The Den of Geek interview: Elisabeth Sladen

By Martin Anderson | November 21, 2007

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Possibly the most revered of the Doctor Who assistants, Elizabeth Sladen is back as Sarah Jane Smith in The Sarah Jane Adventures on CBBC and in two new audio-adventures from BBC Audiozone. Martin thus turned into a great big puppy for a chat with the lovely Liz…

You've done a fair bit of Doctor Who radio work over the years, and now the Audiozone Sarah Jane adventures. How does it compare to the rigours of actual filming?

I love radio, and I haven't done it – other than the actual Doctor Who – for so long now. It takes a different kind of discipline and a different kind of enjoyment really. You don't have to get made up. You don't have to have amazingly early calls. It's very civilised actually, although you actually don't have rehearsal, so you do your work mostly beforehand.

When you go in, if it's the Big Finish Productions level of radio, you do then have a rehearsal. When you actually read, such as for the CDs that have come out, for the two Audiozone stories, you just go in and you start, and if it's not right you just do that bit again.

That's quite intense, actually, to get through. We did those two in one day. It took all day though, because you start and you have to make sure you're not doing the character voices of the other children too much, because it's in the first-person. Well, one of them's in the first person, the other is in the present. So the voices just have to be like a flavour, so it's still Sarah Jane talking.

So you can be more perfectionist about it than with live-action.

Well, live action filming has so many more intricate people involved in what they're doing. I mean, they may use the take where the stun gun worked, rather than the one where you came off best!

Did you ever lose any good takes to K-9 bumping into walls?

He's a difficult character to work with! He's an inanimate object that moves forward and back and it is really difficult to move with him. Obviously if he was more integral to the series, they would have to rethink how he would work, but at the moment he hasn't been updated. It's not the easiest of things.

You're still filming the Sarah Jane adventures now?

No, I've only been down in Cardiff doing Children In Need. We finished Sarah Jane towards the end of July, but then we had to do all the post-production, all the ADR and what-have-you. So I suppose I totally finished with it about a fortnight ago.

Do you know if it's going to be renewed, or is that a decision that hasn't been made yet?

Well, I think when it comes down the line, I will be the last to know – they've got to get stuff in place before they come to me, but I'm told that they're very very pleased with it.

Good!

I imagine in the 34 years of intermittently playing Sarah Jane, the fan mail never stopped. How much of it do you get now?

Well the series was practically dead for so long, no-one really wanted to know about it except the fans that kept it alive. It always came in dribs and drabs. Obviously it's much more now, but it never went away. I get letters each week. I truly did walk away and thought each time 'right, that's gone now'. It's like a little switch, second nature, so that you know where you are with her. And it becomes more like you, I think, as you go on with it, to be honest, although you try not to make it that when you start the job; you want to be 'Oh, I'm so different!' [laughs]

Apart from requests for autographs and photos, do you have any unusual requests to recount?

Well, I think I did in the days of Jon and Tom; I'm an older lady now! I think I had one from some firemen…which I put to the bottom of the tray! But no, they're very kind and caring off men, I think.

Well it's clear from looking at forums that a new generation of teenage boys is in love with you.

[gasps] Really? Oh I didn't know that. The little ones have been sweet to me. I haven't had the teenage thing.

There's much adulation.

Really! Where did you find that?

One of the IMDB forums, and several others.

Dear God. [laughing]

Has it ever gotten on your husband's nerves?

He would laugh. He's an actor too, so no no, absolutely not. It's gotten on my nerves sometimes, more than his, I think!

Would you like your renewed prominence to open up other roles?

I was just thinking about that today actually, strangely enough. The stuff I've done before was what only people who sat and paid for a ticket would really know. Yes, there were a few television series, but it was all very different from Who. Who sort of just…that's what I'm remembered for, and how lucky am I? I did ten years work before Who and I didn't have an agent; I didn't want one, because I'd be told what to do. I stayed up North a lot, and I moved, and I loved what I was doing. I would work for Ayckbourn in Scarborough, library theatre…

I respond to that company feeling, which is probably why I enjoyed Who so much, in the classic days, because you were still a company, always fighting against the odds and the budget and everything else – besides the Daleks. But now it's come as such a surprise, I wasn't ready for it, in a way. At School Reunion I thought 'What a lovely place to leave her'. How lovely. How very very lovely of them to kind of unite through me the old classic series and the new one. How lucky that they chose me.

