

# WHO'S WHO

**A profile of Tom Baker**





Top: Tom Baker as the villainous Prince Koura with the beautiful Caroline Munro (as the slave-girl Marigiana) in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973). Above: Koura listens to a report from his magically created Homunculus.

**T**he *Times* once wrote of Tom Baker that he was "a very tall man with a beautiful voice and a range of expression from the nobly heroic to a fleeting resemblance to Harpo Marx". And that's all most people know about one of British television's most successful and popular actors. A superficial image of a tall, loquacious man with a long scarf. But what is he really like? How did he become one of the screen's most instantly recognisable faces?

One of the strange things is that he came to the *Dr Who* series because of his success in villainous roles. And he was lucky enough to come to the series at a turning point in the programme. Simultaneously, the series lost the three men who held it together. Producer Barry Letts, script editor Terrance Dicks and star Jon Pertwee had worked together on the *Dr Who* series for five years. They had all joined at roughly the same time; and now they all decided to move on to other areas at the same time, leaving an enormous gap in the programme. Philip Hinchcliffe was brought in to replace Barry Letts as producer. Scriptwriter Bob Holmes, who had been a regular contributor to *Dr Who*, replaced Dicks as the script editor. But that still left one vital gap unfilled. Who was to be the new Who?

It was Bill Slater, BBC TV's Head of Drama Serials, who first suggested Tom Baker. He had just seen him as the villainous magician Prince Koura in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*. And he had also seen Baker's performance as Rasputin, the mad monk, in *Nicholas and Alexandra*. So Baker was shortlisted for the lead role in *Dr Who*. But his own background was even more bizarre than the Doctor's.

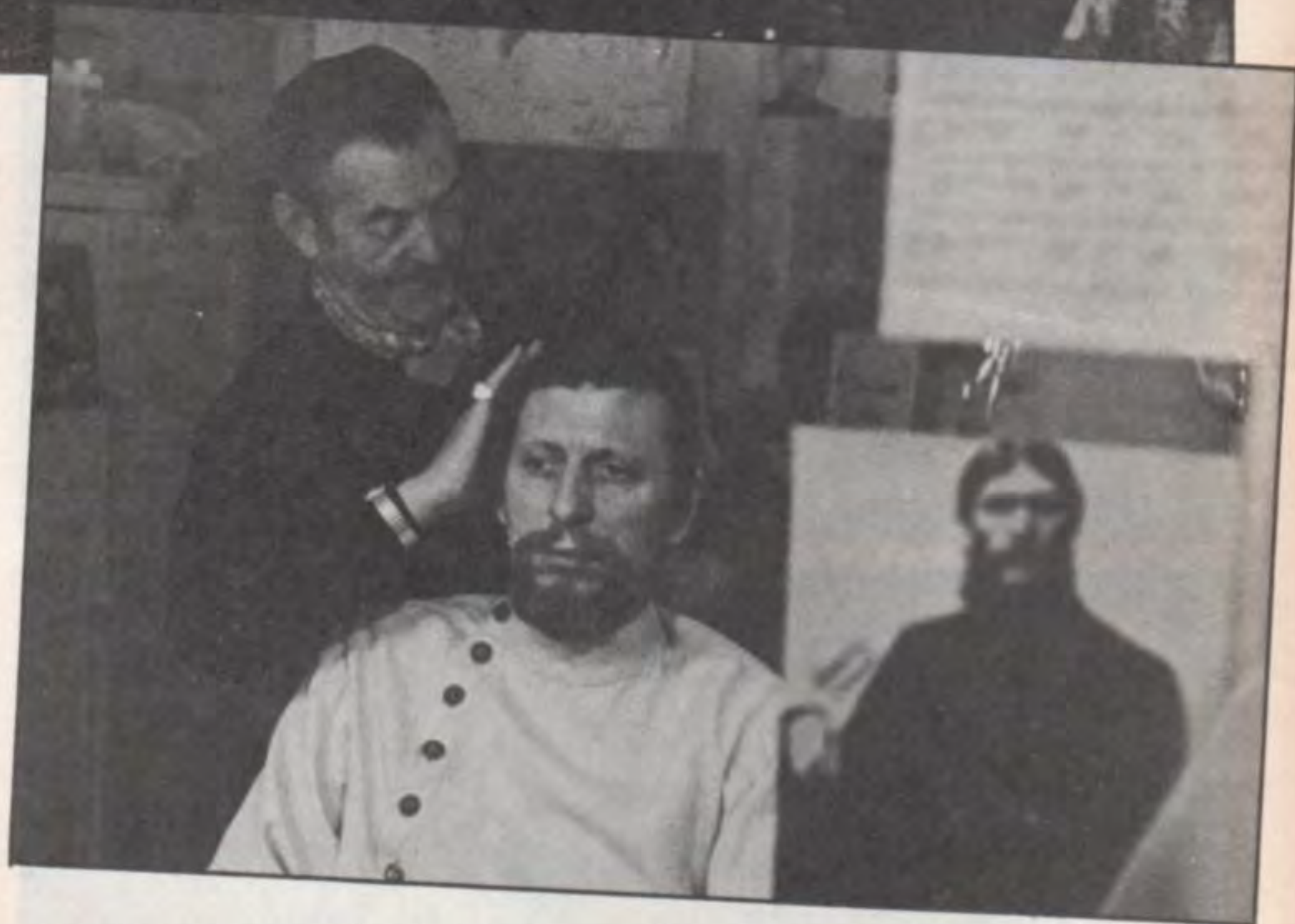
Tom Baker was brought up in the Scotland Road area of Liverpool, one of the toughest parts of one of Britain's toughest cities. It was an Irish area with a very strong religious tradition. His mother was a devout Catholic and it was mainly she who brought him up because his father was so often away at sea. Religion dominated his early life. Baker says that, from the age of five, he was constantly at confession until eventually he dried up of things to confess: "I was brought up among Irish pubs and Irish priests and brainwashed with this pre-occupation with death. Which is perhaps why I still wander round graveyards collecting strange epitaphs".

