THE RIBOS OPERATION

WHERE TRUTH LIES

James Rattue

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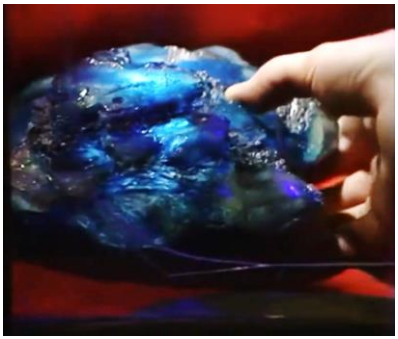

James Rattue

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Most of the illustrations herein are screenshots from the BBC DVD of *The Ribos Operation*. A couple are my photos, and others scoured from the internet. The image of June Hudson on p.35 comes from youtube.com/watch?v=GKqt6S20_1M.

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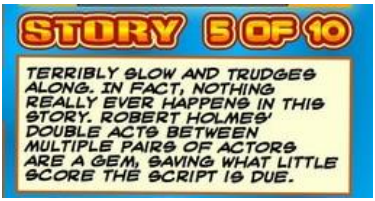

In 2021, *Dr Who* ultrafan and writer Toby Hadoke invited a series of special guests to his video podcasts to nominate a story from the show and discuss what they liked about it. Playwright Dan Rebellato chose *The Ribos Operation*. It was, he argued, ‘the single greatest script that was ever written for *Dr Who*’, which is quite a claim for a story he admitted barely understanding at all when he first saw it at the age of 9 or 10. It spent decades being overlooked, and even the revisionist *Discontinuity Guide* from 1995 liked it but never claimed it as a masterpiece. Early-2000s online reviews described the script as ‘juvenile’ and proof that writer Robert Holmes was overrated, characterized it as ‘utterly uninspiring both in terms of narrative and of design’, or ‘lazily written and stiltedly acted’. I came across one gentleman who was aiming to write short reviews of every classic *Who* story, but was clearly so dispirited by *Ribos* that he got no further: ‘So much standing around and talking, it’s like a gaggle of junior high girls gossiping. The only reason to partake of this slow car crash is to enjoy the Holmesian double acts’[1]. On the other hand we have Andrew Wilcock’s splendid summary:

> *I really enjoyed this story at the time, but it’s even more enjoyable now that I’m old enough to appreciate how outrageous it all is … The author has clearly said, “sod realism! Look at what I can get away with” but with enormous panache … There’s a witch and a wicked prince and they both come to memorable ends; God is deeply scary; Galileo is a hero; everyone wears fantastic hats.*[2]

My child self, who got to see the story when first shown, wasn’t well-equipped to judge the quality of one *Doctor Who* serial from another, in any case. Instead, all I knew was how much it did or did not scare me. I had begun watching the show consistently during Season 14 – *Robots of Death* was the first story I gritted my terrified teeth to watch all the way through. When that was first broadcast I would have been seven; I *might* have seen it during its repeat broadcast early in 1978, but that would still have made me only eight at the time. I’d caught random fragments of various stories in earlier years – *The Sontaran Experiment*,

Pyramids of Mars, *The Brain of Morbius, The Deadly Assassin, The Face of Evil* – each time catching sight of something so horrifying I didn't dare try again for some time. The oldest I could conceivably have been for *The Sontaran Experiment* was at its repeat in mid-1976, when I was six, my flesh crawling as I watched Field-Major Styre's head apparently deflating near the end of episode two. This was at a time, remember, when script editor Robert Holmes claimed *Doctor Who* was aimed at intelligent fourteen-year-olds and any parents who let a child of under 11 watch it unaccompanied 'would be terribly irresponsible'. This wasn't really the fault of my own supervising adults, as I *preferred* to be on my own in the living room for those 25 minutes on a Saturday evening – *Doctor Who* was *my* experience and not to be shared even if anyone else had wanted to.

But perhaps the BBC was right in presuming that for most viewers *Doctor Who* was a family matter. Certainly it was the case in the household of Louise Jameson, long before she got a role in the series which, everyone alleged, was specifically designed to keep 'the dads' watching: 'I was delighted to become Leela because *Doctor Who* had been a Saturday ritual, with baked beans on toast in front of the fire, for my family since it started.'[3]

Having survived all the way through *Robots of Death* I then braved the whole of Season 15 which began with the umbrageous terror of *The Horror of Fang Rock,* and ended in *The Invasion of Time,* which I found both exciting and completely incomprehensible as the Doctor appeared to betray his own people, and then saved them from a threat which was entirely different from the one the story started out with. By the time Season 16 rolled around, I, looking towards my ninth birthday in November 1978, knew what to expect.

For me, watching *Doctor Who* at that point was a ritual marked by anticipation and excitement, a particularly heightened example of the experience of watching any TV in those days. The annual return of the show coincided with the new school year and the approach of autumn, the truncated summer repeats providing a taster for the main event to come. There were no recordings of past stories, home-made or officially-provided: watching was a real-time experience, the occasion augmented only by memory. The production team of producer Philip Hinchcliffe and script editor Robert Holmes had recognised the value of starting the series in September, and concluding it not *too* far into the spring: that associated it with the gathering darkness of autumn and winter evenings, and the accompanying sense of enclosure within the warm shelter of home against the threatening shadows outside. *The Ribos Operation*, coming at the outset of the season, started in relatively light conditions, but by episode 4 it was finishing not long before sunset, and in any case *you knew what was coming* as the season drew on. Darkness. The night pressing in. Threat. Stories told

around the fire, even when, in our house, the fire was an electric radiator with *faux*-coal fittings.

I'm glad I'm not the only person to have felt the same. In 2006 Alex Wilcock remembered exactly the same sensation: 'When I was a boy, this time of year meant two things – going back to school, and the return of *Doctor Who* to our screens to sweeten the pill. A bit of me can't help but still expect the same … It's not just schoolboy memories that make autumn a good time for *Doctor Who* … for a show where much of its purpose is scaring children, it feels right to be shown as the nights are growing darker'. (Mind you, he claims to have been a couple of years younger than me at the time *and* to have understood it all)[4]. A few years later, *The Guardian,* lamenting the decision to broadcast the series midweek and mid-year, summed it up admirably. *Doctor Who* was

> *as essential a part of a winter Saturday as coming in cold from heath, forest or football, warm crumpets (or pikelets, if preferred) before the fire, the signature tune of Sports Report and that sense of liberation and escapist surrender that can only come when tomorrow is a day off too*.[5]

Whenever *Doctor Who* was due to begin, as that time drew closer I would watch the tail-end of the show broadcast before – whether it was *The Basil Brush Show*, *Jim'll Fix It*, the news, or whatever – with a kind of bored anxiety. I was nervous at what I might be about to undergo, and yet desperate for it to arrive. There was nothing anyone could do to resolve the tension: all viewers like me could do was wait, carried along by the BBC's choices. My heart pounded and I felt a bit giddy as the eerie title sequence began. It was an intense and very personal experience, and, for me at least, a solitary one, which I could not have imagined sharing with anyone else. It required absolute engagement and attention even if I sometimes had only a sketchy idea of what was actually going on in the story.

The Ribos Operation fitted into this ritual perfectly. Early September 1978 was not very wintry, but one of the things I remembered most clearly from the story during the long years before I ever re-watched it was its chilly setting, the swirling snow and the fur hats of Garron, Unstoffe and the Shrieves. Regardless of what the world looked like out of the sitting room window, winter, the *proper Doctor Who* season, was already here, prefigured by what I was watching on the screen.

A child tends to view their television, or at least remember what they have viewed, as fragments. On her blog *TARDIS Eruditorum* Elizabeth Sandifer analysed the *Doctor Who Magazine* great 2011 readers' rankings of every story to date, and reasoned that the most popular adventures were those which provided the most 'iconic moments' to remain in viewers' memories, while considerations of plot, design, character, and ideas were all secondary to *incident*.

My memory's overall impression of *The Ribos Operation* may have been to do with snow and furs, but there were also separate images and happenings that lodged there. I remembered the Seeker with her bones, and Romana in her white dress. I remembered the tracer that leads the travellers to the Segment of the Key to Time (although I wonder whether the memory came from *this* story or a subsequent one in the Key to Time sequence). Most of all, I remembered the deaths – Binro the Heretic slumping to the floor and the Graff Vynda-K weaving madly down a passageway to be climactically exploded. These images would join others from *Doctor Who* jostling around my recollection, from later in Season 16 and subsequently, long before I became able to assimilate actual narratives in any detail.

The point was made in Cedric Cullingford's study *Children and Television* (1984), a section of which dealt specifically with the curious appeal of *Dr Who*. From his conversations with children exposed to the series both at home and 'under laboratory conditions', Cullingford concluded 'the plots are quite complex, and it relies on lengthy verbal explanations, and yet it is popular with six and seven year olds. The reason for its success lies in the way it tends to rely on a series of clear images embedded in familiar material'[6].

Anyone older than about nine would have had different perspectives on what I had seen. Probably a little after *The Ribos Operation* was first broadcast in the UK, over in Canada the roughly-twelve-year-old Martin Izsak was flicking through a TV guide looking for something to watch and was intrigued enough by the summary of this show, then new to him, to tune in despite reception issues. He thought the title sequence was 'absolutely the coolest thing I'd ever seen on television'. From the interior shots he expected the Doctor's ship would be 'a gleaming white flying saucer' and was intrigued, if taken aback, when a battered blue box faded into view in Ribos's 'snowy and regal' environment: at first he assumed it was some kind of transmat device allowing the travellers to move from the *actual* gleaming white flying saucer somewhere else. Although he got lost in the plot partway through episode 1, Izsak was excited by the idea of the Key to Time quest, 'my head filled with ideas of all the wondrous places the story might go to, and what agents of the Black Guardian might be lurking around the darker corners of the journey. It was excellent at building anticipation of an exciting, adventurous odyssey through strange and very different worlds'. Even if the end of the episode upset his expectations – Izsak thought the Doctor and Romana would easily retrieve the First Segment and then move on to the next – he was 'hooked' and tuned in the following week to *record the next episode on an audio cassette tape*. Ah, the times.[7]

Fan-based discussions of *Doctor Who* can take a variety of tacks. We can analyse a particular story literary-critically, looking for its influences and antecedents;

socio-politically, in reference to what was happening in the UK and the world beyond at the time; or in terms of the show's own internal history. We might even talk about what we decide is its intrinsic quality. These approaches, and almost infinitely more, are fun and sometimes even worthwhile; but they are all *adult* approaches. Younger children care for none of that. Younger children focus on the images and the incidents, and everything else moves into the background. This is relevant to any discussion of what's going on during Graham Williams's tenure as producer, the dilution of horror and foregrounding of humour, and even the decline in production standards as budgets were chewed into. I can assure anyone bothering to read this that watching Leela about to be steamed to death in the shoddy and visibly cheap sets of *The Sun Makers* under the Williams regime was every bit as horrifying as seeing Mr Sin stumbling towards her with a knife amid the lavish theatrics of *The Talons of Weng-Chiang* barely six months earlier when Philip Hinchcliffe was in charge. As grown-ups we can talk about what we choose and like whatever we like, but we should remember that a major part of *Who*'s audience at the time didn't give, not just a second thought, but even a first to any of these absorbing matters. To my adult eyes, Tom Baker's Doctor may teeter on the brink of the unbearable, but my child self had no such issue: Baker claimed that his in-character interactions with children kept him in touch with what they wanted from the part, and he tailored his performance accordingly.[8]

Grown-ups watching were a different matter, and the most grown-up of all were the actors' and production team's peers in the professional press. Reviewing *The Ribos Operation,* Jennifer Lovelace in *Stage & Television Today* admired George Spenton-Foster's direction and the technical work – 'intelligent with a thoughtful attention to detail' – but found that although the dialogue was 'often funny', 'it can also be arch, with too great a tendency to pander to the sophisticated'. The leading man 'seems to lack the conviction necessary to the role … frequently not helped by dialogue that errs towards slickness and send-up'. A few months later Tom Holt found that 'the element of self-parody … has crept in and infected all, like an alien from a different star.' 'Soon, under the laws of time and, probably, contrasts, a new Doctor must replace the old. Let it be someone who will take his role seriously'. In retrospect James Chapman suggested that as his tenure of the role wore on Baker's 'performance suggests that he was not merely playing an alien from another planet but appeared also to be living there'.[9]

Some viewers see change and decay all around in *Ribos*. In the magisterial *About Time* Lawrence Miles and Tat Wood not only found the opening of Episode 1 'rushed and badly acted … such a contrived attempt to set up a mythic fantasy in the minimum possible screen time that it's painful to watch' but also 'from her very first line, Mary Tamm obviously isn't believing a word of this at all,

and her scenes with Tom Baker sound as if the two of them can't wait for the filming to be over so that they can have a good laugh about it in the pub'.[10] On the whole they liked the story but, as we've seen, others were less generous, and for a long time it was borne down under the tide of disdain fandom felt for Graham Williams's time as producer in general.

Over the last decade Graham Williams has undergone something of a rehabilitation, but he spent the previous thirty years being pilloried for starting the rot that led to the classic series of *Who* being cancelled, a view which is still out there for consumption (on the Wikipedia page for Philip Hinchcliffe, for instance). We can now appreciate more objectively what Williams was trying to do. Nevertheless, if there's a keynote to his tenure as producer it's not unfair to summarise it as *desperation.* At no other time in the show's history has it seemed that the production team had less control, and *felt* it had less control, over what was happening. There was pressure from the BBC, with Head of Serials Graeme McDonald censoring all the scripts in advance, but it was more than that. A complex TV production whose ambition always outran its resources was bound to be a story of expedients, but, unlucky thanks to everything from galloping inflation to lightning demarcation strikes over the *Playschool* clock[11], Graham Williams had to resort to *continual* expedients. There was never enough money, and never enough writers. The collapse of a story called *The Killers of the Dark* during the planning stage and the reformulation of another entitled *A Gamble With Time* led to producer and script editor lashing together last-minute replacements which worked triumphantly in one case and rockily in the other. Williams would have preferred Robert Holmes to write the whole of Season 16, but the former script editor felt that was beyond him, forcing another rethink.

