1994 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Stephen Chow, Lee Lik-chi

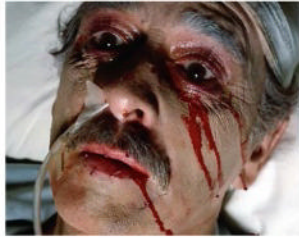
▶ Cast Stephen Chow, Anita Yuen, Kar-ying Law, Wong Kam Kong

BLU-RAY DEBUT In 1974 the Bond franchise riffed on the Asian cinema boom with *The Man With The Golden Gun*. Consider this an act of reverse cultural appropriation: 007 by way of Hong Kong; part spoof, part homage, part rip-off.

Stephen Chow is the pork merchant turned insouciant secret agent, a cigarette seemingly surgically attached to his lips. On the trail of a stolen dinosaur skull he finds himself pitted against a supervillain with – checks notes – a golden gun, and a hench with sinister dental work.

The Bond steals are audacious, made all the more amusing by a straight-faced legal disclaimer that's immediately followed by a cheekily familiar musical cue. But the mix of slapstick and intrigue skews closer to one of the later *Pink Panther* movies, while a brutal, blood-splashed fight sits a little uneasily among the laughs. Still, this is zippy, entertaining fun.

▶ **Extras** Co-star Wong Kam Kong reflects on the movie (22 minutes), while also retracing his career (54 minutes). A 2005 interview with co-director Lee Lik-chi (25 minutes) offers more of a general retrospective on the “king of Mo lei tau” (a Hong Kong brand of slapstick). There's also an audio commentary by Asian cinema expert Frank Djeng. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**



MEATCLEAVER MASSACRE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1976 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director It's complicated...

▶ Cast Larry Justin, J Arthur Craig, James Habif, Robert Clark

BLU-RAY DEBUT When it comes to misleading titles, this one (appended to cash in on a certain Texas massacre) takes the biscuit – meatcleavers are conspicuous by their absence.

It starts very *Last House On The Left*, as four stoner pals kill their professor's family, leaving him paralysed. He then sets a vengeance demon on them. Despite that title, it's pretty light on gore. The demon is initially invisible, but finally manifests as a fat, hairy bloke painted green. Oh dear.

Co-writer Keith Burns was replaced as director after some footage turned out unusably dark. *Plan 9 From Outer Space*'s Ed Wood is in the frame, but cast say that the baton was passed around. Whoever's responsible for what, it's an inept production, though its offbeat eccentricities do amuse: a sepia dream sequence is quite well done; flash cuts and ear-clearing blasts of psych further enliven proceedings.

▶ **Extras** Choose between two cuts – one bookended by seven minutes of portentous Christopher Lee narration. Burns and two of the cast are interviewed (totalling 60 minutes); there are some good “guerilla filmmaking” anecdotes here. All are understandably bemused by the film's longevity. There are two booklets; one presents the original screenplay, entitled *Professor Cantrell's Messiah*. Plus: trailer. **Ian Berriman**



NANDOR FODOR AND THE TALKING MONGOOSE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 12 | SVOD

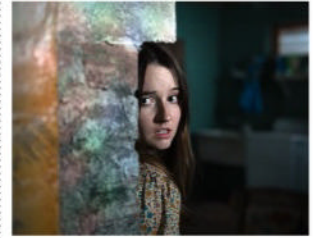
▶ Director Adam Sigal

▶ Cast Simon Pegg, Minnie Driver, Christopher Lloyd, Neil Gaiman

PRIME VIDEO Those who've spent years poring through the pages of *Fortean Times* will no doubt know the story of Gef, the strange creature identified as a mysterious mongoose (and self-described as an “earthbound spirit”) who, it was claimed, inhabited a family's farmhouse on the Isle of Man in the '30s. The tale has widely been dismissed as a fraud. But that didn't stop writer/director Adam Sigal from making a film about it.

With Simon Pegg slapping on a 'tache, beard and accent to play real-life parapsychological investigator Nandor Fodor, this (like its source material) is an odd one. Played primarily for laughs, it also wants to ruminate on perception and grief, and never quite nails down a coherent tone.

Pegg does a workmanlike job as Nandor, while Minnie Driver has the most likeable character as his put-upon secretary/assistant Anne. Elsewhere, the likes of Christopher Lloyd and Paul Kaye do what they can with more minor roles (and Sigal even ropes in Neil Gaiman to voice Gef, which is quite the thing to hear). But ultimately the film disappears down a quirky bolthole and ends up only fitfully entertaining. You may want to believe, but you could have difficulty caring enough. **James White**



NO ONE WILL SAVE YOU

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 16+ | SVOD

▶ Director Brian Duffield

▶ Cast Kaitlyn Dever, Geraldine Singer, Evangeline Rose, Dane Rhodes

DISNEY+ Put the scalpels down: you don't have to perform a Roswell autopsy to trace the DNA of this alien chiller. It's as if *Signs*, *Poltergeist* and the darkest parts of *Close Encounters* have been distilled to their nerve-shredding essence, then injected directly into your dreams – with a paranoid chaser of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* to follow.

Living alone among a hostile rural community, anxious young orphan Brynn (Kaitlyn Dever) finds her isolated home infiltrated by otherworldly visitors. At first director Brian Duffield keeps his ETs in the shadows: half-glimpsed shapes; scampering, imp-like figures, their tantalising, terrifying power enhanced by immersive sound design. It's a house encounter of the third kind, skilfully playing on primal fears.

As Brynn flees her home, the scale of the invasion broadens even as the film takes us deeper into her psyche and the tragic past that defines her life. Audaciously, there's only a single line of dialogue. It's a decision that not only focuses the storytelling but delivers a tension of its own.

In the absence of dialogue it's Dever's expressive face that carries you through the nightmare, all the way to a provocatively unsettling ending.

Nick Setchfield



"Oh I see, a 12-inch pianist! I get it now."

FINGERNAILS

Meet-cuticles

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 3 NOVEMBER**

2023 | TBC | SVOD

▶ Director Christos Nikou

▶ Cast Jessie Buckley, Riz Ahmed, Jeremy Allen White, Annie Murphy

APPLE TV+ **Funny, moving and** delightfully weird, Christos Nikou's first English language feature will draw favourable comparisons to fellow Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Lobster*.

It's set in a world where science has created a test to determine whether or not two people are truly in love using their fingernails and some nifty-looking gadgets. Anna (Jessie Buckley) and her boyfriend Ryan (Jeremy Allen White) have been happily paired up for three years, with the test's approval. But it turns out love and life are not so simple, and Anna

cannot deny the connection she is forming with her colleague Amir (Riz Ahmed).

The chemistry between Buckley and Ahmed is electrifying, and Nikou's world is a strange but fascinating alternative reality. Restaurants offer discounts to those officially in love, schools indoctrinate students with a rewriting of the Adam and Eve myth which comes with a happy ending, and cinemas feature Hugh Grant marathons to further drum in that "love" is the ultimate goal.

Fingernails asks what the point of love is when its limits are so clearly defined; no matter how advanced the science may be, it cannot account for Riz Ahmed's charisma in this film.

Leila Latif

i Technology has a deliberately minimal presence in the film; Nikou explains that he wanted it to "look a bit more timeless".



WHEN EVIL LURKS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | SVOD

SHUDDER **A botched exorcism** unleashes a particularly grotesque form of evil in this desperately bleak Argentinean possession flick.

Suitable only for viewers with stainless-steel stomachs, it packs both gut-wrenching tragedy and vomit-inducing gore. Nothing and no one is sacred here, from little kids to grandparents to cute farm animals, and the practical effects are so evocative you can almost smell the waves of stench coming off the demon-infested "rottens". Feel-bad horror at its gooiest. **Sarah Dobbs**



APPENDAGE

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | TBC | SVOD

DISNEY+ **Anna Zlokovic's** debut employs body horror as a metaphor for both anxiety and the hardening required to survive in a competitive environment, as a young NYC fashion designer grows a talking appendage that acts like a critical inner voice.

This critter (which soon splits off) is a bit too Muppetty to creep you out, and two major twists are visible from some distance. They're good twists though, and the film ticks along entertainingly, deftly opening out Zlokovic's original six-minute short. **Ian Berriman**



IRON WARRIOR

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1987 | 15 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This standalone** story (notionally the third in the Italian *Ator* series) sees our Conan-lite protagonist saving the kingdom from a sorceress and her metal-masked enforcer.

It's atmospheric, with a dreamlike quality; filmed in Malta, the exterior shots are beautiful. But *Iron Warrior* is also a low-budget mess of second-hand ideas, with scenes shamelessly pilfered from *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*.

▶ **Extras** Commentary; producers and cameraman interviews (51 minutes); trailer; booklet; poster. **Dave Bradley**



TOTALLY KILLER

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2023 | 15 | SVOD

PRIME VIDEO **Teenager Jamie** (Kiernan Shipka) time-travels to 1987 to undo her mum's murder by a serial killer in this potty-mouthed horror-comedy, which has much sport showing a Gen Z kid being triggered by the mores of the past.

Heavily in debt to *Back To The Future* and *Scream*, it does the smart thing by explicitly referencing both, though this does tend to remind you they're superior movies. Christopher Landon's filmography also feels like a touchstone – fans of *Happy Death Day* and *Freaky* should approve. **Ian Berriman**

TOD BROWNING'S SIDESHOW SHOCKERS

All the fun of the fair

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1925-1932 | 12 | Blu-ray

▶ Cast Aileen Pringle, Conway Tearle, Lon Chaney, Norman Kerry, Wallace Ford, Leila Hyams

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Tod Browning**

is best known for making Bela Lugosi a star with *Dracula*. But the former carnival barker's sideshow movies are more fascinating. This Criterion Collection box set collects three restored examples.

