



A NOVEL APPROACH

Robert Shearman tells us about adapting his acclaimed **Doctor Who** audio dramas *The Chimes of Midnight* and *Jubilee* into novels...

Take us back twenty-five years – how did you go about crossing Edwardian ghost story with time travel tale for *The Chimes of Midnight*?

■ I remember the process as being very fast! I'd written my first story for Big Finish, *The Holy Terror*, and I really thought that would be my one and only **Who** story. So I flung everything at it – lots of comedy, lots of horror, and a talking penguin! We recorded it in the summer of 2000, and in the studio Gary Russell asked me if I would want to come back for another.

The good news was that it would be a Paul McGann, which was very exciting, as he'd only just been announced,

and there was of course a real thrill in getting the opportunity to write for an incumbent Doctor. The bad news was that the story would have to be delivered in a couple of months, with recording taking place in January. So there was really no time!

At the time, I was also commissioned to write a play for Alan Ayckbourn – my career back then was mostly writing comedies for the theatre. So I felt really up against the clock. But there was no way I was going to turn down a second chance to write **Doctor Who**, and especially not the Eighth Doctor.

What sometimes isn't obvious is that those first ten stories for McGann, all

the way to *Neverland*, were all written before *Storm Warning* had been released, so we were all having to work together to reinvent this Doctor we'd only really glimpsed from the TV Movie and find out what made him tick.

All the writers met up in the pub to discuss the season of six adventures. Mine was supposed to be first. I remember Alan Barnes had a wonderfully detailed synopsis of *Neverland* which made my head spin – part in admiration, part in fear. I gave a one-sentence pitch which was about a murder mystery in an Edwardian house on Christmas Eve, where all the deaths took place on the hour. I felt a bit guilty I had so little to offer!



Above: Robert Shearman.

“I’D WRITE AN EPISODE A DAY, AND THEN TAKE THE NEXT DAY OFF, TO WORK OUT WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT.”

ROBERT SHEARMAN

think because I was in a rush, I was falling back upon what would be easiest for me. As I say, my bread and butter job was theatre writing – so it was quicker for me to write *Chimes* as if it were a stage play, with one standing set and a small group of characters. I live in a Victorian house, so I just used the geography of what I saw around me. And I adore writing about Christmas – I love all the heightened emotions and all the little games and rituals – my first proper success had been a play called *Easy Laughter* which had been a black comedy skewing a very sinister version of Christmas and had won me the Sunday Times Playwriting Award. I love *A Christmas Carol*, which is at once a frightening ghost story

full of real shocks and scares, and also a tremendously redemptive heart-warming piece of sentiment. That’s what I was trying to capture. All the scares, all the heart.

I’d write an episode a day, and then take the next day off, to work out what should happen next. I remember building myself up to the big cliffhangers and I’d so much enjoy them, and then the next day I’d be in a state of mild panic trying to resolve them. I know I felt very guilty that I hadn’t had the time to work out what I was writing in advance.

So much of *Chimes* felt spontaneous – which, looking back, is probably why it feels so fresh. But I know when I finished it, I felt as if I was going to be rumbled. My

wife, bless her heart, read the script while I looked on nervously, and she told me it was good, so I sent it off to Big Finish. Fortunately, they liked it too!

A year later, *Jubilee* was released. It’s a very different approach to the typical Dalek adventure. Tell us about this story and the inspirations behind it.

■ Ah, *Jubilee* was very different. This time Gary had asked me if I’d be interested in writing a Dalek story for a webcast. It’d have to be a tight script, half a dozen episodes lasting ten minutes each, and again, we were out of time!



That’s where I came up with the idea of having a single Dalek in the story – I just thought it would help make it shorter!

I set to work, but Gary decided that the idea deserved more detailed exploration, so instead he commissioned it as a regular four-part release for the main range, and he wrote the webcast himself. (It became *Real Time*). *Jubilee* is a rather angry piece of work. I was alarmed by the growing acceptance of far-right politics, although in retrospect, 2002 seems like such an innocent time now!

I was very conscious that this was a story for *Doctor Who*’s 40th anniversary, and that’s where the jubilee came from – all the dangers of nostalgia, which is so inherently conservative. And the way that Daleks were being treated in popular media at the time: *Doctor Who* was this silly dead children’s show with wobbly sets, and Daleks were funny jokes with sink plungers, and could now be spoofed on comedy shows like Victor Lewis-Smith and used to advertise Kit-Kats.

