

The memoir of *Doctor Who* producer
BARRY LETTS

A photograph of Barry Letts, the producer of Doctor Who, standing next to a companion. Barry Letts is on the left, wearing a purple jacket over a white ruffled shirt and a red vest. The companion is on the right, wearing a blue and white striped shirt and a dark tie. They are standing in front of a Dalek, a character from Doctor Who. The Dalek is a large, cylindrical, metallic creature with a dome-shaped head and a body covered in black spots. Barry Letts is holding a small, silver, cylindrical object in his right hand, which is a Dalek's weapon. The background is dark and indistinct.

WHO & ME

**FOREWORD BY
TERRANCE DICKS**

**AFTERWORD BY
KATY MANNING**

WHO & ME

The memoir of
Doctor Who producer

Barry Letts

1925 – 2009

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FOREWORD

What can I say about Barry Letts? Well, to begin with, we've been working colleagues and friend best friends, for 40 years. We met in 1969 when Barry took over as the new producer of *Doctor Who*. It's no exaggeration to say that his arrival saved my job, and probably the show as well.

I'd been on *Who* for a year as a sort of assistant trainee script editor. The show was flagging, the script situation was in chaos, and I had no real authority to sort things out. Then the previous producer and script editor left to set up another show, Barry took over and things began to change.

I always used to say, half-jokingly, that about this time four very important things happened to *Who* as a result of which the once-failing show became a roaring success. The show went into colour; Jon Pertwee became the Third Doctor; Barry Letts became producer; and I became full script editor.

'Modesty forbids my saying,' I used to go on, 'which was the most important...'

In fact, of course, it was the incredibly fortunate combination of all four. But if any one does predominate, it was undoubtedly the arrival of Barry as producer.

The producer is the show. People often ask what a producer does. The answer is – everything. He doesn't have any one job; his job is to oversee and facilitate everyone else's. He has, or had in those days, total control.

Barry had the first qualification for being a producer: he didn't want the job. A producer has so much power that people who want it shouldn't be allowed to have it – like the seekers of immortality in *The Five Doctors*. Barry's first love was directing. In fact he insisted on a clause in his production contract that he was to be allowed to direct the occasional show, and he seized the opportunity to direct a *Doctor Who* serial whenever possible.

Over the next five years we became good friends and close working colleagues. I can say that about my colleagues because of the generosity of Barry's nature. Although always the boss, he treated me as a friend and equal.

He never said 'I've decided...' but 'We've decided...'

During those years we turned the show around. We sorted out the script situation, evolving a collaborative method of working with writers that resulted in better scripts arriving in time. Ratings rose and, for a few golden years, *Doctor Who* was one of the BBC's top shows.

It all came to an end when Jon, probably wisely, decided that five years was long enough. Barry was keen to get back to directing, and I went with the flow. It was the end of an era.

What can I say about Barry himself?

The American comedian Will Rogers once said, 'I never met a man I didn't like.' Well, I never met a man who didn't like Barry Letts.

He is kind, modest, sensitive, caring and charming. Since I'm none of these things, it's a wonder we got on so well. But we did – and we do!

This book will tell you about his time as an actor and director before *Who*.

Above all, it tells about his time as producer of *Doctor Who*.

I only hope you enjoy reading about it as much as I did sharing it!

Terrance Dicks
September 2009

INTRODUCTION

‘I’m so glad you both could come,’ said Russell T Davies to Terrance Dicks and me. ‘Ever since we got together, Phil and I have been meaning to ask you to come and have lunch with us, but even just took over. We want you to know that we think your era was the best of the old *Who*...’

Over 35 years after we left *Doctor Who*, Terrance and I had been invited down to Cardiff for the première screening of the regenerated series. Terrance was script editor when I was producer. There was a reception beforehand, packed with press, but also with a lot of well-known faces to be glimpsed through the crowd.

Before we could even manoeuvre ourselves into the scrum around the wine bottles, Russell Davies pushed his way through to us, with the producer, Phil Collinson.

And he went on to tell us that they were quite consciously trying to take what we had done and express it in modern-day terms. This first episode made it very clear, picking up the first Jon Pertwee story about the Autons. The intention was to give a signal to the fans that this was their own *Doctor Who*, brought up to date but keeping the spirit of the show at its best. And they’ve succeeded magnificently.

Of course, there’ve been some big changes – the biggest being the personalities at the centre. All the first eight Doctors and most of their companions ‘talked posh’, after all. At first, it was quite a shock to hear Chris Eccleston’s northern accent. But it’s bang-on right. When *Who* started in 1963, the BBC was middle class to its core, and thought of its target audience as middle class. But *Doctor Who* is for everybody, and the new producers have recognised the fact.

But quite apart from that, it doesn’t matter how much the Doctor changes his surface personality. On the contrary, one of its strengths has been precisely that each Doctor was very different from his predecessors.

I was very aware of that when I was producer. Jon Pertwee’s dignified dandyish persona had been chosen as a contrast to the clownish ‘space hobo’ that Patrick Troughton had given us. And after I’d cast Tom Baker to take over from Jon, Philip Hinchcliffe, the incoming producer, and I invited him to have lunch with us at the Balzac restaurant (and a very good lunch it was) to meet Bob Holmes, the script editor, and to work out with the three of us his approach to the new characterisation.

The one thing we were all agreed on was that the last thing we wanted was a ‘poor man’s Jon Pertwee’; and what emerged, as a deliberate contrast, was the wild bohemian fourth Doctor, with his floppy hat and long scarf (though we didn’t plan it to be quite so long!).

But the core Doctor is always the same – and remains the same in Chris Eccleston’s and David Tennant’s sparkling characterisations: eager for every new experience, and seizing upon each opportunity to fight against those, whether human or alien, who will use evil means to gain their own self-centred ends.

Thank you Russell, thank you Phil, thank you everybody.

I never appeared in *Doctor Who* when I was an actor. But having spent over 20 years living in the same world that Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee and, later, Tom Baker came from; I could talk to them in their own language.

The world we came from was a world where every town of any size had a repertory company, with a different play every week; where actors would happily take to the road in year-long tours; where the flickering, often distorted black and white images of television were only beginning to infiltrate the homes and minds of the Great British Public, as we sometimes called the amorphous multi-eyed creature we courted and on whose favour we depended.

