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Neither is it empty.



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Hub

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Man for a Moment

by Jeff Crook

From the movements of the score, Thomas knows when to change places and when to snarl and lunge at Otto, the Prussian lion tamer, to get the biggest reaction from the shrieking monkeys beyond the circle of light. The music tells him when to run out and take his assigned place at the beginning of the show. He is always the first out of the gate, slipping unnoticed into the ring while the crowd

awaits the lions, who have to be prodded snarling and snapping from their cages, much to the crowd's delight. Thomas hates performing, but he consistently turns in the most reliable performance of all the cats, never missing his cues, always following the script. It's easy for him. It's against his nature to attract attention to himself, unlike the flamboyant lions and tigers who enjoy their own preposterous bellowing. He feels no jealousy of the attention lavished on them. The big heavies will always get more applause than he, for they are far more terrifying to the monkeys who know no better.

He dislikes his starring moments in the ring and is glad there are only a few of them. At one point in the show, he slips from his perch and stalks Otto while the burly, bald lion tamer is busy taunting one of the tigers, theatrically unaware of the death creeping up behind him on silent pads, and frightening the audience into hysterics. Of course, Otto turns at the last moment and drives Thomas back with his whip. Another of Thomas' tricks is to leap over three male lions—a simple feat made seemingly perilous by the obstacle of a flaming hoop. But his central moment is the shoulder carry, where Thomas endures the humiliation of being draped across the brawny Prussian's shoulders.

Sometimes it's difficult for Thomas to remember anything about his former self. His days are measured by the waxing and waning of his hunger pains, and the long hours of his sleep, when he dreams of being a man. And though he hates Otto and, to a lesser degree, Otto's assistant Miriam (but only because he hates his physical need for her), he hates the other cats more, and they hate him equally and perhaps a bit more ferociously. Since Creation, lions and tigers have hated leopards on principle, gladly killing them if given a chance, but these, his companions in the circus, hate him even more because he is a leopard and yet not a leopard. They hate him because he was once a man, and in some ways he is still a man. The stench of humanity has not been completely washed away by the blood he has licked with his coarse tongue. And when he needs them, he can still summon his man's hands.

At night, when he sits in his cage and calls to his hands, they appear. First, the claws draw back, then the fur parts and his fingers appear, sliding out of their protective sheaths, the rough pads underneath softening into calluses. His hands are light-skinned, like Otto's, with strong spatulate fingers and thick thumb roots, calloused palms accustomed to heavy labor, yet supple enough for the delicate work of picking the lock of his cage. They have other uses as well, even though he receives regular servicing from Miriam. As assistant to

the lion-tamer, she is required to regularly service all the male cats, to keep them manageable.

Thomas sometimes wonders whether she does the same for Otto. Han smell the Prussian's stink on her clothes whenever she visits his cage. For his part, Thomas suffers her manipulations reluctantly. He hates the indignity of his hips thrusting beyond his power to control. Still, the release helps to mollify his more murderous impulses.

But there are times when neither Miriam nor his own hands are enough to satisfy his urges. Then, Thomas opens his cage, slips out, and pads through the compound until he reaches the fields and pastures beyond. Or, if the circus is near a town, he wanders the night-dark lanes, sometimes sating his fury on a wandering dog or tarrying drunkard. He kills, not out of hunger, for Otto feeds him well enough—just murder, violence. It is a muscle that needs stretching, a deadly itch to scratch and scratch.

The last time he escaped his cage, Thomas happened across a house with an open window. Most townsfolk close their windows at night and lock their doors when the circus is in town, for fear of escaped animals and thieving gypsies. But the window of this house was open to the cool autumn air. He leapt up and found a man and woman asleep in a bed beneath the window, naked and pale with their breath smoking in the moonlight. He could smell the woman's sex and the man's expended seed between her white thighs. They turned and groaned in their sleep as he stepped over them and dropped soundlessly to the floor. He slipped out of their bedroom, down a hall and into another room, where he found their young offspring, caged, helpless and asleep.

Thomas sits in his own cage and ignores the monkeys who pay Otto for the privilege of taunting him from beyond the iron bars. He closes his eyes and imagines the young mother the next morning staring into the empty baby cage, the dots of baby's blood spattering the blankets of her own bed, all the bugbears of her apish imagination prickling, unable to imagine how someone carried her baby over her own bed and out her window without waking her.

He closes his eyes and recalls the soft satisfying crack as his canines penetrated the baby's skull, the ease with which he carried it into a tree outside their open window, the sweetness of its velvety flesh. The taste of blood remains tart as a penny in his mouth. Perhaps some day a storm will blow the baby's little bleached bones down from the joint of the branch where Thomas wedged the leftovers. Won't the monkeys be surprised then!

Thomas has often considered leaving the circus altogether, escaping and never returning, but the lingering man part of his mind knows how that must eventually end. Still, every day his needs grow stronger, while Miriam's ministrations barely suppress his urges. Though it has only been a few days since he last fed his lust, he has already begun to dream of the surprised yelp of his next victim, dog or man – it matters little to him – and to yearn for the flurried scramble of legs, the strangled moan, the crack of bone, and the sublime stillness of death.

*

Thomas wakes to find Miriam reaching through the bars of his cage. The smell of the air and the rumbling of the elephants across the compound tell him that morning is still some hours away. He rises and stretches, yawns, then steps over her coaxing hand. She stretches out her hand to him, her face pressing against the bars. She speaks to him in a voice soft and breathless.

Miriam wears a yellow nightgown that had been patched numerous times and needs patching again. Thomas leans against the bars on the opposite side of the cage, studying her with his amber eyes. Her gown is torn at the neck, and he smells blood and Otto's

seed mingling with the perfumey soap of her recent bath. Her feet are bare, her legs beneath the gown silhouetted by the moonlight, her arms brown and strong, narrow hands lithe, teasing. Her hair, freed from its usual wrap, spills down her shoulders in a profusion of thick black braids.