Talking about himself as a child, Baker describes "a young man desperate to make his mark, fantasising and dreaming. Not clever at school. Rather overgrown and therefore odd to look at. *Good heavens! Is he only eleven? But he's six foot one!* people said". He acted in school productions and, when he was aged 15, he was offered a job at the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin. His highly religious and protective mother refused to let him go.

But, soon afterwards, a school lecturer



Above: Tom Baker, as Rasputin, in *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971). Right: Baker sits in the makeup chair for the same film. Opposite: Baker as Prince Koura in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973).



extolled the virtues of the monastic life. He said it was not easy. You had to adhere to vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. That didn't seem too bad to the young Tom Baker. The chastity was no problem at his age. He had known poverty ever since he was born. And as for obedience—well, everybody seemed to kick him around anyway. So, aged 15, he entered a monastery in Jersey where he dug the gardens and stoked the boiler and did other menial chores and, of course, got up at 5.15 am to say *Veni Spiritus Sancti* with the brothers. Later, he moved to Shropshire as a novice.

In all, he led the monastic life for six long years and he is still reluctant to talk about his life 'inside' except to say: "Until I was 22, I was totally preoccupied with religion" and "I must admit that I only did it to get away from my background". Whether or not it helped him to play the Pope in *Luther* or Rasputin the mad monk in *Nicholas and Alexandra* is anybody's guess.

