

Peter Capaldi as Doctor Who, with his first companion in the role, Jenna Coleman

“I like characters who are strange”

It's not often a fan has the chance to play his childhood hero, which is why Peter Capaldi is determined to make the most of his tenure as Doctor Who. By **Simon Evans**

IT IS a mark of the extent *Doctor Who* has established itself at the heart of our national life that the announcement of a new actor to play the Time Lord now merits its own primetime show.

Thus it was that in August 2013 Peter Capaldi was revealed as the new Doctor, during a show as glitzy and laden with minor celebs as an episode of *Strictly Come Dancing*. There was something quite surreal about this accomplished actor and director being given the breathless Zoe Ball treatment, but Capaldi was being quite truthful when he said it was the fulfillment of a childhood dream.

As a child growing up in Glasgow, Capaldi – who is 58 – was old enough to remember both William Hartnell and Patrick Troughton from the early years of the series, but it was the third Doctor, Jon Pertwee, who fired the young Capaldi's imagination, running the veteran actor's fan club and even writing a letter to the *Radio Times* about the show.

On learning Capaldi had taken over the role Pertwee's actor son Sean, currently starring in US TV series *Gotham*, revealed the his father and Peter had been good friends.

“My father was very fond of Peter and Peter is an extremely lovely gentleman,” Sean said. “He was very kind to my family when my father passed away and the Pertwee household was delighted when he got the role of The Doctor.”

Capaldi has spent much of the past year filming the now traditional Doctor Who

Christmas special, due to air on Christmas Day, and his third full series in the role, which airs next Spring. And Peter says that as long as the producers will have him, he's happy to stay with a role that is, he says, “the best job on the telly”.

Although his career stretches back to the early Eighties, it was only with the satirical series *The Thick of It*, which ran from 2005 to 2012, that Capaldi became a household name.

He played the swearsy political adviser Malcolm Tucker, a role reputedly based

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on Tony Blair's director of communications Alistair Campbell (something Capaldi denies). There was a malevolence, but also an essential humanity about Tucker that only an actor of Capaldi's range and talents could have conveyed.

Even so, quite a few eyebrows were raised when he was announced as the latest incarnation of the Time Lord, and Capaldi himself did not underestimate the challenge he was taking on.

As he told the *Telegraph*: “You have to be able to spin on a penny. You have to be able to go from pantomime to tragedy,

from domestic to epic, within a single scene. You have to keep the ball in the air, and you have to remember that *The X Factor* is on the other channel.

“You have to remember that there are people watching in America, you have to remember that, as much as you want to apply your mature acting instincts, there are actually lots of children watching. You've got to cover all these bases, and make it exciting and interesting, too.”

It was, however, a role he was determined to master.

“You don't just play Doctor Who; you represent him. You represent the 50 years in which he has meant an awful lot to an awful lot of people. And the weight of it – and I really would never want to seem ungrateful – is that it is continual. It is very, very nice because people always greet you with a certain affection, but it is basically every day, everywhere you go.”

Until *The Thick of It* and *Doctor Who* came along, Capaldi had settled into the role of the jobbing actor, his main claims to fame being his role in the 1983 Bill Forsyth film *Local Hero*, playing John Malkovich's manservant in *Dangerous Liaisons*, and in 1995, as writer and director, winning an Academy Award for his short film *Franz Kafka's It's a Wonderful Life*, starring Peter's actress wife Elaine Collins and long-time pal Richard E. Grant.

The Oscar should have opened up the doors to Hollywood but didn't, although Peter and Elaine were able to buy a house in Crouch End with the proceeds from a

failed film option (they now live in Muswell Hill). The option was for a science-fiction script Peter had written called *Moon Man* which, incidentally, had been his nickname at school, such was his fascination with the then-current moon landings and love of science-fiction.

Acting jobs kept coming, though, and in 2005 he was asked to audition for a part in *The Thick of It*. The audition process was long and drawn-out and when Peter eventually met the show's creator, Armando Iannucci, he was in a foul mood. Peter thought he'd blown it, but Iannucci knew he'd found his man, and the character of foul-mouthed, manipulative Malcolm Tucker was perfect for the times.

The country had already endured eight years of political 'spin' under the Blair Government, but rather than basing Tucker on Alistair Campbell, as was presumed, Capaldi's models were the hot-shot American film producers, "malevolent forces in Armani suits" as he described them, that he'd briefly rubbed shoulders with during his flirtation with Hollywood.

