

Jodie Whittaker knows 'Doctor Who' fans have high expectations, but she never hesitated to become the first woman to play the legendary lead

BY CHRISTIAN LISSEMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

There aren't many roles on British television that garner the kind of media attention that Jodie Whittaker received last year, when it was announced that she would replace Peter Capaldi to play the time-traveling alien called the Doctor in BBC's long-running science fiction show "Doctor Who."

It's been more than a year since that announcement, and Whittaker has been on a nine-month shoot that has taken her from Sheffield to South Africa, and no doubt to all corners of time and space, shooting the 10-part series. The show begins Sunday, Oct. 7, on BBC America, relocating from its traditional Saturday night slot.

Whittaker is looking forward to the unveiling of the show.

"After putting all this hard work into something," she said, speaking from London in the middle of a busy day promoting the series, "it feels really exciting to be able to now share it with fans and hopefully gain some new fans."

Ah, yes. The fans. Now approaching its 55th birthday, "Doctor Who" has amassed a number of hard-core fans over the years, many of whom are old enough to remember the show before it was canceled in 1989 and brought back with much fanfare in 2005. "Whovians," as they are known, are an opinionated bunch. But despite the weight of their expectations, Whittaker said she never hesitated when offered the role.

"There wasn't a second when I didn't want to do it," she said, "but it is a huge responsibility. The hard work of gaining a fan base has already been done, but now it's the hard work of maintaining it."

And Whittaker hopes she'll attract some new fans, too.

"I think sometimes the mystique of "Doctor Who" is that you need to have this previous knowledge about everything that has gone before to watch it, but that's not the case. I'm a new Whovian and I've been welcomed and included. If episode one or episode four (of the new series) is the first one you have ever seen, it's a starting-off point because the episodes

will give you everything you need to know and hopefully be exciting enough for you to tune in again and again and again."

Born in the village of Skelmanthorpe, England, the 36-year-old actress has retained her broad Yorkshire accent. Her biggest role on television to date was playing distraught mother Beth Latimer in ITV's "Broadchurch" crime drama. That was written by Chris Chibnall, who is now the head writer and executive producer of "Doctor Who." Chibnall replaces Steven Moffat, who has been the showrunner for the past eight years.

WATCH

What: "Doctor Who"

When: Sunday nights beginning Oct. 7

(time TBA)

Where: BBC America

"I'm an incredibly ambitious person," Whittaker said. "I have always wanted to take on roles that are challenging and that went against the grain and which excited me. It's the right place, right time, moment for me, in the sense that Chris Chibnall knew me and felt my energy was right to audition. If this had come to me younger, I might not have been at the right place in my mind to take it on, whereas now, I feel like it's perfect. Episode to episode, it's like nothing I've ever done before, and it feels like a huge roller-coaster ride to be a part of."

One reason "Doctor Who" endures is undoubtedly its ability to change the lead actor when required, a tradition that began when the first person to play the Doctor (William Hartnell) retired from the show in 1966. Whittaker will be the 13th Doctor, and the first woman to take on the role.

There was a media storm at the time in certain sections of the press, declaring fans' outrage at the change, but despite the headlines, many fans were pleased at the casting. That's not to say there wasn't any negative reaction to the news. The Amazon pre-order page for the DVD of the new series reveals a number of one-star reviews from fans who have written Whittaker off despite not having seen her in action.

"It doesn't affect me turning up and working really hard," Whittaker said. "As long as I do the

work and honor what has gone before and take it in a new direction, then I'm doing my job."

And after all, she said, "I'm playing an alien! To suggest that I'm not qualified to do that (because of my gender) is hilarious. I mean, find me an actor who is qualified to play an alien out there. I challenge you!"

As well as having a female lead, this year's series will feature more female writers than the series has ever known. Three women, including author Malorie Blackman, will join the series, meaning half the writer's room will be female. Whittaker credits Chibnall for this.

"(He) created a writer's room that reflected what he sees when he looks out of his window," she said. "You can only tell current, exciting stories that are from different points of view, if you create a room that has those different points of view in it."

She recognizes that there is still inequality behind the camera, as well as in front of it, however.

"It's obvious in the industry there is a huge difference between the percentage of male writers and directors, and female ones – and it's certainly not due to lack of talent," she said. "There are extraordinary female writers and directors out there, and that should be reflected in every writer's room."

When Whittaker made her debut as the Doctor, in the closing minutes of last year's Christmas episode, "Twice Upon a Time," another thing that stood out was the Doctor's dialect. Her first line as the new Doctor, "Oh, brilliant!" was spoken in her native northern accent. Whittaker, who has played many roles not using her own accent, most notably in "Broadchurch," says the use of her own accent doesn't mean the Doctor is suddenly from Yorkshire, however.

