

Billie Piper and Russell T Davies clutch the Best Drama Series BAFTA in May 2006

ne December morning *Doctor Who's* cast and crew gather in London's Soho Hotel for a screening of the Christmas Special. Ahead of March's new series, a man from the BBC introduces the episode as, "Like having *Sgt Pepper* up your sleeve but putting out 'Penny Lane'/'Strawberry Fields' just because you can."

Afterwards, there's an opportunity for journalists to ask the cast questions. Somewhat to the surprise of those involved in the show, the press interest that started when Eccleston and Billie joined has refused to die down. "Bloody hell," says guest star Catherine Tate, surveying the room of camera crews, "I feel like Tom Cruise."

There are inevitable questions about whether Tennant is missing Piper, who the guests in the new series are, and, most inevitably of all, when Tennant might be planning to leave.

"I've been very careful about not hinting anything ever," he says, good-naturedly. "I've tried to remain as noncommittal as

SO WHY IS DOCTOR WHO SO SUCCESSFUL? THREE WORDS: RUSSELL T DAVIES

Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist). Elizabeth Sladen has been so unwilling/unable to shake the tag of Sarah Jane Smith, she has reprised the role no fewer than eight times. Then there was Bonnie Langford. Bought in as "perky" keep-fit fanatic Mel in an attempt to salvage ratings after Michael Grade waved the axe in 1986, even hard-core fans couldn't stomach the Doctor being served carrot juice in the TARDIS. The show dematerialised soon afterwards, apparently forever.

Twenty-seven-year-old Agyeman achieves a first by having been killed off before she's even started. She played a minor part culminating in death-by-Cyberman in 2006's series; enough to convince Davies she could fill Bille's boots. One newspaper summed up her career as "a decade slogging through *The Bill* and *Casualty*" (a touch unfair, she only graduated in 2000). But the appointment's certainly a step up. Last year she was working in Blockbusters. "I remember selling the Series One boxset to someone," she says. "Weird how life can turn out."

We meet for tea in a London's Courthouse Hotel Kempinski. She is on her Christmas

break, halfway through filming the latest series. She's very excited. Is she ready to become a pin-up? "Oh wow," she says.

"I can't assume these things. Billie's a sexy girl. But I see it as a family show. Think of the children!"

Agyeman grew up in Hackney, the middle child of three born to an Iranian mother and Ghanaian father. She was first on TV in 2003, in the revived-but-doomed *Crossroads* playing Lola Wise, a minxy kitchen assistant. "A little loudmouth who wanted to chase the boys."

Bits in *Holby City*, *Casualty* and *The Bill* followed, though up until *Doctor Who* she was also supporting herself with odd jobs. It sounds as if she was ready to call it a day. "Everyone's got their own time on it. Maybe people are happy to try for 50 years. If *Doctor Who* hadn't arrived, I'm sure I'd still be doing some form of acting. Maybe as a mother with three children, in the club down the road, doing a play."

She describes the latest Doctor-companion chemistry thus: "She's keener than him."


possible and I think I shall maintain that stance today."

We talk about this later. "I've sort of made a decision. But nothing's set in stone. Can't I just enjoy it while I'm here? Pierce Brosnan tells a story – not to me, I don't hang out with him – that literally in his first press conference for Bond it was, like, "When are you leaving?" I'm in no hurry to rush away. But I also want to leave while I'm still loving it."

Later, a newspaper suggests Tennant will quit in 2008, during Series Four. The BBC issues an ambiguous counter-claim, saying he is "absolutely committed to the show".

The biggest testament to *Doctor Who's* success, however, is that perhaps none of this matters all that much.

"Now it's become a success again, you realise it will always keep coming back," says Clayton Hickman. "Someone will reinvent *Doctor Who* for each new generation. He's like Sherlock Holmes, a British cultural icon. It's a testimony to the people in the Sixties who thought it up."

"It is," he says, "just a brilliant idea."  *Doctor Who* is on BBC1 at 7pm from 17 March.