She whispers soothing noises as she withdraws her arm and eases around the side of the cage. He leans against the bars and watches her, a human word fluttering in his throat like a small bird. Instead, he makes a soft *kecking* sound and grimaces, unable to control the muscles of his face. She puts her cool hand against his side and probes between his legs. He steps over her hand and retreats to the far side of the cage. The smell of blood confuses him, confuses his desires. He sits in the straw with his back to the bars and curls his tail around his feet, covering himself. He flattens his ears, grimaces again at the smells coming from her.

She speaks to him and Thomas stares at her, barely understanding. Her words slip away almost as she speaks them, finding no lodging in his fevered brain. He begins to pant, to feel the panic of the hunted as she stalks around his cage, whispering fiercely. She thrusts her hands through the bars and pushes against his flank, trying to coax him to his feet so that she can reach between his legs.

Instead, he moves to the center of the cage and flops onto his side. Head up, he watches her, his tongue lolling between his teeth. Tears pool in her brown eyes and slide down her cheeks. She eases around the cage, her hands slowly slipping from bar to bar, until she reaches the cage door. Then she stands back and reaches down, grabs the edges of her nightgown. She pulls the yellow nightgown up and over her head. It falls from her fingertips onto the trampled grass. Her breasts, small as two halves of a pear, heave with a sob, her dark nipples shrink and harden in the cool night air. Glancing quickly around, she slides the bolt back and opens the cage, then climbs inside with him.

Thomas scrambles to his feet and crouches at the back of the cage as Miriam crawls toward him, pushing through the thick hay on the floor. The unlocked cage door beyond her beckons to him. Thomas's yellow eyes flicker from the woman to freedom, then back to the woman. When she reaches the center of the cage, she turns and prostrates herself, lips flecked with bits of gamey straw, her hips lifted to present the black patch of curly hair heavy with confusing scents. With eyes closed and arms outstretched, she waits as though crucified to the floor of the cage.

The way is open. All he has to do is step over her. But blood flecks the inside of her thighs and the smell of it drives like a spike up through his mouth into the howling part of his brain. He leaps. His paws force her shoulders to the straw-covered planks, while a pained and helpless growl constricts his throat, trying to be born into words. His teeth touch the soft hair of her neck. His whiskers tickle her ear, and he inhales the sweetness of her breath as she gasps, lifting her buttocks to meet him. Yet he hesitates, two conflicting hungers crying for gratification, restrained by an aborted memory.

As he crouches over her, his hands emerge from his paws to grasp the soft warm brown flesh beneath them. At the feel of his fingers closing around her shoulders, Miriam presses herself even closer, urging him with her movements and the small sobbing noises from her throat. "Come back to me, *Mein Mann*," she cries. His growl becomes an almost-human cry as he seeks her, pressing himself into her, entering her at last. The feel of her flesh, of her bones and skin and the muscles gripping him, the smell of her breath and her sex tears though him, bringing flashes of euphoria, brilliance, waking sense, remembrance, guilt, regret.

And then a sound, tiny and distant, reawakens the clarity of his animal instincts—the metallic click of a turning cylinder, a hammer drawing back. The pistol pops like a firecracker, its bullet pings off the iron bars of the cage and whirrs away in the night.

Thomas rips himself out of Miriam, tearing a scream from her throat, and pours from the cage in a long, sinuous silent moment, vanishing into the shadows underneath the wagon. Otto staggers toward the cage, a Mauser pistol wavering in one hand, a reeking bottle of gin in the other. "Gott verdammt Hexen!" he shrieks, firing again. Thomas flattens himself in the grass, but the bullet cracks high, splintering the wooden floor near Miriam's head.

Otto stumbles to the cage and drags Miriam out by her braids. He violently obliges her to kneel, then crouches over her, reeling drunkenly, the sharp black nose of the pistol stabbing into her back. Miriam cowers beneath him and clutches at the blood flowing down her trembling brown thighs. Otto tilts the bottle to his lips and drains the last of its contents, then flings it aside. It lands with a thump between Thomas' hands.

"*Haben Sie keine Schande?* No shame at all, you God damned whore?" Otto spits. "*Du können den Fluch nicht brechen.* Not like that." He grabs a fistful of braids and drags her away between rows of long brightly-painted wagons. Carnival people and acrobats and clowns without their faces stare out for a moment at noise, then quickly retreat from the red-faced, drunken Prussian and his wild pistol.

Miriam screams as she claws at Otto's massive fist. Thomas hesitates at the edge of the wagon's shadow. He grasps the empty gin bottle; the smooth curve of its cold glass fits into the palm of his man's hand as though made for it. The touch of it brings brilliant flashes of memory—of a room lit by yellow light, the scuffling of boots on the rough wooden floor, a chorus scrape of chairs, a pistol shot. There is the Prussian's face, not so fat or red or bald as now, younger, with better teeth, bared in a snarl, the broken neck of a brown bottle lifted in his hand. The crack of a wooden chair, a table tilting up like the deck of a ship in a storm, with glasses and cards and coins and soiled money sliding down it toward him. He scrambles and

quickly regained his feet, surrounded by German and Askari soldiers, but not before someone pulled his pistol from the holster at his belt. Weaponless, he faced them with the courage and arrogance that was his birthright as a German officer. The little canvas and clapboard officer's tent had grown silent. Otto stood at the head of the mutineers, smiling.

"Arrogant bastard," Otto said. "Not so arrogant now that we know about that black slut you call your wife."

"When the general hears of this, you'll all be shot," Thomas said.

"General von Lettow-Vorbeck will never hear of this," Otto said as the men surged forward, grasping, pulling

The gin bottle slips from Thomas' fingers, clinking on the cold ground. He reaches for it again, grabbing for the memories that are even now slipping away, fleeing from the leopard part of his mind. He touches it

a blackened face, wizened like a raisin, yellow eyes bright and keen, bent over and holding a gourd to his lips, poured some thick bitter brown liquid down his convulsing throat. Otto, behind him somewhere, said, "Now take the witch doctor's medicine, *Herr Kapitän*. You have black water fever and this is the cure."

