

Mother Time

Verity Lambert was one of the visionary forces behind the creation of *Doctor Who*, and went on to produce some of UK TV's most acclaimed dramas. Steve O'Brien remembers a pioneer



Another day at the office... Verity with the Beasts from United Galactic Headquarters

The question of who created *Doctor Who* is a complicated one. As a concept, it had many fathers, including the BBC's then head of drama Sydney Newman and writers Donald Wilson and CE Webber. But, crucially, what would become TV's longest-running science fiction show also had a mother, at a time when very few women held positions of power in the television industry.

Verity Lambert was just 27 when she was offered the role of producer of this bizarre-sounding new sci-fi programme. Burningly ambitious, she'd found it hard to scale the media ladder, frozen out by the gentleman's club mentality of TV in the Fifties and Sixties. It took the Canadian Sydney Newman, another outsider to the Oxbridge elite that dominated the BBC at the time, to recognise her talents. 'I remembered Verity as being bright and, to use the phrase, full of piss and vinegar,' he told *Doctor Who Magazine* in 1993 about working with Lambert at ABC Weekend TV. 'She was gutsy and she used to fight and argue with me, even though she was not at a very high level as a production assistant.'

SEXIST SLURS

Today, Verity Lambert is lauded as a pioneer, someone who not only prised open the door to allow more women into the industry, but who was one of the main creative forces behind many of the most acclaimed dramas, including *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975), *Rock Follies* (1976), *Minder* (1979-94), *Widows* (1983-85), *G.B.H.* (1991) and *Jonathan Creek* (1997-2004). 'Verity was a total one-off,' the BBC's head of fiction Jane Tranter once said. 'She was a magnificently, madly, inspirationally talented drama producer.'

At the time Lambert joined the BBC in 1963, she was its youngest and the only female producer in the drama department, often facing down sexist assumptions about her promotion ('They used to ask me if I'd slept with Sydney Newman to get the job,' she revealed in 2006). She soon developed a reputation for being hard-headed, as Newman had noted at ABC. On *Doctor Who*, he'd stipulated 'no bug-eyed monsters', and fiercely opposed the introduction of the Daleks in the show's second story. But Lambert believed passionately in Terry Nation's script, about a race of mutated aliens that are forced to live in metallic shells. 'I think we've got something really special here, Sydney, a knockout - we've just got to hold our nerve,' she's quoted as staying in Mark Gatiss' 2013 drama, *An Adventure in Space and Time*, about the beginnings of *Doctor Who*. 'Well,' replies Newman, with a smile, 'I wanted someone with piss and vinegar.'

Lambert left *Doctor Who* in 1965, moving to another fantasy series developed by Newman, *Adam Adamant Lives!* (1966-67), before transferring to LWT, where she spearheaded the Adam Faith favourite *Budgie* (1971-72). In 1974, she became Thames Television's head of drama, overseeing such hits as the BAFTA-winning *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975), *Rumpole of the Bailey* (1978-92) and *Edward and Mrs Simpson* (1978) and, in 1979, was promoted to chief executive of Euston Films, a subsidiary of Thames, where she worked on prestige dramas including *Quatermass* (1979), *Minder* and *Widows*.

She left Euston in 1982, leaving the world of TV for the big screen when she became director of production for Thorn EMI Screen Entertainment. But, despite a few successes - she was proud of the Dennis Potter movie *Dreamchild* (1985) and the John Cleese comedy *Clockwise* (1986) - she

found the job frustrating, later saying, 'It was terribly tough and not a very happy experience.' Departing in 1985, she set up her own production company, Cinema Verity, which encompassed film (the Meryl Streep movie *A Cry in the Dark*, 1988, earned its lead an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress) and TV (the sitcoms *May to December* (1989-94) and *So Haunt Me* (1992-94) were two of its biggest hits, along with the critically adored Alan Bleasdale drama *G.B.H.*). The company was also behind the BBC's short-lived soap opera *Eldorado* (1992-93), a rare dud from the esteemed programme maker.

CINEMA VERITY

By this time *Doctor Who* had been cancelled by the BBC, and in the Nineties Cinema Verity was one of a number of independent companies pitching to bring back the show, with Lambert revealing that, had they secured the contract, she wanted Peter Cook to headline. The Beeb went with Universal in the US in the end, but though she never returned to *Doctor Who*, she did go back to the BBC as a freelance producer, heading up such shows as *Jonathan Creek* and *Love Soup* (2005-08).

Lambert, who was made an OBE in 2002, continued to work up until her death in 2007. A few months before, *Doctor Who* had paid tribute to two of its main creators. In the episode *Human Nature*, the Doctor believes he's a human named John Smith and talks warmly of his parents. Their names? Sydney and Verity. Talking the year before her death, she said of the newly revived *Doctor Who*, 'I feel like I started off something that went on forever and ever, and has now been resuscitated in a new way and is very successful... I do feel proud that years ago, knowing very little, I started something that is still running.'