This was all bad fortune to an extent that Philip Hinchcliffe never suffered, but it may be that Graham Williams did himself no favours. He came to the series with a degree of self-confidence, justified by his varied BBC experience, only to find he was in charge of a show of unparalleled complexity, and underwent a baptism of fire which was not only daunting, but near-traumatising. Could he cope?

> *I had no idea of just how much I was taking on* [Williams told *In-Vision*]. *I thought, in my youthful arrogance, it would be no problem. I had after all done the first television drama outside-broadcast ever, which was* Z Cars *when it became an all-location programme. I had done all-film scripts which was, again, quite a big deal. I had worked on period dramas, thrillers, even some science fiction, and I thought I knew the television production scene pretty well.*
>
> *But, after the very first* Doctor Who *studio session I sat in on, I felt I had walked in out of the stone age. I had no idea what they were doing half the time,*

> *let alone how they were achieving such good results. The complexity of it, the planning that was needed, the imagination that was being employed by all the departments who never took anything for granted, and all on such mini budgets. It really was astounding. So I had to throw away all I thought I knew about television and start from scratch … The day after we came out of the studio* [finishing the first story he made, *The Invisible Enemy*] *I just crashed out for 36 hours solid.*[12]

As Williams discovered that he *could* just about manage, that self-admitted arrogance – perhaps presumption might be a better word - reasserted itself. It went in a different direction from that of Philip Hinchcliffe and Robert Holmes, who confidently did what they wanted with the series to the exclusion of all other considerations, never departing from their original intention to 'scare the little buggers to death'. It was, instead, born out of very hard work and repeated escape from disaster, and the exhaustion that arose from them, and was directed at the series itself. It was also very precarious, liable to come to grief when anything went wrong. I think this is what gives rise to the cynicism some commentators see manifested during Williams's time in charge. For instance, the producer never believed that Louise Jameson would leave the series until it was finally impossible *not* to believe her, and then, in what he admitted was pique, wrote Leela out at the conclusion of *The Invasion of Time* by the risible expedient of marrying her off to a Gallifreyan guard she'd only just met. We might put this down to bad luck, too, had Williams not done exactly the same when Mary Tamm announced she wanted to give up playing Romana, continuing to imagine that he could somehow talk her round. She would have been happy to film a regeneration into Lalla Ward but the annoyed producer decided not to, resulting in the baffling scene of Romana trying on alternative bodies at the start of *Destiny of the Daleks.* Together with Tom Baker's misbehaving and Douglas Adams's larking about once he became script editor in Season 17, Graham Williams's own attitudes were one factor behind *Doctor Who*'s particular sort of patchiness at this time.

Williams's trajectory was, in a way, strangely paralleled what was happening with the Doctor himself. Naturally the character was aware of his own intellectual superiority to most of the souls around him right from the start ('Your arrogance is almost as great as your ignorance … You don't deserve an explanation' are among his first words to his human companions), and throughout the Third Doctor's era and beyond the sense of the character as infallible and instinctively authoritative had been escalating. Tom Baker later recognised that he had been using the Doctor to plug his own insecurities, and Philip Hinchliffe and Robert Holmes were happy to let this continue. It did, after all, make for good TV, and that was what mattered to them. Watching this slightly monstrous individual swagger and smash through his surroundings and

demolish the authority figures he came across was exhilarating, and obscured the extent to which *he* was an authority figure himself, something that would only begin to be deconstructed by the revived series. Thus Daniel Callahan lists among his 'Top Ten Reasons why *The Talons of Weng-Chiang* is one of the best *Dr Who* stories of all time', uploaded to pagefillers.com in 1998, the fact that the Doctor goes from being chief suspect in the murders of the young women in the East End to 'taking charge of the entire investigation in under five seconds'.[13] Of course this is the kind of thing the Doctor (almost) always does, but *Talons* is probably the apogee of it: it marks the culmination of the Hinchcliffe-Holmes approach in all sorts of ways, a story increasingly recognised as – to be charitable – a dazzling monstrosity, the boys' brigade finally going too far.

As Williams and new script editor Anthony Read strove to take the Doctor down a peg or two, accordingly, Season 15 depicts him making mistakes. In *The Horror of Fang Rock* he commits, and confesses to committing, an error which results in the death of everyone in the story apart from Leela and himself. *The Invasion of Time* shows him receiving congratulations (especially his own) for defeating one invasion of Gallifrey while the *real* one literally starts behind him. As Season 16 begins, the very first thing the Doctor does after arriving on Ribos is get caught up in a net. His humour will enable him to carry on exercising control over the villains and bystanders who can't see the joke, and render him an even more anarchic presence than before, but that tactic becomes increasingly transparent. The development of Romana marked another step in the process: she was going to be the Doctor's equal, someone who could stand up to him and answer back.

This, of course, never quite happened in the way intended. But it not only proved impossible to elevate the role of the companion within *Who*'s existing format, it also turned out to be unfeasible to rein in the Doctor in any significant way either. Tom Baker's charisma was one of the only things in the show that was *consistently* reliable, no matter how much he might have annoyed directors and gobbled unwary scriptwriters for breakfast. Interiorly, Baker was fraught with anxiety, but on set could escalate his performance and drive all before him, or at least felt he could. I think Elizabeth Sandifer's case that 'the series … succeeds [when] it finds interesting things for Tom Baker to do, and generally that means finding someone interesting for him to talk to'[14] is a bit overstated, but not much. So as Graham Williams's producer-ship moves on, he wants to constrain his leading man, yet also comes to rely on him more and more to hold the project together. We've already seen that the professional critics carped at the humour and irony they saw chewing their way through *Doctor Who*, but with an explicit brief from the BBC to move towards precisely that pole there was a limit to how far Williams could keep Tom Baker under control.

Yet part of the revisionist account of Graham Williams is that the mixture of humour and drama he was aiming at prefigured the kind of thing we find in modern *Who*. According to this view, he looks like a pioneer, generating viewer excitement from a constant oscillation of mood. We might question how deliberate this was rather than an accidental concatenation of factors, because much of the Williams era is accidental: sometimes it turns out to be a happy accident, and sometimes not. *Ribos* is one of the happier accidents, because its jokes function as part of a coherent story. By 'coherent' I don't necessarily mean that a good *Dr Who* story doesn't include plot *lacunae* or nonsensical pseudo-science, and a good thing I'm not; but I would rather a narrative features people behaving as we would expect them to. When they don't, it doesn't matter how good the jokes are. In *Nightmare of Eden*, a season after *Ribos*, we find this delightful exchange; apprehended aboard a spaceliner, the Doctor has claimed to be working for interstellar insurance company Galactic Salvage:

> Capt Rigg: Galactic Salvage went out of business twenty years ago.
> Doctor: I *wondered* why I hadn't been paid!
> Capt Rigg: That's not good enough.
> Doctor: That's what *I* said.

Regardless of whether it was written by story writer Bob Baker or script editor Douglas Adams, this is a very good joke indeed. Unfortunately, it's dumped into a dramatic conundrum. Having identified that the mad-eyed stranger wandering around his dangerously stricken ship demanding to look at the engines is a complete liar, Captain Rigg carries on co-operating with him as though he's decided he has nothing else to lose, in just the way a responsible commanding officer wouldn't, and this is long before he gets off his face on the drug Vraxoin. Meanwhile, in *City of Death* – a tale roundly condemned by fandom on its broadcast for being 'too funny' – the jokes barely stop, but there they happen in the context of genuine threat and of characters who behave realistically; or at least, as realistically as people (and aliens) involved in the ludicrous and overcomplex plot might be expected to. You never doubt that Count Scarlioni might kill the time-travellers: after all, you *see* him kill someone.

This is the balance that *Ribos* also, just, manages to achieve. It succeeds because the power of its serious elements is sufficient to stop the silly ones floating off into nonsense: the conviction of its makers weighs enough to make it work, so that the viewer – whether child or well-disposed adult – is engaged and excited despite the odd flaw.

Before we venture further, let us dispose of those flaws, the things that are *inescapably awkward* about *The Ribos Operation.*

1. There are some very choppy edits, some of them caused where a bit of action has been cut out. One comes in the scene where Unstoffe drugs the Shrieve on the Relic Room roof in Ep.1: Robert Holmes had written dialogue for Unstoffe to explain what he was doing there, but the episode overran and so the lines were cut – 17 cuts were made in the first episode, in fact.[15] There's another, for instance, at 2:21.15[16] where Nigel Plaskitt barely gets out the line 'You haven't seen the size of that thing's teeth!' before we jump abruptly to the Doctor approaching the Relic Room.
2. Visually, the Shrivenzale is no worse than many other *Dr Who* monsters, but its floppy claws don't look feasible, let alone threatening. The original intention had been to construct a much bigger version to appear in the Catacombs, but budget and time constraints put paid to that, and so what we get is a very modestly-sized beast that looks as though it could be vanquished with a good hard kick or two. At least Mary Tamm claimed she was scared by it, if only because her short-sightedness made it hard to make out in the dark. 'On screen you can see it's naff', she admitted at WishCon 4 in 1995.[17]
3. The Shrieves are astonishingly unobservant not to notice the Doctor and Romana hiding behind the panels in the Relic Room in Ep.2. The Captain must be looking straight at Romana's shoes at one point.
4. Everyone waxes lyrical about the design of the Hall of the Dead, but the way into it is through a horribly fake-looking door, in stark contrast to all the very good doors elsewhere in the production.
5. In Ep.4 Romana exerts precisely no effort at all against the stones blocking the passageway, while K9 doesn't so much blast through them as magically dissolve them in one go. Graeme McDonald had worried about ending up with 'polystyrene gloom and unheavy rocks' after a preliminary view of the script.[18]
6. The fact that the Doctor, Romana, K9, Garron and Unstoffe escape quite readily from the Catacombs at the end of Ep.4 despite the Captain blowing up the entrance presumably vindicates Binro's conviction that there must be another way out so the colony of Shrivenzales can hunt on the tundra, but it would have been more convincing had one of them referred to how tough it had been. Unstoffe manages even though he can't use one arm, and Garron's limping.

But *Ribos* isn't just *good* as a piece of TV: it isn't just sound, craftsmanlike, entertaining stuff whose fluffs you can excuse within the overall conventions of the form and of *Dr Who*. In some ways, it's even complex. Leave aside Tom Baker's mucking about and Mary Tamm's 'giving the impression that she's got an unpleasant smell under her nose':[19] this hour-and-forty-minutes of 1970s

kids' television is an exhilarating symphony of cynicism and rebellion, as we will explore.

2. ‘Before I met you I was even willing to be impressed’

Mary Tamm is proving to be excellent, though how long she can stick at it is another matter.[20]

Mary Tamm acts mostly with her cheekbones.[21]

She was supposed to be the companion who changed everything. She failed. That’s the story, anyway.

DAILY MIRROR, Friday, April 28, 1978 PAGE 9

The Tardis travellers who hit a time-lag in their careers

by TONY PRATT

SWEPT bewilderingly backwards and forwards through time . . . set upon by awesome gangs of ever more terrifying monsters . . . No wonder the girls in "Dr Who" spend most of their time screaming.

And at the end of their fearsome survival courses they face the ultimate horror—The Curse of Dr. Who himself.

For despite their unstinting devotion, the nine beautiful and intrepid actresses who decorated the good doctor's police box, Tardis, during the last fifteen years have gathered little in the way of a rich reward for their devotion.

Most of them have achieved national fame through the series, but regret the Dr Who tag which clings to them. The majority have found TV work scarce for months—or even years—after quitting the series. But there are always candidates for the job, now worth about £15,000 a year.

Mary Tamm, the tenth Dr. Who girl, was selected from hundreds of possibles for the new BBC-1 series starting in the autumn.

Here's a Who's Who of the nine intrepid girls in whose footsteps Mary will be treading. . . .

WHO'D BE A Dr WHO GIRL?

CAROLE ANN FORD played Susan, the doctor's 16-year-old granddaughter in the first Dr. Who programme in 1963. Then aged 22, she lasted two years.

"I thought it would run only for eight shows," she said. "It was all very simple then—not sophisticated as it is now."

Carole, now 36, enjoyed the show but regrets having taken the part.

"I found it very hard to get work afterwards," she said. "I wanted to be a character actress, but I was typed as Dr. Who's little girl. It didn't help my career at all."

Since her Dr. Who days Carole has been divorced and re-married. She has two daughters, aged 17 and three.

When the younger child has grown up Carole hopes to work on TV again.

"I want to do some period parts as a mature woman," she said.

MAUREEN O'BRIEN (below), played Vicki for a year: "I was only 18 and it was my first job after leaving drama school. I thought it was a tremendous chance," she said.

"I was frightened by it all and used to flee from the publicity. I left because I couldn't stand people staring at me all the time. It was fun but all the girl had to do in those days was scream a lot and I didn't really enjoy it.

"It had a bad effect on my career and I was out of work for a year after I left the series.

"Looking back, I see it as an aberration in my career."

Maureen, 29, is busy with television plays and drama series.

She is married with no children.

ANNEKE WILLS became Polly after starting her career, at the age of 11, in an early version of "The Railway Children."

After Dr. Who, she appeared in television plays and drama series, including "The Avengers." Married to actor Michael Gough, Anneke, now 37, no longer works as an actress in Britain.

DEBORAH WATLING, below, played Victoria in twenty-six Dr. Who episodes. She is the daughter of Jack Watling and the sister of Dilys.

"It seemed like a great break, but from the start I was determined not to stay too long," she said. "I left after a year. It wasn't quite in time—I couldn't get any telly work because I was type-cast."

Deborah, 28, invested her Dr. Who earnings in a boutique—"but I wasn't involved enough and it didn't work out."

She has been on TV in "Rising Damp" and hopes for a West End role soon.

WENDY PADBURY, right, played Zoe for 18 months.

"It was the best break I'd ever had. I was twenty and had only done 'Crossroads' and a few bits and pieces.

"I was lucky afterwards and did a play straight away, but the series didn't make me famous; or, in the long run, help my career."

