

The Real McCoy

Time Lord, wizarding and clashes with the Phantom Flan Flinger!

by CRISPIN ANDREWS

IF ANY actor was born to play a Tolkien wizard, it was Sylvester McCoy. Bright-eyed if not bushy-tailed, fun loving with an air of mystery, big in personality, short in stature.

In Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy, McCoy, famous for his stint as Doctor Who in the late 1980s, plays Radagast the Brown. Or, as the cheeky chappy from Dunoon, prefers to call his wizard, "Radagast the Broom."

"Sounds better, doesn't it?" McCoy says, his rolling r's and multiplying 'oo's' instantly recognisable to this lifelong *Doctor Who* fan, even over a slightly fuzzy phone-line. But do McCoy and old Radagast really have much in common? Yes and no, according to the man himself.

"He's very good looking and heroic," the actor quips. "I'm not. He very much likes animals – I do. He doesn't get on with humans – I do. Lives by himself – I'm a people person. Quirky – I am. Eccentric – I'm told I am. Broken nose and snaggletooth – I haven't. Big ears and eyebrows – I have."

The comparisons roll off McCoy's tongue. His words are full of irony, understatement and the self-deprecating humour that has made him such a

popular performer for five decades.

But there's an unmistakable undercurrent of defiance, there too. Sylvester McCoy is proud of what he's achieved – and why not?

McCoy, now 69, has starred on *Tiswas* and *Eureka* as well as *Doctor Who*. Born Percy James Patrick Kent-Smith, he used an old stunt-act name "Sylveste McCoy" in his first *Tiswas* episode. For a joke, the production team listed this as his real name, and when a reviewer missed the joke, McCoy decided to use this as his stage name. He added the "r" a while later.

McCoy has also worked alongside Donald Pleasance, Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir Ian McKellan. He has sung with Welsh Opera, appeared for the Royal Shakespeare Company and portrayed Stan Laurel and Buster Keaton in one-man stage shows. Not bad for a boy whose uncle once called him a jumped-up little snob, just for listening to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture.

McCoy calls Dunoon "child-friendly but a prison for teenagers." The Clyde mouth, he explains, cuts the town off from the lowlands on one side, and it's surrounded by hills on the other. "When we were kids we'd take the single >>



The Doctor is in...
McCoy manned
the Tardis from
1987-89

track out of the town, spend the day wandering around the hills or paddling out to sea in rowing boats to meet the Empress of Canada on its way to port from Vancouver,” he says. “We’d set off at eight o’clock and not be home until bedtime.”

HIS later teenage years coincided with the onset of the Swinging Sixties. “There was no way Dunoon (a traditional town) was going to join in with all that Sixties stuff,” McCoy says. “It was like it was all happening somewhere else.” McCoy adds that there was nothing to do for teenagers in his home town, back then. “My family, most families, were only interested in what was going on locally. They weren’t much bothered by what was happening in the outside world.”

In this the insular community intelligence and

discernment was seen as arrogance; ambition as delusion. A community of 8000

had its own newspaper, its own sports stadium and until 2008, its own football world cup. Swamp football, that is. Billy Connolly, when still in *The Humblebums*, wrote a song called *Why Don’t They Come Back To Dunoon?* Years later, during a stand-up show, Connolly explained that the first prize in an imaginary competition was a week in Dunoon – and the second prize, a fortnight there.

The young Mr Kent-Smith knew he had to get away. Training as a priest in Aberdeen, he discovered Henry Morton’s travel books. Soon after, he decided the priesthood wasn’t for him, but his fascination with faraway places remained.

His *Hobbit* character, on the other hand, was, according to Gandalf, in Tolkien’s *Unfinished Tales*, “never a

traveller, unless driven by great need.”

One of the Istari, wizards sent by the angelic Valar to aid the Elves and Men of Middle-earth against the Dark Lord Sauron, Radagast merits only a passing mention in Tolkien’s *Hobbit*. In Jackson’s adaptation, he has a bigger role. McCoy could appear in all three *Hobbit* films. He hopes so, but it’s not yet confirmed.

Just as well McCoy loves to travel. *The Hobbit* was filmed in New Zealand, which meant five visits last year. On his way back, McCoy visited India, China, Thailand, Hong Kong and Singapore.

“New Zealand is a great place, the people are really down-to-earth and Wellington is the best little city I’ve ever been to.

“In Wellington you might get two days of rain and two days of sun,” he says. “In Dunoon you get one day of sun

in a hundred, and you think you might be overdoing it in the sunlight.”

McCoy loved working with the *Hobbit*

cast... and socialising. He recalls a night out with Billy Connolly, who plays dwarf warrior Dain Ironfoot, and Ken Stott, who is the dwarf Balin. “It was a musical night of Scottishness,” says McCoy, who’s accent seems to broaden slightly when he talks about the country of his birth. “There was Billy with his great sense of humour and wonderful turn of phrase, and Ken with his great gravelly Scottish voice.”