So I had shared their hopes and their fears; and I knew that behind the public face of each of the there lived a very different and slightly odd being whose nerve endings were much nearer the surface than most.

When Chummy, my wife, and I were still ‘in the profession’ we had to make a conscious effort to stop referring to those outside it as ‘real people’. Yet that’s how different we felt. So in this book I’ve tried to give you some idea of the Patrick and Jon that I knew what they were really like. Tom I’ll have to leave until next time.

But it isn’t just a book of gossip. I’ve also tried to let you know what it was like to be part of this extraordinary enterprise as it took hold of the public imagination and put down the roots which have allowed it to grow and flourish for over 40 years – and for how much longer? It’s not strictly chronological; but not ‘stream of consciousness’ either; maybe halfway in between. Conversation perhaps.

I’ve chosen the title quite deliberately. This is a book about *Doctor Who*, certainly, but it’s also a book about me. There’d be no point in writing it otherwise, considering all the excellent books which have already been published giving so much of the background of the show.

(Thank you, David Howe, Mark Stammers, Stephen James Walker, Peter Haining, Jean-Marie Lofficier. Time and again you came to my rescue with precisely the detail I was searching for.)

What was my background? What was it like to be an actor in live television? How did I come to be a director, and then the producer of *Who*? And what was it like to do the job?

I’ve been honest with you. If I think I screwed up I say so. But if I’m proud of something, I haven’t hidden behind the false self-deprecation that’s customary.

What else? Well, I’m quite sure that amongst my readers there’ll be those who are already involved in making television, or films – and many who would like to be. So whenever it seemed fit, I’ve given you some tips on the best way of going about it, the kind of thing I’d have found invaluable myself.

And then there’s Zen...

CHAPTER 1

When I first worked with Patrick Troughton in a TV studio, I was wearing a ridiculous wig.

You can't help being self-centred if you're an actor. After all, this self – this intensely intimate thing you've lived with all your life – is your stock-in-trade.

Many people think that actors in general and stars in particular, have exaggerated self-esteem, that they are terminally conceited, even arrogant. Some may be. They certainly give that impression. But from my experience (and I've been working with actors for more than three-quarters of my life) is that most are covering up an extreme vulnerability, that they are desperate for approval – and, yes, love in its broadest sense.

Like Jon Pertwee, for instance. But more of that later.

Certainly, when I first met Patrick Troughton in the scruffy church hall that was the rehearsal room for *Gunpowder Guy*, the half-hour play for children about Guy Fawkes which was to be my television debut, my actor's ego was still smarting from the wig-fitting I'd just had.

In 1605 the fashion for men was to have their hair hanging down each side of the face in a type of long bob, a style which was profoundly unflattering for practically anybody. As for me, I looked like a proper onion; and so did the majority of my co-conspirators, as I saw when we got to the studio on the day of the performance – especially with those silly hats on.

But not Patrick as Guy Fawkes. With the clout of an established leading man, he'd been able to insist on an entirely inauthentic sweep of the side hair behind his ears, which gave him the look of a romantic hero.

Patrick was one of the early TV stars, particularly in children's television. He loved screen acting both for television and in films. Kenneth More, with whom I worked in *Scott of the Antarctic* and *Reach for the Sky* (now come on, you're bound to get a bit of name-dropping in this sort of book), told me that he found theatre work boring, having to repeat your performance night after night. Patrick felt the same. He called theatre acting 'shouting in the evenings'.

The result was that Patrick was quite at home in the television studio, even so early in its development. For this was in 1950, well over half a century ago.

I'm what the historians call a primary source. I was there.

The picture was of course in black and white, and of very low definition (405 lines, for those with technical minds). ITV didn't come along until 1955, and BBC2 wasn't even being discussed as a possibility; so there was only the one channel – and it was live. And that made quite a difference to the actors, believe me.

It couldn't be anything else but live. Even telerecording – the filming of the picture as it was being transmitted – wasn't yet practical. The problem of electronic video-recording certainly hadn't yet been solved. The difficulty of transferring the well-established techniques of audio-taping to the visual medium was due to the enormous amount of information that would be needed to recreate each frame; and there were 25 (yes, 25, not 24 as in film) frames to every second.

The BBC's first attempt, a tape recorder which was really nothing but a very large version of an audio machine, had been demonstrated by Richard Dimbleby on *Panorama*, live. It had reels of one-inch tape about two feet in diameter, spinning so fast that if the tape broke, which was exceedingly likely, the whole reel was likely to end up a tangled mess on the floor. It wasn't until the brilliant invention of the helical-scan machines, which slowed the tape to a manageable speed, that we could pre-record a show.

So all drama was live, apart from a minimal amount of pre-filmed location footage, which of course had to be played in as part of the transmission.

Like most actors I suffered from intense 'first night nerves', even though I'd learnt over several years of theatre and radio experience to transmute the resulting adrenalin buzz into a heightened intensity of performance. But with *Gunpowder Guy*...!

We'd had one week's outside rehearsal, and a short day with the cameras in Studio D at Lime Grove, the former Gainsborough film studio; and now, at five o'clock on Guy Fawkes Day 1950, our performance was going to be watched by an audience of hundreds of thousands, if not a couple of million.

Not only that, but as we waited, fiddle-string taut, for the drop of the hand from Mike, the floor manager, that would cue us to leap into action, we gradually became aware that the wait was becoming agonisingly long.

At last, he gently let his arm drop. 'Relax everybody,' he said. 'The transmitter at Ally Pally has broken down.'

So we took a deep breath and relaxed.

Ten seconds later, his arm shot up again. 'Stand by!' he barked.

We stiffened into our characters, like a bunch of Madame Tussaud's waxworks.

Minutes ticked by.

'It's gone again,' said Mike. 'No, no! Stand by!'

This happened twice more, by which time I was ready to relinquish my television career forever.

I wasn't the only television virgin that day. As well as me, at least two more of us had been cast by Rex Tucker from the stable of actors he'd worked with when he was producing and directing dramas for the Home Service, as Radio 4 was called then. And what's more, *Gunpowder Guy* was also Rex's first go at his new job.