It was so easy to forget that these cute little pepperpots had in the 1960s been used to represent Nazis. And I began to



Above (l-r): Martin Jarvis and Rosalind Ayres during the recording of *Jubilee*.

“A LOT OF JUBILEE’S VENOM IS MY BEING LET OFF THE HOOK!”

ROBERT SHEARMAN

think about how Nazis too had become fun generic villains of *Indiana Jones* and shoot-'em-up computer games. I wanted to examine that way we take all that we've fought against and make it silly and safe – and what the dangers of that might be.

Just like *Chimes*, I had another job at the time. And I think that job helped define *Jubilee*'s vicious black comedy. I was working on a BBC series for Chris Chibnall called *Born and Bred* – this sweet, charming thing about a village in the 1950s populated by well-meaning characters doing nice things every week. It was so nostalgic in itself! Chris gave me a fortnight off so I could do my *Doctor Who*, and I think a lot of *Jubilee*'s venom is my being let off the hook!

It really is a very brutal piece of work. A big passion of mine is the revenge tragedies of Renaissance theatre – these wonderful pieces of grand guignol full of larger-than-life characters destroying each other! I set *Jubilee* in a world where one hundred years of obsessing with



Daleks and buying Dalek merchandise had turned everyone into these ghastly over-the-top parodies of humans. With plots and stabbings and decapitations, and this single Dalek looking out at it all and having more honour and self-respect than the lot of them!

What do you remember from the recording days?

■ We recorded *Chimes* in Bristol in early January. So for a couple of days, the cast got to live through Christmas again – I bet they were sick of it! That was a very happy time. Barnaby Edwards was directing, and he was an old friend from university, so it was lovely to see him again, and he knew me well enough to gauge the very particular tone of comedy I write. He'd put together a terrific cast, and there did seem to be magic in the air – I was very proud! It would be over a year later the story came out, and so I put aside my own doubts about the story, and just hung on to how well it had gone down in the studio.

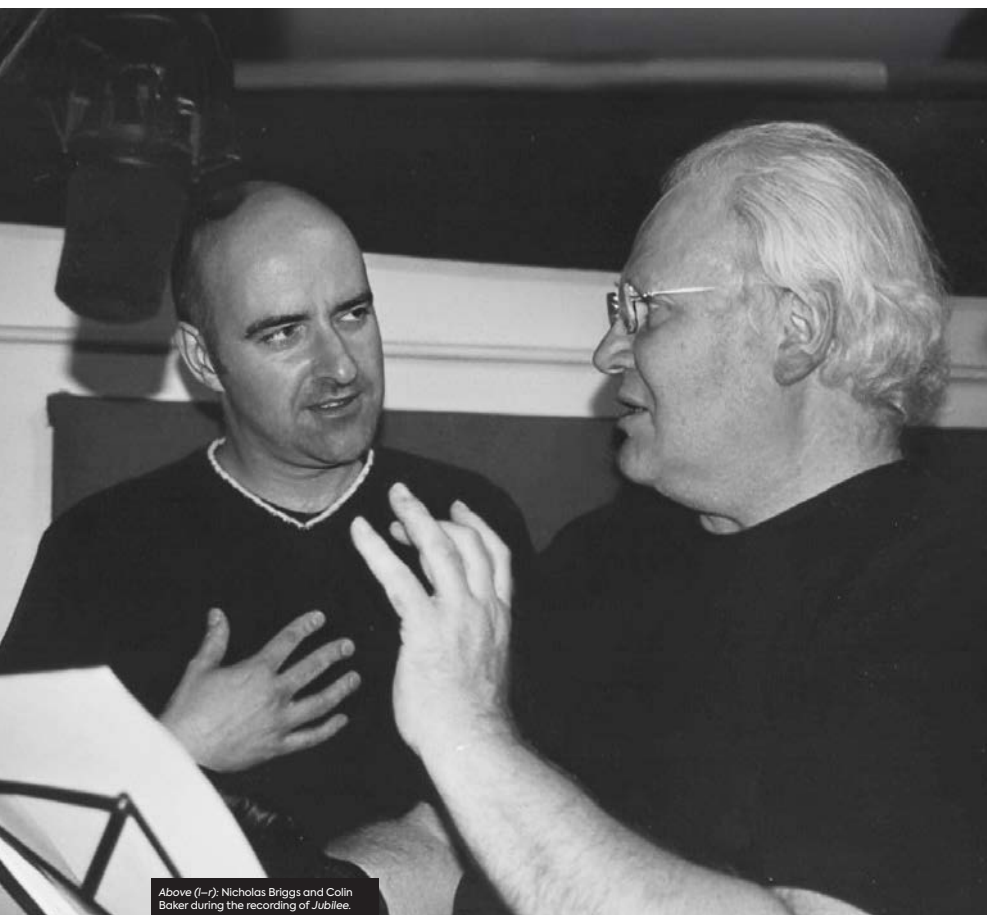
And I co-directed *Jubilee* with Nick Briggs. Nick and I had become very good friends by this point and he knew I directed theatre, and he trusted me. I'd wanted to write a really meaty part for him in *Jubilee*, and allow him to give a much more complex Dalek performance than he was usually required to. That meant it was helpful for him to have someone else to bounce off as he acted, so Nick would direct the scenes he wasn't in, and I would direct Nick. Lots of fun. I was regularly writing BBC radio plays for Martin Jarvis and Ros Ayres at that point – I asked them if they fancied playing these extraordinary tyrants, and they jumped at the chance!

