



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Doctor Who: Dragonfire

Writer Ian Briggs came to the BBC's Script Unit from studying drama at Manchester University, via a short stint as a member of the behind-the-scenes management team in local theatres. He soon met Andrew Cartmel who had recently become script editor on *Doctor Who* and was invited to pitch ideas for the programme's 24th series. Briggs duly pitched an idea which was rejected for being too derivative, but Cartmel saw promise in Briggs' writing and encouraged him to try again.

Cartmel had already decided that the series should end with a brace of three-part serials, one to be shot entirely on location, the other entirely in the studio. Malcolm Kohl's *Delta and the Bannermen* would be the location-set story, leaving a three episode slot that Briggs was encouraged to try to fill. His new pitch, titled *Absolute Zero*, featured a teenage financial whizz kid and his sidekick, Mr Spewey, who are scouring an icebound planet in search of a treasure that is eventually revealed to be a living creature.

Cartmel liked the idea and commissioned Briggs to write a detailed storyline on 9 March 1987. The script editor was unhappy about the emphasis on comedy and Briggs rewrote it in a more serious vein, introducing a new villain, Hess (later renamed Kane after the eponymous newspaper magnate in *Citizen Kane*), and retitled the story twice, first as *Pyramid in Space* and then *The Pyramid's Treasure*.

While Briggs worked on the new story outline, Cartmel and producer John Nathan-Turner were facing a quandary. Bonnie Langford, who had been playing companion Mel Bush since *Terror of the Vervoids* in series 23, had yet to commit to returning for the following series, so they put together a character outline for a new tomboy character then named Alf should she decide to move on. Briggs was shown the outline, but was advised to hold off including Alf in his script until Langford decided what she wanted to do. Instead, he introduced a not dissimilar character named Ace and the production team liked her enough to consider her as Mel's replacement, along with Ray, played by Sara Griffiths in *Delta and the Bannermen*.

By now, Briggs' scripts were bearing the more familiar title *Dragonfire* and he was encouraged to replace his space pirate character Razorback with Sabalom Glitz, a similarly roguish character played by Tony Selby in *The Mysterious Planet* segment of the previous year's *The Trial of a Time Lord*. With Langford's future on the programme still undecided, Nathan-Turner formally commissioned the first two scripts from Briggs on 13 April.

Sophie Aldred, who had auditioned unsuccessfully for the role of Ray in *Delta and the Bannermen*, and Cassie Stuart were the two actresses invited back for a second audition for the role of Ace (still at the time not confirmed as the new companion.) Aldred won the role, becoming what would turn out to be the last companion of *Doctor Who's* original incarnation.

Ace's promotion to full time member of the TARDIS crew came in June when Nathan-Turner, desperate for a commitment one way or the other from Langford, suggested that Mel be written out half way through the series. Langford herself only wanted to appear in the first story and a compromise

was reached, meaning that Mel would finally leave the Doctor at the end of *Dragonfire* to travel with Glitz aboard his new ship the Nosferatu II.

Ace was now formally chosen as the new companion over Ray and on 17 June, Aldred signed a contract for *Dragonfire*. On the day that recording began at BBC Television Centre's Studio 1, 28 July, Aldred agreed to appear in the whole of the next series and eight episodes of series 26 (in the end she would stay for all 14 episodes, through to the end of the original run of the programme). With the future companion finally decided, Briggs was able to complete the final script, relinquishing any further copyright on Ace, allowing the BBC to continue featuring her in the series. The story was directed by Chris Clough, who had just finished work on *Delta and the Bannermen*.

The infamous 'cliffhanger' scene at the end of the first episode was recorded on 12 August. For years, The Doctor's inexplicable decision to dangle by his umbrella from a railing overlooking an ice wall was ridiculed by fans and non-fans alike. In the script, The Doctor was forced to take this bizarre decision as the walkway led to a dead end and there was no other way to escape. Unfortunately, this is not at all clear in the episode as broadcast thanks to poorly chosen camera angles.

With recording completed, videotape editor Hugh Parson was tasked with the responsibility of bringing the episodes, which were overlong despite Cartmell's attempts to edit Briggs' lengthy scripts, down to the required length. Several scenes had to be cut, including one in which Glitz accidentally falls into a trap in corridors beneath Iceworld.

Dragonfire was broadcast on successive Mondays between 23 November and 7 December 1987, each episode averaging around 5 million viewers. It was broadcast opposite *Coronation Street* on ITV, which continued to damage the ratings which had been sliding since at least the start of series 23 and which were still showing little sign of recovering. Though viewing figures remained stable for the following series, they declined dramatically during series 26, contributing to the cancellation of *Doctor Who* in 1989.