And I truly thought that was the end, so when the special came up with the Bane, I kind of thought 'Oh my God', what's expected of me? It was such a different place to go, because television has changed, and the way you're meant to work with it. I just kept my hand in doing little bits of this, that and the other, but quite often the choice wasn't mine. Casting directors forget, my directors forgot…

You've got to keep really ticking over, and you realise that when you walk back onto a set like that, the energy…and you think 'My God, I haven't even got the right colour underwear'! Gotta go to Harvey Nichols [laughs].

And taking that on board, I was only just thinking today, well…I always, always loved period drama, and I would just love that. I've always liked to look other than me. With Sarah Jane I would like the hair to be nice, you know, you're doing heightened reality, you're not actually into the area where the blood is real, as long as the dimension of what you're doing is real. I'm talking about not…I nearly said not doing The Bill, but I go back to Taggart and I mean not doing that. But I would just love to do something in a corset again, because quite a lot of the plays that I would be involved in, some were modern but quite a lot weren't, and I kind of like that. I just feel more comfortable there, strangely enough.

A pity there were no eighteenth-century adventures in your time with the early doctors.

I know, I never got those. I did Gulliver In Lilliput, I think it's the only six o'clock slot that hasn't been repeated, because I think our Gulliver gets mixed up with a few others that were done. Barry Letts directed it and people would just come in to look at the costumes, it was like anopera, just so much attention, and I'm sorry that one's disappeared. Yeah, I think that was my only stab at it on telly. I loved it!

In all the current talk of re-casting The Doctor, I wondered if you had any thoughts from over the years on actors who might have been good in the role?

Well I know that during the gap between Jon leaving and Tom taking over, there were a number of actors that either turned it down or the BBC decided not to go with them. I remember one of them was Ron Moody. My husband was in something with him, and I saw him some years later and

having turned it down, he said 'that was the worst decision I ever made – I should have taken it'. They also mentioned Tommy Steele, Jim Dale, Richard Hearne – I don't know if you're old enough to remember Mr. Pastry…?

Not quite…

Well Mr. Pastry was his cack-handed clown with a bowler hat, like an older version of Chaplin, except that he wanted to play Doctor Who like that [laughs] and they weren't very happy. I would have hated that, I have to say. I was asked about it when they were casting Doctor Who; I think it was after Christopher Eccleston and before David took over, and I said that I would love them to go back to a young doctor, more like an Edward Scissorhands. Now should they ever cast again –and David's brilliant in it – should they ever cast again, I would like them to go back to an older, more cerebral Doctor Who.

The age gap between The Doctor and his assistants has closed considerably…

Yes!

..perhaps bringing romantic issues more to the fore than in the time of William Hartnell, for instance.

I don't think he could have got it off with his grand-daughter! But I know what you mean, yes it has, and it's taken on a different public perception, although the role was always a relationship. I'm not very knowledgeable and I'm not a very big fan of sci-fi, so I always used to think about it as a relationship, and that's the nub of the series. Whatever goes on around The Doctor and anyone that he has actually taken in the Tardis with him is actually irrelevant to how they handle it; it's how they are together as a team.

I looked at it like that, and when I was working on it, my first Doctor, Jon, was very much the parental type. That was Jon, [laughs] telling you what to do! The cloak around the chick, that was his sort of dandy, caring Doctor and then Tom was much more 'go out on your own and find and come back and tell'. There was the conjoined feeling I suppose of being responsible and caring for each other, so that you could make a hash of it every week, but you'd still try, because of the feeling that you had for this other person. But it's been put in a totally different relation, with a spyglass, a magnifying glass in the new series.

If you could get into a Tardis and go back and give your younger self some advice, what would it be?

I couldn't have enjoyed it any more than I did. I don't think I could work on it in any other way. I've had to watch the early ones, you know, recently, because of doing the commentaries. I think that at the time you were almost blinkered to what everyone else is doing on the other side of the camera, i.e. the props, the lightning, and my appreciation of looking at that again from a different viewpoint…yeah, it's like you say to someone when they get married – notice everything. I was so caught up in what I was doing, what I had to take on board, that I should maybe have broadened my appreciation.