And then pain, his bones broken from within, animal screams torn from his throat, a harsh leather collar closed around his neck. He twisted in agony, his spine bending almost upon itself. Through eyes swimming with blood he saw Otto pin Miriam's arms behind her back, force her to the ground before the naked, befeathered savage that had forced the potion down his throat. Miriam, his Swaheli wife, kneeled on a dirt floor in a grass-walled hut lit by a firepit, while Askari soldiers smoked cigarettes in the red shadows, trying not to look at him, or her, or anything, while they waited their turn at her and he helpless, paralyzed by pain

Thomas boils from beneath the wagon, his fingers clawing at the grass. But his hips feel disjointed, his spine stiff, his movements clumsy and uncertain. He staggers forward a few steps, then rolls onto his side and stares at his legs in surprise. His tawny fur has paled and receded, the black rosettes faded to the merest hints of spots. He wants to lick his legs to ease the ache swelling up through his hips and spine. The world around him darkens, smells fade, sounds dull to blind whispers. Yet he forces himself up, crawling on hands and knees while the lions and tigers pace their cages and shake the air with furious roars, hating him more than ever.

He follows Miriam's screams, and when she no longer screams, the thudding rain of blows. Thomas crawls toward Otto's glowing tent until, unable to bear his awkwardness any longer, he rises up and stands on his hind paws, unsteady, his legs ready beneath him. Upright, his joints seem to finally slip into their natural places, relieving his pain and awkwardness.

Otto's shadow hulks enormously against the inside walls of the tent, his coarsely-shaven head scraping the canvas. Thomas stops at the edge of the lamplight spilling from the open tent flap. As a leopard, he learned to trust only what he could smell, but now he can neither see Miriam nor smell her, nor does he detect Otto's familiar gin-soaked leathery scent. He edges closer to the light, hating it, hating the way it exposes him.

The canvas flap explodes outward and Otto, sweaty and blowing, reels drunkenly at the threshold. Thomas shrinks back into the shadows as the Prussian blinks at the darkness. "Monsters! *Ich töte beide!*" he bellows. He paws blindly at his loosely hanging belt, grasping at the sheath knife that has slipped behind his back.

"*Ich schneide ihr schlechten Herzen aus,*" he mumbles. "Cut out their black hearts both!" Tearing violently at his belt, he staggers into the side of the tent. His huge bulk sagging into the taut canvas nearly rips the pegs from the ground. Through the parted tent flaps, Thomas sees Miriam, bloody, lying face down on the floor, one arm twisted at an impossible angle across her naked back. Her face is turned toward him, and as her eyes meet his, her bruised and swollen lips mouth a plea. "*Mein Mann, helfen Sie mir.*"

Mein Mann? The words linger in Thomas' mouth, almost spoken, half-formed. *Helfen Sie mir.* Help me. *Ich töte beide.* Kill them both. Cut out their evil hearts.

Thomas springs from the shadows even as Otto's fist closes around the handle of the knife. Though drunk and enraged, the Prussian still has his lion-tamer's instincts. He turns in time to see Thomas hurtling toward him. He dives aside and rolls unsteadily to his feet, knife drawn, before Thomas can recover from his leap.

"You!" Otto spits in surprise.

The words come, slurred, spilling out beyond Thomas' control from a mouth not yet ready to speak them. "*Ich war, aber nicht mehr. Ich bin ein Mann noch einmal.*"

"Not yet a man, *mein Kapitän*," Otto says as he shifts the knife to his left hand. "Nor will you ever be again."

He rushes, head down, chin tucked to his chest. Thomas leaps back to avoid him. Otto bulls through the tent flap and grabs a pistol from the table just inside the entrance. Thomas slips up beside the tent and crouches.

Otto exits, pistol foremost and Thomas strikes, a vicious downward chop across the lion-tamer's wrist. Otto's forearms are like cordwood, hardened and muscular from whipcracking in the center ring, but Thomas' blow is delivered with the vestigial strength of his leopard form. The pistol fires as it jumps from Otto's hand, the bullet thumps in a puff of dust against the granite-hard, elephant-trampled ground.

The two men embrace. Grunting, feet scuffling, fingers clawing at throats, they pirouette in violent circles before the door of the tent. The Prussian's fingers tighten relentlessly around Thomas' windpipe, and he realizes that he is about to die. He has only been a man for a moment and he feels weak as though newly born. His memories of the leopard remain fresh in his mind, memories of another life that are more real to him than the realization of what he has become.

He thinks, if I were a leopard still, I could kill Otto.

But for Miriam, for the love of whom he became a leopard in the first place, he wants to remain a man. What has she gone through to remain near him, and for how long, he wonders suddenly.

"You think you can save her, *Herr Kapitän*?" Otto grunts, speaking Thomas' thoughts. "*Nein! Die Dirne gehört mir.* I stole her from you once and traded her favors to the witch doctor in exchange for the magic to make you an animal. I should have killed you, but the same mistake I will not make again. She will take your place in the circus. No one will know the difference once she is a leopard."

Thomas struggles weakly against the Prussian's vice-like hold on his throat. Otto laughs as he forces Thomas to the ground. "Perhaps I will let the lions play with her, first. Eh? What say you? Does the cat possess your tongue?" Darkness closes upon Thomas, drowning the last vestiges of his humanity. As he dies, his human mind clings to one thought – to save her, to save Miriam, from Otto, from the lions, from life as an animal, the only life he can remember.

Thomas' throat thickens with muscles, prying open Otto's grasp. Otto gasps as claws sink into his neck. Thomas' face elongates into a fur-covered snout, his forehead recedes into ears flattened in fury, as he opens his mouth and pulls the Prussian's face toward his fangs. Otto screams, high and quavering like a woman, and tries to pull away, but Thomas shifts his grip to the back of Otto's head, needle-sharp claws digging into bone, tearing, peeling back Otto's naked scalp.

Lying on his back with Otto above him, Thomas lashes out. His hind claws rip through Otto's khaki lion-tamer's costume, then through his belly flesh and his loins, opening his bulging stomach and spilling his guts and his testicles out and then ripping through his guts until hot gin gushes out.