Wendy, 30, is married to actor Melvyn Hayes and plans to return to television when their children are older.

CAROLINE JOHN, below, played Liz for a year. "I had been used to theatre work, so it was a good change.

"The series was hard work and while I was there we made it more technical and aimed it more at grown ups.

"I quit after a year because I didn't want to get stuck with the character."

Caroline later appeared in series like "Z Cars" and "Love Story".

She is 33 and has two children.

THE new Dr. Who girl, Mary Tamm, above, will be a different kind of partner for the Space Doc. As Romana, a Time Lady, she will be very intelligent . . . Mary, 27, who married four months ago, says: "Becoming a Dr. Who girl is like becoming a James Bond girl. I'm looking forward to the part immensely."

KATIE MANNING, right, played Jo for three series.

"I'd watched the show since I was a kid and thought it would be fun. But it did me harm," she said.

"Even now, five years later, I'm still known as a Dr. Who girl. I live for the day when I'm known simply as Katie Manning, actress.

"In the meantime I just want to forget it. I can't even watch the programme now."

Aged 28, she lives with her boyfriend, actor Dean Harris and two weeks ago gave birth to twins.

She plans to start work again by July . . . touring with a play in which she and Dean play husband and wife.

Katie did, however, cash in on her Dr. Who days by posing in the nude with a Dalek for a photograph which appeared in a magazine feature.

ELIZABETH SLADEN, left, did a three-year stint as Sarah-Jane. "I was a newcomer to television and it was a big break. I left when I felt I had done it all.

"For some time the television people didn't want me. I went to work in the theatre in Liverpool. But I've no regrets, at least people remember me and know my name." Recently Elizabeth appeared on TV in the "Send In The Girls" series and is working on a new children's programme to be shown soon. She is married to actor Robert Miller.

LOUISE JAMESON, right, quit early this year after playing Lee'a for just over a year.

She brought sex appeal to the part . . . and the proportion of adults in the audience shot up to 60 per cent. during her stint.

"It was an opportunity to learn the television business quickly," she said. "I enjoyed it, but wanted to get back to the theatre.

"Since I left I haven't looked for any television work but I've had one appearance on 'Celebrity Squares.' I'd like to do a classical series and get away from the loin-cloth image I had with Dr. Who."

Louise, 26, was at drama school with . . . Mary Tamm.

Recruited after a long and rigorous process (‘*someone* had to interview all these beautiful women’ commented Graham Williams), Mary Tamm was anxious to announce to any representative of the Press on her unveiling as the new time-traveller that, this time, the female companion would be different. ‘The reason I took the role is because it is a good *character* part’ she informed *Photoplay*, and told the *Daily Express* – who described her as the first assistant ‘tall enough to look [Tom Baker] straight in the chin’ – ‘I’ll often take the initiative and help him out. We’re going to be partners’.[22]

Everyone, not just Mary Tamm, wanted Romana to be different from what they perceived the Doctor's female companions to have been in the past: that's partly why her casting got the press covering it did. 'We decided to go with the one remaining stereotype that had yet to be done', Graham Williams told *In-Vision*, 'namely the ice goddess'. 'We were' – brace yourselves – 'going through the whole Feminist Liberation business on television and so my step towards addressing that issue … was to cast someone who could tackle the aggrievous Mr Baker on his own ground … whilst still being unworldly enough to take the side of the idealist … Romana could carry off an argument with the Doctor on moral or philosophical grounds which Leela never could'. 'The character', comment Toby Hadoke and Rob Shearman in *Running Through Corridors*, 'doesn't give a stuff whether we like her or not. She's haughty, remote and unimpressed … a cold academic who behaves like a model'. For Alex Wilcock 'she's so bitchy and aloof the Doctor doesn't know how to deal with her. Even as a boy I thought she was fabulous'.[23]

And so she is. Before being knocked about a bit by the realities of adventuring on Ribos, Romana is wonderfully snarky, mocking the Doctor's vanity, implying he's bluffing, and sticking a hole in the TARDIS console without a by-your-leave. She takes over. Now, this was high-stakes stuff. Tom Baker had made it abundantly clear that, absent the lamented Elisabeth Sladen, he really didn't see the point of having a companion for the Doctor, and his working relationship with Louise Jameson had iced over once it was apparent how popular Leela was with viewers. So when Anthony Read wrote a scene for the start of *The Ribos Operation* in which the Doctor has an assistant imposed on him by the White Guardian, there was an element of mischief: this was exactly what the production team was doing to their star. For someone allegedly no longer taking his role seriously, perhaps Baker's most convincing line in the entire story is delivered to the unwanted interloper in the TARDIS console room: 'You're not going back to Gallifrey, not for a long time yet, I *regret to say'*. It's positively venomous, and it isn't fanciful to see some reflection in it of what he really felt.

In real life, Mary Tamm quickly got the measure of her daunting co-star. He was rude to her, she was rude back, 'and after that we got on famously', she remembered, recklessly ad-libbing and larking about – perhaps – the kind of thespian naughtiness Miles and Wood claimed to see in their performances. Tamm enjoyed herself more as the series progressed; but things still didn't work out as she would have preferred and always claimed she was promised.

> *They said they were going to give me karate lessons, archery lessons – but none of that materialised. As the series wore on,* [Romana] *became the*

> *typical companion, running along behind the Doctor. I would have liked to do more action, getting into fights, the Leela stuff but in a sophisticated way.*[24]

Tamm said that her suggestions of what Romana might do were never taken up ('the Doctor can do that', the production team tended to tell her), and although Tom Baker could see her point intellectually he couldn't manage to change his ways of working. Still, she eventually worked out that this wasn't simply a matter of chauvinism and inertia, but the structure of the series itself:

> *By the end it had deteriorated again into this little-girl-lost running around, but I realised that it's not the fault of the writing, it's that it's a half-hour programme and you have to get a lot of information into that half hour … and you have to have someone who is like a sounding-board.*[25]

The problem for Romana is that the show is, fundamentally, the Doctor's. If that's going to be sustained, she can't carry on mocking and criticising him: her sarcasm must be redirected at other characters and situations, which can maintain her stature but won't alter the basic balance of the relationship between her and the Doctor, or, more importantly, between him and us.

At Tom Baker's insistence the show had already trialled a story with no companion, *The Deadly Assassin*, and Robert Holmes had found it very hard to order and structure it without that kind of role built in to allow the Doctor to explain what was going on. At the beginning of that story, the Doctor talks to himself so that we viewers stand some chance of following events, in a manner so unlikely it verges on the uncomfortable. No wonder that Baker's preference for, as Graham Williams put it, a companion who was 'a small cabbage who would sit on the Doctor's shoulder to which he could turn from time to time to explain the plot' was passed over in favour of an actual sentient life-form.

But I am not at all sure that Mary Tamm is quite right when she describes Romana's trajectory across Season 16. It may not have turned out as she anticipated, but I neither remembered, nor, when I re-watched the *Key To Time* serials many years later, could find, a great deal that justifies dubbing the character a 'little-girl-lost'. Certainly Romana has a number of peril-monkey moments, nearly falling off a cliff in *Stones of Blood*, getting locked in a dungeon in *Androids of Tara*, and being offered as a sacrifice to a crab-god in *Power of Kroll*, but she never loses her snarky tongue or mental acuity. When fans complained that, under his tenure, the series wasn't as good as the old days, *Who* producer John Nathan-Turner was fond of reprimanding them with the grinned riposte 'the memory cheats', and, much though we may have reviled him subsequently, he wasn't entirely wrong – even regarding the memories of stars.

Mary Tamm had been inaugurated as Romana at a BBC-funded champagne reception in January 1978, to which the invited press had responded gratefully by ample coverage the day after. A little bit later the *Daily Mirror* decided to hunt out the previous 'Dr Who Girls' and give them a chance, as it turned out, mainly to vent about how frustrating an experience they'd found being in the programme. The piece's author, Tony Pratt, seemed to have forgotten about poor Jackie Lane and clearly didn't regard Jacqueline Hill as enough of a 'girl' to count, but most of the other ten blamed their stint in the show for damaging their careers. 'An aberration', Maureen O'Brien went so far as to call it, making no bones about how much she'd disliked it even at the time, adding the fatal recollection 'all the girl had to do in those days was scream a lot'. Romana, claimed Tony Pratt, would be in contrast 'a new kind of partner for the space Doc'.[26]

It was with this narrative that the *Radio Times* fell into line later in the year with a piece written by Liz Hodgkinson, 'Who's Girls', just in advance of *The Ribos Operation* going on air. It wasn't quite as negative as the *Mirror* item, but Carole-Ann Ford, Deborah Watling, and Wendy Padbury all alleged their main selling-point when they were companions was their ability to scream. 'I was supposed to be brainier than the other two', griped Wendy Padbury (meaning the Doctor and Jamie with whom she shared screen time, or Susan and Victoria?), 'but after three episodes I was screaming as loud as the rest'. Caroline John, recalling that her early-70s character Liz Shaw was supposed to be different, remembered being required to negotiate caves in a miniskirt 'because all the directors really wanted was a sexy piece' and felt frustrated that 'there's a limit to the number of ways you can say "What are you going to do now, Doctor?"'.[27]

As the years go on, so do the same complaints. Ten years after *Ribos* Carole-Ann Ford told another *Radio Times* feature that, when asked the qualities a *Dr Who* companion had to exhibit, 'I said you had to be able to scream and run at the same time … You had to be able to say "What do we do next, Doctor?" hundreds of times with complete conviction'. In 1995 Jacqueline Hill maintained that in the sci-fi-oriented stories 'the monsters took over and all I had to do was look frightened and get lost in gloomy corridors'.[28]

This was clearly what both the actors and the production team *felt*, but I have a strange suspicion that The Memory Cheats in this and other respects. Screaming is less easy to investigate than the classic series' dialogue, which is all recorded and searchable online. Liz Shaw asks the Doctor 'what are you going to do?' precisely once across her four stories (although she does ask him 'What are you *doing?*' a couple of times, cueing technobabble), and in fact the person whose future actions she seeks enlightenment over most frequently is the Brigadier. Throughout the course of *her* stories a decade earlier, Susan asks

the Doctor 'What are you going to do?' once, and 'What are *we* going to do?', expecting him to answer, once more; both phrases occur in a single story, *Marco Polo*. Ian uses similar words in *Planet of Giants* and *The Dalek Invasion of Earth*, and Barbara in *The Edge of Destruction*. Sometimes the companions ask these sorts of questions of each other, or of minor characters (such as Susan speaking to Altos in *The Keys of Marinus*). This is across about 1250 minutes of screen time broadcast over thirteen months. Of course it's a bit pernickity to focus on the presence, or absence, of these exact words in the broadcasts; we're discussing more a general ambience, a set of assumptions about the role characters will have. But when the actors anchor their complaints *to* these words, it's not unreasonable to question them.

A *Doctor Who* companion's role can only expand beyond the confines of their relationship with the Doctor if they have not just a backstory but a network of other relationships to which they continually return, and this requires both space and disciplined organisation as opposed to the pell-mell pace of *Who* as it once was. This happens in the revived series, and nobody doubts that a female companion's potential in the classic show was limited. But what the actors seem to have been articulating in these 1970s, 80s and 90s interviews is frustration at *that*, rather than an actual memory of what they *did* during their time on the programme. If we draw back the focus a little and look at how the female companion characters actually functioned, we find rather less of the stereotype than we might have expected.

Susan was to all appearances a child, and Katerina was barely present for the blink of a televisual eye. Among the rest, there is a category of what we might call *trope-stretchers* in various ways: they scream, but that's not all they do. Watch Vicki in *The Meddling Monk,* taking the decisions for herself and Stephen when they're away from the Doctor. Despite her notoriously wandering accent, and whatever she may have ended up *doing*, Dodo was intended to be a modern young woman with her own personality and ideas – in the *Black Archive* volume on *The Massacre,* James Cooray Smith goes so far as to claim her as the first companion who prefigures those of the revived series. Polly follows in the same path. Zoe may be a naïve young girl, but the fact that she is (as the Second Doctor reluctantly concedes) 'something of a genius' who is better at certain intellectual endeavours than he is marks her out as more than just a plot device. The Third Doctor may be outrageously condescending and scornful of Jo's abilities from time to time, but when he manages to put to one side his instinctive irritation with almost everyone around him, he can recognise her courage and intelligence, and so do we. Nyssa seems a bit like Zoe with added aristocratic poise: again, her intellect is never in doubt. Tegan describes herself, of course, as 'a mouth on legs', but this is a self-deprecatory characterisation of her assertiveness and independence which the series underlines rather than

undermines. Mel's less-than-easy relationship with the Sixth and Seventh Doctors might have very large question marks over it – is she a nagging wife stereotype? – but it isn't passive, whatever else it may be.

Another set of female companions don't just stretch the screamer trope, but obviously exist to break it. Liz Shaw, recruited as UNIT's scientific adviser before the Brigadier had any idea the Doctor might turn up again, is so much the Doctor's intellectual equal that she had to be removed from the series and only got her just treatment in later fiction; she's also mature enough to have earned a string of doctorates rather than hovering around her early twenties like most of her fellows (Caroline John was 30 when she took the part). Sarah-Jane Smith, the intrepid journalist, does her share of getting captured and needing rescue, but she also goes on the attack, tackles her adventures on her own terms, and is perfectly capable of telling both alien foes and the Doctor himself what she thinks of them. You wouldn't have wanted to get on the wrong side of Leela or Ace, characters well able to take care of themselves, and risk finding yourself at the sharp end of a janis thorn or a baseball bat; and it's given to Leela to lampshade the companion's role of having things explained to them. In *The Talons of Weng-Chiang* the Doctor shows her Magnus Greel's travel device and asks 'Do you know what this is?' to which her reply is a sarcastic and completely accurate 'You ask me so that you may tell me'. And I deliberately leave to last the very first of this sequence, Barbara; intelligent, resourceful, and courageous, Barbara becomes a goddess in *The Aztecs* and tries to alter history (not that she can, not even one line), and has enough self-possession to bamboozle the Daleks with historical gobbledegook to pursue a plan which has nothing at all to do with the Doctor in *The Dalek Invasion of Earth*. She isn't a cliché either.