The least way-out is 1925 silent movie *The Mystic*. A Hungarian gypsy introduced to New York society conducts seances where spirits manifest, but the fact

they're a scam is the whole point, with Browning meticulously showing how the trick is done. The plotting is Swiss-cheese, but the smirking Zara (Aileen Pringle) is a great character, and the seance scenes are glorious. David Lynch collaborator Dean Harley provides a sumptuously moody new score.

"Man of a Thousand Faces" Lon Chaney stars in 1927 silent *The Unknown* – a perverse, darkly ironic gem. Chaney (aided by a "leg double") plays knife-thrower Alonzo the Armless... who actually does have arms, strapped behind his back to help conceal his true identity. He's wooing a performer with a phobia about touch (Joan

Crawford). Wedding night would clearly present a problem... What to do? A morbid Freudian stew of castration imagery, the film has a weirdly febrile atmosphere, and Chaney's performance – all monstrous leers and lip-curling sneers – is simply mesmerizing.

Infamous for using genuine sideshow folk, including conjoined twins, a "human torso" and people with microcephaly, 1932's *Freaks* sees grotesque vengeance enacted after a trapeze artist marries a dwarf to steal his money. The sight of these knife-wielding avengers crawling through mud on a stormy night still induces a shiver. While it remains "problematic", the focus is squarely on the performers' everyday lives, and we are strongly encouraged to empathise.

▶ **Extras** The lion's share concern *Freaks* – many carried over from a 2004 DVD. Browning biographer David Skal and sideshow experts contribute to a 62-minute Making Of, at its most entertaining when supplying cast biographies. Skal also provides commentary and a reading of "Spurs", the story it was adapted from (48 minutes), and details variant endings (six minutes). There's also a *Freaks*-focused edition of podcast *The Ticklish Business* (58 minutes), a gallery of portrait photos, and the opening scroll from a 1947 reissue.

Skal provides commentary for *The Unknown* and a well-informed intro for *The Mystic* (nine minutes). Finally, critic Megan Abbott's erudite but accessible talking head (32 minutes) tackles all three films, discussing topics like "bodily anxiety", and claiming auteur status for Browning. Plus: booklet. **Ian Berriman**

In the '40s, *The Mystic*'s leading lady Aileen Pringle was briefly married to James M Cain, author of *Double Indemnity*.

(4K X FOUR)

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE ON UHD



A haunted house tale with the ghost swapped for a zombie, Lucio Fulci's 1981 horror **THE HOUSE BY THE CEMETERY** (OUT NOW) sees a family move into a New England mansion once owned by a 19th century scientist – who still lurks in the cellar. Bolstering Arrow's 2012 Blu-ray bonuses are a third commentary and nine interviews (154 minutes) from *Blue Underground*'s 2020 US release. It comes with a booklet, poster and six postcards. We said: "As Fulci films go, about as traditional as it gets – though there are many baffling details." Set in Jersey in 1945, 2001's **THE OTHERS** (OUT NOW) sees Nicole Kidman's character convinced her country house is haunted after her daughter claims visitations from a boy, his parents, and a blind woman. The big twist is a doozy! New bonuses: 50-minute doc "Looking Back At The Others", and a bit on the score. We said: "A supernatural tale cut from crystal, finely hewn and sharp as a razor." Mia Farrow's mother-to-be is the target of a Satanic conspiracy in 1968 classic **ROSEMARY'S BABY** (OUT NOW). No new bonuses – just a 23-minute doc shot during filming and a 2000 retrospective. We said: "Farrow's quietly desperate performance gives *Rosemary's Baby* its true horror." Finally, Dudley Moore's elf gets caught up in a toy company's machinations in 1985's **SANTA CLAUS: THE MOVIE** (13 November). A cheesy, overblown affair, it rather drags; viewers of a certain age may enjoy spotting Christopher Ryan and Don Estelle as elves, though.



The brave ladies and gentlemen of *Freaks*.

MESSIAH OF EVIL

California Dreaming



★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1974 | 15 | Blu-ray

► Directors Willard Huyck, Gloria Katz

► Cast Marianna Hill, Michael Greer,

Joy Bang, Anitra Ford

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The work of** husband-and-wife team Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz, best known for their collaborations with George Lucas (writing *American Graffiti* and *Temple Of Doom*; directing *Howard The Duck*), this eerie horror was abandoned, incomplete, when finances ran out, then pieced together years later using poetic narration and montage.

It's such a strange, dreamlike film anyway that this patch-up job doesn't seem unsympathetic. Set in a town on the Malibu coastline, it sees a young woman (Marianna Hill) searching for her artist

father, meeting a visiting aristocrat and his companions, and slowly realising that something is *very wrong* in Point Dume.

You could call it a zombie film, but the pale-skinned locals who feast on human flesh don't stumble about – ominous staring is more their MO. Plus they're not actually dead, rather somehow infected. The Z-word also creates the wrong impression, because this is a beautifully shot film which melds horror tropes with a European sensibility.

There are striking images here, some of them surreal: bleeding eyes; sinister silhouettes; scenes awash with blue light; figures

“This eerie horror was abandoned”



Entranced by the sight of Richard Osman.

walking mysteriously abandoned streets, rendered insignificant by all the looming empty space. For those who love horror and arthouse cinema, it's a must-see.

► **Extras** A 57-minute documentary is decent enough, but only features critical voices, lacking any cast or crew. You'll learn more hard facts from Kim Newman and Stephen Thrower's commentary, with Thrower in particular a fount of knowledge. Willard Huyck is represented, via

a phone call recorded for a 2019 podcast (37 minutes; the first 23 focus on *Messiah*). Unfortunately the audio quality is poor, bringing to mind Norman Collier's malfunctioning-microphone routines (ask your dad). A dry visual essay (21 minutes) discusses the film as an example of gothic – which seems a bit of a stretch. Plus: an 80-page book. **Ian Berriman**

i Huyck and Katz first met at a screening of *The Wild Angels*. He was impressed by her miniskirt – the first he'd ever seen!

SHORT SHARP SHOCKS Volume Three

Camera obscura

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1951-1985 | 15 | Blu-ray

► Directors Various

► Cast Orson Welles, Valentine Dyall,

Henry Woolf, Dexter Fletcher

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The BFI's mission** to prise edgy, offbeat or plain forgotten curios from obscurity continues with this third collection of shorts.

No less a god than Orson Welles fronts “Return To Glennascaul”, a predictable but gorgeously atmospheric Irish ghost tale. More long shadows fall in “Strange Stories”, which sticks together two stories: one a Victorian chiller with a charismatic turn from *Dad's Army*'s John Laurie – naturally

he's doomed, doooooomed – the other a pseudo-Hitchcockian thriller on a boat. Two trite '50s yarns under the “Strange Experiences” banner are balanced by a couple of reliably nasty '70s public information films, while the wilfully oblique “The Maze” feels like the post-'60s hangover put on celluloid.

Disc two brings a little more energy: “Skinflicker” is an authentically disturbing found-footage kidnap tale with a grim 'n' grotty aesthetic, while “Wings Of Death” proves a richly textured junkie nightmare. Finally, trading in ZX Spectrum-era paranoia about primordial AI, 1982's “The Terminal Game” proves that while the tech dates, our fears remain.



Press Gang's Dexter Fletcher in “Wings Of Death”.

► **Extras** Bob Bentley reveals how Truffaut, dream states and Greek myth helped shape “The Maze” (20 minutes), “Skinflicker”'s Tony Bicat confesses “I tried to be messy” (26 minutes); Nichola Bruce and Michael Coulson reveal the Jarman-adjacent, punk culture connections of “Wings Of Death” (31 minutes); while with impeccable irony, “The Terminal Game”'s Geoff Lowe discloses he now uses AI to write (28 minutes). Elsewhere composer Colin Towns

reflects on his score for “The Terminal Game”, and there's a retrospective on indie producer Roger Proudlock (seven minutes). Some original 8mm footage takes us behind the scenes on “Wings Of Death”. Plus: galleries for “The Maze”, “Skinflicker” and “Wings Of Death”; an illustrated booklet with further insights from the directors. **Nick Setchfield**

i “Wings Of Death” was released as a supporting feature to *A Nightmare On Elm Street* in British cinemas in 1984.

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THE HORRIBLE DR HOCHCOCK

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1962 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Riccardo Freda

▶ Cast Barbara Steele, Robert Flémyng, Silvano Tranquilli

BLU-RAY DEBUT **No, not Alfred** (with a T) – though it is a nod, and he might have approved of this slice of ripe Italian gothic. Set in a foggy 19th century London, it has strong echoes of Poe, *Rebecca* and *Gaslight*.

Sometimes a facial expression can horrify more than gore. That's the case here, in a film that toys with necrophilia. Nothing's *shown*, but as the camera lingers on the titular surgeon's face, emotions playing over it as he comes to the decision to pop back to the morgue, your skin crawls...

And sometimes a face can be the best visual effect – as with Barbara Steele (as Hochcock's new wife), whose eyes clearly take up too much of her face. Still, as Hochcock's dead first wife seems to be haunting her, some bulging is justified. An abrupt ending frustrates, leaving questions hanging, but goths will still snaffle up this perverse, gloomy confection.

▶ **Extras** Three versions (Italian, English, US cut) and two commentaries (one actually a long essay, read out). Writer Ernesto Gastaldi (34 minutes) is charmingly sardonic. A useful visual essay (34 minutes) relates the film to gothic melodramas. A slightly troubling talking head (18 minutes) with an artist who argues that "we're all on the necrophiliac spectrum" (er, really?) may have you reaching for your cruxifix... Plus: gallery; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



Paris Fashion Week once again proved controversial.

THE NIGHT OF THE DEVILS

Not found Vourdalak-ing

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1972 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Giorgio Ferroni

▶ Cast Gianni Garko, Agostina Belli, Maria Monti, Cinzia De Caroli

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Framing devices**

can be a bore, but not this one. An amnesiac man (Gianni Garko) is wired up to an encephalograph. Images of eroticism and violence follow: a maggot-ridden skull, a woman's naked body groped; a heart ripped out; a face exploding.