At the sound of Otto's inhuman screams, doors open and circus people stumble outside, blinking sleepily. But Thomas is gone like a cloud shadow, leaving his victim alive but destined to die after many hours of agony, his wife half-dead but destined to live. He flees into the night, no longer fleeing his fate but simply fleeing the sounds and the lights that he naturally abhors, and already thinking ahead to his next meal.

Behind him, Otto sags at the door of his tent, shrieking and blind with his bald and bloody scalp pulled over his face like a stocking, his intestines smoking in the chill morning air. The circus people recoil at the freakish sight of him, at the man turned inside out before their eyes.

About the Author

Jeff Crook is the author of four fabulous novels. His short fiction appeared last year in *Nature*, *Eclectica*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Nanobison*, and is scheduled for publication this year in the *Triquorum* and *Stalking Shadows* anthologies, as well as an as-yet-untitled Cutting Block Press anthology. He is the editor of *Southern Gothic* (www.southerngothic.org). If you would like to learn more about his work, you can find it all at jeffcrook.blogspot.com, along with other things of interest.

REVIEWS

Hellboy: Blood and Iron reviewed by Paul Kane

Grudge 2, The Return, Bernice Summerfield: Freedom of Information reviewed by Alasdair Stuart

HELLBOY: BLOOD AND IRON

Directed by Victor Crook and Tad Stones

Starring the voices of: Ron Perlman, Selma Blair, John Hurt, Doug Jones

Stars Home Entertainment DVD.

RRP: £18.99

Blood and Iron marks the second in the lucrative Hellboy animated spin-offs from Anchor Bay, and it marks something of a turning point in the evolution of the animated adventures. This instalment takes the European Hammer-style movies as its inspiration and is all the better than the previous episode **Sword of Storms** because of it. Cherry picking supernatural legends from these films, as well as from his own comic book back catalogue (specifically *Hellboy: Wake the Devil*), writer and Hellboy creator Mike Mignola comes up with something richer, darker and downright scarier than before. So much so it would make a decent live action film in its own right, or at least a feature-length episode of any potential live action Hellboy TV series.

The film pitches us straight into the action, with Hellboy (Perlman, who else?) tackling a big bad with the help of long-time helper Abe Sapien (Doug Jones). After the usual round of Hellboy getting slammed against things and muttering "Crap" a lot, it's defeated and they prepare themselves for the next mission. Ostensibly it looks like just another haunted house investigation, but it coincides with nightmares Professor Broom (John Hurt) has been having about one of his early cases from 1939. This one involved an ancient vampiric witch who made a deal with an ancient Goddess to give her immortality. In fact Erzsebet Ondrushko (Kath Soucie) was so obsessed with her appearance that she bathed in the blood of her victims, Baroness Bathory style.

It's little wonder that the Prof is reliving his past encounter – when he thought he'd vanquished her evil forever – because the owner of the upstate New York house is in possession of all of her effects, taken from her castle (including a nifty Iron Maiden). His hopes to turn it into a tour and bring in punters backfires spectacularly when the ghosts of Ondrushko's victims begin to appear in the building. As Broom's flashbacks tell the story from 1939, Ondrushko gathers her strength and returns thanks to the attentions of her two loyal hag-witch aides. But that's not the worst of it: not

only do Hellboy, Liz (Selma Blair), Abe, Broom and nerdy agent Sydney Leach (Rob Paulsen) have to deal with this, Hellboy also accidentally stumbles upon the Goddess herself, Hecate, which opens a whole other can of worms...er, snakes.

The world of Hellboy Animated lies somewhere between del Toro's movie and Mignola's exceedingly dark strip, straddling both with consummate ease. No doubt there are fans of the former who will be lost here – mainly because Broom is still alive and Liz appears to have no problem at all with Big Red's attention (she even holds hands with him at one point), and fans of the latter will inevitably scream 'watered down', even though there are some moments of genuine creepiness (when the wrinkly Ondrushko changes in the bath full of blood and then rises to confront Broom, or the ghosts which eventually turn out to have skulls for faces). But, taken for what it is, a new and different version of the mythos, it's quite easy to settle down and have a good time watching it.

No one can dispute the vocal talents of the cast, either, seeing as the main ones are the actors from the film. Perlman is bang on the money once more as the world-weary demon and his exchanges with Broom are the highlight of the show ("You got too old to spank," says Broom. "And the tail got in the way," Hellboy replies). Plus the use of animation allows the makers to go nuts in the monster department without having to worry quite so much about budget as they'd have to with a Hollywood movie. Instead of just one or two beasties, we get not just Ondrushko, but the hags, the wolves with glowing eyes, the ghosts and, of course, Hecate. It means that there's never many slow moments without some kind of action happening. The script is also incredibly sophisticated for a cartoon, with Hecate imploring Hellboy to join her because they are not like the mortals. Guess what his answer is.

All right, there are some flaws with the design I could mention – like the fact Hellboy's legs look just too damned weedy to support his bulk – and a couple of bits that make no sense – why is Liz wandering around with a pistol when she can just blow things up with fire? But these really are minor quibbles. Add to this a nice package of extras, which include Mignola taking you through Broom's story in chronological order, a 'making of' featurette telling you all about the source material, and a bonus interactive comic, and you have a product no Hellboy or genre fan could possibly resist. It's a Hell of a fine 'toon.

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Written by Eddie Robson

Directed by Edward Salt

Starring: Lisa Bowerman, Stephen Fewell, Michael Fenner, Harry Myers, Miles Richardson, Sam Stevens, Steven Wickham and Paul Wolfe

Big Finish Productions

RRP: £10.99

The war between the Draconians and the Mim has struck at the heart of Benny's world. She's lost friends, been imprisoned and her home, the Braxiatel Collection is under Draconian martial law. But if she's under guard, how come no one has seen her? How come she seems to be everywhere at once and how come the Draconian Consulate, Kothar, is acting so strangely? And why has the Collection's gardener Hass been dispatched to the Mim homeworld, the Mim Sphere, when everyone else is effectively under arrest?

