

WHO? ME?

Andrew Collins on taking part in a Big Finish Doctor Who audio adventure

"Walk down Stockwell Road and if you're coming from Brixton tube it's on the right, opposite the Far Side wine bar."

These are my directions to Colony 34.

"It is a small cul-de-sac and you feel as if you're walking into a small council estate. Which indeed you are. As you go further in, it bends to the left and at the very end, through a blue gateway, is the studio."

Colony 34 is an Earth colony in the distant future. There are over 200 colonies in this region of space, grouped together on five habitable worlds. This particular planet is home to Colonies 15 to 68.

"It has a huge blue metal grid-like door. The person-sized door will most probably be ajar so give it a tug."

As with any place that humans go, there is wealth and there is poverty, some have done well in their brave new world, others struggle to survive.

"Our studio is as far back inside as you can go - just wander through the long corridor and you'll find the green room at the end."

It was day five of the June scorcher and day three of Wimbledon when I got to be in *Doctor Who*. I left early, so as to beat the stated 10am start time and get to the green room before all the actors did. I felt, in many ways, like an interloper, a fraud, at best a competition winner. I was going to be in *Doctor Who*, a claim with which I had been boring friends and colleagues ever since I received the call-up.

The original telephone conversation between Gary Russell, head honcho of Big Finish productions and provider of the above directions, and my voiceover agent Annette, went something like this:

"Would Andrew like to be in an audio episode of *Doctor Who*?"

"Hahahahahahahahahahaaaaa!"

The subsequent conversation between Annette and myself went something like this:

"Would you like to be in an audio episode of *Doctor Who*?"

"Hahahahahahahahahahaaaaa!"

It's not a question that needs answering is it? The money, Annette assured me, was small, "but they'll give you lunch." I needed no further buttering. I would have happily made lunch, packed it into Tupperware tubs and served it to them in exchange for this opportunity. I was going to be in *Doctor Who*. If I'd been asked a year ago, pre-Eccleston, I would still have leapt at the chance to become a footnote in *Who* history, but the Doctor has re-entered popular culture in such a profound way in 2005, thanks to the Welsh bloke, the franchise now carries a brand new cachet. *Doctor Who* is cool again. By extension, I'm cool. Actually, I spent most of the day sweating, but we'll come to that.

Know this, as William Goldman says: I was cast in a Big Finish *Doctor Who* audio adventure because they needed a radio presenter to play a radio presenter. I would be treading in the self-mocking footsteps of Tony Blackburn, who played a DJ in an audio called "The Rapture", episode 36, released in September 2002, the chief difference being, he played himself and I became Drew Shahan, a cross between Jeremy Paxman, Nicky Campbell and James Whale, or at least, that's how I played him.

The entire episode - debut *Who* commission from genial and admirably starstruck writing duo James Parsons and Andrew Stirling-Brown - is presented as a radio broadcast, with the Doctor (Sylvester McCoy) and assistant Ace (Sophie Aldred) involved in a kind of peasant uprising and being interviewed by roving reporters from Live 34. I don't

think it would be prudent to go into any more detail, for fear of causing a rip in the fabric of time and space for Whovians, through which monsters might emerge. I will say this, it's not a monster-heavy story - indeed, the writers went for this radical approach in order to get noticed. Their pitch was chosen from 650 unsolicited admissions in the most recent Big Finish "offers round". There are a lot of *Doctor Who* fans with word processors out there. And who better to valiantly continue the good work of the TV series, which has apparently been "off the telly" for a while, although you'd never know it from the continued devotion of the fans, who have been buying up novels, downloading webcasts, ordering CD-based audio adventures and attending conventions ever since closedown in 1989. I normally say that I don't count Eighth Doctor Paul McGann, partly because I didn't much like his one-off outing in 1996, and partly because it was a one-off outing - but this becomes a pretty limp pose when you know that McGann is among four Doctors who have been lending their voice talents to the Big Finish episodes (along with McCoy, Peter Davison and Colin Baker).

Hey, you don't want a history of extramural *Who*, you want to know what it's like to be in an audio adventure. Well, first they send you a script. "Live 34" is 76 pages long - and it's not double-spaced either. It's a dense read, with some hefty speeches, not least for anchorman Drew Shahan (my longest runs to about 400 uninterrupted words). Thankfully, on the day, my part was not all spoken in isolation - I did get to interact with the Doctor and Ace - in other words act with actors.

What this actually means in reality is that Sylvester McCoy and I got to speak at the same time and in the same scene, but in separate glass recording booths. It's like being in quarantine, or a glass case in a *Doctor Who* exhibition. The studio itself comprises a series of these soundproof booths, all facing the control room, where Gary Russell (acting as producer and director) sits, with rotund engineer Toby.