We then see what trauma sent him doolally. The mystery man is a lumber importer. Pranging his car in the Balkans (painful), he takes refuge with a nearby family. But they are cursed, barricading the house each night against a witch – who seems more like a vampire.

Based on Tolstoy's *The Family Of The Vourdalak*, the film doesn't match director Giorgio Ferroni's *Mill Of the Stone Women*, but its moody atmosphere still impresses. Carlo Rambaldi – later to win Oscars for *ET* and *Alien* – provides

some gruesome face-melting effects; you can see the hairdryer heat haze, but they're good for the time. There are some pretty musical cues too – especially the swoonsome love theme. The film ends just as strongly as it began, in harrowingly bleak fashion.

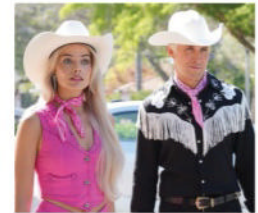
▶ **Extras** Of four new interviews (totalling 78 minutes), three with cast are no great shakes: the only revelation lead Gianni Garko has is that he wore a fake 'tache, while then-child actor Cinzia de Carolis barely remembers anything.

A chat with cameraman Nino Celeste is better, with amusing anecdotes about pranking the director – who, practically deaf by this point, relied on a hearing aid. There's also archive footage of a rambling talk with late composer Giorgio Gaslini (32 minutes).

Horror mavens Alan Jones and Kim Newman provide a commentary track. Plus: an old intro; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Cameraman Nino Celeste put on star Gianni Garko's trousers to film a shot where the hero is stumbling along.

(ROUND UP)



Good news, physical media lovers: the following are all now available on shiny disc. **BARBIE** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees the doll suffer an existential crisis and travel from Barbie's world to ours. We said: "Hilariously meta, very clever, ridiculously funny." It comes with around 40 minutes of featurettes on important topics such as casting, costumes and Ken's "dream ballet". The fifth in the franchise about a family haunted by demons from a realm known as the Further, **INSIDIOUS: THE RED DOOR** (Blu-ray/DVD) is directed by star Patrick Wilson, and sees his character Josh uncovering the truth about the father who abandoned him. We said: "A solid legacy sequel that digs deeper into the mythology." Extras? Just two featurettes, totalling eight minutes. Seriously, Sony? **Shark sequel MEG 2: THE TRENCH** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD) goes full kaiju by letting three Megalodons and a giant squid loose on a resort. We said: "The action is relentless but also incoherent, while the script's stabs at self-mocking humour get stuck in the shallows." Bonuses: a 13-minute Making Of and 10-minute creature design featurette – which you can just watch on YouTube... Finally, in **TALK TO ME** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD), a group of friends come into possession of an embalmed hand; grip it and say "talk to me" and your body is taken over by a dead spirit. We said: "Impressively gnarly and exceptionally scary." Bonuses: directors' commentary, a Q&A, a 13-minute featurette, and deleted scenes. Now that's a bit more like it!



THE FUTURE

Bunker mentality

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 7 NOVEMBER**
416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
► Author Naomi Alderman
► Publisher Fourth Estate

◉ If recent years are anything to go by, our collective path through the next few decades could find us collectively encountering much weirdness. How do you write about such interesting times? One approach adopted by William Gibson was to set his stories in the unfolding immediate future, emphasising how we already live in a disconcerting world.

While the timelines are fuzzier in Naomi Alderman's fifth novel, there's certainly something of this approach at play as she builds around a plot around the idea – odd and compelling because it's true – that Silicon Valley billionaires might be preppers, people making grand plans to live in comfort while the rest of the world goes to hell.

Leaving aside for a moment the inherent problems with this idea, there's something disquieting about those with so much power and wealth being so disconnected from the rest of us that they would even do this.

Then again, the billionaires Alderman shows us here do like to chase after money. Men – and it's mostly, although not exclusively, men who behave most badly in *The Future* – like Lenk Sketlish, founder of Fantail, someone prone to volcanic eruptions of temper yet in control of a social network central to millions of lives. Suffice to say these are characters you can map onto our current world.

While we're fascinated by these kinds of larger-than-life figures, we less often think about those who surround them. In *Succession* terms, think of Kendall Roy's general counsel Gerri Kellman, albeit without the ick factor of her connection to Roman Roy. Instead, Alderman offers us Martha Einkorn, who's the daughter of a cult leader and, because of this, better equipped than most to thrive in a world of capricious business leaders who blithely wield power without thinking too much about the consequences.

Except what if you could use this proximity to turn the tables on a mega-rich class who are imbued with a kind of dangerous fatalism that things can only get worse? Without giving too much away, when Einkorn meets Lai Zhen, an

influencer-survivalist whose view of post-end-of-civilisation scenarios is far more realistic than the rich she occasionally encounters, the opportunity to do this opens up.

What unfolds reads, in all the best ways, like an airport thriller. The plot skitters along in heist-flick fashion. Alderman's conjuring up of near-future technologies – systems to control the weather, nasty weaponry and more – is convincing. The characters – excluding those you'd want to punch in a preemptive strike were you to meet them – are likeable but flawed.

Yet this is also an exercise in popular fiction filled with ideas. In particular, in passages written as if they were forum posts, Alderman contrasts a hunter-gatherer view of the world with that of farmers – via an extended riff on the deeper meanings of the story of Lot and his daughters – and the worldview of those who live in

“This is also an exercise in popular fiction filled with ideas”

nature with an urban perspective. It says much for Alderman's writing that she can be pedagogic without making you wish she'd get on with the story.

A criticism is that the main plot resolves itself too neatly. Structurally, this means Alderman, having built an argument for collective action, also effectively offers a narrative of the near future that emphasises how individuals shape events.

Whatever your view of how things happen and why, there's a tension here – although perhaps that's the point, another dichotomy for readers to mull over. Which you will, because this is a terrific novel that, for all its dystopian elements, may even make you optimistic about what lies ahead as it offers approaches for building a greener and better world. **Jonathan Wright**

i Naomi Alderman will be doing a virtual author talk on 30 November. Visit bit.ly/naomitalk for details.



SATURNALIA

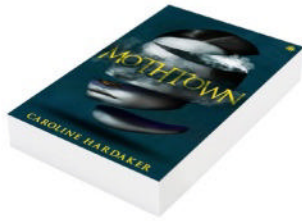
★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
238 pages | Paperback/ebook/
audiobook
► Author Stephanie Feldman
► Publisher VERVE Books

◉ Stephanie Feldman's follow-up to her Crawford Award-winning debut must be the most Halloweeny novel ever to not be set during Halloween. There's an all-night festival, spooky fancy dress, a graveyard and blood sacrifice, but here the occasion for world-turned-upside-down debauchery is the winter solstice. Oh, and the end of the world.

In a near-future Philadelphia, climate collapse, virulent disease and desperate refugees are seriously harshing rich people's buzz. In response, said rich people have established various private clubs to while away the dying-Earth days in networking, entertaining and plotting their escape to the few remaining habitable enclaves. Working-class Nina was an outsider in the Saturn Club long before she left its ranks under a cloud, but at the invitation of an old friend she returns, for the lavish annual Saturnalia bash.

What unfolds is a propulsive mystery-thriller, with Nina pursued by both a creepy man-shaped critter and her own past, but also a portrait of a terrified city slowly losing its collective mind. Future Philly falls somewhere between steampunk and cyberpunk – baroque, pungent, stratified, crumbling – and Feldman gives its plight considerable emotional charge by making it feel real and lived-in. Like her home, Nina is broken and bitter – but not without humanity or hope. **Nic Clarke**



MOTHTOWN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED** 14 NOVEMBER

300 pages | Paperback/ebook

► Author Caroline Hardaker

► Publisher Angry Robot

❖ **Isolation and loss do** strange things to you, as young David Porter, the protagonist of Catherine Hardaker's eerie second novel, gradually discovers for himself.

Mothtown is set across two time periods. In the past we follow the young David, who is devastated when his university professor grandfather dies unexpectedly. Gramps always had esoteric interests, and David becomes convinced that he hasn't really died, simply vanished elsewhere.

He wouldn't be the first – it seems to be a regular occurrence, to the point where these disappearances are simply referred to as “the Modern Problem”. Years later, the twentysomething David continues his search, obsessed with the idea that perhaps his grandfather is somehow still out there.

Mothtown is an odd book that defies easy categorisation. It's about a young boy growing into maturity, but it's far from a conventional coming of age story. It has more than a shiver of the uncanny, but it's not exactly horror. Likewise, its otherworlds are more elusive than those of, say, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*.

That's not a criticism – the book is, in some ways, fixated on the obsessive places we create for ourselves, and Hardaker writes beautifully about loss, grief and the loneliness of mental illness, while still filling her novel with wonder and horror. **Will Salmon**



STARLING HOUSE

Flying from the past

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Alix E Harrow

► Publisher Tor

❖ **How do you build a life when** the odds are so stacked against you as to be seemingly impossible to overcome? You just keep going. You never give up. You treat life as a hustle. Or at least that's the approach adopted by Opal, the twentysomething heroine of Alix E Harrow's latest novel.

In the ironically named Kansas town of Eden, a community blighted by environmental degradation caused by the mining industry, Opal lives in a motel. She works at Tractor Supply. Her mother is dead. However, Opal is imbued with a sense of purpose by the need to ensure her academically gifted younger brother fulfils his potential.

Which is why, despite its inherent spookiness, Opal goes to work as a cleaner at Starling House. This is a sprawling mansion occupied by a grouchy custodian, Arthur Starling, with whom Opal bickers incessantly. It's also a house with its own distinct personality, which you could best describe as sullen and resentful. But why is the house this way?