The creation of Paul Cornell, Bernice is one part Indiana Jones one part Ford Prefect, her passion for knowledge matched only by her sense of justice and astoundingly dirty laugh. Now into their eighth season (To say nothing of the countless books she features in), Big Finish's single disc plays have placed her at the centre of an extended family and world that's richly detailed, well realised and just 'to the left' of Doctor Who.

And that, oddly enough, is the problem. Bernice's world is so richly detailed and well realised that *Freedom of Information* is actually generated completely from the consequences of the previous stories. It's a testament to how strong Bernice's world is,

after all some of *Buffy*'s finest episodes were constructed the same way, but for the new listener it's not exactly user friendly. The overall effect is somewhat like starting to watch *Babylon 5* in the middle of the third season; it's really good and you can tell there's a huge back story to the world that you'll have great fun exploring but at first you have absolutely no idea what's going on.

That being said, there's a lot to enjoy here. Lisa Bowerman is actually rather magnificent as Benny, her cut-glass accent and willingness to swear like a docker doing a great job of showing the many sides of the good Professor Summerfield. In fact, it's the different perceptions of Benny that provide much of the enjoyment here. As Kothar continues his investigation into Benny's disappearance we see how the other inhabitants of the collection view her. This in turn gives both Bowerman and the other cast members a chance to shine. Particularly good are Paul Wolfe as the fatalistic Hass whose role in the story is far darker than it initially appears and Miles Richardson as Irving Braxiatel. An exiled Time Lord who has dedicated his lives to the study of history and, in particular dead species, Brax is Benny's intellectual equal and, it seems, her moral inferior. Ambiguous at best and always with one eye on the big picture Brax is always a pleasure to listen to and I encourage interested listeners to seek out the *Gallifrey* collection of discs to find out more about him. This ultimately becomes Brax's story as much as Benny's and his actions here look set to provide the foundation of the next phase of Benny's adventures.

Equally impressive are Michael Fenner as Kothar and Sam Stevens as Doggles. Kothar's sparring sessions with Benny are huge fun, and show him as an oddly avuncular, friendly figure for all the terrible things he's done. Crucially, he's never painted as a cartoon villain, never posturing or preening and is all the more impressive, and dangerous, for that. Doggles, at first, appears to be the exact opposite, a perpetually sozzled, cheerfully amoral academic who is gifted with many of the story's best lines, all delivered in a resolutely deadpan, somewhat inebriated manner. It's easy to write Doggles off as a Captain Jack Sparrow-alike but Stevens gives him an edge and authority that stays so well hidden that when he finally shows it, it becomes clear that Doggles is clearly not a man to cross. Or to get drunk with.

In the end though, what really impresses here is the story. The hapless staff of the Braxiatel Collection find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place and there are no easy answers for any of them. Some, touched by tragedy, advocate violence, others seek compromise and still others, Benny in particular, attempt to solve the problem in a suitably Gordian and oddly affecting manner. The fact that no one is right, and that Brax in particular makes hard choices that look set to reverberate down the next few discs only makes it more impressive.

Freedom of Information then sees the Bernice Summerfield series at its best. Huge ideas are debated, heroic action is taken and Benny herself manages to bounce through the whole thing with her usual combination of humour, compassion and righteous anger. If you feel brave, dive in here and immerse yourself in one of the best, and least recognised, elements of the Doctor Who universe.

GRUDGE 2

Directed by Takashi Shimizu

Starring: Sarah Michelle Gellar, Amber Tamblyn, Arielle Kebbel

Aubrey (Tamblyn) is sent to retrieve her sister Karen (Gellar) the only survivor of the previous film whilst three school girls visit the most haunted house in Japan and discover the true meaning of the curse. Meanwhile, back in the US, a family move into their new home only for their son Jake (Knight) to realise that something awful is going on next door...

The Grudge was neither one thing nor the other, never coming close to the heights achieved by the American version of The Ring but never quite plumbing the depths that the American version of The Ring 2 sunk to. It wasn't great by any stretch of the imagination but a top flight cast and some genuinely interesting plotting meant it was a cut above most of the increasing tired J-Horror remakes that had begun to flood the market.

Now, a couple of years on and with at least one legitimately awful remake on the books (Pulse. If you've been fortunate enough to avoid it, keep it that way), the bloom may have gone off the J-Horror rose. To make matters worse, the original sequel that this is based on (Still with me?) was widely panned and the director promised some major changes for this version.

By and large, it's worked. Eschewing the remarkably dour tone of the original for something faster paced, the sequel's three plot lines are all populated with some genuinely interesting characters. Tamblyn, laden down with exactly the same role as Gellar in the original, does a lot more with it and brings a fragility to her scenes that works remarkably well. Where Karen tried to beat the curse by researching it, Aubrey is swept along in events, nicely tying into the favouritism shown to Karen by their mother. She's not as good at life as her sister was and given that Karen barely lasts fifteen minutes into the sequel, that doesn't bode well for our heroine. For her part, which is barely a cameo to be honest, Gellar does a passable job but she's little more than scenery here and it shows.

Oddly enough though, the real dramatic heavy lifting is done by Arielle Kebbel as Allison and Matthew Knight as Jake. Superficially, Allison's plot line looks like the least promising, one part the original Grudge to one part Friday the 13th but Kebbel sells every single scene she's in, her Allison an awkward, shy girl uncomfortable in her own skin and yet somehow together enough to realise how much trouble she's in. In the hands of a lesser actress, Allison would be a screeching stereotype but Kebbel gives her far more depth. She's a convincingly uncomfortable, normal teenager in a desperately abnormal situation and that only heightens the danger she's in.

Likewise, Knight does fantastic work as Jake in the US plot,. It would be all too easy to play Jake as the typical stroppy child, angry at having to move and get used to his dad's girlfriend but Knight plays him with an authority past his years. Jake's a very together little boy and that strength is what's sorely tested by the growing mystery surrounding his neighbours. Also worthy of note is Edison Chen as Eason, the journalist covering Karen's story whose matter of fact, pragmatic approach to the curse helps both Aubrey and the viewer deal with it.