AS ALL good Tolkeinians know, the new films are a prequel to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. They tell the story of Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit who has to undertake a dangerous quest to reclaim Lonely Mountain from a great dragon. Many stars from Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy reprise their roles. Elijah Wood is Frodo once again, Hugo



As Radagast “the Broom” in *The Hobbit*

Weaving plays Elrond, the Elven Master of Rivendell, Cate Blanchett – who McCoy admits “to being totally in love with” – also returns as Lady Galadriel and Ian Holm is an older Bilbo Baggins. For *Lord of the Rings*, Holm was chosen ahead of McCoy for the part of Baggins. “There were two at the final audition and I came second,” McCoy says.

Sir Ian McKellen, of course, is Gandalf. McKellen, according to McCoy, is the sharpest man around. “The Doctor would outwit Gandalf I think – but if it was the actors, Ian McKellen would win, even against the great Tom Baker.”

McCoy has appeared alongside McKellen before. As Fool to McKellen’s King Lear on stage in 2007, and more

recently in a pilot TV show called *The Academy*, a mockumentary about a rundown Clapham arts school. Sir Ian plays his own fictitious brother, Murray, and like Macbeth or Voldemort, no one at the Academy is allowed to mention the more famous McKellen’s name. “I played the movement teacher,” McCoy says, “which was ironic because I’d just had both hips removed. I was a movement teacher who couldn’t move. There was a lot of eyebrow acting.”

McCoy calls *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* producer Peter Jackson a God of the big screen. “He (Jackson) creates these magical worlds right down to the tiniest detail, yet he’s so down-to-earth with a great sense of humour,” McCoy >>

says. "You never see him walking around telling everyone how great he is."

McCoy's Doctor Who was known for being darker and more dangerous than previous incarnations. Secretive and manipulative, this Doctor would literally talk opponents to death. "A lot of famous actors had made the Doctor a very recognisable character," McCoy says.

"I wanted to add something distinctive of my own, make him more mysterious. The first Doctor (William Hartnell) was

mysterious, because nobody knew who he was."

Ironically, much of the seventh Doctor's dark persona evolved after McCoy hung up his trademark Panama and umbrella. When BBC cancelled *Doctor Who* in 1989, Virgin Books

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members of the Scottish press contacting him, aghast that David Tennant was to use an English accent whilst playing

commissioned a series of novels, aimed at adult audiences. The weight of the universe weighed heavily on the Time Lord's shoulders and McCoy's Doctor became more willing than ever to sacrifice the lives and happiness of his friends for the greater good.

McCoy hasn't seen much of the new *Doctor Who* series, but does remember

the tenth Doctor. "They were calling me, saying 'it's not right, it's not right'," he laughs. "At least I'm still the only Doctor who rolls his r's like a real Scotsman."

McCoy has certainly faced some villainous nasties during his career. Daleks, cybermen and haemovores –

vampire-like sea-creatures controlled by Fenric, an ancient evil from the dawn of time. Now, in *The Hobbit*, he faces the wizard Saruman, and Smaug the treasure-guarding dragon, voiced by Benedict Cumberbatch.

McCoy's first television nemesis, however, wore a black cloak, face-mask and hat, and threw custard pies.

The Phantom Flan Flinger terrorised the *Tiswas* studios throughout the mid to late 70s. Nobody was safe – presenters, audience, even guest stars like Annie Lennox and Ian Botham. No one knew who the mysterious Phantom was, and nobody – not even McCoy dressed in a superhero outfit – could best him.

McCoy, who worked alongside Chris Tarrant, Sally James and Lenny Henry, says, "I think he was a taxi driver from Birmingham, but I'm not sure I'm allowed to say that. Am I?"

"**TISWAS** was great, completely chaotic," McCoy adds. "You'd be in the middle of a sketch, just about to get to a punchline, when the camera operator would disappear off to Chris or Sally who were about to interview someone. So you'd go and grab the camera, bring it back and deliver the punchline."

When the BBC cancelled *Doctor Who*, the show had become a subtle anti-government protest. Script editor Andrew Cartmel was no fan of current Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and gathered like-minded writers. In one story, *The Happiness Patrol*, a female dictator banned happiness, praising "enterprise and initiative" as her secret police rounded up dissidents. In this story, the Doctor persuaded the drones, who toiled in the factories and mines, to down tools and rise up in revolt.

McCoy realises that the Thatcher government needed to take on the unions, but he believes they did it in too brutal a way. "She could have learned



Lunacy often reigned in the *Tiswas* studio

from Harold Wilson," McCoy adds. "Wilson believed you could solve problems by talking about them, but with Thatcher it was back to the days of gunboat diplomacy."

Since he left Dunoon, Sylvester McCoy has lived most of his life in London. Last year, however, he visited Glasgow for the first time in many years. He was at the Tron Theatre, in a play about the Lockerbie disaster called *Plume*. "When I was growing up we saw Glasgow as a dark, dying, political place, wild and angry," he says. "The Glasgow I found last year was artistic, musical, expressive. And the humour! It seemed like every Glaswegian I met thought they were as funny as Billy Connolly. And many of them really were."

McCoy has a busy year ahead of him. There's more (he hopes) *Hobbit* filming in New Zealand, and the 50th anniversary of *Doctor Who*, with all the associated paraphernalia.

Lots of people, travel, fun and merriment to look forward to, then. A perfect year for Radagast the Broom, the boy from Dunoon. 🍷

The Doctor was reunited with Bessie (his car) and the Brigadier in the 1989 adventure *Battlefield*