This leaves us with just two companions from the classic series to consider. Firstly, Victoria was always a character out of her depth travelling in the TARDIS, and her departure at the end of *Fury From the Deep* to join a 20th-century family who, however kind, she has very little in common with, says a great deal about her weariness and frankly desperation: it's virtually her sole act of agency. Even regarding Victoria, though, Elizabeth Sandifer makes the point – in line with her general preference for 'redemptive readings' of the text of *Doctor Who* – that precisely by making Victoria 'the character that feminists should be most frustrated with', the production team make it easier for future female companions to push against the mould. Previously the pattern was to take female characters who embody a good idea but then 'get shoehorned into peril monkeying'; by writing Victoria as the peril monkey *par excellence* – a sheltered, pretty Victorian girl played by a former child star – when those expectations were undermined ('dishing out sassy put-downs to sexist men') it had more impact than it otherwise would.[29] Then secondly, Peri as a character, and Nicola Bryant as the actor who played her, were horribly ill-served by a

production team whose interest in either was cursory at best and misogynist at worst. Peri actually does comparatively little screaming or running through corridors, but you can hardly point to her as a model to follow when John Nathan-Turner kept intervening to make sure she wore as little as decently possible.

In conclusion, if the model of what female *Doctor Who* companions are popularly supposed to be only fits two of them very comfortably, and if it's subverted *right at the very beginning* by Barbara, can it really be said to have existed at all? The companions of the classic series often fall into cliché, and very rarely exhibit the depth and richness of female figures in the revived series, but they aren't usually as programmatic as is often claimed.

When the actors and programme-makers were giving these retrospective interviews, very little of *Doctor Who*'s past was available for anyone to watch. The BBC first released a story on video in 1983, and the first from the *distant* past – *The Seeds of Death* – came along in 1985. There was only a trickle after that. Caroline John would have to wait until 1988 to see any of her stories (*Spearhead from Space*), and Carole-Ann Ford 1989 (*The Daleks*). By 1990 Wendy Padbury would have been able to view most of Zoe's available footage, had she wanted to, and it would have revealed a character who did visibly little screaming. Perhaps Jacqueline Hill never felt like re-watching the seven stories with Barbara in them that existed on video by the time she gave that interview to *Radio Times* in 1995, as they would significantly have contradicted her. It may be that *Doctor Who*'s early stars and makers are not only misremembering the show's past, but also remembering it *through each other's misrememberings* which explains why Carole-Ann Ford and Caroline John virtually echo one another's words.

Nevertheless, the somewhat false memory of the past was the memory everyone shared, and it generated the way Romana was presented. Everything about her reflects aristocratic *hauteur*. Her very name sounds grand and expansive, recalling the city of Rome and words such as romance. It was clearly always intended to be the character's name, and was then extended into a sprawling Gallifreyan version to provide a couple of comic exchanges with the Doctor. All the other Time Lords we've encountered in the series so far at this point have had quite sensible, short names, and the Doctor's derisive reaction to Romana's self-introduction in Ep.1 implies that a name the length of hers is unusual; although it might be that Time Lords have grandiose formal names which they shorten for convenience, and his scorn is directed rather at her pretentious use of the full version. To her credit, she doesn't insist on it, though she presumably doesn't understand how prosaic 'Fred' is as an alternative.

But what *is* Romana's full name? All the written information, from the contemporary *Radio Times* to subsequent comments by the production team, give it as *Romanadvoratrelundar,* but what Mary Tamm says on-screen is clearly *Romanadvoratnelundar.* Moreover she says it more than once, and Tom Baker repeats it in *The Stones of Blood*.[30] Small-case 'r' and 'n' would have looked similar on the script, and in her autobiography Tamm claims that an 'n' was what appeared on the first draft she saw. The mistake, if that's what it was, was allowed to stand, so if *Doctor Who* is primarily what we see on TV, that's her name. The only time in the whole series that the 'correct' version is used is when Lalla Ward says it in *Warrior's Gate*, and it's a bit late by then. Mind you, Tamm has a bit of difficulty saying it at all, whatever the correct version is. The stresses in the name fall very unnaturally: she has to stress the second and third syllables together, quite against the normal iambic tendency of English, showing how the long name is a slightly forced expansion of *Romana,* rather than Romana being a contraction of the long one.

Romana is just the third female Time Lord we have seen in the series at this point, and Susan barely counts as it wasn't clear that's what she was at the time; one slightly shocking aspect of *The Deadly Assassin* is that, in our first sustained visit to the Doctor's home world, the sole female voice we hear through the whole story is the synthesised one of a computer. Romana's only true precursor in this respect, then, is Rodan from the immediately previous serial *The Invasion of Time.* It's striking that Rodan is used to make a similar dramatic point as Romana, contrasting the importance of experience versus raw intellect (Rodan is also one pole of a related but different contrast, that of reason and civilization as opposed to instinct and nature, which is why her pairing with Leela is one of the more interesting aspects of that chaotic story).[31] Naturally, being a Time Lord, Rodan is both highly intelligent and technically competent in her field of engineering, but she goes through the same arc as Romana does, from self-confident haughtiness through culture shock to (somewhat) humbled recovery. She takes the very sensible decision to flee the Citadel with Leela, but, never having been outside it, it's hardly a surprise that she falls to bits emotionally and needs the savage to pull her onwards. At least Romana is, we must assume, prepared for her task in theory and perhaps has a personality better able to make that dramatic readjustment of expectations and attitude – the White Guardian will have chosen her for her role just as much as he selected the Doctor, after all. Rodan looks almost like a dry run for Romana; and one echo of the earlier character will come when Lalla Ward has taken over the latter. In *Ribos* Romana appears to be more a psychologist than an engineer, but she has enough technical ability to add a port for the Segment Tracer to the TARDIS console, much to the Doctor's outrage, and certainly acquires a considerable bit of knowhow by later stories. In *Nightmare of Eden* the Doctor gives her two minutes

fifty-eight seconds to rebuild a machine and she replies, in a rather derided comic line, that she'll need a screwdriver; in *The Invasion of Time*, Rodan states that's just what she'll require to repair Gallifrey's defence field.

Romana's very costume expresses aloofness and purity – an outfit which 'took some wearing', according to costume designer June Hudson, but which someone of Tamm's poise could carry off. Never before had the camera panned up a new companion taking in every inch of white expanse, available skin, and coiffured hair. June Hudson took Mary Tamm to Cilla Black's dressmakers to get ideas for the outfit although the wrap was her own. At the time Tom Baker disliked it, presumably because he knew full well the attention Mary Tamm would get from it, but it distils not just aristocratic glamour but also signals naivety. It's not garb for wandering around catacombs avoiding monsters and murderous soldiers. Over the *Key to Time* sequence Romana will wear a variety of different *schmutter*: a pink-and-white silk suit that looks New Romantic *avant la lettre* in *The Pirate Planet*; red shirt and trousers with a cloth cap, or red top and dress, in *Stones of Blood*; brown felt jerkin over black with sensible boots in *The Power of Kroll*; and Mary Tamm's favourite, a purple-and-green silk suit and hat, in *Androids of Tara*. Tamm essentially designed that herself to replace an impractical tweedy outfit – June Hudson asked her for her favourite colours and fabrics and they came up with it together.[32]

When Williams and Read had drawn up the character plan for Romana, they'd always envisaged a scene in which she would eventually respond to the Doctor's jibes about her unsuitable garb by hacking off her dress below the knee, and this was picked up in some of the press coverage too. In fact, we never see this happen on-screen, and when the white dress reappears in *The Armageddon Factor* it's already shorter (and somewhat lower-cut). Far from becoming a 'little girl lost', the acolyte Time Lord has in fact developed into a grown-up, moving from naivety to experience over the course of the five previous adventures. But that also means, paradoxically, that she's a less jagged, challenging character than she was in those initial sarcastic scenes – because she *has* to be.

3. 'A Terrible Ham at Heart'

> Doctor Who *is full of people being very ambitious and writing scenes that are impossible to pull off in a studio …* [But] this *is a writer, and a director, and a design department, all going, Well, we could do it like* this*, and it will suit the story, and also suit the resources that we have at our disposal*.[33]

I wish I could rediscover who it was who claimed that in directing *Image of the Fendahl* George Spenton-Foster 'seemed not to know which way to point the camera', but however fair or unfair that may have been, he was, more often than not, pointing it quite the right way during *Ribos*. In his blog *Watching Blakes 7* Tim Dickinson describes the 'wildly varying' quality of the four episodes of that serial Spenton-Foster directed but suggests that *Gambit* was his best – the closest in tone to *Ribos*, a witty, wordy script which nevertheless provided opportunities for some touches of flair and flamboyance.[34] Chatting with costume designer June Hudson for *Doctor Who Magazine* in 2010, Tom Baker recalled Spenton-Foster as 'a lovely, camp old thing' (quite a statement, coming from Tom Baker) and they both remembered him leading the whole crew to the pub and sleeping with a bottle of whisky under the pillow. This was a slightly uneasy recollection considering that in 1993 the poor man basically drank himself to death. But June Hudson maintained that 'it was a marriage made in

heaven, really, George Spenton-Foster and the sweep of *The Ribos Operation*, because we all wanted that marvellous reach'.[35]

The first decision George Spenton-Foster takes that will make *Ribos* work as well as it does is, as Toby Hadoke suggests, to organise it as a play. The story not only has a Shakespearean impetus, action building towards a bloody climax with an accompanying monologue (for nearly two minutes in Ep.4, apart from the masked Doctor muttering 'No, sir', only the Graff Vynda-K says anything), but it both accepts its theatrical artifice and consciously organises the characters as though they are moving around a stage.

Everyone calls attention to the economy with which the script and design generate our sense of Ribos as a place, but the characters are also made to inhabit the space in a carefully theatrical manner. The scenes in Ep.1 & 2 of the Shrieves first closing and then reopening the Relic Room make it clear that we are witnessing a culture in which people have specified roles and actions to perform that *have nothing to do* with the story, with anything the Doctor and Romana, Garron or the Graff are there to do, and the way they move emphasizes the independent reality of their functions and Ribos as a whole. The stagiest moment of all, perhaps, comes at 1.14:30 as Garron, Sholakh and the Graff exit stage right and the Levithian guards left, leaving the set clear for the arrival of the TARDIS. In fact it's clear for about two seconds, enough to make us aware that something important and dramatic is about to happen. Until the TARDIS turns up, we don't know for sure how *Doctor Who* is going to collide with this snowy pseudo-medieval world. There is no moment more vital to a *Doctor Who* story than the arrival of the TARDIS – although strangely, for Ribos, the Doctor will not become the galvanising presence he normally is.

The performances, too, are nothing if not stagey. If the 'terrible ham at heart' line was in Robert Holmes's original script, it was strikingly precognitive. One of the demands Iain Cuthbertson made to George Spenton-Foster before he would agree to join the cast was that his performance would be allowed to go a bit over-the-top; and once he'd conceded that to his guest star, the director extended the invitation to the rest of the cast. The actors' amendments and additions to the script – such as the way Iain Cuthbertson and Nigel Plaskitt top and tail their first scene together – stretch further what Robert Holmes gave them. Because everyone gets to play quiet moments and varied emotions, too, this expansive style doesn't grate as much as it otherwise would do: somehow, it seems authentic, or at least authentic to the mood of the piece as a whole.

Except when it isn't supposed to. *Ribos* offers us delicious instances of characters indulging in diagetically bad acting accompanied by awful accents. Garron's normal East End cadence is taxing enough, but the Morningside drawl he

adopts to deal with the Graff truly appalls. The Doctor calls attention to Garron's attempt at Mummerset at their first encounter, an option Unstoffe also plumps for when he spins the scryngestone yarn in the Relic Room. Unstoffe has already gone Oirish when doping the Shrieve on the Relic Room roof. This is all a joke spinning off the unspoken rule that all sci-fi aliens speak with RP English accents,[36] but it also plays to *Ribos*'s themes of deceit and pretence. (We might speculate how the alien characters are supposed to *hear* these adopted modes of speech. Do Sholakh and the Graff understand that Mummerset means 'peasant', and does the Shrieve guard hear an Irish accent as a signifier of unpretentious friendliness, as Unstoffe intends it? Does he understand what the phrase 'top of the morning!' means, or is Unstoffe saying something that translates 'top of the morning' into the Ribosian tongue? To we viewers, anyone talking the way Garron does is clearly a fraud of some kind, but his marks obviously don't notice a thing, a comic touch in its own right.)

The result of all this is that the acting in *Ribos*, almost throughout, is as broad as a boat, but that means that the colossal presence of Tom Baker is contained by a group of players mostly behaving in the same way as him, and he doesn't look overdominant or out of place.

If we're looking for mannered performances, Mary Tamm's is sometimes so arch as to be mistaken for something else. The origin of the common belief that she's reading off cue cards in the TARDIS scenes, to my thinking a calumny on the actor's competence, is hard to pin down. I thought it derived from Miles and Wood, but their volume was first published in 2004 and Jason Miller was already spreading the libel in February of that year,[37] suggesting that her eyes fly in the cards' direction so often she must have had designs on the stagehand holding them. I'm not sure that Tamm herself ever addressed the matter, but to me it looks distinctly as though she is, surprising though it may be to some, *acting*: her glances off-camera are signalling Romana's ironic detachment and also trying to give the impression that the character is actually thinking through the outrageous psychobabble she's coming out with. You notice she doesn't do it anywhere else in the story.