Thanks to military planning they record a whole 60-minute episode in one day. (I almost said "knock one out" there, one of the most insulting phrases in the media, suggestive of a lack of care and attention which would be entirely misleading in this case. There is, as you can imagine, a lot of love in the room.) By dividing up the 43 scenes and grouping them around which actors are required for each batch, Gary can call his cast at staggered intervals during the day. For example, I had to be there on the dot of 10am, as did "Sylv" as they rather campily call him, Bill Hoyland, who played the baddie and an Australian actress called Zehra who took the part of a reporter (and who confessed to never having seen the Eccleston incarnation of *Who*).

It was calming for my non-actorly nerves to get to Stockwell first, follow those instructions through the blue gate, get my bearings and chat to Toby (BBC experience has taught me always to make friends with studio engineers!) You are greeted with tea, coffee, water, wooden fruit bowls piled high with miniature chocolate bars and Wotsits, and a Travel Connect Four for longueurs. Although the green room itself - positioned in the bowels of the modest studio complex - has more air conditioning ducts than actual room, the oppressive piping gives it a *Doctor Who* space-station feel.

I managed to suppress any visible signs of fanboy excitement when "Sylv" first appeared (he's miniature in real life and wears sandals). Gary had also materialised, and set about his other job of Making Sure The Actors Are Happy. Sylv knows Bill and they swapped thespian war stories, as well as holiday plans - Sylv is off boating on the Aegean before jetting to Australia for a convention appearance with Baker and Katy Manning. He was just back from a six-month tour of *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Bill went to the opening night). Bill had just landed a small part in the next Woody Allen film. No, he hasn't met him yet. He probably won't.

We set to work, standing at our quarantined music stands with our scripts propped like we were in *The Archers*, gesticulating wildly with our hands even though it's audio. It was bloody hot in those glass cases. Perhaps this was where we started paying in sweat. It's amazing how quickly you fall into luvviedom - once you're thrown together in a small space with other performers it become instinctive to support one another. That's where the "You were marvellous, darling" comes from. It's not a bad thing. Actors are not bad people. They're insecure, but that's because they're self-employed and live in a world where people with no more skill than the ability to show their breasts in a Jacuzzi can become celebrities. In this regard, I can say that appearing in *Doctor Who* has changed me. Acting - even pretending to act, which is probably a tautology - concentrates your mind so much that acting becomes the whole world while you're doing it. Even in a hot booth in Stockwell.

Lunch was magnificent. Salad and coronation chicken and prawns and avocados and fresh fruit. I felt silly for packing my own.

Later in the day, the second shift arrived: Sophie Aldred, who apparently breast-fed her baby while I was locked in the booth (although she claimed afterwards to have suckled her previous child whilst actually in the booth itself, microphone on, which is an arresting thought for the fans); also Ann Bryson, former Philadelphia Cheese girl and Duncan Wisbey, with whom I share an agent, and who was so quiet and unassuming, sucking on an iced lolly, he almost wasn't there. Philip Olivier, off of *Brookside* and *The Games*, who's a regular as Hex, didn't turn up at all

because of something to do with changing agents, the outgoing one having failed to tell him about the job. Luckily, I had no scenes with Hex and didn't have to come back two days later for "pick-up" as they call it. Australian Zehra did. Short straw. (Although I would have enjoyed meeting Tinhead.)

The two writers had come all the way from the West Midlands, and can you blame them? The thrill of seeing your words appear out of the mouths of professional actors, in some cases icons, is one that repeat-fee money can't buy. James is an actor himself, and something of a luvvy, while Andrew is the quieter, more writerly one, who wouldn't let his eight-year-old daughter watch the Mark Gatiss-scripted *Who* for fear of sending her behind the sofa. What an overprotective world kids now live in. (If a *Doctor Who* writer's child can't watch it, what chance the rest of them?)

My own experience in the booth was weird. I have no trouble reading words that are put in front of me. Years of doing radio with Stuart Maconie taught me how to read and speak at the same time (we were always in a rush during our double-act radio days and often didn't have the luxury of reading each other's scripts before recording). Also, for the most part, all I had to do was be a radio presenter. The only real acting came later when ... well, when that dramatic thing happened, but you'll have to buy the CD to find out what it is. (My friend Richard Herring played a space plumber in a previous Big Finish audio and had his head squashed by a Cyberman. I can't compete with that.) I was finished and on my way out of the council estate before 3pm, all my parts read. I was quite sad to leave behind that happy band of thespians. I wish them all well in their acting careers. The ones I saw at work were marvellous, darling.

I accept that I'll never be called back to be in *Doctor Who* again, but I've already been in one more episode than I'd ever have dared dream when I was watching "The Ark In Space" and memorizing bits of it for use in adult life in clips shows.

I had my photo taken with Sylv and Sophie against the blue gate. Guess what? It was ace.

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