However, just like the original, the cast can only do so much with the material they've been given. The balletic viewpoint changes of the original have been replaced by simple fade outs and whilst the plots do all converge, they lack the impact of the original's closing sequence. Crucially as well, both Kayako and Toshio are clearly visible over and over again and with one notable exception in Karen's final scene, not even remotely frightening. There's a sense of trying to cut new clothes from old cloth here and for all the best efforts of the cast, and the occasional striking image (A hooded figure being led down a hallway, three pairs of feet walking past Jake when there's only one person there) the film never really connects. It's not bad by any stretch of the imagination, it's just unremarkable and given the amount of effort that's been expended, that's a real shame.

THE RETURN

Directed by Asif Kapadia

Starring: Sarah Michelle Gellar, Peter O'Brien, Sam Shepard

Joanna Mills (Gellar) is a travelling saleswoman for a trucking firm with a dark past tied to her childhood in Texas. Repeated visions of a man in overalls, the memory of a childhood car crash and a propensity for self harm have caused her to shut herself off, buried in the simple repetition of making sales and moving on. Until, she finally decides to return to Texas, face her past and discover the truth.

Gellar has been roundly criticised and in some cases justifiably for being a one note actress but here she genuinely connects with the material for the first time since, arguably, *Cruel Intentions*. Joanna is a woman completely alone and completely mistrusting of everything and everyone and a remarkably difficult role to play as a result. However, Gellar nails it, bringing exactly the right combination of caution and determination to the role to make her sympathetic and interesting. It's a remarkably somber performance but the role demands it and the end result is that Gellar becomes the glue that holds the movie together.

Her search for meaning, and gradual acceptance of the increasingly bizarre events Texas throws at her is slow paced but has a genuine air of mystery that few films of this type achieve. The first time we see Joanna slip back into the past is a perfect example of this as as she walks into the toilet at a night club and out across the car park of a bar that cannot possibly be there. Joanna's world is malleable, mercurial and increasingly dangerous. This sense of menace is only increased by the other cast members with J.C. McKenzie as Griff, a local mechanic and Peter O'Brien as Terry Stahl, a man Joanna knows but has never met being the stand outs. The moment where we find out her exact connection to Terry is particularly good as countless little details from earlier in the film suddenly take on a whole new meaning. Equally good is Sam Sherpard as Joanna's father Ed, a genuinely loving, caring parent whose inability to deal with Joanna's impossible problems stems not from neglect but from simply not understanding them. Shepard is an effortless actor and although he has precious little screen time here does a typically excellent job. Adam Scott also manages to register in his brief appearance as Kurt, Joanna's abusive ex-boyfriend and rival at work, creating a character that's plausible, seemingly normal and intensely sinister.

What really makes the film sing however, is the cinematography. The flat, blank expanses of Texas that Joanna's work takes her to are a landscape too large for any one person to cope with and only serve to emphasise how small and fragile she is. The film's colour palette only helps this, with every scene shot through with wintery greys and blues to create an atmosphere of loss and distance. Director Asiff Kapadia made his name on the stunning *The Warrior* and along with his cinematography team he brings the same sense of small people caught in a vast landscape to this film. There's something genuinely different about much of *The Return* and the direction, together with the cast, turns what could have been a fairly standard supernatural story into something more.

Which isn't to say the movie's perfect. The tone is so uniformly somber that there's precious little light relief and the eventual reveal, whilst effective is hampered by the film not so much ending as coming to a juddering halt. However, if you can get past those problems then there's a lot to enjoy here, from the intelligent direction to Gellar turning in a performance which, in a few years, will be re-evaluated as one of her best.

GODS AND MONSTERS - THE SECOND DOCTOR: 1966-69

By Scott Harrison

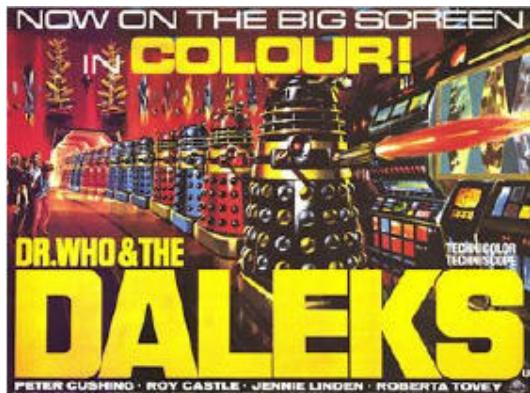


By late 1964, with the Daleks having only appeared in two complete stories on *Doctor Who* (with a third adventure already planned for later in the season) Dalekmania was already sweeping across the nation. The metal-shelled mutants from the planet Skaro were becoming something of a cultural icon and by now it was nigh on impossible to travel any great distance without seeing that familiar pepper pot image staring back at you from even the most mundane of items; cereal packets, sweet wrappers, even bubble gum cards. A wide variety of toys, games and books were

beginning to appear on high street shelves from wind-up models to kites, spinning tops to colour-in kits and, most importantly, the first of Dalek creator Terry Nation's *Dalek Annuals*.

American producers Milton Subotsky and Max J. Rosenberg, inspired by their rivals Hammer Films who were at the time enjoying big business with their summer Pirate family films, were eager to cash in on this success and casting around realised that the Daleks were incredibly popular, particularly with the younger audience. Never having been seen in colour or on the big screen Subotsky and Rosenberg saw the Daleks as a lucrative opportunity and quickly secured the rights for a motion picture deal. Using the original seven-part Dalek story as its source material Subotsky and Rosenberg began preparations on the screenplay. By this time writer and creator Terry Nation was already committed to several projects so was unable to attend script meetings, instead he approached *Doctor Who*'s original Story Editor David Whittaker (who by this time had moved on from the television series) to oversee the project in his absence. Nation had great respect for Whittaker and trusted him to adapt his original scripts for the screen. Before production began, however, Subotsky extensively rewrote the screenplay and ultimately Whittaker's name was dropped from the onscreen credits.