I'd been used to Rex coming out of the control gallery in the radio studio in Leeds, smiling and saying 'Well done' to everybody even if there had been the odd minor cock-up during a live transmission (like my saying '...fuck-funking it' in a production of *Hobson's Choice*).

But on 5 November 1950 he came down the iron steps from the gallery as pale and shaking as the rest of us. 'Well, I suppose that was all right,' he said, obviously trying to forget the lost camera, the occasional prompt, the wrong position that had ruined the carefully constructed group shot, and so on and so on, just as we were.

And it was all right. Because none of this had fazed Patrick Troughton in the slightest. He'd given his usual strong performance, carrying the play as the character had to. Rex's boss, Cecil Madden, the new head of Children's Television, was very pleased with the show – and Audience Research later confirmed what a success it had been with the viewers.

It was a great lesson for the future: it's the director's job to tell the story, using all the means at his disposal – the cameras, the sets, the music and so on – but it's the writing and the acting that really matter.

'See you in the club,' said Patrick to us all, and in an undertone to me as he turned to leave the studio, 'I'm dying for a cigarette...'

He and I had already struck up an immediate friendship based on the fact that we were both heavy smokers. During the camera rehearsal in Studio D, whenever there was one of the tedious waits while they sorted out some technical problem, we would slip out onto the fire escape for a quick draw.

Though it took some five years of abortive attempts, I managed to give up – on 10 March 1960, just as the Royal Society of Physicians published the first unarguable evidence that smoking could, and most likely would, either give you lung cancer or kill you with a heart attack. It gave me just the extra boost that I needed and this time I made it.

Pat wasn't so lucky. Some years later he had to have a lung removed.

And then, in 1978, when he heard that I was about to produce Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*

he got in touch with me and asked if he could play the villain, Quilp, as he'd played it for BBC television about 15 years before, and felt that he hadn't got it quite right.

I was delighted to agree of course, and so was the director, Julian Amyes; and when we came to the pre-filming on location our decision was proved to be right over and over again. This was going to be the definitive Quilp for our time.

However, if you were to view *The Old Curiosity Shop* now (it went out in the States on PBS as part of the *Once Upon a Classic* strand), you might spot that though it's Patrick in all the filmed sequences, in the studio interiors, recorded on video, the part is played, excellently, by Trevor Peacock. (They were enough alike for us to be able to save the large cost of remounting the filming)

Pat had had a heart attack after the exterior filming had been completed.

It was another heart attack that killed him in 1987, three days after his 67th birthday and his return to America for a *Doctor Who* convention.

The trouble was... no, I'd better rephrase that. The fact that he threw himself into whatever he was doing with 110 per cent glee wasn't a trouble. It was intrinsic to his personality.

If you asked him to do something over and above the call of duty, he'd think for a moment, and then either say, 'No!' with absolute finality, or he'd say, 'Great! Great!' And give you far more than you'd asked for.

An example. One of the early jobs I had after I left acting in 1965 was to direct *The Enemy of the World*, the *Doctor Who* story in which Patrick played not only the Doctor but also the villain Salamander, a look-alike who might have been his twin.

When the TARDIS first arrives in the Australia of the future in which the tale is set, it lands on a beach. The script called for the Doctor to pull off his shoes and go for a paddle in the sea. But of course the sea in question wasn't the semi-tropical warm bath of the Southern Hemisphere, but the near freezing English Channel near Littlehampton. So I asked him well in advance if he was happy to have a go.

A fairly long pause. Then: 'Great! Great! Tell you what, why don't I strip off to my long johns and go for a swim?' And that's just what he did.

That was Patrick Troughton.

I worked as an actor with Pat quite a number of times, and got to know him well, so when I was asked to direct *The Enemy of the World*, I was delighted that I would have the chance of working with him wearing a different hat.

It was the cherry on the delicious cake of being offered a proper six-part serial, after several months (which I'd thoroughly enjoyed) of directing twice-weeklies. I felt that I'd graduated, and was about to join the grown-up world.

Being grown-up is all very well; but it means you're exposed to all the vicissitudes that go with it.

As you can imagine, the most important element in the run-up to the production of a play, a film or a television serial like *Doctor Who* is the script. Until the final version is available it's just about impossible to get on with casting, design, location hunting, scheduling... To an extent you can manage with storylines which tell you the content of each episode. But things do change. Or have to be changed.

When I arrived to start work on *The Enemy of the World*, I was presented with only a draft script for the first episode and just rough synopses of the rest.

I don't know whose fault it was. Innes Lloyd had been the producer for over a year, with his script editor, Peter Bryant, sometimes taking over from him for the odd story. Peter was about to take over completely, so his successor, Derrick Sherwin, was also on the scene.

The writer was the *Doctor Who* veteran David Whitaker, one of the pioneers who was the first story editor, and also wrote the third serial ever in 1963.

From what I learnt later when I took over as producer, it wasn't likely that he was responsible for the indefensible position I was put in.

Did I mention location hunting? The Australian beach wasn't the empty one you may remember you saw it all those years ago. The lone script started with the TARDIS, containing the Doctor (Patrick Troughton), Jamie (Frazer Hines) and Victoria (Debbie Watling), appearing on the seafront of a crowded resort.

Apart from the cost, by the time we would be shooting summer would be well and truly over, so there would be no hope of using Southend or Margate as a stand-in for Oz.

The first decision was obvious: to change the word 'crowded', as in 'crowded beach', to 'deserted'.

But that meant, of course, that the attacks on the Doctor in the amusement arcades, the gift shops and the fast-food joints would have to be replaced by something else.

At least I was able to have an input into the story.

I can't remember whether I made the discovery of a certain news item or whether my production manager, Martin Lisemore, did.

The news story was about a hovercraft which had been built as an experiment by a retired Naval Architect who lived in Worthing on the South Coast – and he was delighted when we asked if the thugs who were trying to assassinate the Doctor could use it on the empty beach that Martin had found a few miles down the road. This was a pretty recent invention, a completely new concept: a vehicle/boat riding on a cushion of air over land and sea alike. The first giant to rival the cross-Channel ferries had gone into service about a year before – but ours was less than 20 feet long. It had a cabin capable of holding three people at an uncomfortable pinch.