Would you not tell yourself to accept John Nathan-Turner's offer to return as Sarah Jane?

Ah God, no! I still think that would have been a mistake, because Tom and I had the best time; they just worked, and I didn't know that we could actually do that again, coming back after he'd been in it again for so long after I'd left. When you try to recreate something of the same, without a big gap in between when you've both moved on…it was on a very personal level, I didn't do it for a job…I've never taken jobs on a

‘mortgage’ kind of thing; I’ve had to sometimes, but it’s so lovely to have that door that says I can say ‘no’. Or maybe that’s a coward’s way out? Just walking away. You could look on it as a vice or a virtue or a fact, which ever day of the month it was, whatever I want to pluck from the air and tell you!

No-one screamed less than Leela, but Sarah Jane didn’t scream much…did you make a conscious decision that even though in peril, she wouldn’t cave in like a ‘damsel in distress’?

I wasn’t ever meant to be helpless, but I still scream now!

I have no problem with screaming, I don’t think it even means a lot – it’s an expression. Look at Lillian Gish in the silent movies going down the ice floe – even when her mouth’s open you think ‘Yeah! It’s a reaction’. I remember on some cliff-hangers it was ‘Oh my God, we can’t have Liz screaming again’, so some of it was taken away.

In the new series, I can’t scream at all, because I have to lead the kids. They had to take some of the shots again, because I screamed! I screamed when the Sitheen came. [laughs] I just don’t have this problem with being girly at all. That’s the way I am; it doesn’t mean I’m any less… so you can carry a heavier dustbin than me. So what? Fact. Nothing to do with what’s inside.

If anyone came along with the Women’s Lib thing, I hated that. It was almost demeaning. Why do you have to have a tag? You are this person who is a different gender and your hands aren’t so big. Y’know, I’ll play the girly part if it’ll get me what I want. Why not? You had to sometimes, it was mainly men on the program. I used to think ‘Christ, no-one’s listening to me’ .Is it very different now?

Yes. One particular actor came on set and couldn’t believe there were so many women behind the camera. Back then you had a set designer occasionally, and you had a costume designer of either sex, but you did not have a camera person or a sound recordist or props…they just weren’t there. So that has changed totally.

You and Tom Baker were the first guests on Multi-Coloured Swap Shop. Was it as mad and frenetic as it looked?

Yes! Did it look that way? Well, I kept my mouth shut most of the time and left it to Tom, that’s fine, take over! Yeah, it was literally on the sofa, quick, phone in and off you go again – it was such a fleeting experience. I don’t remember much, but I can remember what I was wearing, and that’s about it. That says a lot for me, doesn’t it? [laughs]

You’re on record as hating spiders and being left with a spider on your back in Planet Of The Spiders – did any of the more unearthly monsters get to you?

I was dying to meet the Daleks, and you really do think ‘My God, aren’t they wonderful’. It’s just a fantastic creation. I was living in a house at the time where the floor hardly joined the skirting board, and the size of spiders that would scuttle out…the speed! So I just happened to mention that to Jon one day and he went to the whole palaver of having these spiders, the prop ones, laid up, and I got into rehearsal one morning…’Now Lizzie’, he said, ‘We’re going to get you over this…’. My fear wasn’t that big, y’know, but by the time I left, it was! He made me touch every single one.

Did it work?

No, it made it bloody worse! It was horrible! But the one that gives me the most chills, the first one I ever saw, coming out of the silver golf ball was the Sontaran, and I think that was such a good creation. And sometimes it's not so much the creation, it's the actor inside, what they've done with it – the way they almost breathe or sound, or move; and the other one is Davros.

In the new series, I haven't seen every single one, but there was one creature – I don't know what they're called, they come on like rhinoceroses in an army – the Judoon? Before you actually see them, you hear them march, march. Like shadows and sounds, the build-up to them…how you present them, I think sometimes gives them the authority and the kudos. Sometimes it's how it's introduced into a program rather than the actual thing itself.

And with that, our time with Elisabeth came to an end: our big thanks to her for sparing us the time.

The two new Sarah Jane audio adventures, The Glittering Storm and The Thirteenth Stone, can be found at BBC Audiozone