

Visions '98

November 27-29, 1998 * Chicago, IL



And now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain . . .

As I was writing this review, Her Majesty's Entertainment announced that **Visions '98** would be their final convention. This news should not have been a surprise. The rumors of the convention's imminent demise were among the first things I heard this past Thanksgiving weekend, when I entered the Hyatt Regency O'Hare, Chicago, Illinois. However, I, like many other attendees, chose to ignore the signs of the end and enjoy what was the classiest of America's annual SF media conventions.

This year's collection of Doctor Who guests was a personal favorite.

Sylvester McCoy was in fine form, giving his usual 200 percent to the fans. **Louise Jamison** made it to Visions this year after having to cancel last year. She was full of stories like how she managed to get her DW prop knife on the plane. The knife was later auctioned off at the Charity Auction. **Mark Strickson** made an excellent host of the Variety Show, which in some ways is surprising, since he has not performed in many years. He is currently producing and directing nature films, some of which have been shown on the Discovery Channel. Then, there was **Caroline John**, with her husband **Geoffrey Beevers**. As Liz Shaw is my favorite companion, I have been looking forward to seeing her for years, and it was worth the wait. Rounding off the Doctor Who guests was **Lisa Bowerman**. While she had only a minor role in the television story "Survival", she is currently portraying the Doctor's first literary companion, Bernice Summerfield, in a new series of audiotapes based on the Virgin New Adventures novels.

The biggest surprise I had this year was how much I liked **Tracy Scoggins**. Like many other fans, I found her character in Babylon 5 this past season to be lacking. In fact, she has been getting about as much bad press as Michael O'Hare did during the program's first season. During her first ever convention appearance, Scoggins proved she is not her character, and has more depth than many of her roles have shown. She is intelligent, active in politics, funny, and very approachable. Most everyone who saw her was impressed.

Speaking of **Michael O'Hare**, he was a surprise guest on Friday and Saturday. While he did not participate in programming, he was available for autographs throughout the day. Other guests of the convention included **Nigel Bennett** (Lacroix from Forever Knight), **Nicholas Brendon** (Xander from Buffy the Vampire Slayer), and **Kent McCord** (Battlestar Galatica among others).

In a major first, the Variety Show finished early. Part of this, unfortunately, can be attributed to fewer celebrities participating in the event. That didn't mean there was a shortage of talent. It opened with the winners of Friday night's Masquerade Show, a high-

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energy act combining Men In Black with the Blues Brothers. This paved the way for acts such as Tracy Scoggins performing "Jailhouse Rock", and Sylvester McCoy's almost manic musical comedy act. The standout performances came from **Robin Atkin Downes** and his significant other. They really can sing, and the show would not have been successful without them. The most unusual act was **Erin Grey** giving a demonstration of Tai Chi. Tai Chi is something she is passionate about, and the demonstration showed it. In fact, the demonstration led to her teaching a well attended Tai-Chi workshop on Sunday morning.

My opinion of the programming schedule is mixed. Main programming was not as diverse as it has been in previous years. All of the guests from a particular program were grouped together on a single panel, and that panel was repeated all three days. From a convention organizing perspective, this makes sense. It allows greater accessibility to the convention's programming for one-day attendees. It also makes coordinating the activities of the guests a simple matter. For someone who purchased a weekend membership, the lack of variety is painful. I would have liked to see more "topic" panels with the guests like the "Women in SF" panel at Visions '91. This allows the guests from the different areas to interact, thus producing more interesting conversations.

On the positive side, fan programming seemed to be at its best this year. Much of the credit for this belongs to The Doctor Who Alliance of North America, the new online Doctor Who fan organization. They ran eight of the panels, and produced their own schedule flyer. The convention does deserve some credit for moving the fan programming closer to the main room. However, the fan programming was more a replacement for the missing lower tier author and production guests than a deliberate improvement.

The one thing that hurt HME/Visions most was the lack of more British guests, and this was not the fault of the organizers. Red Dwarf was in the middle of production in November, thus eliminating many potential guests. This just leaves Blake's Seven in the potential guest pool. While I did want to see Gareth Thomas again (he cancelled his appearance during the summer), most of cast has already been to Visions. Some of them have appeared multiple times. They are just not the draw that they were a couple years ago. The end result is that the convention was missing much of what gives it flavor.

The convention, itself, ran smoother than I can remember. The autograph lines were well managed, and were as quick as they could be while still allowing a few moments of personal interaction with the guests. I heard no complaints about the photograph sessions, which sparked many of last year's complaints. The professional dealers room looked like it had more dealers than last year. Finally, the Art Show returned with Artist GoH John Platt displaying his work as well as those of many other contributors.

HME/Visions '98 was not best of its kind, but some of the magic was still there. The level of contact with the celebrity guests was greater than most of the media SF conventions I have attended. The attendees and guests were treated like gold. In addition, where else could one encounter the "Invasion of the Dancing Foam Heads" (you had to be there).

All of this was due to the work of Bob McLaughlin and his team at Her Majesty's Entertainment. I wish to thank them for this year, and the eight previous Visions. I wish them well in their attempt to create smaller, two-day, four-guest events in the years ahead.

This review is dedicated to the memory of Bea Owens, senior staff volunteer in Registration, who died during the last week January. I worked with her at Visions since 1995, and I can say without doubt that she will be missed.