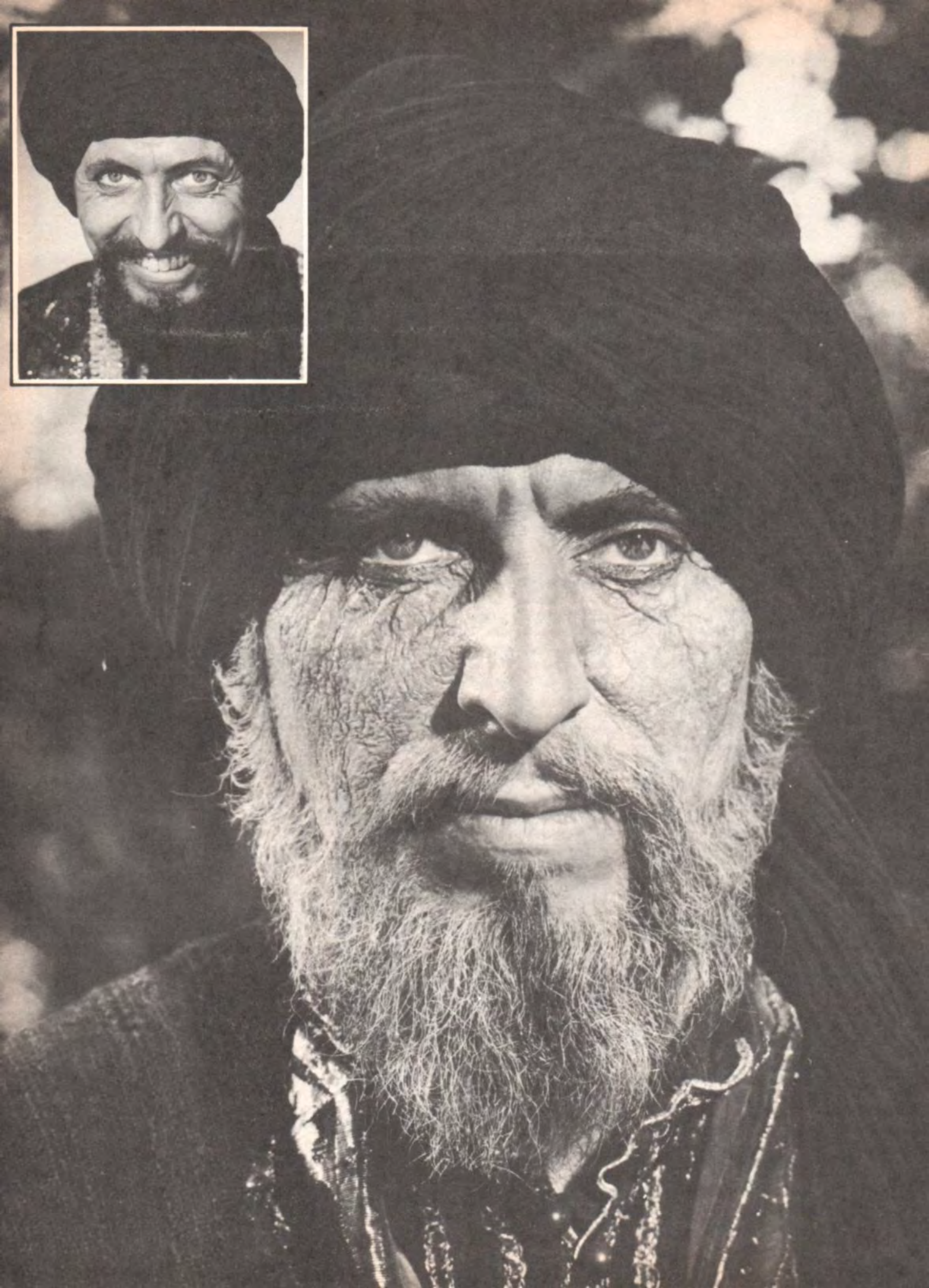
At any rate, after six years in the enclosed, inward-looking monastic world, he left for a taste of freedom. Six weeks after leaving, he was called up for compulsory National Service in the Army. As usual, he had a unique method of dealing

with the circumstances in which he found himself. "I simply", he says, "feigned idiocy right through my National Service and got away with murder. In my second year, I was able to turn up on muster parade in red leather slippers. Harmless dementia is considered something sacred as long as there's no violence in the unhingement. I went around saying preposterous things. I'd say *I won't be shouted at by a bunch of professional murderers* and, of course, they'd shout at me, so I'd proceed to cry. And that simply unhinged

them. Finally, they just left me alone because I was too much trouble."

It was also one of the turning points in his life. He explains: "I was a terribly withdrawn, pained, skinny man and the Army released me. I loathed Queen's Regulations. It was the enforced contact with people of disparate backgrounds that did it. I was coerced into a Unit show. When I discovered I could make people laugh, it gave me a new strength."