Discussions of the acting in *Ribos* underestimate how vital Paul Seed's and Robert Keegan's performances are. Surrounded by an entire butcher's window full of ham, it's absolutely crucial that the threat to the Doctor and Romana is made to seem real, and the script does this by making the Levithian aristocrat and general callous and dismissive of everything that isn't the business of soldiering – in other words, of killing people in legitimate and sanctioned ways. Although we're left to speculate about what kind of upbringing the Graff may have had and therefore the nature of his relationship with Sholakh – especially given that daring kiss at the end – they're united over that, and there's no reason

to think the Graff has any other emotional ties to anyone. He and Sholakh speak to each other quietly, each sentence weighted with – as they are keen to tell us at points – the bloodshed they have shared together. Paul Seed gets to rant and rave, and veer in a moment from low-key irony to screaming paranoia in a way that hints at his near-madness long before Sholakh's death tips him over the edge, but Robert Keegan's ramrod-straight take on his role tethers the Graff to reality at those very moments when he might collapse into comedy, as when the Doctor slaps his face at the start of Ep.3. Wonderful though Paul Seed is, it's Keegan, primarily, who keeps the threat genuine.

Equally, it's the Graff's death scene – the moment when Paul Seed is finally allowed to turn the dial up to 11 instead of hovering a couple of notches below – that locks the entire production together and makes it work. This is a human equivalent of Frankenstein's windmill burning at the end of that 1930 movie, or indeed any number of climaxes within *Who* itself where everything blows up and the roof falls in: it's the cataclysmic final event that demonstrates how serious the stakes really were all along. The Graff's screaming mental breakdown raises the emotional and dramatic temperature to the required point. More specifically, look how skilfully it's handled; the obvious choice would be to have him going to his demise calling down wrath and vengeance on his enemies, looking forward to the fantasy of revenge which has powered him throughout the story so far. Instead, we see his fracturing persona catapulted into the past, into nostalgia, which is now all he has left. He's alone. His dreams are finished, and even though he isn't aware he's going to die, he has nowhere to go except memory. It's magnificent and, in fact, tragic: it's not just any old explosive narrative climax, it's a profoundly humane one driven by character.

Another instance is Garron's taunting of the Graff when finally cornered in the Catacombs. He's a liar and a fraud, and he's lying even now as he knows full well the Doctor and Romana aren't security agents of any kind, but his rage and scorn is absolutely real. He's going to use his last few moments of life to let the Graff know exactly what he thinks of him – the poor boy from Hackney Wick getting his own back, verbally at least.

Finally, the exchange between Binro and Unstoffe defends the integrity of *Ribos* not against its own *humour*, as the simmering violence of the Levithian interlopers, and Garron's defiant anger, do, but against its *cynicism*. We'll deal with this in greater detail later, but for now we'll note that, without their brief relationship based on a recognition of the persecution each other suffers, the story would be bleak indeed.

Nevertheless, this is a TV show, not a stage performance, and the director knows it, using camera movements to keep the action interesting. Most of the time this is nothing very tricksy, just a tweak beyond the ordinary, but there are two notably clever shots exploiting set design. At 1.16:04 we see the Graff, Sholakh and Garron in the Graff's quarters as Garron gives his sales pitch. Spenton-Foster enlivens this essential but potentially dull wodge of explanation by introducing it to the viewers through a false archway as though we are interlopers spying on a private conversation: the view only lasts 13 seconds before reverting to something more conventional, but by then the trick has done its work and we are drawn in. Then at 2.19:45 we are given a brief shot through

the back of the cupboard in the Relic Room as the Captain places in it the Graff's bag of gold, a technique repeated in Ep.3 at 01:28. This is visually interesting, but it also brings us a privileged view which none of the protagonists have: we are, again, made spies and conspirators, one step ahead of everyone in the story.

Spenton-Foster's other devices are subtle enough to be barely noticeable, which is both testament to their skill, and an argument why they should be pointed out. To run down a few:

1.07:50 As we see Garron and Unstoffe for the first time, the camera starts high, then tracks close to the floor, and finally closes in on them. It's placing them in context.

1.23:15 The camera signals an approaching moment of drama as it halts in front of the Captain, then closes on him slightly from below for him to deliver the instruction to release the Shrivenzale which, we viewers know, will put the Doctor and Romana's lives in danger.

2.23:50 Sholakh moves in front of the camera (and Romana, Garron and the Doctor in the background) to give the guards the order to shoot, a nice bit of blocking.

3.05:18 The camera follows a Shrieve crossing the Concourse to Binro's hovel – though not always keeping him central – showing the whole set in one movement.

3.11:25 Tracking along the line of guards to Sholakh as he addresses them gives these faceless characters some individuality (and their helmets differ from one another).

4.16:00 While Sholakh speaks his last words, rather than show him in a static shot, the camera moves across the fallen rocks for a couple of seconds before we see him, creating anticipation.

But the best of all these little touches comes in the scene where Binro and Unstoffe discuss Binro's ideas in Ep.3 (13:30-16:04). By a combination of unhurried zooming and

cutting – none of it done obviously or intrusively – we finish with the two men's faces filling the screen alternately. This is a moment of intense personal contact, as two fugitives make an unexpected connection on the shared basis of compassion and rebellion against authority, and the camerawork brings us right into that encounter.

The production also, very sensibly, decides not to try and show us too much. A proposal to depict the city of Shur through the windows of the hallway in Ep.3 was abandoned, and instead the minimal number of well-composed sets carry the burden of suggesting the culture we, and the time-travellers, have been propelled into. That, and a few moments of diagetic audio – monks chanting and the bells of St Mark's in Venice[38], neither of them very Russian sounds, in fact – and, of course, the script. It *may* be that the reputation of Robert Holmes's dialogue for economy in its world-building is at least partly due to some of it being cut, but if Ian Marter's novelisation of the story is closer to the original scripts than the broadcast episodes, the point still holds. Throughout the script, information about Ribos – and the Cyrrhenian Empire as well – is introduced quite naturally, something which sounds perfectly easy until you spot how readily it can go wrong in *Doctor Who* and fantasy fiction in general. Even Garron's description of the planet to the Graff steers skilfully away from the rocks of info-dumping. Holmes not only gives Ribos a currency that actually sounds real (unlike so many sci-fi names), but *opek* is a double-pun, recalling both the Russian *kopek* and the Organisation of Petroleum-Exporting Countries who were causing the global economy such difficulties in 1978. He gives Garron a name which recalls both *garrulous* and *gammon*, and thus makes him skilled in talking nonsense. However we might note that some of the best jokes (such as Garron's 'Who wants everything? I'll settle for ninety per cent!') aren't in Marter's book, so perhaps they weren't Holmes's at all.

Music

By 1978, composer Dudley Simpson had been composing *Doctor Who*'s incidental music for fourteen years, and *Ribos* sees him at his most assured, not to say baroque. Simpson loves a chance to introduce an organ to his scores, and the accompaniment he gives to the Shrieves' Opening Ritual in the Relic Room is one of the grandest pieces of music ever to grace the series, stately, hieratic, and magnificent. And we get it *twice*, at 1.08:35 and 2.02:14, with further echoes of what we might call the 'Ribos Theme' at 1.21:28 and 3.21:42. Those first two treatments intensify the sense that we are observing another culture at work, while that third-episode recollection as Binro and Unstoffe pick their way into the Catacombs contains an element of menace.

The standard purpose of incidental music is to reinforce mood, and Simpson's work for *Who* does this, but he also has a trick of adding interest by composing *against* the action we see on-screen. The music accompanying the Graff in Ep.2 as he is about to discover Garron's listening device is an example of the former, signalling intrigue before a single note played on a wind instrument of some kind goes flat and tails off as he realises the deception (15:00); we also have the single, irregular drumbeat behind the Graff's soliloquy at 4.19:30. The eerie sequence following Unstoffe as he plants the jethrik in the Relic Room, on the other hand, dramatises a scene where nothing is actually happening (though it might be seen as raising tension) (1.11:00), and at 2.08:50 we have trumpet, cymbals and drums indicating a moment of intense drama while what we *see* is just the Graff putting on his hat. At points like this the viewer is being played with, though most entertainingly.

Finally there are a couple of occasions when the music provides a link between scenes, carrying through from one to the next. This happens, for instance, at 3.07:45 onwards, as the Graff and Sholakh leave the Relic Room, followed by a few seconds of K9 making his way through the hallways, and finishing with the Doctor, Romana and Garron talking in the Graff's quarters. A single trumpet note, concluding a dramatic musical flourish, continues over all three, a space of about six seconds.

Design

Many sources repeat the claim that Ken Ledsham, *Ribos*'s designer, and June Hudson the costume designer, made use of recycled sets and clothes from the BBC's lavish production of *Anna Karenina*, broadcast the year before *Ribos*. The original statement to this effect comes from the usually excellent *In-Vision* volume so I am hesitant to dissent from it definitively, and it would be understandable practice for a show always looking for ways to save cash, but rather odd in this case. It would be a bit like reusing bits from a production of *Bleak House* for *Game of Thrones* – not completely impossible, but not your first stop. *Anna Karenina* is set in the 1870s, while Ribos is clearly a medieval-type society: not many railway stations or opera houses there. The 1977 *Anna Karenina* is (at the time of writing, until it gets removed) available to watch on Youtube, and although I may have missed something scanning through ten hours of television in ten minutes, I can't see a single item that could have made its way to *The Ribos Operation* without being extensively changed. *The Discontinuity Guide* also points towards a debt to the 1944-5 movie of *Ivan the Terrible*, a point repeated on the DVD commentary: 'even the fireplace' was influenced by the film, that claims. In fact there are remarkably few furry hats in Eisenstein's masterpiece, apart from the Tsar's, and I can't spot a fireplace in the entire thing, let alone any that looks like the one in the Graff's quarters.

There *is* a scene with monk, coffins and candles that looks a lot like *Ribos*'s Hall of the Dead, but funnily enough nobody mentions that.

As for sourcing costumes, what seems to have happened is that June Hudson and George Spenton-Foster called round at grand theatrical costumier's Bermans & Nathans to see what they might have that looked 'medieval Russian', and whatever they took away with them, Bermans & Nathans had back once the recording was over. That was certainly the case with the Graff's costume, a sheepskin and fur concoction made 'for an unknown production' that Hudson then tarted up, and which was sold by The Prop Gallery relatively recently.[39]

June Hudson in 2021 with the design for Garron's costume

Whatever the influences on the design team for *Ribos* may have been, they used them to help elevate what might have been a run-of-the-mill *Doctor Who* story into something the desperate expedients of the Williams era rarely managed. Ken Ledsham's other credits, *Destiny of the Daleks* and *The King's Demons*, are not usually thought of as design highlights in the series, and June Hudson's subsequent skilful work only occasionally attains the same instantly memorable quality (though some of us might find it quite hard to shake off the image of Lady Adrasta in *The Creature from the Pit*).

You can argue that *The Ribos Operation* might not be a work of *genius* on the part of anyone involved. But examining the direction, script, music, and design reveals great talents bringing themselves to bear on what remains, after all, a kids' TV sci-fi show. It's not *I, Claudius*: but, marrying craft and inspiration in an unusually happy combination, it *is* the kind of thing that gives 'workmanlike' a good name.

4. '*Eternal* Chaos?'

Almost everyone loathes the Seeker for her screaming and over-the-top delivery, but what do you expect from a shaman? Her scream is part of the ritual, also including the burning of some substance, herbs or incense, and the invocation of the Ribosian ancestors who are present via the medium of their bones: directly after it she covers her eyes with her hands and in that 'blinded' state sees the visions the gods and the ancestors vouchsafe her. As Jack Graham points out, she turns businesslike enough as soon as she thinks her work is over, anyway.[40]

It would be neat to suggest that the Seeker, like so many of *Ribos*'s other characters, is engaged in deceit, but she appears completely genuine. There's no hint in what we see onscreen that her visionary statements can have been worked out in any other way than psychic insight. Within the world of *Who* paranormal abilities can be pseudoscientifically explained readily enough, so she doesn't necessarily disprove Binro's rationalism, but we aren't *given* an explanation in the story. Ironically her prediction that all but one of the pursuing party will die is exactly what brings about her own death, but the fact that this isn't the part she sees herself playing in the drama doesn't make the prophecy any the less accurate.

Yet the Seeker's main function in the story doesn't in fact relate to the theme of superstition versus reason, either to confirm or to muddy it. Instead, she's a functionary sent out to express and enact the demands of the old order of Ribos. Like Ann Tirard's other role in *Who*, Locusta the poisoner in 1964's *The Romans*, the Seeker epitomises the way the regime which employs her works: occult power and obscure authority, fear, and resistance to change. She's the point at which the native way of doing things and the alien violence of the Graff are united: no matter how technologically advanced the Cyrrhenian Empire may be, here on Ribos the Graff becomes indistinguishable from any other benighted thug, led through caves by a shaman rubbing bones together. In the Seeker, the apparently ancient and the modern are shown to be two aspects of the same monster, power trying to destroy whoever threatens it. And that idea of power, and resistance to it, echoes through the whole scheme *The Ribos Operation* belongs to.

The original memo in which Graham Williams proposed the concept that became the Key to Time first appeared in public in *In-Vision* 38: 'In the beginning was the CV', runs the article title, suggesting it was part of his application for the producer's job at *Who*, presented to BBC Head of Serials

Graeme MacDonald. This shouldn't create the impression that he was in any sort of competitive process, however. At the prompting of MacDonald's predecessor, Bill Slater, Williams was being bumped up to producer as compensation for the skewering of a police drama serial called *The Zodiac Factor* which Williams and Slater had devised and already spent a (for then) astonishing £20K on before it was dropped. Williams thought that the Controller of BBC1, Bill Cowgill, had never had any intention of commissioning *The Zodiac Factor*, but it was a tangled tale. His promotion coincided with Philip Hinchcliffe making it known that he would quite like to leave *Doctor Who*, but Hinchcliffe hadn't actually decided whether to go or to stay on for one more season when Graeme MacDonald brought Williams into the *Doctor Who* office to announce that he would be taking over, while Hinchcliffe would be moved across to make *Target*, another police and crime show that Williams had been developing. It was a bit of a *fait accompli*. The chronology isn't clear either: what *In-Vision* calls the 'final version' of the 'Key to Time' memo is dated 30th November 1976, but Graham Williams was already shadowing Philip Hinchliffe earlier that month, and increasingly desperately trying to snatch more than a couple of minutes with script editor Robert Holmes to work out how his first season might develop. In fact in 1990 he claimed that he'd been talking to Hinchliffe about the handover as early as July. So there was never a question of anyone else taking over the show, nor did Williams's appointment depend on the memo, even if it helped make the point that he had a decent understanding of what *Doctor Who* could do.