Kevin Lyons, eofftv.com

DOCTOR WHO: DRAGONFIRE

Director: Chris Clough

©: BBC

Producer: John Nathan-Turner

Production Manager: Gary Downie

Production Associate: Ann Faggetter

Production Assistants: Rosemary Parsons, Karen King

Assistant Floor Manager: Christopher Sandeman

[Written] by: Ian Briggs

Script Editor: Andrew Cartmel

Lighting Director: Don Babbage

Camera Supervisor: Alec Wheal

Technical Co-Ordinator: Richard Wilson

Vision Mixer: Shirley Coward

Video-Tape Editor: Hugh Parson

Costume Designer: Richard Croft

Make-Up Designer: Gillian Thomas

Visual Effects Designer: Andy McVean

Video Effects: Dave Chapman

Titles: Gareth Edwards, CAL Video *

Designer: John Asbridge

Graphic Designer: Oliver Elmes

Theme Music Composed by: Ron Grainer

Theme Arrangement: Keff McCulloch

Incidental Music: Dominic Glynn

Song 'Singing Trees' by: Dick Mills *

Sound: Brian Clark

Special Sound: Dick Mills

Courtesy of BBC Studios

Doctor Who: The Collection – Season 24 is released on Blu-ray soon

Cast

Sylvester McCoy (*The Doctor*)

Bonnie Langford (*Mel*)

Tony Selby (*[Sabalom] Glitz*)

Edward Peel (*Kane*)

Patricia Quinn (*Belazs*)

Tony Osoba (*Kracauer*)

Sophie Aldred (*Ace*)

Shirin Taylor (*customer*)

Ian MacKenzie (*Anderson*)

Stephanie Fayerman (*McLuhan*)

Stuart Organ (*Bazin*)

Sean Blowers (*Zed*)

Nigel Miles-Thomas (*Pudovkin*)

Leslie Meadows (*the creature*)

Lynn Gardner (*announcer*)

Miranda Borman (*Stellar*)

Daphne Oxenford (*archivist*)

Chris MacDonnell (*Arnhem*)

Ian Bodenham, Ray Knight, Ross Murray, Sue Somerset (*Glitz's crew*) *

Chris Andrews, Jon Baker, Simon Brown, Keith Harvie (*guards*) *

Miles Ambrose, Olwyn Atkinson, Caroline Christie, Tricia Clark, Penny

Cole, Noel Drennan, Patrick Edwards, Christian Fletcher, Nick Florio, Rick

Florio, Andrew Hunter, Brian Jacobs, Ian Johns, Linda Kent, Harry Klein,

Eric Lindsey, Maggie Linton, Bill Malin, Gloria McGuire, Stuart Myers, Le

Pond, Denise Powell, Barbara Russell, Pat Shepherd, Doug Stark,

Julie Ann Wood (*customers/mercenaries*) *

UK 1987

3 x 25min + bonus content

* Uncredited

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump

Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10

Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire

Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10;

Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

Member Picks: Rumble Fish

Fri 2 Jul 17:30

Projecting the Archive: Trottie True (aka The Gay Lady)

+ intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting

Tue 6 Jul 18:00

Silent Cinema: Nell Gwyn + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon

Sun 18 Jul 15:30

Seniors' Free Archive Matinee: Cabin in the Sky

+ intro by writer Marcus Powell

Mon 19 Jul 14:00

Experimenta: Born in Flames + discussion

Thu 22 Jul 18:00

Relaxed Screening (tbc)

Tue 27 Jul 18:00

Terror Vision: Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things

Thu 29 Jul 21:00

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IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Censor + Q&A with director Prano Bailey-Bond

Thu 1 Jul 20:45

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 5 Jul 18:00

African Odysseys Present: European Premiere: The Milkmaid + Q&A with writer-director Desmond Ovbiagele and producer Oluseun Sowemimo

Sat 10 Jul 14:00

Black Lens Festival Opening Night: UK Premiere:

How to Stop a Recurring Dream + Q&A with director Ed Morris and actor Ruby Barker

Fri 16 Jul 18:00

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Girlfriends

Fri 16 Jul 18:15

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

First Cow From Fri 28 May

After Love From Fri 4 Jun (Q&A with director Aleem Khan and actor Joanna Scanlan on Sun 13 Jun 18:40)

Gunda From Fri 4 Jun

Fargo From Fri 11 Jun

The Reason I Jump From Fri 18 Jun

Nashville From Fri 25 Jun

Ultraviolence From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder

Supernova From Fri 2 Jul

Another Round From Fri 9 Jul

Jumbo From Fri 9 Jul

Deerskin From Fri 16 Jul

Girlfriends From Fri 23 Jul

Mandabi From Fri 23 Jul