Is it cursed, as locals suspect? More importantly, can any curse – or destructive patterns with roots deep in the past – ever be broken? As Harrow answers these questions, it becomes clear that her intention is both to celebrate and subvert Southern Gothic.

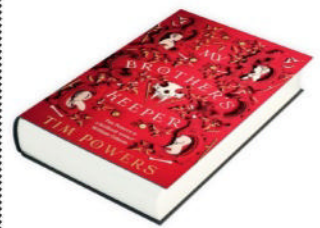
Celebrate because what's not to like about eldritch happenings, bad people getting their comeuppance and the sense that history lies heavy on the present? Subvert because, in key respects,

“It's a house with its own distinct personality”

Southern Gothic is acting as a mood-setting backdrop to a novel about post-industrial society and the need for human connection.

Starling House occasionally flags in the middle, as its inherent authorial slights of hand leave you wondering where the story may be headed. But there's no need to worry. As Harrow pulls the plot strands together, the denouement is, by turns, devastating, eerie and upbeat. **Jonathan Wright**

i Eden is based on Paradise, Kentucky, evacuated in the '60s over health concerns related to coal-fired power generation.



MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

320 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Tim Powers

► Publisher Head Of Zeus

❖ **There's something about** Emily Brontë, reclusive author of one of the most compelling gothic novels ever written, that makes people really want to mythologise her.

Emily's own sister Charlotte started the trend after her death in 1848, writing prefaces to *Wuthering Heights* that depicted her as a shy but mysterious genius. With *My Brother's Keeper*, World Fantasy Award winner Tim Powers adds to the author's mystique by casting her as an indomitable force of supernatural goodness: when Brontë brother Branwell almost succumbs to a werewolf cult, she's his only hope of salvation.

Powers has form for this sort of historical revisionism, and as usual he makes sure to keep all the facts in place even as he weaves his own story of the occult around them. It's clever, as is Powers's original pagan twin-god lore, and the ghostly imagery he superimposes over the Yorkshire moors is properly shiver-inducing.

The thing is, though, because Emily Brontë is the heroine of the story, it's impossible not to think about Cathy and Heathcliff. There aren't many horror stories that can live up to that one, so this all feels a little inconsequential. And the Brontë family are fascinating, but not because of werewolves. So as respectful as this is, you're probably better off just reading their books. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE WICKER MAN THE OFFICIAL STORY OF THE FILM

Burning issues

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

192 pages | Hardcover

► Author John Walsh

► Publisher Titan Books

► **We make this John Walsh's** fifth deep-dive into the StudioCanal archives over the last three years. The results are the best yet, providing entertaining new perspectives on a film that is already extremely well-documented.

The author conducted 15 original interviews, key among them discussions with production designer Seamus Flannery, producer Michael Deeley and

Peter Snell – then MD of production company British Lion. Flannery is absolutely excoriating about director Robin Hardy, variously labelling him “just unpleasant”, “a nasty little man” and “in love with himself”.

Deeley, meanwhile – often cast as the villain of the piece – mounts a solid defence, arguing that without the cuts which made him a hate figure for some fans, *The Wicker Man* would not have received a theatrical release at all.

We have a few nitpicks. Lumping *Witchfinder General* in with “pagan sacrifice films” is off-beam, as is the assertion that



Christopher Lee's outings as Dracula beyond Hammer were “minor roles” (er... *Count Dracula*, 1970?). Just occasionally you get a sense of internet scuttlebutt being repeated without confirmation.

But mostly the book feels very scrupulously researched, with Walsh taking pains to interrogate a few old myths.

And visually it's a delight, with scores of stills reproduced at a generous size, including shots of lost sequences and snaps taken by locals on location. The biggest treat, however, are Flannery's original sketches for the Wicker Man – including variant concepts featuring a sinister grinning mouth and eyeholes packed with Michaelmas daisies. It's a book worth keeping an appointment with. **Ian Berriman**

i Logan's Run star Michael York was offered the lead role of Howie, but had to turn it down as it clashed with filming *Cabaret*.



THESE BURNING STARS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

448 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Bethany Jacobs

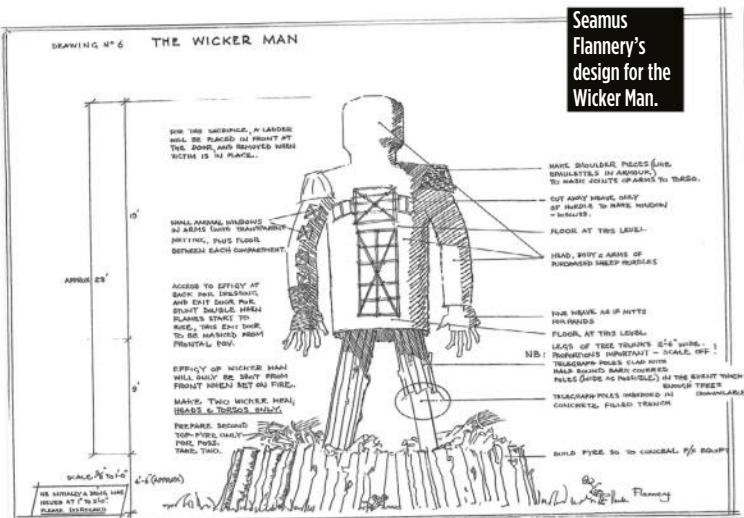
► Publisher Orbit Books

► **One of the biggest obstacles** facing any space opera is balancing the prerequisite world-building with the need to grab the reader's attention. It's a challenge the opening chapter of *These Burning Stars* navigates in spectacular style, delivering a barnstorming introduction to the future universe of “the Treble”, while setting the scene for a thoroughly entertaining game of interstellar cat-and-mouse.

Warrior cleric Esek Nightfoot – an amoral but utterly compelling creation – creates an enemy for life when she cruelly shuns a promising rookie known simply as Six. Over the subsequent decades, their destructive obsession with one another is the catalyst for a dense, cleverly plotted mix of action and political intrigue.

With its ocular implants, jump gates and a totalitarian regime known as the Kindom pulling the strings, *These Burning Stars* borrows plenty of elements from standard SF. But it's what debut author Bethany Jacobs does with them that matters, as she constructs her story around characters who talk like real people, carry plenty of emotional baggage and keep you guessing.

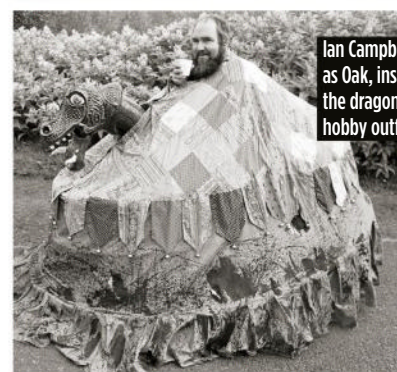
You also get the sense that the book has just scraped the surface of this vivid universe – which bodes well for future instalments. **Richard Edwards**



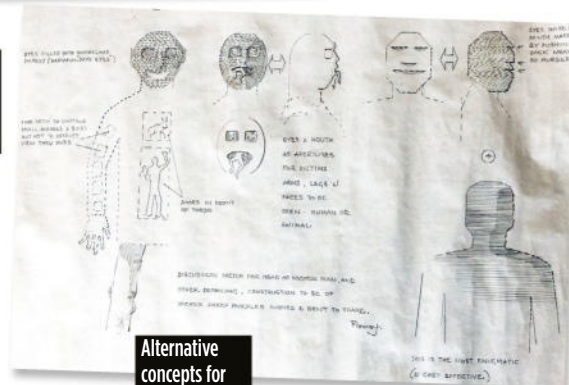
Seamus Flannery's design for the Wicker Man.



Christopher Lee and Britt Ekland shelter from the rain.



Ian Campbell as Oak, inside the dragon hobby outfit.



Alternative concepts for the Wicker Man's face.



THE HURRICANE WARS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

470 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author **Thea Guanzon**

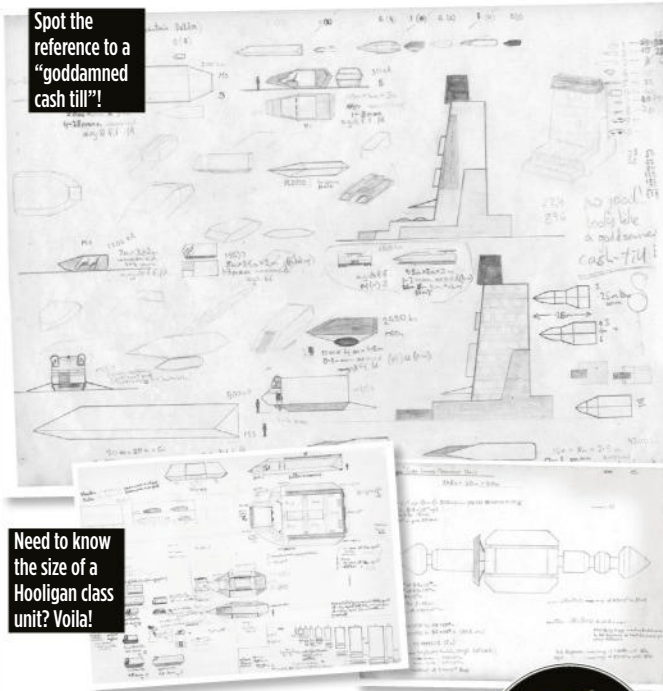
► Publisher **HarperVoyager**

► **Making a “new” series out** of a popular fan fiction can work out very well – just ask EL James. It’s a success story many have hoped to emulate, including, we’re sure, the publishers of this romantasy debut, which reworks a *Star Wars*-inspired fanfic. Try and guess the original characters...

In the last days of the Sardovian/Kesath war, young soldier and powerful Lightweaver Talasyn finds herself up against the heir to Kesath’s Night Empire, Shadowforge master Alaric. Both detest each other for the damage wrought by the other’s side in the war, and yet their mirrored powers keep bringing them together.

