

Michael Pickwood, *Doctor Who*'s Production Designer on flying fish, cryogenic coffins and creating a Dickensian Christmas in space...

Practical Magic

Interview by: Cavan Scott



EXT. SARDICKTOWN — NIGHT: PRESENT 1

FX: Flickering streetlamps, a narrow street. Foggy and frosty, but no snow. HURRYING FIGURES wrapped up tight against the cold. Victorian in effect, though not in detail. This is a colonized planet, several decades on. This is a city of iron — girders and rivets and rust — with narrow windows, a twisting labyrinth of slanting alleyways, and raised walkways. Squalour rendered beautiful by heightened reality — like the set of *Oliver!*

The above words are what greeted Michael Pickwood when he received the script for *A Christmas Carol*, the 2010 Christmas Day *Doctor Who* special. It was no small task. Take Dickens' ghostly little book, throw in a flying shark and set the entire thing on a poverty-stricken, 44th-Century planet.

Michael would soon discover that such challenges were all in a day's work in his role as *Doctor Who*'s new Production Designer.

I've managed to grab half-an-hour with Michael in his office at Upper Boat Studios near Cardiff and have asked him to cast his mind back almost a year to his first *Doctor*

Who story. Every surface is smothered by heaps of paper, the bookshelves crammed with well-thumbed tomes on every aspect of art and architecture and the walls are covered by paintings, sketches and photos offering tantalizing glimpses of Matt Smith's second series of *Doctor Who*. One picture in particular



catches my eye. There, next to a giant blueprint of what looks like a stately home, is a black and white still of the very first actor to play the Doctor, William Hartnell, deep in conversation with a white-haired gentleman. At first it seems an odd choice of picture until Michael explains. The white-haired gentleman

is in fact his father, who under his stage name William Mervyn played Sir Charles Summer in the *Doctor Who* adventure *The War Machines* back in 1966. So, it would seem that *Doctor Who* has been a part of Michael's family's life for a long time. Was it daunting, therefore, to take on such a pivotal role in a programme

that has such a long history?

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Heavy metal



When it came to building the streets of Sardicktown, Michael looked to Wales' industrial past, finding a perfect location in nearby Newport.

Mir Steelworks was founded in the early 1970s but had closed after filing for bankruptcy four years ago. When Michael scouted the site as a possible location in early 2010, it was preparing to partly reopen, but still had plenty of space to house *A Christmas Carol*'s exterior scenes. Filming would take place at night, when production had stopped and there was no need to black out the huge windows in the roof, which only added to the location's otherworldly atmosphere.

"From the outside, Mir looked like a wonderful location, all ventilators and heavy metal," Michael remembers, "but when we went inside we were completely blown away. Everywhere you looked there were extraordinary blast furnaces, giving you the most obscure shapes imaginable. Even before we built anything the place already looked weird."

A study in steel

What then of a little Yuletide magic? Where did Michael draw his inspiration for *A Christmas Carol*?

"It was all there in those first few paragraphs of the script," Michael says. "Here you have a Scrooge-like character lording it over a Dickensian city in another time and place. It immediately started to come together. Kazran Sardick wasn't just Scrooge on another planet. He was *Citizen Kane* on another planet. Everything came from that. Here let me show you."

And with that Michael dashes around the office for a second, checking under countless piles of drawings, until he

recovers a big black portfolio full of his designs for the story. The first page reveals his original sketch of Kazran's imposing study, 18-foot tall columns dwarfing the figure of Michael Gambon's miser hunched in his chair. "We looked for ages for a location where we could build such an over-the-top set," Michael says, flipping through the pages showing details of the columns that were based on those found in Castle Howard in North Yorkshire, and the European chateau-style fireplace that the Doctor uses to make his most dramatic entrance in the show's history. "Eventually we decided the only way of doing it was to build it here, on one of the stages."

The rest of Kazran's dominion developed from this one set. As the script indicated, it was a world of iron and steel, bolted together from the ships that carried the original colonists across the stars. "When creating a place like this, there needs to be a visual logic. Why is everything made from metal?" Michael asks before answering himself. "Well, the town's founders were shipwrights. That's what they knew. That's how they built things, with everything riveted together. So the walls of Kazran's house were made to look like oxidized bronze, with metal paneling instead of wood. It's still Victorian, but heavily industrialized."



Past influences



Inspired by the steelworks, the streets of Sardicktown began to form both in Michael's mind and on his drawing board.

He drew on his experience of working on productions of *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* to add flourishes of Dickens, including a blink-and-you-miss-it Olde Curiosity Shop and a Bob Cratchit-style hovel for the family of Katherine Jenkin's character, Abigail.