You've now returned to these stories to adapt them into novels – how did this come about?

■ It was the strangest thing, really. I'd novelised my TV script *Dalek* for BBC Books a few years before, and that had been such a great experience. I used to love the Target range – they'd been my entry point for *Doctor Who* – and so getting to write one was such an honour.

After it was all over, I felt very disappointed that would be my one and only book for them, because I'd only written the one TV script! I never thought for a moment they would ever ask me to adapt any of my Big Finish work. I assumed that with so many new series adventures broadcast, they'd never look at the audio plays. But I received an email asking if I'd be interested in tackling *Jubilee*.

I was very excited, but felt duty bound to point out that *Jubilee* is quite strong



Above (l-r): Nicholas Briggs and Colin Baker during the recording of *Jubilee*.

“THERE’S ALSO THIS HEADLESS TURKEY THAT REFUSES TO STAY DEAD...”

ROBERT SHEARMAN

meat, and that the target audience might not find it suitable. And that although the stories were very different, *Jubilee* had been the inspiration for *Dalek*, and I’d just novelised that. I suggested that *Chimes of Midnight* might be a better fit.

They wrote back and said they still wanted *Jubilee*, but perhaps they could have *Chimes* too! Which, of course, massively appealed to my ego. To be the first person asked to novelise a Big Finish audio is rather amazing – to be asked to do two made me feel hugely self-important. There was no way I could say no to that!

How does writing these adventures in novel form differ from writing an audio script?

■ Well, prose is so much more a visual medium than audio. Both *Jubilee* and *Chimes* convey their drama through conversation rather than action. If you do the job well, you hope the conversation is pretty exciting, but you can’t get around the fact that both stories largely involve

people talking to each other in a room.

I felt that the job of both books was to open them up a lot more, to give them much more space. In *Jubilee*, that means you get to see a lot more of the English Empire and its people outside the confines of the Tower of London.

Chimes depends upon the claustrophobia of the house to work, but now I could make the imagery a lot weirder and wilder. It’s not just the murdered servants who keep being brought back to life – there’s also this headless turkey that refuses to stay dead and keeps running about the kitchen spraying sage and onion stuffing everywhere!

And I realised I could lean in much more to the ghost story side to *Chimes*. In the audio drama, the ghost story is just a sort of genre beat; in the book, we get plenty of full-blooded ghost stories as the servants try to live in a bizarre world where death and life are side by side.

It’s funny – my instincts on adapting *Jubilee* were to take the horror down a notch, to lose some of its cartoon grand guignol, and make it more subtle and real. And with *Chimes*, I went the other way, and I’ve upped the scares!

It sounds like you’ve made a few changes to the stories – are there any particular surprises you could tease us about?

■ Oh, so many! You’re going to be introduced to the thirty-seventh Doctor! That’s good fun. And you’re going to find out who the real murderer is behind the killings that take place at the chimes of midnight.

There are, I hope, lots of sequences in both that will surprise anyone who knows the originals – at many times I change the direction of the story altogether. I’m very proud of both the audio plays, and it means the world to me that nearly 25 years later, they’re still fondly remembered.

But it’s such an opportunity, to take the same basic story and see what it looks like if I write it *now*. Having another go at them altogether. So I’ve not slavishly copied the originals – either the dialogue or the plot! I hope I haven’t broken them. But they are both very different takes – this time they’re wholly designed to be novels. What I’d love is that when you read them, you forget they were ever audio scripts at all.

I hope that these new versions of the stories surprise and amuse and confound, while also capturing the joy I felt writing the original scripts 25 years ago.