For both good and ill, this is a story that embodies many of the tropes of its origin mythology as well as fan fiction itself. The cliché of an orphan with a royal destiny and magical powers is balanced out by an intriguing magical system and world, but the war and politics are far less important here than the drawn-out romance between Talasyn and Alaric.

Enemies-to-lovers is a classic trope, but one taken to frustrating lengths here in the pair’s complete blindness to each other’s desire. Uneven pacing and an overabundance of expository dialogue contribute to a novel that whips up “all the feels” but ultimately fails to impress. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THE CULTURE: THE DRAWINGS

The original Banksy

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 7 NOVEMBER**

152 pages | Hardback

► Author **Iain M Banks**

► Publisher **Orbit Books**

► **The scribbles in this book** are reproduced from notes Iain M Banks kept in the ‘80s as he planned the utopian universe of his SF novels. Banks sketched as part of his creative process. It’s haphazard work – back-of-envelope plans, never intended for sharing. The drawings of some ships are barely a couple of triangles and a rectangle, but nevertheless annotations show the author calculating the length and crew capacity.

It’s fantastic to see the detail that went into specific stories. For instance, a tiny figure shows the character Gurgeh’s size compared to the ship from *The Player Of Games*. There’s a youthful

exuberance here, a genuine joy in creation. One wonderful page has weapons with neat writing explaining how each works: the Ion Holer Gun is “mostly used to impress natives”, while there’s no illustration of the Micro Black Hole, just the cheeky note “invisible”. Wit like this is typical. One vessel has below it the – accurate – complaint, “Looks like a goddamned cash-till.”

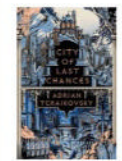
The collection is a fascinating glimpse into how Banks thought, but it’s not especially pretty. Many pages, dominated by miniature rows of numbers and abbreviations, are unlikely to be meaningful to a *Consider Phlebas* virgin. Intended for Culture completists, it’s the ideal gift for a fan hungry for insight into Banks’s world-building. **Dave Bradley**

i In the 1994 essay “A Few Notes On The Culture”, Banks names himself Sun-Earther Iain El-Bonko Banks Of North Queensferry.

REISSUES

Our paperback picks this issue include Adrian Tchaikovsky’s **CITY OF LAST CHANCES**

(★★★★★, 9 November, Head Of Zeus), winner of



the BSFA award for Best Novel. The setting is Ilmar, occupied three years ago by the

Palleseen, rationalists whose mission is to bring perfection to the world. Residents weary of their oppression can try to escape through a mystical grove where the full moon opens a portal to distant lands. We said: “As complex and multifaceted as the plot’s structure may be, Tchaikovsky’s prose is as vigorous as ever... An ambitiously imagined creation.” Also ace: Ian McDonald’s **HOPELAND** (★★★★★, 9 November, Gollancz). Moving from



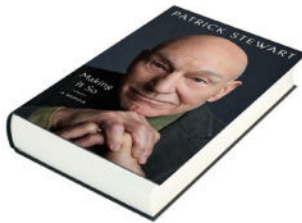
rioting London to geothermal Iceland to the climate-struck islands of Polynesia, it starts as an

urban fantasy love story before twisting to become a magical realism-tinged tale and a philosophical novel that’s also a rollicking sea adventure. Crikey. We said: “Touches beautifully and deftly on gender, human connection, the nature of family, and how we perceive time.” Finally, *Divergent* author Veronica Roth’s latest is **POSTER GIRL** (★★★★★, 15 November, Hodder). Set in a world in which citizens receive points for



good behaviour, it centres on teenager Sonya, locked up by new regime the Triumvirate

for once appearing on a poster promoting the old regime. We said: “Roth is a master not only at solid world-building, but also drip-feeding just enough information.”



MAKING IT SO

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

469 pages pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Sir Patrick Stewart

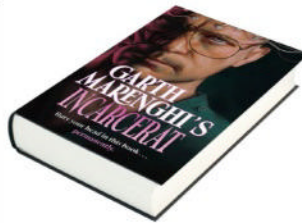
► Publisher Gallery Books

✦ **With an acting career that** stretches back 64 years, Sir Patrick Stewart has no shortage of material for this memoir, but it's his time in the Captain's chair that will reel in *SFX* readers. You can expect about 60 pages on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and another nine on *Picard*. The movies get shorter shrift, with only *First Contact* dealt with in any depth.

This makes sense, as his life among the stars has been well-documented. Most fans will already know, for example, how during season one he scolded fellow cast, priggishly declaring, "We're not here to have fun!" Though it is news that his LA home of that era was plagued by a poltergeist...

Other SF projects are covered: there's an amusing *Dune* anecdote about getting the cold shoulder from David Lynch. But it's his account of a working-class childhood in Mirfield, near Huddersfield – no hot water, no bathroom, two in a bed – and the violence he witnessed his father meting out to his mother that's most captivating. Stewart credits this short-tempered man (formerly a sergeant major in the Parachute Regiment) as an influence on Picard's bearing.

It's an unpretentious account, which never threatens to become self-important; Stewart, a proud Yorkshireman whose upbringing left him (in Jonathan Frakes's words) with a "poverty mentality", is far too grounded for that. **Ian Berriman**



GARTH MARENghi's INCARCERAT

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Matthew Holness

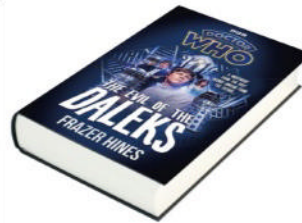
► Publisher Coronet

✦ **Garth Marenghi's** *TerrorTome* marked the reprise of comedian Matthew Holness's signature character almost 20 years after his wonderful TV show *Darkplace*. It followed the misadventures of Nick Steen, a pompous paperback horror hack (and thinly veiled avatar of Marenghi) as he variously had sex with a demonic typewriter, beat off an army of Boners (living skeletons – get your mind out of the gutter) and faced his own subconscious coming to life.

Incarcerat is very much more of the same. Steen's demented imaginings are causing chaos in the town of Stalkford, while Nick – now an airline pilot as well as a writer – is imprisoned by the shadowy Nulltec. Can he escape? What's with the young girl that seems to be haunting him? And where is his editor Roz in all of this?

Like *TerrorTome*, this is nominally three stories, but actually one rambling narrative. Garth's prose is as purple as ever, Holness always finding the right mix of astonishing self-regard, casual sexism and bitterness in the character.

The fact that it's coming out hot on the heels of the first book does slightly take away from the impact of having Garth back, but he remains singularly dreadful and hilarious company. **Will Salmon**



DOCTOR WHO: THE EVIL OF THE DALEKS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

229 pages pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Frazer Hines

► Publisher BBC Books

✦ **This 1966 seven-parter has** been novelised before, by John Peel (not that one) in 1993. However, copies of that rarity now change hands for £50 – and who can resist an actor adapting a story they starred in?

It takes the Second Doctor and companion Jamie (as played by author Frazer Hines) from modern-day London to Victorian times and the planet Skaro, caught up in a Dalek plan to achieve invincibility by isolating the "human factor", using the Scot as a subject.

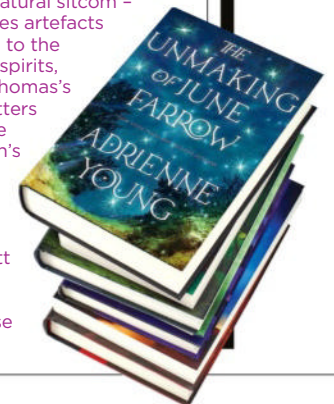
David Whitaker's scripts give the Daleks some amusingly oddball things to do, such as playing like children, but the means used to lure in our heroes seem overly complicated – and why on earth would you include deadly booby traps in the test set for Jamie?

Hines frames the story via the same device used for a 1968 repeat, with new companion Zoe shown past events via a telepathic display machine. These regular intermissions become rather unwelcome – did we really need a sandwich break, for instance?

He does a decent job of fleshing the scripts out into prose, though. We'd say the results are indistinguishable from the work of a regular *Who* writer, except you can't help but notice that practically every young woman Jamie encounters considers him a dish... **Ian Berriman**

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more books that we couldn't quite fit in. In Adrienne Young's **THE UNMAKING OF JUNE FARROW** (out now, Quercus), the titular character sets out to break the curse that's beset her family for generations and solve the puzzle of her mother's disappearance. The clues lead to a mysterious door... and ultimately a star-crossed love. A mansion with strange symbols marked on the doors, a naive heroine and a handsome young priest with a secret aptitude for magic all feature in Isabel Cañas's gothic romance **THE HACIENDA** (out now, Solaris), set in the 1820s shortly after the Mexican War of Independence. Translated from the original French, Christelle Dabos's YA book **HERE AND ONLY HERE** (out now, Europa) follows four students at a macabre, rigidly stratified high school. Could its peculiarities be down to a supernatural substance in the pipes? The 40th anniversary of *Discworld* is looming (more on that next issue). Co-written by Terry Pratchett's daughter Rhianna, in-world title **TIFFANY ACHING'S GUIDE TO BEING A WITCH** (9 November, Random House Children's) offers advice on subjects like tending flocks and dealing with elves. Naturally, Paul Kidby provides the illustrations. Finally, **GHOSTS: THE BUTTON HOUSE ARCHIVES** (out now, Bloomsbury) – written by the creators of the supernatural sitcom – compiles artefacts related to the series' spirits, from Thomas's love letters and the Captain's war journal to Julian Fawcett MP's dodgy expense claims.





Cory Doctorow

The prolific SF author has a very impressive famous fan...



JOHNATHANWORTH.COM

What is your daily writing routine like?

► I write 500 words every day when I'm working on a novel; I write until I reach my limit and stop mid-sentence so I have a few "free" words to start with on the next day.