Few people had seen one at all, so it was ideal for a story which was set a few years in the future.

But how were the Doctor and his companions to escape? The hovercraft could follow them just about anywhere...

Aha! They could be rescued by our guest star, Mary Peach, flying a helicopter. A super way. (super? There's a lip-smacking period word; well, we were shooting this in 1967, weren't we?) ... a super way to introduce the heroine of the tale, Astrid, a direct pinch from the leather-clad superwoman played by Diana Rigg and Honor Blackman in *The Avengers*.

But having introduced the helicopter, we'd have to get rid of it. It could be an embarrassment if Astrid could swoop in at any moment in the six episodes and sort things out like a hi-tech guardian angel.

And what about the thugs? We didn't need them anymore, either.

An extract from the script (we and the gang have just seen the thugs steal the helicopter and take off):

ASTRID: Oh no! I told you we'd made it just in time. There's a bad petrol leak. It'll blow up!

AND IT DOES.

A clunky device, but it did the trick.

Martin found a film clip of a helicopter exploding in mid-air. It was one of the alternative shots of a model of the SPECTRE helicopter in the James Bond film, *From Russia with Love*, and Martin also managed to find a real one for us to use that more or less matched.

It worked so well that I later wrote the same thing into the black-magic myth, *The Daemons*, the first Jon Pertwee story that Bob Sloman and I wrote together. A sub-villain, chasing the Doctor and J

Grant in the UNIT helicopter, flies into the 'heat-barrier' that Azal, the resurrected Daemon, has created over the village of Devil's End, and...

We used the same shot.

CHAPTER 2

Talking of James Bond and the helicopter...

As we'd got it on location for a day, I was determined to make full use of it. We got ahead of the schedule, and I had an idea.

In a film I'd seen fairly recently, there was a spectacular shot, obviously using a helicopter, which I thought we might duplicate; or rather, have a go at a poor man's version.

For more than 35 years, I've been convinced that the shot was in a James Bond film (probably *From Russia with Love*) but I've checked all those in existence in 1967, and I can't find it. Perhaps somebody can enlighten me.

Two people are having lunch together in a railway dining car. The scene finishes with a wide two-shot, a double profile, with one on each side of the table. They talk for a while, and then the camera pulls back, and we see that we have been looking through the window of the train.

But that's not all. The camera goes on pulling back, and up, and up, and up, higher and higher until we can see all the carriages. And still it goes up, settling at last on a view of the entire train snaking its way through a miniature countryside.

'They'd have had a special mounting – probably gyroscopic,' said Fred Hamilton, our cameraman when we broke for lunch and I said I wanted to try a similar shot in the afternoon, swooping up in the air from a close shot of the chief thug, played by Rhys McConnochie, firing at us.

Oh well.

But towards the end of the break, he sought me out where I was checking the positions of the afternoon set-ups, and said, 'I've had a word with the pilot, and we reckon we could have a go.'

The helicopter was one of those small jobs with a bubble cabin at the front. The pilot, whose name was Jack, had agreed to take the doors off, so that Fred, the mad glorious fool, could sit on the edge of the deck, with his feet on the right-hand skid, and do a hand-held shot. He was loosely attached with rope, but that was more of a gesture to allay the anxieties of poor Martin, who was responsible for the safety of the unit, than a real safeguard.

There was a snag.

'I'll have to have somebody sitting on the other side of me, to balance Fred,' said Jack.

Ah.

Remembering the General Montgomery/Laurence Olivier principle... (what's that? Simple. You never ask anybody to do anything you're not prepared to do yourself) ...I volunteered.

Admittedly I was strapped in, but the open space where the left-hand door had been was only a foot away. And normally even looking over the Clifton Suspension Bridge gives me the heebie-jeebies in my loins.

It wasn't a sound shot, of course, so we could dispense with the clapper board.

Start the engine.

Turnover.

'Running,' says Fred.

I signal to Martin. 'Action,' he yells, over the noise of the rotors. Rhys runs into position and starts firing his automatic. I touch Jack's shoulder, the signal for him to take off.

Up we go, with a heavy list to starboard. Well, Fred is a big lad, six foot two and counting, and I'm a measly five eight.

Now what? Down we come, settling back into the starting position.

'Do you mind if we have another go?' shouts Jack.

This time we swoop up, and up, and up, exactly as planned.

‘Do you know,’ said Jack casually after we’d landed. ‘The three of us were as near being killed then as we’re ever likely to be. Another couple of seconds and we’d have side-slipped into the ground with Fred underneath...’

The shot worked beautifully.

At that time the number of *Doctor Who* half-hour episodes in a year averaged 40; indeed, Patrick’s last season there were 44. There was the short break in the summer, but apart from that the pressure on the actors and the production teams was relentless.

Having rehearsed from Monday to Friday in an outside rehearsal room – usually a church hall, or a youth club – they would find themselves, all too soon, with a full day’s camera rehearsal in the studio on the Saturday, leading up to an hour and a quarter of recording in the evening.

Sundays were nominally off, but of course there were next week’s lines to learn. It never let up.

So how did we fit in the location filming?

The rule of thumb was to have a day’s shoot – up to six minutes of screen time – for each episode. So with a six-episode serial like *Enemy of the World* we had about a week to get everything in. But how could we, when our good Doctor and the other principal actors were back in London recording the previous story?

Doubles, that’s how. In long shot. And then, at the end of the week, Pat, Debbie and Frazer gave up their precious Sunday to come down to Littlehampton to fill in all the closer shots.

The script position was so dire that the dialogue rewrites hadn’t arrived by the time we went off the coast; so we were in the position of improvising our lines to fit the situation. We all had a go.

THE HELICOPTER LANDS. THE PILOT JUMPS OUT AND SHOUTS TO THEM.

ASTRID: Quick! Over here!

THE DOCTOR LEAPS INTO ACTION.

DOCTOR: Come on!

VICTORIA AND JAMIE ARE TERRIFIED.