Then came the fish. To create a planet where humans lived alongside flying fish Michael searched for a nautical theme. "A designer's job is to underline the message of a story and it suddenly came to me. We needed portholes. Every window would be round in Sardicktown."

The presence of the fish brought other design considerations. The last thing the inhabitants of Sardicktown would have wanted was a school of herring darting in through the front door or minnows streaming

down the chimney. So every porch and chimney pot was fashioned with grills and covers. "It's the visual logic again," Michael says. "You need to believe what you're looking at, believe it's how people live and work. It's the same for the props. As I studied engineering at university, I hate machines that look like they couldn't do what they're meant to. Yes, you need the audience to take a leap of faith every now and then, but everything must look like it works."

Michael is on a roll now, flicking through Kazran's possessions, losing himself in the steampunkish designs. There's the projector the Doctor uses, a glorious lash-up of a 19th-Century magic lantern and a LCD projector, Kazran's mobile candlestick telephone, a heavy looking riveted laptop and Michael's crowning glory – the weather machine. "The inspiration for the weather machine came from the organ Vincent Price plays in the old Dr. Phibes movies," Michael admits, "Kazran sits there in the seat of power with all these pipes rising up to the clouds above. And of course, it couldn't look like something you'd find in an engine room. This had pride of place in Kazran's baronial living quarters and like all things 19th-Century had to look like a piece of Gothic furniture, hiding away all the wonderful technology."

On Kazran's heavy duty laptop

"I have this old Toshiba laptop at home with a metal case. It's a glorious thing that feels like it will last. It struck me this was how the shipwrights of Sardicktown would make a laptop, riveting it together."



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DEEP FREEZE

If the weather machine is Dr. Phibes' organ then the cryogenic bays, deep beneath Kazran's tower, are the *Phantom of the Opera's* catacombs, shrouded in swirling mist.

"The cryogenic units were designed like a Mafia coffin," says Michael with morbid glee, digging out the original renders of the sarcophagus-like devices, "made of metal but beautifully lined." 23 cryogenic units were made in total. One was

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a practical prop with a working door while, other than two almost perfect copies that were used in close-ups, the rest were light polystyrene mock-ups that could be easily moved to make room for the camera.

Designed so that the porthole was just the right height for Matt's line of sight, a step had to be built into Catherine's unit so you could see her frozen features perfectly framed through the window. Looking at the designs, I wonder aloud if Catherine found them claustrophobic.



On comments that the spaceship in *A Christmas Carol* is a bit like the USS Enterprise

"If you're going to invent something completely new you'll always have to explain it. We didn't have time for this. We needed something everyone would instantly recognize as a spaceship. If the entire episode was about a new spaceship we wouldn't have done that."

On creating a harness for a shark

"You have to look at how a horse is harnessed and work from that. You'd need a double yoke and leave space for the fin. Above all you have to believe you're actually doing the job, otherwise it'll never look like it would work."



On Kazran's portraits

"They were painted by my eldest daughter, Katie. My youngest daughter, Amy, is now standby art director on alternate blocks. It's very satisfying – three generations of my family have worked on *Doctor Who*."

"I don't think so," Michael replies. "I got in it one day and sat in there looking out, thinking this is rather peaceful, a nice escape from filming." He flips the page before adding, "Yes, I like those. They might get reused one day... Everything is reused in *Doctor Who*." He reveals, "There's one particular set that has been used in Series Six, time and time again."

What of Sardicktown? Should we be looking out for any of the *A Christmas Carol* sets in upcoming episodes. At first Michael says no, before quickly correcting himself. "The big round window in Kazran's bedroom," he remembers, pointing at a photo of himself lounging on the windowsill during the recording. "One of the recent episodes called for a large window in a security room looking out into space. We popped a plain sheet of glass in it and there you go, it's a whole new window."

So, more magic is required. Let's face it; we're talking about *Doctor Who* here. Fans will pore over these episodes for years to come. If you're going to re-use sets you'd better disguise them pretty well or they'll be spotted instantly. Michael laughs at the thought: "If fans want to look out for re-used set pieces they can," he says with a wicked glint in his eye, "but for every one they think they've spotted there will be many they've missed. You have to give them a challenge, don't you?"



On the lost painting

"This was to be a painting in Kazran's study. It's based on *Coalbrookdale by Night*, an 1801 painting by Philip James de Loutherbourg that symbolizes the birth of industry. We named it *The Birth of Sardicktown*, but it never made it in the final show."