It was all a long way from the rarefied environs of Glasgow School of Art, where Capaldi had graduated in 1980. He had grown up in a tenement block in the Springburn area of Glasgow, where his

parents – an Italian-born father and Irish-born mother – ran a café and ice-cream delivery business. His childhood was happy, "very safe, full of delights" and life was busy and noisy – several relatives lived in the same block –with The Beatles on the radio and *Doctor Who* on the television to keep him amused. Peter was an instant fan of the travelling Time Lord: "The show had that quality of darkness that you find in a Grimm's fairy tale: this strange creature of a man who takes you on all these adventures, but who always keeps you safe." It became a tradition that Peter's mum, Nancy, would buy him a *Doctor Who* annual every year, something that would continue into adulthood.



Peter Capaldi, right, with Burt Lancaster, centre, in *Local Hero*

Nancy died last year but it was a source of much pride that when Peter visited her in hospital towards the end of her life he would get the film star treatment and whoops of instant recognition from the nursing staff.

While at art school Peter became a fan of punk rock, singing in a band called the Dreamboys, but also started to consider becoming an actor. By happy accident his

landlady was a costume designer and one night, coming home drunk from the pub, he found her chatting to the film director Bill Forsyth, who had just enjoyed great success with the film *Gregory's Girl*. Forsyth was immediately taken with Capaldi and cast him in his new film, *Local Hero*, opposite Hollywood legend Burt Lancaster. Roles in the best forgotten Ken Russell film *Lair of the White Worm*

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(with a young Hugh Grant) and as George Harrison in the TV movie *John and Yoko: A Love Story* followed and he would also turn up in roles as varied as a *Songs of Praise* producer in *The Vicar of Dibley*, and a transvestite in *Prime Suspect 3*.

Peter has had more than his fair share of playing oddballs and outsiders, but it's something he is perfectly comfortable with.

"I like characters who are strange and on the edge," he told the *Standard*.

"A lot of the people I play are excluded from the mainstream and I think that's because of the way I look."

Malcolm Tucker was another outsider, who desperately wanted to be an insider, and, ironically, Peter's success in the role created new opportunities.

He directed several episodes of the Bafta-winning sit-com *Getting On*, appeared in *The Fifth Estate*, the film based on the Wikileaks saga, and revisited his art school days, writing and presenting



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Peter Capaldi

Peter as Malcolm Tucker in the film *In The Loop*, based on the TV series *The Thick Of It*. Tom Hollander is the politician feeling his wrath



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A *Portrait of Scotland*, a wonderful documentary on the history of Scottish portrait painting. Then a certain Time Lord came calling and it's fair to say life has never been quite the same, although Peter's family do all they can to keep his feet on the ground.

Peter met wife Elaine, who is now a BBC producer, in 1983 when both were working for the same theatre company.

They have a daughter, Cecily, who recently graduated from university and is now living in London training to be a teacher. Although he's enjoying his moment in the spotlight, Peter is all too aware that he won't be playing the good Doctor forever. He says that although Malcolm Tucker belongs to the past, he'd love to play Jeremy Corbyn, or perhaps Francis Bacon. He's wary of Shakespeare,

mainly because he's not had any formal dramatic training, but he'd surely make a wonderful Hamlet or perhaps, at some point, King Lear.

As for Hollywood, or at least American television, it holds no interest for Peter.

"I don't want to be a guy who goes to work every day for nine months of the year in a corner of Burbank," he said at the height of the *Thick of It*, when there were suggestions he could follow fellow English thespian Hugh Laurie to Hollywood. "I like doing a bit here and a bit there and strange things."

For now, however, nine months of the year is taken up playing *Doctor Who*, and although that running up and down corridors is already taking its toll on his knees (Peter had to have keyhole surgery after his first series as the Doctor) he wouldn't have it any other way.

The forthcoming series will be his third in the role and, despite rumours that have swirled around since show-runner Steven Moffatt announced his departure, it seems Peter will be staying in the Tardis for the time being at least.

"I love being *Doctor Who*," he said earlier this year, "so I will be around as long as it's right to be around." Daleks and Cybermen, you have been warned.



Peter, right, with Dan Stevens in *The Fifth Estate*

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