[Well, they would be, wouldn’t they? Victoria’s from the 19th century and Jamie from the 18th..]

VICTORIA: What is it?

DOCTOR: It’s a chopper! A whirly-bird!

JAMIE: He says it’s a bird...

DOCTOR: Come on!!

Additional dialogue by Patrick Troughton.

I had a nasty shock some weeks earlier than this when I was on my personal recce on the beach, alone by myself, finding the camera positions.

The beach, which was a private one owned by the Littlehampton golf club, whose course was just the other side of the sand dunes, was deserted.

Not quite. In the distance a small figure was approaching from the direction of the lane almost

mile away, which was the main access. He waved to me, so I went to meet him. It was nearly ten minutes before I was close enough to see that it was a diminutive boy scout (in the khaki uniform of the day).

‘Are you Barry Letts?’ he said. ‘Your secretary wants you to give her a ring. It’s urgent.’

Of all the odd moments of my life, this must rank as one of the most surreal.

He’d found a note pinned to the gate – left there by the owner of the hovercraft!

‘The bookers [*the contract department*] have been on to me,’ said Rosemary. ‘We’ve lost Mary Peach.’

Oh no! Innes had the policy of having a guest ‘name’ or two, in this case Bill Kerr and Mary Peach. During the last few years, she had caught the public eye with a series of cracking performances for ITV, notably for *Armchair Theatre*. Her costume was already being made and we were due to start filming in just over a week.

It seemed that our booker had looked up the last fee that the BBC had paid her, when she was a relatively unknown playing a relatively tiny part, and told her agent that this was the fee this time too. Not negotiable.

The agent, quite rightly, said that in that case the Beeb would have to do without his valuable client.

And neither would budge.

This is just the sort of thing that a producer is there to cope with. But both Innes and Peter were away on legitimate *Who* business, sorting out a tricky location for a future story.

I spoke to the booker. And his boss. Would they listen to me? BBC policy, they said.

It took the intervention of the lofty Head of the Drama Serials Department to move them. And they still insisted on putting the final agreed amount into Mary’s contract in scarlet ink, marked *SPECIAL FEE*, so that they could try the same trick again next time.

I’d sold the part of Astrid to Mary on the strength of the story synopsis, as there were no scripts to show her, and emphasising the *Avengers* connection. After all, hadn’t playing the original turned Diana Rigg into a big national star?

And then episode five arrived from David, and Astrid wasn’t even in it.

It had to be completely rewritten.

At a policy meeting of producers and script editors, attended by Terrance (I wasn’t there until somewhat later than this, a lengthy discussion sprang up about scripts. Over and over again it was emphasised that late scripts were the bane of production.

And then a gloomy voice came from the back of the room. ‘That’s all very well – but when they do arrive, are they any bloody good?’

By the time *The Enemy of the World* had arrived on the screens of the millions panting with anticipation, it was a right old mish-mash of good and bad. It’s a great pity that the only episode that survived, and was included in the video *The Troughton Years*, was one of the poorest. The stuff in the kitchen, for instance, goes on far too long. It’s full of padding; and padding shows up at its dullest in a half-hour show.

And isn’t it ridiculous that the VIP prisoner, Denes (played by George Pravda), is held in a corridor, rather than in a room?

The whole episode (number three) is lacking in tension. Nobody is in any real danger, except poor old Denes, and we don’t know him well enough to care very much.

That’s not to say that other episodes weren’t a lot more exciting; the rewritten number five, for instance, where we visited Salamander’s control caverns deep underground.

It isn’t a typical *Who* story by any means. The central idea is that the villain Salamander fortuitously looks like the Doctor’s identical twin, so that Patrick played both parts, and had the

obligatory scene at the end when he meets himself. It was enough in the future for Salamander to be able to control natural events (via 'solar energy'. Eh?), such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes and using them to try to get ultimate control of the whole world. A James Bondish story.

As always, the whole thing is saved by Pat. His Salamander isn't the usual moustache-twirling melodramatic villain usual at that period of the programme, but a more than real monster of evil that chills the blood.

You're either an actor or you aren't. If you're not, you can spend years at an all-singing, all-dancing, copper-bottomed, organic drama school, and you'll still not fool those who know.

A good school can be invaluable in cutting and polishing a rough diamond, but if you're the real thing, you'll quickly learn on the job. Patrick went to a drama school, true, but neither of his two sons David and Michael, did. Both stepped straight into the profession from school, and quickly made their mark.

David made his first professional appearance in a *Doctor Who*. But it wasn't as the young king in *The Curse of Peladon*, as some of you may think. Nor, as the real experts will know, was it in the first episode of *The War Games*. It was in *The Enemy of the World*.

David was on holiday from his last year at school. He'd already made up his mind that he was going to follow his dad, so Patrick asked me if I could give him a walk-on part, just for the experience.

He played the guard who got Jamie's elbow in his midriff – and collapsed so convincingly that I had to keep the camera off him so that the viewer wouldn't be distracted from the escape attempt.

As I'd expected, I enjoyed working with Pat, even though his view of the dialogue (whether by the author, the script editor or even by P Troughton Esquire) was not even a rough blueprint, but more an idea scribbled on the back of an old envelope. Speech as written:

DOCTOR: Ah, Mr Bloggs. Do come in. Take a seat.

Speech in rehearsal:

DOCTOR: Come in, come in. Mr Bloggs, isn't it? Do sit down.

Speech on the take:

DOCTOR: Oh, there you are. Come in and take a pew. Now then, Mr Bloggs...

This sort of semi-improvisation infuriated Jon Pertwee during rehearsals of *The Three Doctors*:

[Patrick finishes speaking.]

LONG PAUSE

JON: Is that what you're going to say?

PATRICK: Never mind what I'm going to say. You concentrate on what you're going to say.

JON: (PLAINTIVELY AND WITH BARELY SUPPRESSED IRRITATION) How can I know what I'm going to say until I know what you're going to say?

In the end they became good friends, appearing together at an American convention – in a play written by Terrance overnight in his hotel bedroom – which capitalised on their supposed antagonism, enjoying it so much that they insisted on two repeat performances.