Williams's ideas had to be put to one side during the chaotic process of assembling Season 15, which had included new script editor Anthony Read virtually weeping at his desk over the unworkable script David Weir had submitted for the final story, and Williams realising the two of them would have to come up with a replacement in no time at all. Even getting used to how *Doctor Who* was *supposed* to work had been traumatic enough, as we've seen. Having survived season 15, the producer looked forward to actually doing what he had planned in the first place.

The 1976 Key To Time memo is an odd document. It's best explained by assuming it was written in reverse to the logical sequence it presents. The original question it must have tried to answer was how to manage the character of the Doctor which, Graham Williams said he and Anthony Read had determined, was 'amoral … all he really wants to do is observe and not get involved'. What can make him 'involved' apart from the accident of arriving wherever the TARDIS puts him down and finding himself embroiled in some local difficulty? Williams might have been recalling the Doctor's frustration at being the agent of Time Lord policy ('I will not tolerate this continual interference in my life!' he fumes at the start of *Genesis of the Daleks*), but *The*

Deadly Assassin and *The Invasion of Time* had seen the Time Lords convincingly reduced in status relative to the Doctor to the point that it was no longer credible for them to send him anywhere: he had been President of Gallifrey, after all. Who could take on the responsibility of supervising and commanding the Doctor's time? Enter the Guardians: this is their dramatic role, to shape and frame the Doctor's adventures, at least for this season. They can fill the gap the Time Lords leave.

As I say, it's an odd document. *In-Vision* claims Graham Williams 'delved into his academic background' to produce it, presumably referring to the name-dropping of various famous 20th-century scientists at the start. I don't know what academic background Graham Williams had: perhaps, like his boss Graeme MacDonald, he'd begun a science degree and then switched to arts (MacDonald never finished his). On the other hand, Elizabeth Sandifer calls the Key to Time Memo 'a cavernous mound of gibberish', and, I fear, of the two opinions, even granted that you can't *have* a 'cavernous mound', I rather incline towards Dr Sandifer's. She quotes Williams's statement that the Guardians represent one level of an unending 'pyramidal hierarchy [that] stretches through Time and Space and can have no apex', when, as she reasonably argues, the very point of pyramids (as it were) is that they *have* apices and no pyramid can *be* a pyramid without one. She boggles at Williams's invoking of the 'weak interactive force' as being the power that allows the Time Lords to maintain cosmic order in so far as they do. But it isn't Williams's barking-mad science or mummery mathematics which are the core problem with the Key to Time Memo. After all, *Doctor Who* has really always been more science fantasy than science fiction: it's invariably better at positing nigh-magical ideas in cod-scientific language, than at thinking them through in the consistent and scientifically-informed way Ursula le Guin might have done, and woolly concepts don't necessarily pose a challenge to it. No, the difficulty lies in the memo's philosophical incoherence and what that means for the drama its author wants to shape.

The introduction of the Guardians as opposing forces holding the cosmos in balance is comprehensible especially if we understand 'order', for which the White Guardian holds responsibility, as *stasis*. Stasis does positively demand something else: freedom, growth, and moral agency are impossible without change, and change involves decay and destruction; stasis alone, an unchanging condition, has been the goal of authoritarians down the ages. Pursued consistently, such a conception would make the Guardians both necessary, and interestingly amoral, at least when considered as a pair: each would recognise the need for the other to carry on existing. In the broadcast programme, we get a hint of this in the Doctor's opening exchange with the White Guardian, both

in Anthony Read's script and in Cyril Luckham's performance. Aloof and vaguely threatening, he is hardly a comfortable presence.

But Graham Williams *doesn't* propose the Guardians as morally neutral forces, and they aren't when they appear on-screen either: they are stated to be, and appear as, the Guardians of 'Good' and 'Evil'. This complicates the whole notion of them maintaining a cosmic balance: 'balance' and 'order' are really the same thing, and only the White Guardian shows any interest in maintaining the 'balance' at all. The Black Guardian, when we finally see him in *The Armageddon Factor*, obviously wants to *win*, to defeat his White opponent decisively and eternally. Notwithstanding the way the White Guardian presents himself, the Doctor and Romana immediately understand his role as positive and beneficial, as falling within what they understand as 'good'. 'If a force of good were to govern the balance, there would *be* no balance', Williams insists in the Memo, and yet 'balance' is really victory for the White Guardian, for 'good': if it is preserved, the Black Guardian and the disintegration he represents is only an aspect of the overarching order championed by his White counterpart. Williams's bizarre excursion into moral relativism in an attempt to illustrate his point that good and evil need each other - 'there is no account, nor any evidence, that Hitler believed in his principles any less sincerely than Churchill did in his' - only highlights the incoherence of the whole scenario, an incoherence

which generates the anticlimactic conclusion to the Key to Time sequence at the end of *The Armageddon Factor*.

We might note that the personality the White Guardian presents in *The Ribos Operation* is markedly different from the far more avuncular and affable character we see in *Enlightenment* in 1983, even though Cyril Luckham plays him on both occasions. This raises the possibility that the being the Doctor agrees to work for isn't the White Guardian at all, but the Black, an interpretation which, to be fair, the Key to Time Memo does anticipate: 'Perhaps this is a gigantic fraud. Does the good guy always wear the white hat?' 'It would be a terrible tragedy for the Universe if it suddenly turned out that I was colour blind … unable to distinguish the White Guardian from the Black', the Doctor reasons right at the end of his quest. Perhaps he doesn't just mean that the Black Guardian has been masquerading as White *then*, but from the moment he materializes in that natty rattan chair.

The inconsistent presentation of the Guardians might lead us to question what we seem to see in a different way. Nothing in the Doctor's reaction to the White Guardian – awe, resignation, and resentful submission – leads us to think his new employer is anything other than he appears to be, essentially God (or at least *a* god), his appearance heralded by a *faux*-ecclesiastical organ fanfare suggesting we are in the televisual presence of the divine. And the Black Guardian's powers should parallel the White's. Yet, as plenty of viewers have spotted, if the Guardians are so powerful, why can't the White Guardian find the Segments of the Key to Time himself; and why can't the Black Guardian break into the TARDIS at the end of *The Armageddon Factor* in the way the White does? How is it that he can be baffled by its straightforward (in Time Lord terms) technology? Whatever the Guardians' powers – and by *Enlightenment* we see them able to banish the Eternals back to their own plane of existence simply by willing it – omniscience clearly isn't among them, or there would be no point in the Doctor bolting the randomiser onto the TARDIS's navigation: it's possible to give the Black Guardian the slip in a way you simply can't with God, who always knows where you are. Also, when by the time of *Mawdryn Undead*, he *has* worked out where the Doctor is, the Black Guardian doesn't just pop up and kill him: instead he decides to recruit and seduce a susceptible mortal, Turlough, to do it for him. This is indeed what the Christian Devil might do, but that's because the Devil is a strictly limited being whose capacity for action is constrained and who gets a kick out of corrupting souls. Furthermore, once Turlough finally tells him to get lost and flings a crystal at him at the climax of *Enlightenment* there seems to be little he can do about it and he vanishes in flames with a nasty cough. Perhaps the Guardians are not the godlike presences they would have us believe, and the mission of the

Key to Time not what it seems either: maybe the fraud is deeper than just one Guardian impersonating another.

After *Enlightenment* both Guardians disappear from televised *Doctor Who* until *Can You Hear Me?* in 2020, when the godlike Zellin makes a passing reference to 'the Guardians [and] their power struggles'. That these are mentioned in the same breath as 'the Eternals' games' implies they are just another way for a category of immortal beings to amuse themselves. Now, the Guardians do seem concerned to conceal themselves from the universe at large, which is why they choose to work through the agency of less powerful creatures. The fact that we've never heard of such allegedly awesome powers until *Ribos* is consistent with only a handful of senior Time Lords knowing they exist, including the Doctor from his stint as President; Romana doesn't *seem* to know who they are, although the scene in *Stones of Blood* where the Doctor finally lets slip what their mission is about is ambiguous (we might expect her to say something like 'who the hell are the Guardians?' if she didn't know about them before). The Guardians *might* do this because they don't want to upset mortals' view of reality, but it is also consistent with their power not really being quasi-divine at all, even if their abilities are clearly significant when you happen to be in their proximity. Again, applying the idea of 'proximity' makes sense in that, even though they can materialise potentially anywhere, they are obviously physically bounded in a way that, say, the Christian God is not. They aren't omniscient, they aren't omnipresent, and they probably aren't omnipotent either. The Guardians are, it seems, quite Small Gods.

So their choices to act through the Doctor or Turlough do look like part of a sort of game. The Black Guardian is understandably furious at the end of *The Armageddon Factor* that his round in the game has been thwarted, but we are justified in wondering whether the situation is really as apocalyptic as the White Guardian suggests and, to judge by what he says in *Stones of Blood*, the Doctor believes. He may well *not* believe it by the time we reach the conclusion of the season, as his interactions with the Black Guardian give the strong impression of someone who's rumbled the whole thing, no matter how the Guardian huffs and puffs.

Events read this way render the nature of the Guardians properly morally ambiguous. It remains possible to gloss the White Guardian as 'good', and he obviously prefers to have the Doctor around rather than not, but he is not the summary of all goodness in the universe, and nor is that really his concern. Possibly the Guardians' true role is educative; in *Enlightenment* the White Guardian warns that both of them will continue 'until we are no longer needed', which could mean their existence is integral to that of reality itself, or it could imply that mortal beings might outgrow them, as Turlough has at that point.

The trouble with supposedly benign colonial powers educating their native charges to the point there they can manage themselves – recalling the image the White Guardian presents in *Ribos* – is that they very often don't notice when that moment has come, and resist being told it has. The Guardians, anyway, are definitely not running the whole cosmic show, whatever the beginning of *Ribos* suggests or the production team intended.

In any case, the story is having none of this grandiose nonsense. The story wants to dally with a petty tyrant and a crook. It's not just that Robert Holmes takes the mode of cosmic conflict the Guardians represent and translates it to a tiny, low-stakes setting – it's that he rejects the entire binary model and presents us with grubby complexity, with one swindler who has a heart for the outcast and another with no heart for anyone but himself, but who makes us laugh. Let us grapple with that *milieu*.

Everyone talks about Robert Holmes's abilities to fashion a world in his scripts, as much by alluding to what *can't* be seen as actually depicting detail. *Ribos* is a perfect example, in which there's a crucial relationship between what can be seen and what is merely referred to. But there are some things we don't see about the planet Ribos, some visible absences, which must nevertheless exist and that we need to think about. One, the nature of the mysterious North, we will leave for now; for the time being, let's consider two other questions: first, who does the Shrieve Captain answer to? And second, what's Sun Time like?

Prentis Hancock's Captain of Shrievalty is the highest native authority we encounter on Ribos, either in person or by repute. He obviously has pretty broad powers to deal with what we might categorise as issues of order and security around Shur, the capital. Although for budgeting reasons we don't see him commanding great cohorts of Shrieves, he never mentions having to ask anyone else's permission when, for instance, Garron suggests storing the Graff's gold in the Relic Room, or when he needs to hunt down an escaped felon. He can call in the Seeker if need be, and takes the apparently extreme decision to 'seal the Catacombs forever' towards the end of the story. There is no hint that he needs to consult with anyone else on a higher level about any of these matters, although after having agreed to look after the gold in an arrangement he admits is 'highly irregular' in the hope of getting a kickback, his subsequent actions might well be an attempt to cover up that initial decision, which has hardly turned out as he expected. And yet ostensibly that's *all* he is: a senior guard. He probably doesn't get paid all that much: a hundred opeks is enough to pique his interest when asked to store the gold, whereas Garron casually deals in millions.

From its general similarity to medieval Russia, we would assume that Ribos is a monarchy. *Doctor Who* as a series likes monarchies, or monarchical-like

presidencies, as they're narratively easier to deal with than complicated and messy parliamentary systems ('I always get on terribly well with the aristocracy', the Doctor tells Romana[41]). The Relic Room in Shur contains Ribos's crown jewels, which are similar to the United Kingdom's: we see crowns, orbs, swords, and even spurs, like those in the Tower of London. Outside the display case, there are robes and furniture which again seem to combine the British coronation regalia with the court gear of the Byzantine empire, and the Captain's staff is topped with a gold dove like the *ampulla* from the United Kingdom Crown Jewels. The Doctor speculates that the crown of Ribos hasn't been out of its case more often than twice a century, although that would suggest a long average reign for Ribosian monarchs and we might question how he knows.[42]

The regalia are not treated as merely precious or historic by the Ribosians, but as *holy*. The Shrieves' ceremony greeting the new day is one of the most impressive moments in the whole of *Doctor Who* as it gives us a glimpse into an alien world as a place with its own history and culture, completely independent of us as viewers or anything the Doctor might be up to, a history and culture which is valid quite separately from the Whovian narrative. The Shrieves salute the relics almost as sentient presences, and clearly regard them as powerful. But their power isn't the kind we often get presented in sci-fi narratives, that common trope of alien artefacts which have found their way into a more primitive society, in the way Robert Holmes will present us with the Fifth Segment of the Key to Time that becomes the ceremonial sceptre expanding Kroll to monstrous proportions when the beast swallows it (*The Power of Kroll*). Instead, they are clearly conceived in entirely local and ordinary, if exalted, terms as the vehicles of Ribosian history and tradition.

This is a role very similar to that of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom, but in an exaggerated form. Usually sets of crown jewels have a symbiotic relationship with the monarchy they pertain to: they confer legitimacy on a monarch, but only make sense within the context of a monarchy to confer legitimacy on, or else they become nothing more than interesting historical artefacts. So the Crown Jewels of the UK have the patina of the antique past, but are based on originals mainly destroyed during the Commonwealth: they exist only because they have been called *into* existence by the current monarchy they have a relationship with. But the exalted reverence paid by the Ribosians to *their* Crown Jewels rather implies that they are all they have that represents continuity with their past.

