

Classic sci-fi show 'Doctor Who' is as much a part of former companion Katy Manning's life as ever. Ahead of a special screening at BFI Southbank, she reminisces with Jeremy Blackmore about...

daleks and DOCTORS

FOR THREE YEARS in the 1970s, as plucky *Doctor Who* companion Jo Grant, Katy Manning battled intergalactic monsters from Daleks to Sea Devils, from Dæmons to giant maggots. Alongside the dashing Jon Pertwee as the third incarnation of the title character, she helped to save Earth and distant planets from alien menace. Fiercely loyal and resourceful, she was, in many ways, a precursor to Billie Piper's Rose when the show returned to television in 2005.

Almost 50 years on, Katy embraces her *Doctor Who* past happily, reprising the role of Jo regularly in audio adventures alongside other former stars. It's a sign, she says, of the unique nature of the series: "Everybody who's ever been in *Doctor Who* honours the time they were in it and the characters they played," and this month she is attending a special screening of Pertwee classic *Planet of the Daleks* at the BFI with updated visual effects and a new 5.1 sound mix and taking part in a special Q&A.

Born in Guildford, Katy's first memories of the time-travelling Doctor are of watching as a child on Saturday teatimes in the sixties. She was immediately impressed. "I thought it was the most incredible show. Like everybody back then I'd never seen anything on television quite like that. It was extraordinary!"

She met her lifelong best friend, Liza Minnelli (daughter of Hollywood legend Judy Garland) at school, and through that connection was introduced to the world of film, though she says: "Growing up with Liza and Judy, I wasn't this child who was walking around wanting to be a part of all this. It was just all glorious and all going on around. It was just life."

Katy first trained as a dancer before attending a school for dramatic arts and joining *Doctor Who* in 1970. It was the start of a golden era.

Jo was a contrast to the Doctor's previous companion, scientist Liz Shaw (played by Caroline John). Perhaps, as a result, she later became a very misunderstood character, but one that Katy thinks people are now 'getting' again.

"Jo was really necessary for the show. They wanted somebody



Katy Manning, pic © Ian Fraser

that maybe needed a little looking after, a little protecting so people could see how the Doctor nurtured her. But she was also a feisty, gutsy little thing."

The character was probably more relatable for the audience too. Katy recounts the example of when the Doctor says, 'I thought you said you took O level maths and science' and Jo replies, 'I never said I passed!'

She was the first companion to offer her own life for the Doctor's. "You could guarantee if you told Jo not to do something she would jolly well go and do it. If her Doctor was in danger, she didn't think about herself at all. I think that is now being seen by people again."

Jo was seen as funny and clumsy, and rather like Rose, very much a girl of her time. Her only attribute was that she could do escapology and she was very good at climbing and running. "She didn't scream very much [even though] people said, 'oh, Jo screams.' Oh no, she didn't! A lot more screaming went on later."

In short, she was great fun to play. "She was a very modern miss and that appealed to younger girls and teenagers. She appealed to quite a few people. There was no side to her. She wasn't a clever-clogs, but she was passionate about what she was doing and she was learning from the Doctor all the time."

Katy's deep affection for Pertwee – "my friend and mentor" – who had worked in vaudeville, circus and light entertainment, is clear. *Doctor Who* was her second job after *Man At The Top*, a very different, successful groundbreaking piece of television: very northern, very working class, very gritty.

"To learn all about the history that Jon was able to teach me about showbusiness was an amazingly wonderful thing to happen to a young girl. He was so kind and generous and welcoming to everybody that joined the show. It was an

extraordinary experience and I began to absolutely love what I'd chosen as a profession more and more through Jon and his wonderful theatrical stories. He was funny and witty and a joy to be with and he had a lovely childlike quality."

They did, though, take the show very seriously: "For Jon this was his first really serious role. So, for him it was very important to get every little aspect right. Jon was an adventurer in life. He wasn't just an actor, he was a man that had been deep sea diving. The things that that man had done. So, he was that swashbuckling chap and he brought that to play in the character."

The pair shared an immediate bond. "[Producer] Barry Letts and [script editor] Terrance Dicks said, 'that is what you absolutely pray for when you cast two people who are going to work closely together, that you're going to get that chemistry, that magic...'"