We could have mounted a nationwide search with full press coverage and couldn't have ended up with two more different personalities than Jon and Patrick. They shared two things (and you could say the same about 'my' other Doctor, Tom Baker): when they were on the screen you couldn't take your eyes off them; and they were enormously likeable. Yet...

Jon: Over-sensitive; self-centred; worried (in spite of his very successful career); manipulative; a good 'performance' actor; indeed he was usually giving a performance even when he was just being Jon.

Pat: Quietly confident in spite of the inevitable actor's vulnerability I spoke of earlier (he hated to be teased); sure of his own worth; wouldn't suffer fools; a true character actor who transformed himself.

I was fond of them both.

Having worked with Pat so many times, I knew him as the good-hearted soul that he was. Jon was a kind and unselfish man as well; indeed, his sensitivity was extended to everyone else. He did a lot to turn our casts and crew into a cohesive and happy company. For example, when a newcomer (even if playing a small part) arrived in the rehearsal room, he'd wander over and introduce himself.

'Hello, I'm Jon Pertwee. I play the Doctor.'

No, really?

He made good friends of all the stunt men and other actors who were regularly cast. He was amusing and charming, and could surprise you with flashes of unexpected humility.

I'll give you an example.

The producer (which was my prime role by the time I was working with Jon) didn't go to the daily by-day rehearsals. So it came as a surprise, about halfway through his reign as the Doctor, when Sue Hedden, one of our well-established assistant floor managers, told me that the other actors were complaining about Jon.

Since the death of live drama, prompters were no longer necessary during the performance, but AFMs still 'carried the book' at rehearsal. It appeared that Jon wasn't making any attempt to learn his lines at home, but using the rehearsal time to get them into his head, much to everybody's annoyance.

I could see how this had happened. He was a very busy man. He was still keeping up the occasional cabaret appearance; and since becoming a national star he was in constant demand for opening supermarkets and such (for a handsome fee) and charity bazaars (for nothing). Fitting in what actors call 'study' was just about impossible.

Luckily this was the last story of the season, and Jon had asked me if it would be possible for me to lay on a showing of a serial he'd missed on transmission. (This was of course long before the introduction of home video-recording.)

So I took the opportunity, when we were alone in the little viewing theatre after we'd seen the playback, to bring this up.

'You've been an actor, Barry,' he said. 'You know how difficult it is to learn your lines at home.'

'Yes,' I answered. 'But I also know that unless you make the effort, it just wastes time. It's really frustrating for the other actors – and the director for that matter.'

He didn't respond – and we repaired to the BBC club and drank a friendly glass of wine.

Now, it so happened that Sue Hedden was the AFM on the next story after the break, and when on the second day it came to Jon's first scene, he sailed through without a pause. 'Good God,' said Sue. 'You know it!'

‘Yes,’ said our star, in front of the entire company, ‘Barry took me into a corner and gave me bollocking.’

CHAPTER 3

But of course, 17 years had separated *Gunpowder Guy* and *The Enemy of the World*. How was that I had moved from playing a smallish part in the one to being the director of the other? For that matter, where had I come from? How did the Fates steer me along the way that would lead me to being the producer of *Doctor Who*?

‘We think we can turn you into a film star!’

How would you react if somebody said that to you? Especially if that somebody was speaking the name of the famous Ealing Studios?

It was Robert Hamer, later to become famous as the director of such films as *It Always Rains on Sunday* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*.

I was 18; it was Saturday 14 August 1943. No, I don’t keep a diary; I remember the date because it was two days away from my going into the Navy. I’d just spent something like four months playing Taff, the apprentice deck officer, in *San Demetrio, London*, the true story of a bunch of British seamen who reboarded their abandoned oil-tanker, put out the fires and filled in the shell-holes, and brought her safely back home.

Robert Hamer was the Associate Producer, and had directed us for a while when Charles Frennd fell ill.

They gave me £100 a year retainer for the three years I was in the Royal Navy – not to be spurned especially in my first months as an Ordinary Seaman, a rating somewhat lower than the ship’s cat.

And when I came out in 1946, I became a film star.

Well, no. As a matter of fact I didn’t, as you may have noticed.

I had a three-year contract: £1000 for the first year; £2000 for the second; and £3000 for the third. Riches beyond the dreams of avarice, as Oswald Bastable says in E Nesbit’s book *The Treasure Seekers*. The most I’d earned in my three years of weekly rep (yes, I became an actor at 15. The theatres were desperate. Nearly all the juveniles were busy fighting the war) was £6 a week – roughly £300 a year. Now I was on course to earn ten times that.

And what’s more, I was going to become a star.

What went wrong?

While I’d been away, the sparky little Ealing Studios had been completely overshadowed by the Colossus of the Rank Organisation. My contract had been handed over to Rank. Instead of being one of half a dozen contract artists, I was one of 40. I was lost in the crowd.

But I wasn’t really film star material. I’m a good actor, but I’m simply not good at selling myself. You have to play the game. I used to watch the others – Christopher Lee, for example – happily laying out their wares to the producers and the casting directors who came to the weekly ‘cocktail party’ laid on by the organisation for this very purpose: for them to meet the contract artists.

I was jealous, yes, but I knew I couldn’t do it myself.

There were two long-term consequences of my two years with Rank. (Yes, only two years. They dropped me, and I don’t blame them.) One, a colossal tax bill that took another two years to pay off, and two, meeting a girl, Muriel Pears, known as Chummy, who was playing a member of the cycling club in *A Boy, a Girl and a Bike*, the last film I appeared in under my contract. She was 18 years old, she had chestnut hair and freckles, and she was the most alive person I’d ever met.

Reader, I married her; and it was one of the best things I’ve ever done.

Before the war, if you were under 16, you could get into the cinemas in Leicester for sixpence.

provided you bought your ticket before four o'clock.

In 1939, when I was 14, I went to see *The Wizard of Oz*, getting to the cinema at ten o'clock in the morning, and sat through three complete programmes: the main feature (three times); a B film (three times); the news (three times); a travelogue designed to empty the theatre (three times); and the wretched organist, whose rise from whatever circle of hell he inhabited between times was my sign to go to the gents and come back to a different seat, so that the ushers wouldn't spot me. I left the cinema at ten o'clock at night, starving, but purring inside. And all for sixpence.