"Chris (Chibnall) just said use your own voice when I started to audition. It didn't feel wrong in any way. And I think if I used a different accent (for the role), then you've got to discover why, why is that the choice? When it's just using your own voice, it's not a statement of any kind, you know, why not?"

Plus, she said, what with playing a verbose alien who has a penchant for talking about time travel, she has plenty to do in the role already, without having to speak in

hoped this would lead to a new series, but it never materialized. However, McGann did get to revive his Doctor in a number of Big Finish audio plays and in a couple of mini-episodes shown as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations.

After an unbroken run of 26 years, Doctor Who was effectively canceled in 1989 due to dwindling viewing figures. Michael Grade, BBC director general at the time, defended his decision, calling the show "ghastly" and "pathetic." The show lived on in numerous books, comics and audio plays, however, while avid "Doctor Who" fan Russell T Davies – whose previous credits included "Queer as Folk," which features a central character who is himself

WHO'S NEXT

a different accent.

"As acting jobs go, it's not the hardest job to do in every case; it's just the amount of lines you have to learn because the Doctor speaks more than anyone, and in a way that I have never had to do in any other show, and that's challenging," she said.

Everything is changing in the series this year. New Doctor; new showrunner; there's even a new composer taking over from Murray Gold, who was the musical director since the series was first reborn. And there are new people joining the Doctor aboard her Tardis. Three, in fact. Actor, comedian and quiz show host Bradley Walsh will join relative newcomers Mandip Gill and Tosin Cole, who both have had stints in teen-soap "Hollyoaks" (although – fan fact – Cole also landed a small part in "Star Wars: Force Awakens").

Whittaker clearly loves having them on board.

"I have made three of the best friends I could ever have dreamed of," she said. "I am so excited for the world to meet their characters. It's a wonderful dynamic."

As the weeks count down toward the new series, Whittaker is as excited as any Whovian to see the show. She hasn't seen any of the episodes herself in their finished form, once the CGI and other special effects have been added, for example, but she's already "really proud" of the show.

"I feel like for Whovians that this is the show that they love, but it's also not regurgitating the stuff that's gone before, because why keep making it if you're not going to use what's happening day-to-day around you? It's got to be current.

"It's a show for any age," she said. "It's scary, it's funny, it's epic, it's emotional, and it's all the things that I want from something. And all the things that I know that my niece, who is 14, would want from something."

Doctor Who remains for many a slice of event television, much discussed, much dissected and certainly eagerly awaited.

Whittaker laughed. "No pressure then!"

Courtesy of Big Issue North / INSP.ngo

a Whovian – spent years campaigning to get the show back on TV. He was rewarded for his efforts in 2005 when he was made executive producer and head writer of the newly revived series.

Steven Moffat won a BAFTA for the episode Blink in 2007. The story barely features the Doctor and instead focuses on a woman called Sally Sparrow (played by Carey Mulligan), who investigates the disappearance of a friend in a creepy abandoned house. The show introduces new monsters, the Weeping Angels, stone statue-like creatures that can move only when you're not looking at them, and it's widely regarded as one of the best episodes of the series.

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JODIE WHITTAKER

Jodie Whittaker is the 13th person to play the Doctor on "Doctor Who" – and the first woman.

PHOTO BY STEVE SCHOFIELD/BBC

Far left: The Doctor's space and time-traveling machine is called the TARDIS, an acronym for Time and Relative Dimension in Space. The fact that it looks like a police telephone box is because the ship is supposed to disguise itself and blend in with its surroundings, but its "chameleon circuit" got stuck and it's never been able to change since. It's also because the tight budgets of the BBC in 1963 meant the producers wanted something cheap to use for the Doctor's ship.

PHOTO BY BABBEL1996/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

'DOCTOR WHO' THROUGH TIME

First broadcast Nov. 23, 1963, "Doctor Who" was intended to be a family show with an educational emphasis on scientific ideas, and famous people and civilizations from history, such as Marco Polo and the Aztecs. It was no coincidence that two of the first companions to join the Doctor, Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright, were teachers. However, the pepper-pot-shaped Daleks, the first real monsters to appear on the show, became the real stars and ensured the program's survival after the first series.

The first Doctor is a pretty unlikeable character. He's patronizing and

cantankerous, and he effectively kidnaps teachers Ian and Barbara, whisking them away against their will to the Stone Age and immediately putting them in mortal danger. His character mellowed over the course of the series, however, and he soon becomes the kindly heroic figure that we know and love today.

The longest-serving Doctor is Tom Baker, who played the fourth incarnation of the character from 1974 until 1981. He's still regarded as one of the best Doctors and made a cameo appearance in the 50th anniversary episode of the show. The award for shortest-lived Doctor goes to



Paul McGann. He played the Doctor in the 1996 television film, a co-production between BBC and American studios. It was