I wonder, then, whether Ribos has not *lost* its monarchy, either because the royal house has died out, or because the legitimate monarch went missing, but that such is the emphasis there on form and order that whoever has assumed power

in the monarch's place – let us assume some other aristocrat – doesn't use the royal title or claim monarchical status. This would fit with the fact that nobody ever refers to a Ribosian monarch (including Garron in his tour-guide mode dealing with the Graff and Sholakh), and it would make Ribos a dramatically conservative society whose politics was in suspended animation, unable to move forward. Monarchies contain a basic progressive impetus, powered by the question of what you do when they go wrong. When the lottery of genetics produces a monarch who is spectacularly incompetent, evil, or mad, you're faced with the problem of how to get rid of them, and at some point with the question of how to minimise the risk of it happening again. That's what leads to the dispersal of monarchical power and some sort of limited or representative government. A state which is *imagining* that the real monarch might turn up at some point is going to find it far harder to deal with that issue: it will be stuck looking forever backwards. If Ribos is sparsely populated, Shur being the only major settlement, the spur to change that comes from political conflict and competition is also minimised.

Secondly, we know what Ribos looks like during Ice Time. It's a harsh and unforgiving environment in which anyone who's bold enough to try crossing the tundra earns the Shrieve Captain's sympathy. And this is in the capital: presumably conditions in the fabled North are even more challenging. But what might Sun Time be like? After all, if Ribos is a bit like medieval Russia, summer in Moscow is quite agreeable, with temperatures in the mid-20s Celsius and plenty of sun. Ribos's Sun Time is probably just as pleasant, and it can be relied to go on for years uninterrupted.

This extreme climatic predictability across lengthy seasons – 32 Levithian years, claims Garron, and however long those are they aren't likely to be all that different from ours – coupled with the challenges of the Ice Time, also probably makes for a very fatalistic and conservative culture. Ribosians broadly know what the weather is going to be like for long periods, and they know when it's going to change, and that the great drivers of their circumstances are beyond their control. Their main concern will be that things don't get any worse, rather than speculating about how they might be better, and it's no wonder that they personify the forces that direct their society as Ice Gods and Sun Gods.

The extent to which the Ribosians *believe* the myth of divine conflict which produces their planet's climate is, I think, moot. They will have had to have been preternaturally unobservant not to work out that their seasons come at regular intervals, unlikely if they really are the result of quarrelling divinities, and they are aware their ancestors built the Catacombs while simultaneously stating that the Ice Gods live there. This is the way folklore – and pagan religion – works: not as a consistent ideology, but a set of stories, which may be attached

to powerful, hidden entities who are best appeased rather than annoyed, even if all the details of the narratives people tell about them don't hang together completely coherently.

Into this unpromising landscape for independent and original thought enters Binro. I think we can see how his heresy is not merely a set of cosmological speculations, nor, unlike his historical antecedents Galileo and Giordano Bruno, does he come up against a powerful religious establishment which guards the boundaries of publicly-acceptable belief because, notwithstanding the sounds of monastic chanting we hear at various points on-screen, the script gives no hint that Ribos has one. No, Binro's rational enquiry threatens to unpick what stability and security the Ribosians have managed to develop, and his alternative narrative is one his society doesn't feel it can take the risk of allowing to spread. When the Captain tells the Graff, horrified, 'You're not from the North!' he's glimpsing something that he simply cannot admit into his worldview; and when he seals off the Catacombs with cannon-shot 'forever', he's closing down the heresy of Binro, defending Ribos not just from the Graff's violence, but from the possibility of changing its mind, of being exposed to a wider reality it can't accommodate.

As Miles and Wood point out, *Ribos* is the first time *Doctor Who* shows us an alien planet which is less technologically advanced than contemporary Earth[43], and like all the worlds the TARDIS visits, Ribos offers us a chance to think about our own. On Earth, empirical scientific enquiry coincided – very, very slowly, and roughly – with a political movement towards individualism and respect for the person, and with the replacement of feudal economies by capitalism. The coincidence rather deceives us into imagining that the motion was inevitable, each element implicit in and demanded by the others. But the Graff comes to Ribos with modern weapons and tech and allies himself with a shaman waving bones about: power and self-interest are what make the difference here, not technological advance. Unless Ribos adopts not just Binro's proto-scientific empiricism, but also his resistance to injustice – the instinct that leads him to shelter a man on the run – its future won't be liberal humanism, but fractured monsters like the Graff. The inner theme of *Ribos* isn't science versus superstition, or medieval versus modern, but the pitching of raw power against human sympathy. Binro's conversation with Unstoffe is Robert Holmes's 'hope lies with the proles' moment: whether the old cynic believes it is another matter.

5. Nobody Comes From the North

Proof

I've said I repeatedly encountered *Doctor Who* for some time before daring to sit through an entire episode. What I've told you so far would make for a neat story of how I began watching the show, yet I think – I *know* – that reality wasn't quite that simple, because that wasn't how I first became aware of it. But how did that happen? Every year my family went on holiday to St Ives in Cornwall, staying in the chalets of the St Ives Holiday Village, a cheap-ish option for a 1970s working-class household from Dorset. St Ives had, and still has, a small amusement arcade on the seafront and, in the early 1970s, this was one of the venues across the UK which had a coin-operated Dalek.

Fairground ride manufacturer Edwin Hall made between 35 and 50 amusement-arcade Daleks in 1965; originally they were all red, but the one at St Ives had been repainted blue, at least when I was photographed inside it in 1977 (in the back cover photo you can see the red showing through). My parents could easily have left me in it for an hour, quite happy to wiggle the sticks up and down as it thrashed and gyrated dangerously about (the rides were designed to play the *Doctor Who* theme and Dalek voices, but I don't think 'mine' ever did that; the mechanism may have broken by then).[44] Our 1977 holiday would have taken place in late summer or autumn (possibly in term time as my parents might naughtily have extracted me from school for a few days to save money on the booking fees), but I remember sitting in the Dalek for several years running. The photograph shows my seven-year-old incarnation in a horrid brown striped top and beige flared trousers, a perfect epitome of the epoch.

Even if I'd clambered inside that Dalek years before, 1977's was a very *Who*-related holiday. On the way down to Cornwall we had made a colossal detour to visit the *Doctor Who* exhibition at Longleat and there is another photograph showing me standing awkwardly (I didn't stand in any other way) outside its TARDIS-shaped entrance portal. Pausing in the shop on the way out, I'd been bewildered by the array of books. I wanted to buy them all – or, more realistically, have them bought for me – but was only allowed one, *The Cybermen*. To this, once we actually got to Cornwall, I was permitted to add *The Abominable Snowmen*. These tomes forced me to come to terms with the fact that the Doctor's face had changed repeatedly, and the show was a vast landscape whose edges I had only touched. I think. That's what I remember, anyway.

These events are at least roughly dateable; they are documented on my Mum and Dad's photographic slides stamped with the month they were developed. But why was I interested in *Doctor Who* at all? Those two books I bought in 1977 may not have been the first I read. Another fixed memory is reading *The Loch Ness Monster* and *The Genesis of the Daleks* in hardback editions borrowed from our local library. As *Doctor Who* is very likely the most documented TV series of all time, the publication dates of these books are readily available: they emerged in 1976. The opening pages of *The Loch Ness Monster* are masterly suspenseful and harrowing, and so I found them; but I was even more horrified by the image of Davros on the cover of *Genesis*, insisting my mum cover it up, as I did with the dessicated Master on *The Deadly Assassin* cover later in 1977. Did I really read these books in 1976, or was it later?

The Denys Fisher-made *Doctor Who* action dolls I acquired were first produced in 1976 but I can't recall when I got mine: the TARDIS arrived one Christmas, certainly, but which? Consulting the exhaustive account of toys, merchandise and tie-ins in the *Doctor Who* TV handbooks by David Howe, Mark Stammers and Stephen Walker, I recognise the second cohort of character cards you could collect from packets of Weetabix in 1977, and in fact I still have a couple which survived being played with to the point of disintegration (I had no thought for their future value). Again, see the photo at the head of the chapter.

Interesting though this may all be, it doesn't get me any closer to the ground zero of my obsession with *Doctor Who*. I am left with fragments of memory which swirl around some original event, a cloud I can't penetrate through to what lies behind. I wonder if you are different? We are all caught up in the cheats of memory, after all, and construct narratives for ourselves to account for them.

The Ribos Operation is a story of deceit: everyone in it who isn't a native Ribosian is lying in one way or another. Garron and Unstoffe, obviously, are engaged in

a scam, but the Graff and Sholakh are also concealing who they really are to scout out Ribos as a future base. Even our heroes the Doctor and Romana are covering up their real identities, a necessary deception given their covert mission to recover the segments of the Key to Time and the ever-present possibility that they may come across agents of the Black Guardian: this may, in fact, be the first time in *Doctor Who* that the Doctor and companion(s) have an active interest in keeping hidden who they really are. Jack Graham writes on *Tardis Eruditorum:*

> *As usual in a Robert Holmes script, the story is powered by misunderstandings, and, on the deeper level, by failures to understand oneself. This isn't Garron's last job, nor is Unstoffe leaving him. The Graff's plans for conquering back his throne are as illusory as Garron's business proposal, or Romana's idea that she's on a mission for her Supreme Council and can re-educate the Doctor by knowing him.*[45]

In fact, Garron's scheme, we are driven to conclude, is a cheat within a cheat. Very reasonably Romana asks Garron, while they're detained, if jethrik is the most valuable material in the galaxy, and a chunk of it as big as Garron's could 'power an entire battlefleet for a complete campaign' , why doesn't he just sell it and live off the proceeds? His answer 'Oh, I don't think it's worth all that much', is entirely unconvincing. His real motive, Jack Graham decides (and we agree), is less to do with the money he might make than with the fun he might have. His business is the deceit, or rather the people he is deceiving – the rich, the powerful, those afflicted by delusions of grandeur, those who might despise a man from 'a mud patch in the middle of nowhere' to the extent of not noticing that he's got the better of them.

'If anyone asks you where you're from, just say "The North"', Garron informs the Graff, confident that no one from Shur will have been there, and thus sets running a joke precisely about deception and dissembling that everyone buys into. In this way, 'the North' functions as a realm of unknown possibility, but also the domain of lies: the joke goes dark by the story's end. When he speaks to Binro, Unstoffe clearly keeps up the fiction at first, as his positive response to Binro's ideas leads the tattered heretic to speculate that 'perhaps in the North, they are a different people after all' – a people who will not reject his beliefs and crush his hands. But there is no reason to believe that's true. The Graff comes from an unknown land, but brings with him only death; and even the Doctor, who also, having rumbled Garron, claims to be 'from the North', is signally uninterested in 'bringing down the government',[46] leaving Ribos to its own devices once he has what he wants. He never meets Binro, never endorses his ideas or the progress he represents. As the TARDIS dematerializes, Ribos is unchanged, the Captain and the Shrieves doubtless working to put the whole

unpleasant business behind them. Ribos is not a problem the Doctor solves, and, in the end, while so many people claim to come from the North, nobody really does.

Perhaps *Doctor Who* actors also claim to hail from the North, metaphorically speaking. The *Ribos Operation* DVD audio commentary by Tom Baker and Mary Tamm is deservedly famous, not because it reveals much about the actual making of the serial, but for the banter between the two actors. Just in case you may not have heard it, possibly the highlight is the following exchange:

> TB: Do you remember that photograph of us that made us look as though we'd just been married? When people asked me to sign it I always used to sign across your bosoms.
> MT: And I used to sign across your face.

What you also get is yet another layer to the veils of truth and untruth around *Ribos*. This mainly comes courtesy of the tall stories Tom Baker tells. Some of these are clearly nonsense, such as his insistence that the Ribosian Crown Jewels were borrowed from the late Queen Mother who 'was a huge fan' and often used to write to him; Mary Tamm guffaws at this and thankfully the conversation moves on before Baker can elaborate on the exact content of the Queen Mother's missives. There are jokes at the BBC's expense such as Baker's description of Cyril Luckham's drink as 'a BBC cocktail … water and paint stripper', or suggesting that the Shrivenzale's snout has real blood over it 'because the BBC couldn't afford the fake stuff'. But then there are more uncertain statements. Baker claims to have proposed that the White Guardian should appear behind a burning bush, but that this idea was spiked as blasphemous; is this a joke, or did it really happen? Mary Tamm doesn't obviously scoff at it, and it's not basically implausible. But neither is there any proof.

The story of Tom Baker's lip injury, for instance, is a well-known one, but it has grown a bit as it's been retold. It was known about as long ago as the *In-Vision* volume, though the circumstances weren't mentioned there. The tale goes either that Baker was ill-advisedly trying to replicate Paul Seed's party trick whereby his dog would jump up and bite a sausage (or something) out of its master's mouth; or that he was merely teasing the animal despite being warned that it wouldn't take kindly to it. Nigel Plaskitt took Baker to hospital to have the dog-bite treated. Nobody was in costume, but Baker was habitually wearing a coat and scarf at that time so Plaskitt found himself sitting in A&E alongside a man who was very obviously Dr Who with blood pouring down his face. Now, Mary Tamm claimed that throughout the production thereafter, where possible, Baker had to be shot from the right to obscure the wound, and that the thick make-up applied to his lip caused an infection that only made

matters worse. But *In-Vision* is clear that the accident happened on the last day of filming[47]. Looking carefully at the finished broadcast we can see Baker's injury very clearly in the scene with the White Guardian, and the TARDIS scenes at the beginning and end. These were all shot last in the recording. The damage is also visible in the scene where the Doctor, Garron and Romana are hiding in the niches in the Catacombs, implying that sequence, too, was recorded after everything else. In any case, Tom Baker's misfortune couldn't really have interfered with the production that much at all.