At the Wyggeston grammar school we had a half-holiday on Wednesdays – going to school on Saturday mornings instead – during which the house rugby matches were played. Dick Attenborough (not Dickie in those days) and I were both in our house teams, so we would forgo the delights of an after-game shower, and shoot off as fast as our muddy legs would carry us to catch a tram ride into town – only a ha'penny if you were at school – to get to the cinema box-office before four o'clock. It was a narrow squeak sometimes but we always made it.

It was on the way home from one of these jaunts (walking to save the ha'penny) that we solemnly decided that if Tyrone Power could make it as a film star with that nose, the same shape that we shared, then we could too.

Dick did. I didn't.

Dick's Dad was the principal of University College, Leicester, which eventually became Leicester University. Coming from that world, he wasn't sure that his son's ambition to go into the theatre was an entirely good idea; and when Dick was 14 or 15, he was persuaded that Doctor sounded better than Actor (you could always be an amateur), and managed to persuade me too, at least to the extent of taking biology for a year, though I quickly reverted to my long-held ambition.

In those days, the equivalent of GCSE was the School Certificate. It was a very similar exam, with one crucial difference: it wasn't modular. You couldn't take your subjects separately. All had to be passed in one go or you were told that you'd failed. What's more, certain subjects were compulsory: English and Maths, for example. If you 'failed' in the summer, you were allowed to take the whole exam again in the winter term.

Dick flunked one subject (Latin, I believe) on the first occasion; and another on the second.

Perhaps he did it on purpose, because he was then allowed to apply to RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) and won a scholarship, which didn't surprise me at all.

Dick has always had the knack of making instant friends with everybody, whether it was the local greengrocer or a famous film director. Quite apart from his undoubted dramatic talent, this, together with his incredible determination (think of the film of *Gandhi*; he remortgaged his house to get it off the ground), is the thing that has taken him to the very top.

Until I met Chummy, and learnt from her how to 'be myself' with anybody, I found it almost impossible: a great handicap when what you are trying to sell is yourself.

I didn't become a star. But I wasn't unsuccessful.

After more rep, and a nasty year which included a stint on night work at Wall's ice cream factory in Acton, a career I wouldn't recommend to anyone, I attended a mass audition for the second lead, the villainous Petty Officer, in the Number One tour (magic words to an actor) of the smash hit *Seagull over Sorrento*, which had Ronnie Shiner as the star. It was 1953, and the part I was going for had been played for the four years of the London run by William Hartnell, who ten years later was to become the first Doctor.

I got the part, and my life was turned round.

After a tour of more than a year which was like a paid holiday (more trouble from a greedy Inland Revenue), back in London I landed the lead in the BBC children's Christmas special on Boxing Day 1954 – Prince Ahmed in *The Three Princes*, by Rex Tucker, directed by Shaun Sutton.

We had a day's camera rehearsal on Christmas Day (cold turkey reheated in the oven when I got home), another on the 26th, and did the show live in the evening.

When I left Lime Grove after the transmission – at this point the Television Centre was in the middle of being built – I could have jumped over the moon, like a striker who'd just won the World Cup with a last-minute penalty. A bit laboured as a simile maybe, but it expresses what was going on inside. At last I felt like a star.

The Three Princes launched me into a new career. For over ten years, albeit precariously, I managed to feed Chummy and myself, and the three children as they came along, by playing all sorts of roles both for the BBC and for all the commercial companies when they arrived. The majority of the parts were in children's television and most were worth playing, either leads or good supporting roles.

Those days of live television stand out in my memory as some of the best. Once you'd got used to it, the buzz of performance, of being able to inhabit a character, knowing that every little thought would come across without the need for projection (Patrick's 'shouting in the evenings'), was even better than playing in the theatre.

No, I must qualify that. If anybody ever asked me which I preferred, theatre or television, I used to say, 'Which do you prefer, roast chicken or chocolate mousse?'

I missed the intimacy of connecting to a live audience, certainly; it was one of the things that had brought me into the theatre in the first place. But live television was... well, different.

Perhaps it was the constant awareness that things could go disastrously wrong which kept the adrenalin high. And of course old hands regaled us with tales of legendary disaster.

The time, for instance, when Robert Speight, playing Thomas à Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* was waiting in precisely the circumstances in which we'd found ourselves with *Gunpowder and Guy Fawkes*. Suddenly, without any warning, the floor manager waved a frantic cueing arm at him. Speight thought it was a send-up, a joke, and responded with the two-fingered salute which means '...and up yours to your mate', only to see the camera's red light come on.

Without a pause he managed to guide his hand into a smooth blessing, making the sign of the cross: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son...'

Or when the watching millions saw the dead King Lear, thinking he was off camera as rehearsal ended, clambering to his feet to be hoisted onto the attendants' shoulders for the exit of his regal corpse.

I had my own moments, of course. Playing the villain, Sir Daniel, in *The Black Arrow*, I had to give my henchman his sinister orders while I was eating my dinner. At the dress rehearsal, I was faced with an empty trencher.

'What sort of food will I be eating?' I asked.

'Dunno,' came the reply. 'The canteen's sending something down for the transmission.'

Fish and chips? Raspberry jelly?

But no, somebody had done their homework. Come the evening, I was confronted by a pile of chicken drumsticks. Very mediaeval.

Chatting away villainously, I picked one up. Tasty. But what to do with the bone?

Aha! Charles Laughton playing Henry the Eighth in a 1930s film had tossed the carcass he'd been gnawing over his shoulder.

So, over my shoulder went the drumstick; and, as it went, out of the corner of my eye I saw half of my moustache go with it.

I finished the scene with my hand hiding my bald lip, and as soon as it finished was urgently scrabbling in the straw to find it. It was stuck back just in time for my next scene.

But, yes, I loved them, those live days.

Indeed, I was very disappointed when I was told one day that my performance as Lord Nelson was

to be pre-telerecorded on film.

Until the take.

Turning arrogantly to leave an altercation with the fuddy-duddy Board of Admiralty, I strode to the door, tripped over my sword and fell flat on my face.