Although largely remaining faithful to the original television story the film differed wildly in one important aspect – the characters. On television the main character was known simply as The Doctor (a common misconception amongst the British public, even to this day, is that his full title is Doctor Who) an alien from a distant planet in Earth's future and an exile from his own kind. The film, entitled simply *Dr. Who and The Daleks*, presented a very different character, however, relying heavily on that old eccentric British inventor archetype. The Doctor of this film is a loveable, gentle, kindly old so-and-so, with a mischievous glint in his eye and a warm, friendly smile for both human and green-skinned Thal alike. Among his many inventions is a space/time machine built inside an old Police Box, only recently completed. The film begins as he is about to take it out for a test flight. In the television series his companions Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright are school teachers at his granddaughter Susan's school. Again many changes have been made for the film version; Susan is still his granddaughter but so too is Barbara (neither of whom are given surnames onscreen – Who presumably!) and Ian Chesterton, now no longer a school teacher, has been given the role of Barbara's current beau, a hapless buffoon who could give Norman Wisdom a run for his money. For all its faults (and there are many) the film did incredibly well at the box office and, not surprisingly a sequel was quickly planned. Arriving in cinemas a year later *Dalek: Invasion Earth 2150AD* again looked to the original television series for its inspiration, this time adapting Nation's second Dalek serial *Dalek Invasion of Earth*. Although far superior to the first film, *Dalek: Invasion Earth 2150AD* failed to perform as well at the box office as its predecessor and, although a



third film was discussed based on Nation's third Dalek serial *The Chase*, the plan was eventually scrapped and neither Dalek nor Doctor appeared on the big screen again.

In November of 1966 television viewers were still reeling from the dramatic upheaval a certain Saturday tea-time television series had recently undergone. Just three stories into its fourth season actor William Hartnell had bowed out to be replaced by an equally familiar face from television and cinema; Patrick Troughton. To help ease this transition between lead actors (something that, up until now, was virtually unheard of) the production team enlisted the help of the Doctors oldest and much loved enemies – the Daleks! Realising that it would be extremely difficult, not to mention damaging to the programme, to cast an actor who could imitate Hartnell's unique portrayal of the character, producer Innes Lloyd decided that a completely new Doctor should be created, a complete contrast to the character that had already been established in the previous three seasons.

In contrast to Hartnell's curmudgeonly old 'grandfather' figure this new Doctor would be much younger, both in appearance and attitude, and take a much more active (not to mention a more physical) role in his weekly adventures. Often described by series creator Sydney Newman as being the ultimate "Cosmic Hobo" the character of the Second Doctor was pitched initially as the 'kindly uncle', a distilled version of all the First Doctor's 'better' qualities. Even Troughton's costume was an exaggerated take on that worn by his predecessor; oversized black frock coat, comically large bowtie and baggy checked trousers. This new Doctor would be a deliberate departure from the 'anti-hero' figure that had been established in the programmes first three years, much less inclined to take a back seat while his companions blundered ahead into unknown dangers, and be a lot more headstrong, forthright and confrontational in his dealings with the evil forces he encountered - something that would be carried over, to an even greater degree, in future incarnations.

By early 1967 writer Terry Nation had taken the decision to withdraw his metal creations from the programme in an attempt to launch their own weekly series on the U.S. networks. The series would have followed the exploits of the intrepid Space Security Service (seen in 1965's *The Daleks' Masterplan*) as they struggled valiantly against the growing Dalek menace. Although a pilot script was completed by Nation and several parties were approached with the idea the networks soon lost interest and, ultimately, the series was never picked up. As a consequence of this the Daleks would remain absent from the remaining two seasons of Troughton's tenure and would not reappear on the programme again for five years until the Third Doctor story *Day of the Daleks* in 1972.

Although often cited by fans as *Doctor Who*'s 'Golden Age' (by those who grew up with the programme before the fourth Doctor, that is) there are many who have criticised the Troughton era as being too repetitive and unimaginative with it's scripts and, in particular, its monsters. Whether this is true or not there is no doubting, however, that seasons Four, Five and Six were arguably the most important with regards to establishing some of the programme's most



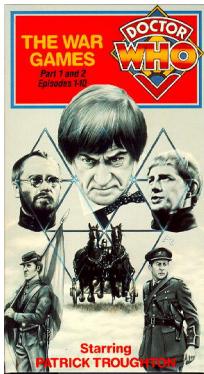
important and memorable monsters. With the show's favourite villains now unavailable the production team decided to promote the programmes second most popular villain to the number one spot, the Cybermen. Making no less than four appearances in three years, most notably in the highly regarded stories *Tomb of the Cybermen* and *The Invasion*, both stories were instrumental in establishing the future mythology of the programme in later years. *Tomb of the Cybermen* saw an important step forward in Cyber

history as, their home planet Mondas now destroyed, the Cybermen had established themselves on a new planet, Telos, upon which they constructed vast 'tombs', hibernation chambers in which their race would rest and regroup before emerging once more rejuvenated and in greater numbers to strike out against the galaxy. This story also saw the introduction of the Cyber-Controller, the monolithic, oval headed coordinator of the Cyber race, who would be seen again in the 1985 Sixth Doctor sequel *Attack of the Cybermen* as well as the recent Tenth Doctor two-parter *Rise of the Cybermen/Age of Steel* (albeit in his alternate Earth guise of the converted John Lumic). Shown in 1968 the mammoth eight-part epic *The Invasion* was originally intended as a 'pilot' for an idea the production team had of reformatting the show for the following season. Producer Peter Bryant believed that the programme was in danger of becoming too fantastical and silly and looked to the massively popular and important *Quatermass* serials of the 1950s for inspiration. The serial saw the introduction of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce and its commander Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart (although the character had first been introduced in the previous season's story *Web of Fear*) and followed the basic format that would become familiar to viewers over the following five years; an alien threat to the Earth is ultimately defeated by the Doctor's scientific ingenuity and UNIT's militaristic might. The story was deemed a success by both the production team and the audience prompting Bryant to push forward with his plans for a radical change to the show in the programme's seventh season the following year. As well as rewriting Cyberman mythology the Troughton era saw the introduction of many Doctor Who 'villains' that would prove immensely popular with the viewing public prompting many repeat performances over the following years. Season five saw the introduction of the Ice Warriors, scaly, reptilian creatures from the dying planet Mars, intent on migrating from their home world in order to colonise the Earth as seen in both *The Ice Warriors* and *The Seeds of Death* – they would return again a few years later in the Third Doctor stories *The Curse of Peladon* and *The Monster of Peladon*. They were scheduled to make a fifth appearance in 1985 during the Sixth Doctor's now infamous eighteen month hiatus, but due to pressure from certain heads of BBC programming this story, and the entire season, had to be dropped and was eventually replaced by the fourteen-part season arching story *Trial of a Time Lord* (more about that in a later article!).