The stars and production team of *Doctor Who* have now told these stories at conventions and on recorded commentaries for decades. There are the same questions, and the same answers. So, over and over, Mary Tamm related the tale of how George Spenton-Foster suggested she get on Tom Baker's right side at the casting interviews by sitting on his knee, and how she steadfastly refused; of how John Leeson aided the rehearsal process by acting K9 not just vocally but crawling around the floor on all fours; and of how she came up offhand with the idea that Lalla Ward, then playing Princess Astra in *The Armageddon Factor*, should succeed her as Romana, only to find that Graham Williams had taken it seriously. Appearing at fan conventions, and being interviewed for BBC DVD releases, is another sort of performance, dependent on the original broadcast one. It promises to tell the truth about the primary performance, but of course it doesn't. The memory cheats and fragments are spun into more convincing and amusing episodes.

We might also think about the relationship of the cast with the script. The transformation of a *Doctor Who* script into a broadcast story was a uniquely complex business, as new writers sometimes discovered to their chagrin. The submission of the script was only the beginning. The script editor would have to work through it to make sure it made sense dramatically, before passing it to the producer who would check it for continuity issues and compliance to BBC expectations. The director would have to determine what would work within the budgetary and time constraints available to them; the technicians would make suggestions; and finally during rehearsals the cast would have an input. At each of these stages the written words might be changed, and what emerged might be significantly different from what the writer had sent in.

As an old hand, ex-script editor, and the least precious writer about his scripts imaginable, Robert Holmes knew this would happen. But it's at this stage in *Doctor Who*'s history that the cast's interference with the scripts became notorious – or so we are told. Nigel Plaskitt remembered that his first encounter with Tom Baker consisted of the latter bursting into the room where the read-through was taking place, throwing his script across the floor, and shouting 'Who wrote this horse shit?' a question the answer to which he knew full well.

Once he and Mary Tamm had got the measure of each other – she determined not to be intimidated by his bluster, and soon, as she recalled in her 2009 autobiography *First Generation* 'we went on curse for curse' – they altered the scripts together. 'We're turning shit into gold', Baker told her, which was rather unfair to Robert Holmes, if no one else. Thus in 1999 Tamm claimed 'we changed everything in every scene we played together'; yet a few years earlier she'd recollected that 'there was no adlibbing as such'. Equally she might state that 'all the directors were terrified of Tom except Mike Hayes' (*The Androids of Tara*, *The Armageddon Factor*, and *City of Death*), but also wrote in *First Generation* that George Spenton-Foster managed his star by, for instance, not allowing him to pause in rehearsals to launch into an anecdote.[48]

We viewers look in on Ribos from the outside, and we see a tapestry of falsehood. Watching a TV programme, we have a privileged viewpoint, especially in the case of *The Ribos Operation*, a splendid example of an 'open' story in which we know far more of what's going on than the characters do, and in fact ever do. We can enjoy our superior awareness. We *know* that it's all fake. On the other hand, the anecdotes and recollections we fans consume through DVD commentaries and guest appearances promise to admit us to a truth about *our* world, or at any rate that tiny slice of it implicated in the making of one *Doctor Who* story; but as we can see they do that only to a debatable extent. And what of our own memories of watching the show, especially if they lie a long way in the past, and form part of a world of which we only remember fragments, and have to construct into a narrative we weren't aware of at the time?

It's only appropriate that a story about deception and resistance should be wrapped in layers of misremembering. Provided we realise that we and others misremember, that 'the memory cheats', there should be no harm in it. Indeed, it's one aspect of admitting to ourselves that we might be wrong, a thought which lies at the heart of all tolerance and understanding. It's only ever the malign powers, the authoritarian Guardians, the mad princes and the vengeful gods, who want to reduce thoughts down until they all point in the same direction. Thoughts that overlap, that head elsewhere, inoculate us against them. From time to time, we all meet our Binros who tell us things we might be reluctant to accept, and we ought to treat them generously.

Plot Summary

The Doctor prepares to go on holiday with K9, but is intercepted by the awesomely powerful White Guardian and given a mission to locate and assemble the six segments of the Key to Time, a device the Guardian needs to restore the cosmic balance which his evil Black counterpart is trying to disrupt. He equips the Doctor with an assistant in his quest, brilliant though inexperienced and sceptical young Time Lord Romana, and a tracer allowing them to locate each segment of the Key.

The Doctor and Romana track the First Segment to Ribos, a planet resembling medieval Russia, currently undergoing its generation-long cold season locally known as Ice Time. Also present are exiled tyrant the Graff Vynda-K, plotting to restore himself to his throne on a distant world; and con-man Garron who poses as an interplanetary real-estate agent to negotiate a sale of Ribos to the Graff. The Time Lords realise that the nugget of immensely valuable jethrik which Garron uses in his serial frauds is the disguised Segment. The Graff discovers he is being cheated, initiating a hunt through the ancient Catacombs under Ribos's capital city, terror and death, before the Doctor and Romana manage (despite Garron's best efforts) to secure the Segment and leave with it. In the course of all this, Garron's sentimental associate Unstoffe meets Ribos's persecuted proto-scientist Binro the Heretic, and brings meaning to his life by assuring him his cosmological theories are true.

Details

Writer:	Robert Holmes (opening scene Anthony Read)
Director:	George Spenton-Foster
Original UK transmission dates:	2 – 23 September 1978
Running time :	Ep 1, 25m 02s
	Ep 2, 24m 46s
	Ep 3, 24m 42s
	Ep 4, 24m 50s
UK viewing figures:	Ep 1, 8.3 million
	Ep 2, 8.1 million
	Ep 3, 7.9 million
	Ep 4, 8.2 million
Regular cast:	Tom Baker (Doctor Who), Mary Tamm (Romana), John Leeson (voice of K9)

Guest cast:	Iain Cuthbertson (Garron), Nigel Plaskitt (Unstoffe), Paul Seed (Graff Vynda-K), Robert Keegan (Sholakh), Cyril Luckham (the Guardian), Prentis Hancock (Captain), Timothy Bateson (Binro), Ann Tirard (Seeker); Oliver Maguire, John Hammill, Barry Sommerford, Roy Brent, David Young & Uri Gudneff (Shrieves); Stephen Ismay, Harry Fielder, Derek Chafer, Tony Snell & Pat Gorman (Levithian guards); Nick Wilkinson & Stuart Fell (the Shrivenzale).
Novelisation:	*Dr Who and the Ribos Operation*, Ian Marter, Target 1979

Notes

1. I weary of commentators endlessly drawing attention to *Who* writer Robert Holmes's penchant for scripting duos of picturesque characters, if only because the phrase 'Holmesian double act' is so lazy and unhelpful. What Holmes does is create pairs of characters who tend to perform a unified role within the plot. In *Ribos* Unstoffe and Garron act together in the planet-selling fraud; in *Carnival of Monsters* it's Vorg and Shirna who operate the Miniscope; in *Talons of Weng-Chiang* Lightfoot and Jago pair up to assist the Doctor in his investigations. Any of these narrative tasks could more economically be allocated to a single individual, but splitting them between two opens up possibilities for dramatic (and often comic) interaction, giving them different personalities and relationships with other characters. Holmes doesn't always do this, and it's not just a trick or habit, but a conscious technique by a fine writer to make the stories work harder and more fruitfully. I mention the phrase here to explain it for anyone who may not automatically know what it means, and I am very happy not to do so again.
2. http://loveandliberty.blogspot.com/2006/09/back-to-old-school-ribos-operation.html
3. *Radio Times* 19.11.1988
4. http://loveandliberty.blogspot.com/2006/09/back-to-old-school-horror-of-fang-rock.html; http://loveandliberty.blogspot.com/2006/09/back-to-old-school-ribos-operation.html

5. 2.1.82, quoted in J Chapman, *Inside the TARDIS*, IB Tauris: London (2013), 194-5
6. Quoted *In-Vision* 26, Aug.1990, p.15.
7. http://www.lyratek.com/bg/dwida098.htm
8. *Ribos* DVD commentary.
9. J Lovelace, 'Tame as a Pet Kitten', *Stage & Television Today* 7.9.78; T Holt, 'Dr Who – No Longer Taking Him Seriously', *Stage & Television Today* 1.2.79; Chapman 2013, p.123
10. L Miles & T Wood, *About Time*, Mad Norwegian Press: Des Moines (2010), iv 224.
11. Normally this periodic dispute about which of the members of two trade unions – the electricians or the stage hands – should operate the clock which played an important role in the BBC's flagship show for pre-school children is described in terms of the union-ridden industrial relations sclerosis that afflicted the Corporation. On the *Ribos* DVD Paul Seed recounts the hazards that awaited the unwary TV director who might take it upon themselves to move a chair on set: if they had good relations with the shop stewards a props person would rush over saying 'I'll do that for you, sir', and if they didn't an impromptu strike might result. *The Ribos Operation* enjoyed its own demarcation disputes over who should turn on the Relic Room lamps and operate some ChromaKey mechanisms (*In-Vision* 32, 9). But rampant inflation – in 1975 it hit over 24% - puts even the *Playschool* clock row into an economic context. The usual pattern was that one of the unions concerned would give in and the aggrieved party would be paid off with a bonus. There was a good reason this dispute tended to blow up at Christmas: it was basically a way of extorting a few extra quid out of the BBC at a time when families needed everything they could get. The victorious union would get paid to work the clock, and the defeated one got paid not to.
12. *In-Vision* 26, Aug 1990, 7-9
13. http://www.pagefillers.com/dwrg/topten.htm
14. E Sandifer, *Tardis Eruditorum V: Tom Baker & the Williams Years* (2019), 185
15. Ainsworth 2017, 118.
16. That is, Episode 2, at 21 minutes and 15 seconds; henceforward the shorthand we'll use for referring to specific points within the broadcast story. The descriptions may differ slightly according to whatever format you watch the story in, but they won't be too far off.
17. yt.com/watch?v=EKhScyEmCw0
18. Ainsworth 2017, 105
19. DJ Howe & SJ Walker, *Dr Who: the Television Companion*, BBC: London 1998, quoted in

https://web.archive.org/web/20100810012246/http://www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/classic/episodeguide/ribosoperation/detail.shtml

20. Tom Holt, *Stage & Television Today* 1.2.1979
21. Chapman 2013, 125
22. *Photoplay* 1978.11; *Daily Express* 9.2.78.
23. *In-Vision* 32, July 1991 8-9; A Hadoke & R Shearman, *Running Through Corridors*, Mad Norwegian Press: Des Moines (2010), ii 320, 321; http://loveandliberty.blogspot.com/2006/09/back-to-old-school-ribos-operation.html
24. *Starlog* 6.85
25. yt.com/watch?v=CCQ138KNNyk
26. *Daily Mirror* 28.4.1978
27. *Radio Times* 2.9.78
28. *Radio Times* 19.11.1988, & 25.5.1995
29. https://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/when-youre-living-your-life-one-day-after-another-fury-from-the-deep
30. In fact, in that story the name becomes two words: *Romana Dvoratnelundar*. That doesn't make it any easier to say.
31. Nobody talks about 'Graham Williamsian double acts', you notice.
32. yt.com/watch?v=GKqt6S20_1M; yt.com/watch?v=eKhScyEmCwO; yt.com/watch?v=fHiVetHhrhs
33. yt.com/watch?v=bRØ0t2bd76Q
34. https://watchingblakes7.wordpress.com/2017/08/20/b11-gambit-and-a-bit-about-post-war-architecture/.
35. https://www.tombakerofficial.com/october-2010-issue-427/
36. Apart from one of the Krotons in that 1968 serial, who is audibly if bizarrely a Brummie.
37. http://www.pagefillers.com/dwrg/ribo.htm
38. The DVD visual notes mention the bell sounds as being taken from stock, and the original source as 'St Peter's Church, Venice'. There *is* a church of St Peter in Venice, but its belltower leans and is the most precarious in the city so I don't know when its bells were last rung!
39. https://www.thepropgallery.com/Graff-vynda-k-paul-seed-the-ribos-operation
40. https://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/binro-was-right
41. He also 'gets on terribly well with robots' (*Robots of Death*) and 'with children' (*Full Circle*).
42. Though how the Crown Jewels have come to be decorated with Christian-looking crosses is anyone's guess. They are not, however, the most incongruous objects in the Relic Room; that honour goes to the red, white and blue-striped bell-rope, of a kind common in Anglican churches, but, as far as I know, nowhere else in the cosmos.

43. *About Time*, iv 215. Peladon (*The Curse of Peladon* (1972)*; The Monster of Peladon* (1974)) may look medieval in style, but the Pels are still very much aware of other worlds, enough for interplanetary relations to become politically controversial. Maybe Peladon is the kind of place Ribos will become, if it's lucky. Ribos does have one anomalous bit of technology: how do the lamps in the Relic Room work? How can they be turned on and off simply by being touched with the Shrieves' staves? Maybe they contain phosphorescent minerals which can be activated in some way. In the script they seem to have been 'gas globes' but were presumably changed because electric lights were cheaper to make. When the Seeker refers to the Graff as an 'alien', perhaps she just means 'foreigner'; but there's also a slightly baffling moment when a Shrieve says he can hear the Graff's guards 'firing' in the Catacombs (4:15.22). How does he know what the noise is? They've only seen the Levithian energy weapons used once and, apart from the cannon, the Ribosians don't have anything analogous of their own. It's a bit of a conceptual jump. The lad should go far (if Ribos had anywhere for him to go).
44. https://www.projectdalek.co.uk/mainsite/index.php/edwin-hall
45. https://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/binro-was-right
46. Legend relates that, when asked by producer John Nathan-Turner what he would do with *Doctor Who* if appointed, prospective script editor Andrew Cartmel replied 'I want to bring down the government'. The phrase has become a proverbial descriptor for the times when the show is in a radical mood and depicts the Doctor galvanising change in the societies they visit – which, as in *Ribos*, doesn't always happen.
47. The exhaustive *Complete History* volume including *Ribos* (no.28) shies away from giving a *date* when this event occurred, but it does insist on a *location*, the Castle Hotel in Acton, names the dog (George), and is definite about the presence of a sausage (Ainsworth 2017, 115-116)
48. yt.com/watch?v=GKgt6S20_1M; yt.com/watch?v=EKhScyEmCwO; yt.com/watch?v=CCQ138KNNyk

umbra