

# 'Doctor Who' class notes: Free, open lecture at Palace Theater draws 200 students

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About 20 people dressed as "Doctor Who" characters for a costume contest in the open "Doctor Who in the Digital Age" class on Monday, March 2, 2015. (Katrina Tulloch | ktulloch@syracuse.com)

By Katrina Tulloch | ktulloch@syracuse.com

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- For the first time this semester, Anthony Rotolo opened up his 'Doctor Who' in the Digital Age class to the public Monday night. Anyone could come out to the Palace Theater and join the class for free.

About 200 people came out and Rotolo estimated about half the crowd consisted of registered students, while the other half was new.

For the sake of the new viewers, Rotolo launched into a hyperspeed history of the BBC show and how the Doctor's adventures reflected the culture in the U.K. up until the 1980s. That's where we left off [last week](#).

## 1. Costume contest

The highlight of last night's open class was the group of 20 people who came dressed as "Doctor Who" characters and participated in a costume contest to win prizes.

The group included at least five Daleks, two Eleventh Doctors, two Tenth, one Twelve, one Master, one Amy Pond, one [Sarah Jane Smith](#) and one Romana.

Rotolo gave away "Doctor Who" action figures, shot glasses, Mad Libs, magazines, even a celery bunch (the Fifth Doctor's signature fashion piece) to the best costumes.

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Four-year-old Aasiyah Siddiqui wore the standout costume of the night: a perfect Eleventh Doctor complete with a red bow tie, fez and mop. She won the Fifth Doctor's hat "for her next costume."

Siddiqui's mother, Javi, wore a red Dalek dress. That's parenting done right.

"She's been saying all night, 'I can't believe I won!'" said Javi, after class.

"Geronimo!" yelled Aasiyah, using the Eleventh Doctor's signature catchphrase.



Aasiyah Siddiqui, 4, poses with Professor Anthony Rotolo. Siddiqui dressed as the Eleventh Doctor for a costume contest in Rotolo's "Doctor Who" in the Digital Age class.

Javi Siddiqui (@Jannath) | Twitter

## 2. The merchandising of 'Doctor Who'

The 1970s ended with labor strikes at the BBC, leading the "Doctor Who" show runner Graham Williams and script editor Douglas Adams to quit after their episode "Shada" never went to air.

Heading into the 1980s, [Fourth Doctor Tom Baker](#) remained the Doctor for another season, but John Nathan-Turner entered as show runner and swiftly made changes Baker didn't like.

Nathan-Turner wasn't interested as much in writing as he was in turning "Doctor Who" into a big budget sci-fi universe like "Star Trek" or "Star Wars."

Nathan-Turner also wanted to make the show more merchandise-friendly. He ditched Tom Baker's signature long scarf and replace it with a "Doctor Who" uniform, with question marks on the lapel.

"Tom Baker hated this," Rotolo said. "Why would the Doctor wear question marks? The Doctor knows who he is."

Baker got fed up. After playing the Doctor for the longest tenure yet, Baker was replaced in 1981 by the young, blond Peter Davison. Here's his death and regeneration scene:



## 3. Fifth Doctor: Peter Davison

Peter Davison (a Cary Elwes doppelganger) was the first actor cast as the Doctor who also grew up watching "Doctor Who" with William Hartnell and Patrick Troughton.

But Davison wasn't brought in to replace Hartness or Troughton. He was brought in to replace Tom Baker, who many fans thought of as irreplaceable.

"Fans wondered 'How do you follow Tom Baker?'" Rotolo said. "Even Davison thought he was too young to play the Doctor, while all the other actors had been middle-aged."

Baker's Doctor was erratic and bluntly alien, while Davison's Doctor was calmer, more human, but also less sure of himself.

Davison kept the controversial question marks on lapel, but also started dressing



Peter Davison played the Doctor on "Doctor Who" from 1981-1984.

BBC video still

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like a cricket player. He pinned a stalk of celery to his lapel, for an alien touch of whimsy.

Nathan-Turner added some new problematic companions during Davison's era, including an Android which the BBC didn't have the budget to support.

Nathan-Turner's biggest mistake? Getting rid of the Doctor's signature tool, the sonic screwdriver. The writers found it too convenient of a plot device to get the Doctor out of tricky situations. When the screwdriver was written off, the Doctor said it's like seeing an old friend killed.

"JNT (Nathan-Turner) didn't actually realize the power of merchandise," Rotolo said. "He could've sold a whole lot of sonic screwdrivers."

Davison decides to leave in 1984, because the "writing was poor by all accounts in 21st season," Rotolo said. Former script editor Robert Holmes wrote the last episode like an adventure he would've written for previous Doctors Jon Pertwee or Baker. It used quick, witty dialogue and Davison's Doctor got more action than he had in many episodes.

In this week's class, we watched Davison's last episode, "The Caves of Androzani," in which the Doctor and companion Peri Brown (a young, curvy brunette in high-waisted shorts -- popular with adolescent boys) faced off with androids, spectrox toxemia and power-hungry tyrants from other planets.

Davison said he could've been persuaded to stay another season if he knew there would be more stories like this one.



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Nicola Bryant played Peri Brown in "Doctor Who."

BBC video still

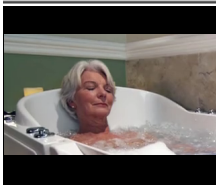
Before signing off, Davison finally got to explain the stalk of celery he had worn on his lapel for his entire tenure. Davison's incarnation of the Doctor was allergic to certain gases, which would turn the celery purple if it came into contact with them.

Rotolo also wore a stalk of celery on his lapel last night, but had to change it twice because it kept wilting.

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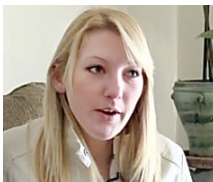


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**Jim B. Johnson**

Mar 4, 2015

That little girl was ridiculously adorable. Good job by her parents raising a little Whovian.

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