There was real ensemble feel to the Pertwee years with genuine affection between the team: "We use the word 'family' and it's very trite but it absolutely was. I never had lunch without

Jon. We travelled together, we ate on location together, the whole team. We just adored being and working together. I think that does show. We kept our friendship right the way through."

She took full advantage of the opportunities to learn about television production, including the fast-developing world of special effects: "I couldn't have asked for a greater place to learn. So many wonderful and exciting things were happening. It was inspirational to work at the BBC. I learned so much about my craft. I'm so eternally grateful."

Television might sound romantic, but production was far from glamorous. Shooting took place throughout the winter with Katy often wearing miniskirts and knee-high boots. "We worked in dreadful conditions but with absolutely big smiles on our faces, freezing cold. All the men, of course, would wear long-johns and things like that. Not this little twerp in her skirts!"

At one time, they had to pour boiling water round her boots to get her feet out of the cold. "Then I was put in a bog in one story and I started to sink. I was up to my armpits in mud..."

She recalls it as "a great learning process for a young actress"

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Jon Pertwee and Katy in character as Doctor Who and Jo Grant; pics © BBC

because she worked with the army and navy, and had just a couple of caravans and places to change. "It was amazingly difficult but wonderful because you learnt: this is not about being spoilt, you get on and you jolly well do your job."

Letts' concern for the environment was woven into several stories. It's an issue Katy herself feels very passionate about: "You look back and you see some of the points that were being made through *Doctor Who*. It wasn't just a bunch of fun and doing things about another planet."

Katy's final scene as Jo was deeply moving as the Doctor left her engagement party in silence, clearly heartbroken at losing his companion, but proud of how much she had grown.

"You can imagine what the studio was like, nobody could speak. To end a show with the last few minutes virtually wordless, there had to have been a very strong relationship between the two." Katy remembers everyone in the studio being in tears. "We were all an absolute mess. This wonderful thing had come to an end and we knew that it would continue brilliantly without me. It was time to go. After a while you need to see the Doctor react differently with different people in the same way as wonderful, beautiful Liz [Sladen] found her soulmate with Tom Baker."

Both actress and character developed within the role. "It's lovely to have played a character that you watch grow up – from a 19-year-old straight out of school, totally learning, knew nothing, very green, to somebody who gets married and goes off with somebody who is the closest thing she could ever find to the Doctor. It was beautifully written."

In the years since, Katy has worked extensively in theatre, television and film as an actress, writer and director, living in Australia and America before returning to London. She performed her one-woman show, a true story of Bette Davis entitled *Me and Jezebel*, directed by partner Barry Crocker across Australia and brought the show to The New End Theatre in Hampstead, where it was well-received. She also wrote and performed *Not A Well Woman* in New York and LA and recorded it as an audio, complete with 26 voices!

Doctor Who returned to great acclaim under showrunner Russell T Davies, after a 16-year hiatus. "The only person that could have possibly brought *Doctor Who* back was Russell," says Katy. "When his first episode went out, I just stood up and cheered. Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper reminded me a little bit of Jon and Jo. There was just this touch of this perfectly ordinary girl. It was absolutely brilliant."

It was "the biggest surprise" to be asked to appear as Jo in spin-off show *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, designed for a younger audience than the main programme, with Elisabeth Sladen and Matt Smith as The Doctor. "Matt was lovely to work with, very

generous. He was a joy and Liz was a dear friend. We had the best time."

Katy's children have been asked about their mum's famous role throughout their lives, but she explains that it's not yet affecting the next generation. "My grandchild... she's no idea! She was playing with one of the plastic figurines and I said, there's something very wrong about watching my grandchild play with a plastic Grandma!"

Although her granddaughter might not recognise the significance of *Doctor Who*, there is no shortage of people who do. Katy describes the fans as "extraordinary" and says they are one of the most important things about the show: "It doesn't matter where you go, you meet somebody who says, 'I was inspired to go into this business because of *Doctor Who*.' It really is quite something."

A favourite on the convention circuit, Katy is keenly aware of how much the series still means to people and believes firmly in engaging. "You've got fans who were going through very difficult times and the show took them away from that and gave them something. Without them there isn't a show. They're the most important thing and the most amazing people..." ●



'Planet of the Daleks' is to be screened at the BFI on Saturday 15 June, and features Katy's Q&A session: tickets.bfi.org.uk. See katymanning.com for more information.