Describe the room in which you typically write.

► When I'm home, I write in my backyard hammock, under the eaves. I'm on the road a lot (a third to half of the year) and then I write wherever I am – subways, crouching next to airport lounge AC outlets, escalators, etc.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

► My crucial realisation was that even though some work feels like it's great at the time and other work feels terrible, and even though some of the work in retrospect is great and some needs a rewrite, the two aren't correlated. The major correlate of feeling like the day's writing is poor is stress – work/personal conflict, low blood sugar, sleep deprivation.

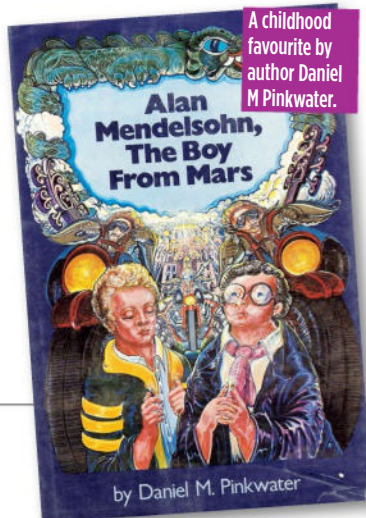
Following that realisation I can feel the absolute certainty that my work is terrible that day and write it anyway. It's an anhedonic discipline with major commonalities with cognitive behavioral therapy.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

► *Someone Leaves Town* took the longest; I started it in a hotel room while inspired, wrote 8,000 words, then revisited it two years later and wrote the rest over a year. When I got to the ending, I discovered I hated what I had planned. I moped for two weeks, then conceived an alternative ending. Having written that, I turned the manuscript over to revise the whole thing to suit the new ending, only to discover that I'd foreshadowed it all along, literally from the first page.

Got any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

► Only writing too much. I write to distract myself from stress, anxiety and upset. The pandemic years were hard for all of us; I ended up writing eight books. That was



A childhood favourite by author Daniel M. Pinkwater.

great, but touring them all and getting them through production is leaving me unhealthily overextended.

Were you a keen reader when you were a child?

► I was, and I read many thousands of books. I worked in bookstores and libraries. I didn't really have faves per se, though I devoured the entire canons of Daniel Pinkwater, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Octavia Butler.

What would be your desert island book?

► Never trust anyone who has a single favourite book. It's inevitably either the Bible, *Mein Kampf* or *Atlas Shrugged*.

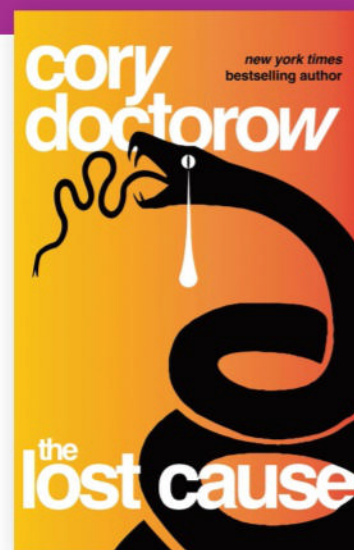
Recommend a book you love that's not very well known.

► Daniel Pinkwater's *Alan Mendelsohn, The Boy From Mars*. It made me the mutant I am today.

What's the best gift you've received from a reader?

► My all-time favourite musician is David Byrne; he follows my work and we know each other slightly. I recently had tickets to the first and last Talking Heads reunion fall through, and he sorted me out with replacements.

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?



► In Edward Snowden's hand, as he's packing up to flee Hong Kong, in the documentary *Citizenfour*.

What's the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?

► An extraordinarily small number of people control your career, and a careless slip or arbitrary decision on any of their parts can destroy a lifetime's work.

Any writing advice to share?

► Write every day. Make it a habit. Habits are free. ●

The Lost Cause is out on 16 November, published by Head Of Zeus.

ULTIMATE INVASION

Shake-up Maker



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Marvel Comics**

► Writer **Jonathan Hickman**

► Artist **Bryan Hitch**

ISSUES 1-4 Superhero comics love unexpected comebacks – and there are few weirder or more convoluted than the return of Marvel's Ultimate universe.

Created in 2000 as an accessible and modern reboot of Marvel characters, the Ultimate universe lasted 15 years, spawning memorable classics like *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *The Ultimates*, before eventually collapsing under the weight of its own continuity and being phased out as part of 2015's universe-destroying *Secret Wars* event.

Only two major Ultimate characters survived this

apocalypse. While new Spider-Man Miles Morales is the best known, it's the Maker – a megalomaniacal version of the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards – who's at the heart of the four-issue miniseries that kicks off this return.

When the Maker escapes from imprisonment in the core Marvel universe, he voyages into the multiverse and executes a devious plan. Finding a new alternate of the Marvel universe, he manipulates events so that the majority of traditional Marvel characters don't exist, and starts to engineer the resulting strange dystopia into a perfect society.

He's helped by that universe's Iron Man (Howard Stark, Tony's father), but soon the Maker's strategy spins out of control thanks to attacks from an

unexpected source... If this is sounding complicated and bizarre, then Jonathan Hickman's presence as writer should make sense, although his work here in reviving an old concept isn't as focused as his epic 2019 *X-Men* reboot. Instead, *Ultimate Invasion* reads as yet another "villain universe" tale, one that's ambitiously stylish and well-paced, but which isn't quite as gripping as it needs to be – and also isn't as much fun as the similar recent *X-Men* saga *Sins Of Sinister*.

Ultimate Invasion has Hickman's wild imagination on its side, and also has *Ultimates* artist Bryan Hitch bringing a familiar kind of intense detail and wild cinematic style. What it hasn't yet delivered is a decent reason for

“Ambitiously stylish, but not as gripping as it needs to be”

rebooting the Ultimate universe in the first place, beyond nostalgia and the dreaded “brand recognition”.

The original point of Marvel's Ultimate comics was to be new-reader-friendly, and this introductory series – while undeniably well-crafted and entertaining – will be borderline gibberish to anyone who doesn't have a deep knowledge of Marvel continuity. Maybe things will get clearer with the upcoming *Ultimate Universe* one-shot special, which will properly introduce the new Ultimate comics coming in 2024, but right now this fascinatingly flawed reboot hasn't yet fully justified its own existence. **Saxon Bullock**

i Hickman will also be writing one of the new Ultimate comics, with his *Ultimate Spider-Man* series starting in January.



VOID RIVALS



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher **Skybound**

► Entertainment/Image Comics

► Writer **Robert Kirkman**

► Artist **Lorenzo De Felici**

ISSUES 1-4 Although it was inevitably spoiled online, stealth-releasing this apparently standalone new title as the first salvo in Skybound's new Energon Universe was an ingenious masterstroke.

Beyond brief cameos from Jetfire in issue one and Shockwave in issue four, Robert Kirkman wisely keeps appearances by the Autobots and Decepticons to a minimum, instead weaving in characters from the wider Transformers lore, such as a Skuxxoid freebooter and slippery alien Slizardo. In contrast to the shrill bombast of the Transformers' big-screen outings, *Void Rivals* begins at a refreshingly subdued pace.

Indeed, the first issue is essentially a two-hander, centred on two pilots from bitterly opposed races who crash-land on a desolate remote planet and are forced to work together in order to escape their predicament. Agorrian Darak and Zetonian Solila uncover a conspiracy that has implications not only for this book but the Energon line as a whole.

With issue one's double-page spread of Darak and Solila first removing their helmets particularly impressing, Lorenzo De Felici proves to be equally adept at depicting the quieter moments as he is at exhilarating action sequences. There's definitely more to this enthralling series than meets the eye. **Stephen Jewell**



Where's Wally? Just joking, he's not there.



WORLD'S FINEST: TEEN TITANS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher DC Comics

► Writer Mark Waid

► Artist Emanuela Lupacchino

ISSUES 1-4 DC's ever-popular band of teen superheroes are back again, in a new series that spins directly out of the current *Batman/Superman: World's Finest* title. Here, we flashback to the early days of the Titans, when the adolescent heroes were learning to work together, delivering adventures that are colourful, entertaining and (mostly) self-contained.

The characters here are the *original* Titans – Robin, Kid Flash, Aqualad, Wonder Girl, Bumblebee and Speedy – not the more familiar line-up from various animated shows, and while there are overarching plot threads (and an unnamed villain lurking in the shadows), these first four issues are refreshingly light on continuity.

Veteran comics writer Mark Waid makes this an easy jumping-on point for new readers, while delivering plenty of retro comics action and inter-team conflict. He also adds modern elements (like archer Speedy's obsession with his social media status) and keeps the storytelling frothy and fast-paced.

Adding to the energy is Emanuela Lupacchino's brilliantly expressive art, which balances lively character interactions with kinetic action sequences. Together with Waid's light narrative touch, this makes for a satisfying mix. More superhero comics should be aiming for this level of accessible fun. **Saxon Bullock**



RONIN: BOOK II

Frankly, disappointing

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Publisher Frank Miller Presents

► Writer Frank Miller

► Artists Philip Tan, Daniel Henriques, Frank Miller

ISSUES 1-4 With its pioneering prestige format and creator-owned status, Frank Miller's *Ronin* arguably proved just as influential when it first appeared in 1983 as *The Dark Knight Returns* a few years later. With its black and white art – mostly by Philip Tan and Daniel Henriques, with Miller providing layouts throughout and full pencils for issue four – this belated sequel can't help but underwhelm.

Although he includes some additional background in subsequent issues, Miller throws readers in at the deep end in issue one; before diving in you'd be well advised to brush up on the original series, which centred on a feudal

“You'd be well advised to brush up on the original series”

Japanese warrior who's reincarnated in a dystopian New York. Evoking *The Matrix* – which *Ronin* predated by two decades – we're reintroduced to Aquarius Corporation security chief Casey, who's initially kept captive in a simulated virtual reality and now has a son. Like Casey's father Billy Challas, limblest host of the original *Ronin*, he's confusingly also called Billy.