The Macra, giant, crab-like creatures, were first seen in the 1967 story *The Macra Terror*, terrorising a holiday camp-like community of the future. They would not be seen again for another forty years when they made their recent triumphant return amidst the smog of New Earth in the Tenth Doctor story *Gridlock*. The mysterious Intelligence and it's robotic Yeti servants were seen roaming the remote mountainside near a Tibetan monastery and lurking in the shadows of the London underground system respectively in the stories *The Abominable Snowmen* and *Web of Fear*. Although very popular at the time and considered now to be classic other monsters such as the crystalline Krotons, the face-stealing Chameleons and the malevolent weed entity each made their one and only appearance in *Doctor Who* to date, though this may change in future years...who knows!

Interestingly, due to there declining popularity with audiences, the Second Doctor era saw the last purely historical story on the series for a whopping sixteen years with *The Highlanders*, the next would be the two-part Fifth Doctor story *Black Orchid* in 1982.

As was the case with the First Doctor before him very little is actually revealed about the character of the Doctor during Troughton's run. Indeed, after the shocking revelation that the Doctor possesses the ability to regenerate (replace or renew his body when it has become worn out or damaged) it is pretty much business as usual with regards to the adventures, which continues uninterrupted as it had done since the show began three years previous. It is not until the first story of Troughton's second season, *Tomb of the Cybermen*, that we are finally treated to a second, somewhat startling, fact regarding the Doctor's age. It is during a lull in the action, as the rest of the characters lie sleeping that the Doctor confesses to his rather incredulous companion, Victoria, that he is, in fact, over 450 years old. This news is made all the more fantastic due to the still recent change of the lead actor. If we had been given this news when Hartnell was still in the role it would have probably passed us by without a seconds thought, but now we were confronted by a much younger Doctor (Troughton being



almost twenty years younger than Hartnell when he took over the role) and there's no doubting that the impact of this news was far greater coming at this time! Unlike his predecessor the Second Doctor is prone to bouts of flustered confusion, childish sulking and comedic exclamations, such as "Oh my giddy aunt!" and "Oh crumbs!", although, like the First Doctor, the child-like stubbornness and over inflated self-importance is still very much in evidence. Perhaps the most important discovery that is made about the Doctor during the Second Doctor era (in fact, during the programmes entire forty-four year run so far) comes during the final story of Troughton's run on *Doctor Who*, the wonderful ten-part adventure *The War Games*. Facing a situation that is too far reaching and complex for him to resolve alone, the Doctor has no choice but to call on his own race, the very people he has

been running away from since he first stole the old Type 40 TARDIS and began his adventures – the Time Lords! Far removed from the tedious, petty, back-stabbing political power mongers that they would become in the hands of writer/script editor Robert Holmes during the 70s these Time Lords arrive like gods to the undulating cry of the Time Winds. All powerful and all seeing they strike terror into the hearts of all those that oppose them, they are the bringers of justice and the guardians of time. It is from this moment that we begin to see the character of the Doctor in a different light. If these are the omniscient, all powerful beings they appear to be then the Doctor is far from the funny, little, baggy-clothed clown he would have us believe. Here, at last, was the true alien nature that the Doctor has been concealing from us for all these years and in the face of such an opposing and threateningly mysterious race as this, regeneration and an infinitely prolonged life span do not seem such difficult concepts to accept any more.

When Virgin Books began releasing their Past Doctor novels in 1993/94 there was a distinct lack of regular Second Doctor novels. Writers, it seemed, were somewhat reluctant to tackle this particular incarnation. Several 'reasons' were passed around in the Who community, chief of these being that either it was hard to distinguish in print between the character of the Second Doctor and that of the Seventh Doctor or that due to the lack of episodes that survive from the Troughton era it was difficult for a writer to truly capture the feel and style of that particular period of the show's history. Of the two the former explanation is the harder to believe; apart from both characters being quite diminutive and having dark hair the two are totally dissimilar in how they approach and react to a situation and how they integrate themselves into the unfolding story. When the publishing license was picked up by BBC Books three years later novels featuring the Second Doctor began to appear more frequently. In 1985, when writing the scripts for *The Two Doctors*, Robert Holmes formulated the idea that when the Doctor was put on trial at the end of *The War Games* there was a period of time when he was forced to become an agent of the Time Lords. Because of this many authors found that they had a little more scope in expanding and adapting the original Second Doctor era beyond the constraints that were imposed on those authors writing for the First Doctor. Of all the novels released by Virgin and BBC Books by far the best is *The Roundheads* by Mark Gatiss who proved, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was neither difficult to capture the character of the Second Doctor nor that of his tenure on the programme!

By the end of his second season Patrick Troughton had become increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of the scripts and decided that the next season would be his last; he would, however, return to the role a total of three times over the next twenty years before its cancellation in 1989. Sadly, due to the BBC systematically destroying episodes from their archives in the latter half of the 1970s only 56 of Troughton's 119 episodes survive; only 6 of his stories exist in there entirety, a further 2 are 'almost' complete, the rest are odd episodes, mostly from his second season. Luckily, all ten episodes of his final story remain in tact and with it the terrible judgement imposed on him by his own people. Put on trial he is found guilty of stealing a TARDIS and interfering with the course of time. His punishment; to have his appearance altered yet again and to be exiled to the one planet he has visited the most throughout his adventures... Earth!

Coming Next Week: Fiction: *More Than a Butterfly* by January Mortimer

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