In a stroke I was converted into a fervent disciple of recording.

Live television? You could keep it.

CHAPTER 4

I became part of Shaun Sutton's so-called 'rep' – the band of actors he used over and over again which included Colin Douglas (who became well-known as the grandfather in *A Family at War*), John Ackland, Paul Whitsun-Jones, Pat Troughton, Nigel Arkwright, John Woodnutt and Roger Delgado who later created the part of the Master in *Who*.

In *The Queen's Champion*, which Shaun also wrote, I was the traitorous Sir Thomas Wycherl doing my best to assassinate Queen Elizabeth the First. Roger Delgado, in a nice twist as a loyal Spaniard, Don Jose, not only foiled the plot, but – in a duel fought in the sea – stuck his rapier through me.

My beautiful suede thigh-boots, especially hand-made by the best theatrical shoemaker in London were ruined by the salt water. The costume designer was not pleased.

One year I was in 18 episodes of Shaun's serials.

But...

Oh Gawd. Bloody money. I'm not all that good with it even now. But then...

You see, there are very few actors, no matter how successful, who don't have bad patches when the work dries up. If you've got any sense, you cater for that and budget accordingly.

I didn't. The result was that I ended up with a perpetual overdraft, and an ever-present fear that the next bill to arrive would be simply unpayable.

But to face the facts (for instance, in working out the Income Tax figures as a freelance) would screw me up inside so badly that I had to walk briskly round the block before I could even sit down at my desk. It was much easier to put things off, have another glass of wine, and join Mr Micawber hoping that something would turn up.

My inability to cope with the pounds, shillings and pence was one of the multiple symptoms of my worst fault: procrastination, especially concerning tasks of some consequence.

When I was a midshipman in the Royal Navy – navigating officer of a Coastal Forces craft patrolling for U-boats off the South Coast – the torrent of chart corrections so overwhelmed me that I would literally (and I mean that literally) beat my head against the wall of the chart house to take away the mental pain.

It was partly fear of course. Fear that I should miss something and put us on the rocks. In the event, the only time it could have happened was because I'd got something right. A light in the blackout proved to be an RAF beacon five miles inland, but my skipper decided that it was the new buoy in the swept channel (cleared of mines, that is) that we were following.

I managed to convince him otherwise, thank God. If I hadn't we could have crashed into the Dorset cliffs, but I was scared out of my wits in case I was wrong, that I'd missed an Admiralty Fleet Order which had a vital change.

Putting things off nearly put paid to my marriage; and it was this that eventually put me on the path which led me into the clear.

What was that path?

Maybe *Planet of the Spiders* – which takes place in a Buddhist meditation centre – could give you a clue.

But back in 1965 something had to be done about our parlous financial situation. Although I was playing leading parts, I was very far from becoming a 'star'. It was becoming increasingly obvious that I would probably stay in the second rank for the rest of my time as an actor.

It wasn't the first time I'd had these thoughts. Right at the beginning of my new screen career, I played the Indian Gentleman in *Sara Crewe* – or was it called *The Little Princess*? No matter. I was

talking to Peggy Livesey, who was playing the Head of the school, about the difficulty of climbing the professional ladder.

‘Even if you make it,’ she said, ‘you can still find yourself in trouble. Look at my brother.’

Her brother? Roger Livesey, one of the big film stars of the 1940s. Think of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*; *I Know Where I’m Going*; and *A Matter of Life and Death*.

What about him?

‘He’s in Australia, working in the theatre,’ she went on. ‘It got to the point where he was too old to play the sort of leading parts which had made his name, and nobody offered him the supporting ones because they still thought of him as a star. He was getting no work at all.’

So even if I did manage to claw my way up a bit higher, I knew that it would be no guarantee of security.

Luckily my own predilections offered a way out.

I had fallen in love with the idea of directing TV. I’d always been fascinated by film, and I’d done a certain amount of directing in the theatre, but this seemed to combine the fun of both worlds.

During this time, the early 1960s, we left the days of live drama behind. Everything was recorded. But the reels of two-inch tape were expensive, so it was played straight through as if we were doing a live show, and any necessary retakes done afterwards.

Shaun knew I was fascinated, so he let me sit behind him during camera rehearsals whenever I wasn’t needed. The idea of sitting in the gallery, in charge of the whole operation – having worked with the actors in rehearsal; heading the team of designers and production crew; deciding on the camera shots and so on, and making it all happen instantly – seemed to me to be professional paradise, especially if you were directing something you’d written yourself, as Shaun Sutton usually did.

And quite apart from the joy of the work itself, being the director, the Big Daddy of the company, is a sovereign cure for the actor’s secret fear – that ‘they’ are going to find you out, that all your little successes have been down to luck, that after this job you’ll probably never work again; and how is that everybody else seems to have cracked the problem? How is it that all your contemporaries seem to swan from job to job with no sign of the frantic paddling you have to do just trying to keep up?

Of course the real answer, which you know deep down, is that most of them feel just as you do. But try telling that to the scared little mole hiding inside.

Soon after *The Three Princes*, trying to give myself the opportunity to heave myself up the ladder a few rungs, I had written to Michael Barry, the Head of the Drama Department, suggesting that I should do potted versions of well-known books, telling the story from the point of view of the main character, in costume and in front of an appropriate small set.

He asked me to go and see him. I thought at once that we’d get on, as he had a reproduction of the famous Nefertiti bust on his desk, though his was bigger than the one Chummy and I had brought home from our honeymoon in Paris, which still sits in our hall.

‘If you’re going to have costumes and sets,’ he said, ‘why not do it as a play? No, I don’t think it’s a goer. But if you’re interested in telling some stories...’

This was a recognised form in those days, long before *Jackanory*: an actor telling a story direct to camera. John Slater was a regular. The slot was the last thing at night, before the BBC closed down at 11pm.

Michael suggested that I should write a six-week series of short stories about life in the theatre and tell them myself.

It was an extraordinary experience. Live, of course. And I was the only thing on all the British TV screens which were switched on at that time of day.

Apart from one cameraman, one sound man and the floor manager, clutching the script, I was alone by myself in the vast black cavern that was Studio D, with two or three blank scenery flats behind me.

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