With Casey and Billy setting off on a quest to free Billy Sr from the clutches of the evil AI Virgo, Miller stretches the plot too thin over these first four issues, and the dialogue is often portentous and overwritten. The highlight is undoubtedly the artwork. With frequent double-page spreads, Tan is given plenty of opportunities to cut loose, while Henriques's moody tones are an adequate replacement for Lynn Varley's lush painted colours of the original. With two issues left in this six-parter, hopefully Miller, Tan and Henriques can bring this to a conclusion worthy of its predecessor. **Stephen Jewell**

i *Ronin* was originally going to be a Marvel graphic novel, until Miller was persuaded that he'd have more freedom at DC.



DOCTOR WHO: ONCE UPON A TIME LORD

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 7 NOVEMBER**

► Publisher Titan Comics

► Writer Dan Slott

► Artists Christopher Jones, Matthew Dow Smith, Mike Collins

GRAPHIC NOVEL Dan Slott

helmed an impressive 10-year run on *Amazing Spider-Man*, and has written for characters like She-Hulk and the Avengers. He's also a *Doctor Who* fan, something that came across in his run on *Silver Surfer*. So Titan getting him to write *actual Who* is a big deal.

Once Upon A Time Lord is mainly focused on the Tenth Doctor and Martha Jones as they encounter the Pyromeths. These baddies feed off stories and, after capturing Martha, force her to tell some tales to save her life. Yes, we're in meta territory, as Martha regales them with accounts of the Doctor going fishing, on a quest to find an Osiran starship, and taking a trip to the underworld. A backup story with the Ninth Doctor is fun but throwaway.

There's a nifty twist that ties a bow on the main Pyrometh story, and Slott's dialogue is strong throughout. Still, the comic falls foul of Titan's tendency to overdo the continuity references: on the first page alone there are cameos from multiple Doctors and a companion from the audios. The art, meanwhile, is fine, but rarely pops.

Entertaining enough, but with a writer like Slott you'd hope for something a little more exciting and accessible to newbies. **Will Salmon**

SPIDER-MAN 2

Nothing short of spectacular



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PS5

► Publisher Sony

VIDEOGAME Superhero movie grumblers, shift your focus. The PlayStation's third Spidey game (2020's smaller-scoped *Miles Morales* was still phenomenal) is one of the best adventures the wallcrawlers have ever had.

Peter Parker and Miles Morales are now working side by side, and neither is without their personal problems. Miles is using crimefighting to procrastinate about filling in college applications, while Peter struggles to pay off the mortgage on his family home – alongside juggling his non-existent career and his presently on-again relationship with Mary-Jane Watson. Things briefly look up when Peter's

childhood friend Harry Osborne is seemingly cured of his chronic illness thanks to an inky black ooze. But, naturally, that symbiotic gunk turns out to be somewhat *venomous*; all the while, Kraven the Hunter tears through New York to free supervillains, beef them up, and then set them loose for him to hunt and kill in the search for the ultimate game.

What's great about this Spidey universe isn't just how it retells classic stories, but how it remixes and reimagines them to tell them anew, all while being unafraid to make events have huge consequences for these versions of the characters. Indeed, having Miles as a foil to Peter's symbiote suit crankiness is a genuine revelation.

The game introduces and tells a complete Kraven story. The villain is a constant scene-stealer, leading

a faction of enemies that feel truly formidable to brawl with – some snipe from perches, others leap at you with massive swords, and he even has robo-hunting dogs.

These fights unfold as you web-swing and web-glide (the wingsuit is new to this entry) with ease across a huge, lush rendition of New York City, bigger than ever. You can now fight crime across the river in Brooklyn and beyond, with the PS5's fast-loading SSD meaning you can really web across the districts without noticing. Pop-in Story missions, meanwhile, offer fantastic unique spaces (there's a lot less boring warehouses than there were in previous entries), including one fantastic monumental scrap across Coney Island's funfair.

Given such great foundations, it's just a shame that by the time *Venom* makes a proper appearance the game has run out of ideas for the finale, ultimately settling into much more generic and familiar boss-battle fare.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

i Look out for a brief appearance by Delilah, the bartender from a deleted scene in *Across The Spider-Verse*.



ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE



► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PS5

► Also available on PS4, Xbox One,

Xbox Series S/X, PC

► Publisher Ubisoft

VIDEOGAME While the last few entries in this sci-fi tinged historical fantasy franchise have seen you explore whole continents, *Mirage's* Golden Age of Baghdad setting feels refreshing thanks to a more focused approach.

Going from street urchin thief to an initiate in the mysterious Hidden Ones (read: assassins), Basim finds himself returning to his home city to unravel and ultimately cut the puppet strings of the evil, shadowy Order Of The Ancients, who've taken control in his absence.

Pleasingly, this has you unfurling a large Investigation Board of missions at pretty much your own pace, parkouring across rooftops and streets as you go, with plenty of hidden treasures in puzzle box-like buildings to snaffle up.

With enough clues, you take on a more detailed mission to off a larger target. While somewhat freeform, ultimately it only gives you a few fairly strict options to choose between, unlike truer sandboxes such as *Hitman: World Of Assassination*.

Picking your way stealthily through enemy camps has a certain charm, but wonky AI and clunky controls make it feel old-fashioned in more ways than one. *Mirage* is a mid-step on the way to *Creed's* next reinvention, and unfortunately feels like it. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**



"No tongues" is never an option with Venom.

DOCTOR WHO

Carey and Keff cacophony

► **RELEASED** 24 NOVEMBER
52 minutes/76 minutes | CD/download
► Label Silva Screen Records

SOUNDTRACKS Silva Screen's sixtieth anniversary celebrations see them dusting off two TV scores best described as "divisive".

Carey Blyton's score for 1975 Tom Baker adventure **"Revenge Of The Cybermen"** ★★★★★ is so idiosyncratic that producer Philip Hinchcliffe balked at it, with the Radiophonic Workshop's Peter Howell asked to rework material, overlaying electronic sounds. Of Blyton's original 37 cues, only 16 were aired; and of Clarke's alternative takes and additions, seven of 27 were also left unused.

Heavy on percussion, it makes extensive use of the scraper, an instrument usually only wielded

by bored primary school children in music lessons. It's not hard to imagine Hinchcliffe playing the tape, hearing 30 seconds of alternating drum bash/woodblock hit, and arching an eyebrow.

Blyton also employs archaic wind instruments, the serpent and the ophicleide, to represent the story's two factions of alien Vogans, with results faintly suggestive of an intestinal disturbance. Slightly reminiscent of Jerry Goldsmith's work on *Planet Of The Apes*, it's a memorably strange score, bordering on avant garde.

"Memorable" can also be ironically applied to Keff McCulloch's score for Sylvester McCoy's debut **"Time And The Rani"** ★★★★★ – a story that's been reclaimed as a camp artefact, but deserves its next-to-bottom

positioning in fan polls. No doubt the music has its advocates too, but they need their ears testing.

To be fair, McCulloch put a shift in: while Blyton repeatedly reworks core melodies, his themes are multitudinous. Unfortunately many are better suited to a Big Fun B-side; others are drizzly lachrymose. Ambient sections are fine, but whenever there's action on-screen, the score shifts gear

into an overpoweringly brash synth bombardment, with dramatic stabs that are like

having a fork repeatedly poked in your ear. He's also horribly fond of gimmicks, riffing on Ron Grainer's theme and deploying naff settings on his Roland – you may find yourself howling, "No, not the Pan-pipes!" You could simply shrug and say, "It was the '80s", but even then this was fingers-in-ears stuff. **Ian Berriman**

i Both CDs also have bonus tracks, including improvisation from Blyton's session musos and McCulloch's theme tune demos.



SLAYERS

Once More, Without Buffy

★★★★★
► **RELEASED** OUT NOW!
483 minutes | Download
► Publisher Audible

AUDIO DRAMA **Listening to Slayers:** A *Buffyverse* Story is a little like watching *Doctor Who*'s "The Power Of The Doctor" – a lovely nostalgia fest for hardcore fans, but other listeners might be thinking, "Couldn't they afford proper stars?" Okay, we do get James Marsters (Spike) and Anthony Stewart Head (Giles), but Buffy, Angel, Willow and Xander are all notable by their absence.

Still, if you value quantity over quality, this is great stuff: Cordelia, Tara, Anya, wrinkly demon Clem, evil geek Jonathan and Giles's love interest Olivia are all back, played by the original actors. There's authenticity behind the scenes,

too: it's co-written and co-directed by Amber Benson (Tara) and Christopher Golden, who wrote about a zillion *Buffy* spin-off novels.

It's set 10 years after the *Buffy* finale. Our world is full of Slayers, with demons forming a resistance to fight them. Spike is a double agent pretending to be evil, but actually working for the Slayers. A great set-up, but one in which most of the returning characters are unfortunately dead. The answer? An alternate dimension of course, where Cordelia is the lone Slayer, and an evil Tara and

“Some of the cultural references are truly clunky”

Drusilla are planning world vampire domination. Pretty soon our Spike, Clem and Giles are crossing realities, taking a new young slayer, Indira, with them.

It's kinda fun, but far from the slickest audiobook production. At nine hour-longish episodes it's way too long for its plot. The dialogue feels as if it's about 50% exposition. Some of the meta-gags and cultural references are truly clunky, while a glut of comedy supporting character voices leave some scenes sounding like *Fraggle Rock*. Both Marsters and Juliet Landau (Drusilla) struggle to maintain their faux-British

accents, and all the performances feel like they needed a bit longer in rehearsal.

However, there's a bonkers energy to it, and moments where it captures that old magic. Mainly when the characters aren't explaining the plot to each other...

Dave Golder

i Although Oz doesn't feature, Seth Green popped by during recording, as he was in a booth elsewhere in the building.