He left the Army after serving his two years and, eventually, was accepted by a





Above: Tom Baker, as Rasputin, in *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971).

drama school. But he had to wait seven months before the course started, so he joined the Merchant Navy as a seaman on the *Queen Mary*, then came back for the drama course which lasted two years. He found work in repertory theatres around Britain and it was during this time that he discovered a dog's life has its advantages.

While he was working at York Repertory Theatre, playing the part of a dog in a late-night revue, he was 'spotted' by a National Theatre talent scout. He is probably the only spotted dog ever to be interviewed by Laurence Olivier and given an acting job at the National.

It was his big break, right? Name in lights? Choice of all the big parts? Wrong.

The first part he played at the National Theatre was a horse in *The Trials of Sancho Panza*. He later graduated to playing humans and stayed at the National Theatre for 2½ years. He also worked in movies. It was Laurence Olivier who suggested Baker for the role of Rasputin in *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971). He also appeared in Pasolini's *Canterbury Tales* (1972), *Vault of Horror* (1973), *Luther* (1973), *The Mutations* (1974) and *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1975). He also had to support himself by working in a Meccano factory, a bakery (Baker in a bakery?), by selling ice-cream, hod-carrying and housework.

It wasn't an easy life. Immediately before he was chosen as the lead in *Dr Who*, *Films Illustrated* interviewed him and his view of the future seemed bleak: "I suppose next week I will be working for the Cadogan Employment Agency, which

means I shall be putting emulsion on people's walls or scrubbing the front steps. I shall not despise it, but it distresses me slightly because I feel I'm too old and have been going too long to have to do that. But there's no other way. I can't live on what they pay me to do *Macbeth* at the Shaw Theatre. I'm never asked to do television. I did a couple of days work on Jack Smight's *Dr Frankenstein* (title later changed to *Frankenstein: The True Story*). I was reduced to taking two days work—one scene in a picture."

You might think that, when he was chosen as "the Doctor", no-one could have been more surprised than Tom Baker. But that's not entirely true. When the news was announced, he was working on a building site with mates Chopper, Art, Tod, Shorty and Pud. "Those men", he says, "couldn't believe it—their cement-mixer becoming *Dr Who*!"

Producer Philip Hinchcliffe said at the time that his basic idea was "to get back some of the eccentricity of the earlier character" (presumably referring to the flute-playing Patrick Troughton). An important part of the new Doctor's character was the costume (vaguely reminiscent of Baker's appearance as a deformed murderer in *The Mutations*). The over-all design, including the floppy hat and 16-17 feet long scarf, evolved over two days of dressing up.

The initial omens for Baker were bad. On location filming on Dartmoor for his first *Dr Who* programme, he fell and broke his collarbone. But the new Doctor was soon a hugely popular success.

How did Tom Baker like his new life?

Very much. Especially his contact with younger fans: "I'm not interested in the jaded reactions of parents to *Dr Who*. I've never heard a really revelatory remark from adults. But little children—their imaginative reactions mesmerise me." He felt so involved with his audience that he stopped smoking in the street, because he felt responsible for the youngsters who watch the show. (The BBC says the audience is about 60% adults and 40% children.)

He is, in fact, a father with children of his own. He was once married to Anna, the daughter of famous rose-grower Alfred (brother of Harry) Wheatcroft. They had two sons. He says, "The marriage was a rather sad failure and I don't like to recall it. I think of myself now as a bachelor." The *Sun* once quoted him as telling their reporter: "I have this recurring nightmare that I am outside a church. Bent double like a hunchback. All I can see is the hem of a wedding dress. The photographer keeps muttering *Stand up straight, Mr Baker*. I can't because, if I look up, I'll see the bride. My bride."

Whatever the truth of that (and there's always the suspicion that Tom Baker kids some of his interviewers), he seems to be happy now and it's easy to believe him when he says: "I have enjoyed my life much more since I became the Doctor," even though he adds, "I used to get terribly tired of Tom Baker". As if to explain, he says, "When I was Tom Baker, my life was pretty quiet. But now I've become a doctor—without the hassle of training—I have a much more colourful life. The comeback for me has been so preposterously out of proportion."