CRYPTIDS

How well do you know these creatures that lurk at the edge of science? Put some Fort into your answers...

Quizmaster Nick Setchfield, Editor-at-large

QUESTION 1

In *The Six Million Dollar Man*, which cryptid turned out to be a cyborg created by aliens?

QUESTION 2

The Yeti in '60s *Doctor Who* "The Abominable Snowmen" were the robot servants of which adversary?

QUESTION 3

2021 horror *Antlers* features which demonic creature from Native American folklore?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Identify this cryptozoological film from the poster detail.

QUESTION 5

In the 1998 found-footage film *The Last Broadcast*, which mythical creature are the documentary crew searching for?

QUESTION 6

Doctor Who gave two competing explanations for which classic cryptozoological phenomenon?

QUESTION 7

In *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, which actor portrayed moss-covered bayou boogeyman Père Malfait? (Hint: think Bond.)

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

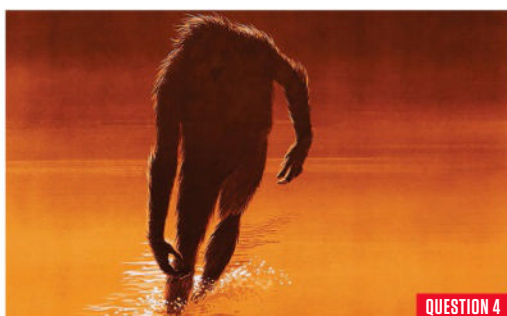
Name this British comedy film.

QUESTION 9

What mythical beast is suspected of being involved in the *X-Files* episode "El Mundo Gira"?

QUESTION 10

And what distressing event befalls Scully during their investigation of the aquatic cryptid Big Blue?



QUESTION 4



QUESTION 8



QUESTION 12



QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11

Which legendary sea beast takes on the Nautilus crew in 1954's *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Name the movie.

QUESTION 13

Who wrote the screenplay for the Hammer film *The Abominable Snowman*, based on his own television play?

QUESTION 14

The myth of the Blackwater Beast haunts the pages of *The Essex Serpent* – who wrote the novel?

QUESTION 15

Which member of the X-Men was named after a giant flying creature in indigenous North American folklore?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Identify the movie from this detail of the poster.

QUESTION 17

What kind of creature is the mokele-mbembe, featured in *Baby: Secret Of The Lost Legend*?

QUESTION 18

Which classic 1954 cryptid movie directly inspired Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape Of Water*?

QUESTION 19

Inspired by an urban legend, 1980's *Alligator* featured which future star of Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*?

QUESTION 20

Which bog-dwelling creature appeared in print first – Marvel's Man-Thing or DC's Swamp Thing?

Answers
1 Bigfoot 2 The Great Intelligence
3 The Wendigo 4 The Legend Of
Boggy Creek 5 The Jersey Devil
6 The Loch Ness Monster 7 Richard
Kiel 8 What A Whopper 9 El
Chupacabra 10 Her dog is eaten
11 Giant squid 12 Harry And The
Hendersons 13 Nigel Kneale
14 Sarah Perry 15 Thunderbird
16 The Mothman Prophecies
17 A brontosaurus 18 Creature From
The Black Lagoon 19 Robert Foster
20 Man-Thing (by two months!)

How did you do?

Measure your sasquatch track

0-5
Titchyfoot

6-10
Smallfoot

11-15
Mediumfoot

16-19
Bigfoot

20
Biggestfoot

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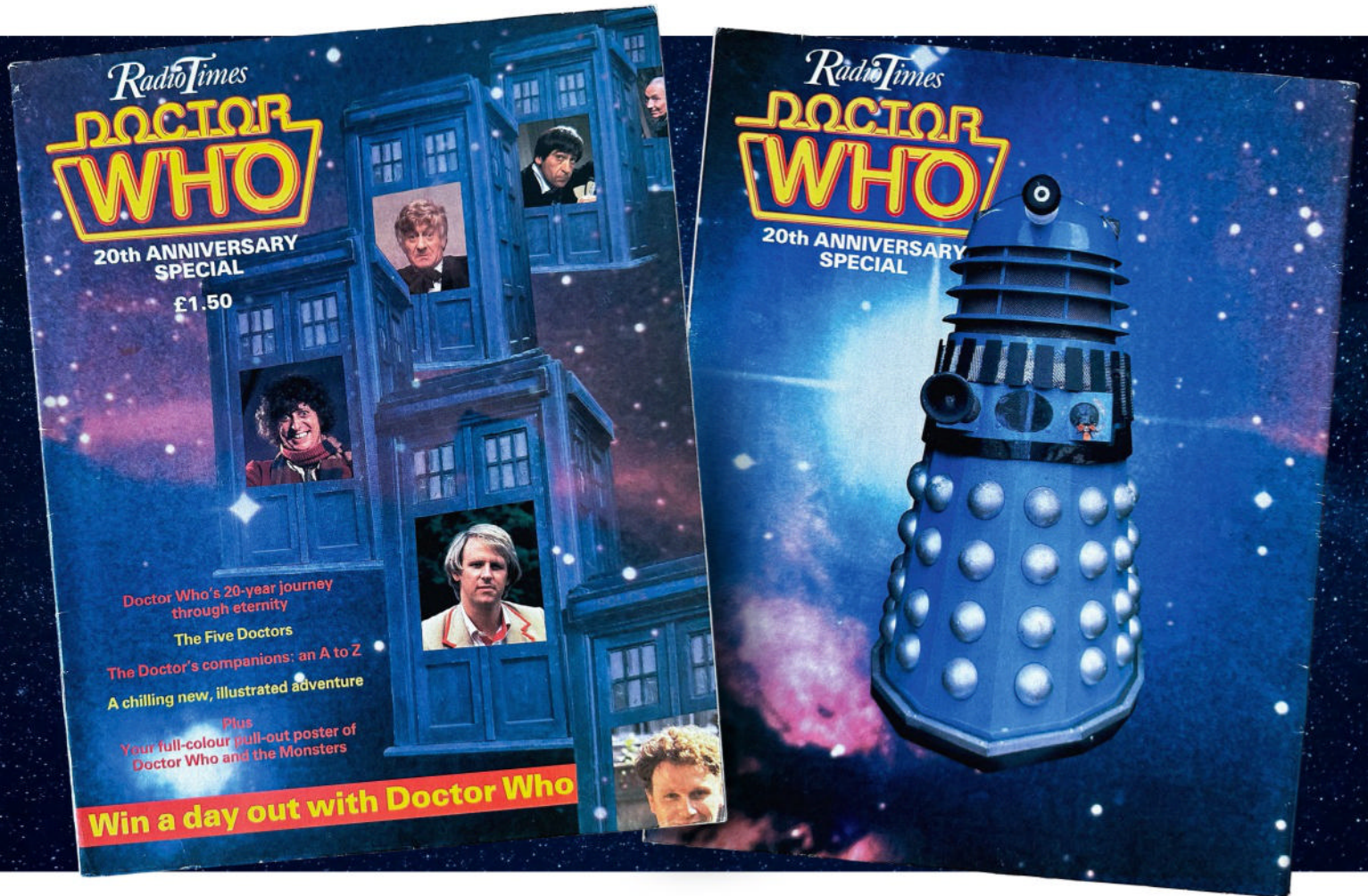
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Radio Times' Doctor Who 20th Anniversary Special

Darren Scott, Editor



Do you remember the before-times when you were blissfully unaware of dates, deadlines and release schedules? My life must have been so completely carefree not having to anticipate anything other than weekly comics and annual events. So it was Christmas 1983 when a very special magazine materialised in my Christmas stocking and blew my tiny little mind.

The *Radio Times Doctor Who 20th Anniversary Special* was only 64 pages, but even now the memory cheats at how big it was because of the wealth of information within. It was probably my gateway to the very magazine you're reading today. My first issue of *Doctor Who Magazine* followed a few months later.

With, ahem, a little more expertise under my belt I can see how truly dreadful the cover is, but as a child it was beyond exciting. "A 20 Year Voyage Through Eternity", by Ian Levine, listed every story in order. That back page giving a hint at the season ahead! Witchcraft!

I remember poring over the opening double-page spread with a photo of producer John Nathan-Turner in his office, looking at every detail behind him, and devouring the A-Z of companions. I never really got Roger Woddis's poem, "Five Against The Fiends" – sorry Rog. And Eric Saward's short story "Birth Of A Renegade" was so exciting to me as a youngster with no concept of canon.

I genuinely think it unlocked something in me: the *Doctor Who* Fan Gene, if you will. I'd say it made Christmas and birthday gifts easy

for my Mum for another 39 years, but given that I also got the *Doctor Who Technical Manual* and some *Doctor Who* sweets that year, I reckon she was already wise to it. Weirdly, apple chew bars always make me think of the *Radio Times Anniversary Special*.

I quite literally read the magazine until it fell apart in my hands years later. What was left of the pages lived in a binder before being lost to time and eventually replaced with a pristine new copy. Now I'm nostalgic for a whole other thing: the possibility that something magical, new and previously unknown might just materialise in my life one day. But then, isn't that the magic of *Doctor Who*? ●

Darren thinks it must be timey-wimey that this came out 40 years ago, as he's only 39.

Fact Attack!

→ The success of the *Radio Times 10th Anniversary Special* led to this publication; sadly a 30th anniversary special never followed.

→ Originally the magazine cost £1.50 (that's about £6 now). These days you should be able to pick up a copy on eBay for around £15.

→ Colin Baker and Nicola Bryant appeared in the magazine, but not in costume, as their characters hadn't been seen yet.

→ The mag came with an iconic poster of Peter Davison, Janet Fielding and Mark Strickson, shot in mist against a black background.

→ Bizarrely, the Dalek on the back cover is a blue and silver model from Madame Tussauds' *Doctor Who* Exhibition.

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