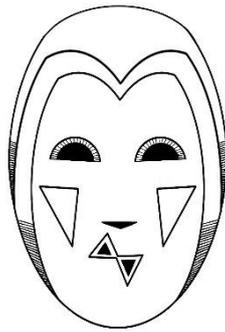


The Black Archive #8

# BLACK ORCHID

## Sampler



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## DOUBLES, TWINS – AND IDENTITY

That question of identity is raised in the very element of *Black Orchid* which so displeased Peter Davison: hiding his identity behind a mask. It is a brave or generous actor (or both) that is willing to remain undercover throughout – Hugo Weaving in *V for Vendetta* (2006) for example, or Karl Urban in *Dredd* (2012) (in contrast to Sylvester Stallone in *Judge Dredd* (1995)). Unlike Lord Peter Wimsey as Harlequin, the Doctor is unrecognisable. He could be anyone behind that mask. Once that visual identity is taken from him then the possibility is raised – for the other characters but not the viewer, as we are shown everything – that the Doctor could be guilty of murder. Being good at cricket does not eliminate him from suspicion and for Lady Cranleigh he is a useful stooge to whom otherwise awkward-to-explain murders can be attributed. Davison is right. Whether it is the script or the costume, the character of the Doctor is not pivotal in *Black Orchid*. It is more Nyssa's story than the Doctor's.

In a long-running series with a high episode count each year, that is not necessarily a problem. Starting with *Love and Monsters* (2006), **Doctor Who** has frequently included stories with reduced involvement for the Doctor. This is mainly to allow the lead actor some time off from a demanding role. Much dramatic television in the 21st century is based on having an ensemble cast. **Doctor Who** is one of a diminishing number of series that rely on a lead actor playing a lead character who is essential to much of what happens. This is not really sustainable in the long run. Nor is that a new phenomenon. Regular cast members were often written out for whole episodes in the first six series, when the lengths of the seasons were very long indeed (three-quarters of the year was not an unusual run). However, this is not the way the role of the Doctor is diminished here. Peter Davison is there throughout filming. He is not absent to allow him time off. It is just that the action is happening away from where he is much of the time. His role as the mysterious time-travelling figure who confronts the forces of evil wherever he finds them is put in question. His identity is less clear here than it has been since the difficult regeneration at the end of *Logopolis* (1981) and the beginning of *Castrovalva*.

Sarah Sutton joins the list of actors mentioned above who play companions to the Doctor as well as another character in the series. Like Mary Tamm in *The Androids of Tara* she plays two parts in the same story. Her twin roles of Nyssa and Ann Talbot allow Sutton more opportunities to express herself. While Davison is constrained by having to submerge his identity into the Harlequin, Sutton has the opportunity to develop Nyssa, to a limited extent, beyond what has gone before. Having been sidelined for the middle two episodes of *Kinda*, it is interesting that *Black Orchid* is the place where Nyssa once more comes to the fore. It would have been possible that having a double appear would detract from Nyssa as a character, in the way that the presence of the Doctor is reduced by having to share screen space with doubles in *The Massacre* or *The Enemy of the World*. In fact, the contrast between Nyssa and Ann gives some insights into who Nyssa is. Despite her physical resemblance, Ann is clearly a more experienced woman in some respects. She has been engaged twice, and even if both relationships have been chaste (about which the viewers can decide for themselves – there is no evidence in the script one way or the other) she must have acquired some insights into the world of adult relationships. Nyssa, up to this point in the series, has been portrayed as both young and previously protected from the outside world. It was only when the outside world, or universe, came to her that her stable life was challenged.

One of the more subtle things in *Black Orchid* is the way Adric is able to tell the difference between Nyssa and Ann. This is clearly deliberate on the part of Terence Dudley, and is one of the aspects of the story that he develops further in his novelisation:

'Poor Adric. It would only make matters worse if he attempted to explain to her that they'd been together long enough for him to be able to recognise certain of her little ways; her challenging stance, the set of her head when looking intently at anyone, the little intake of breath that preceded a sudden question.'<sup>1</sup>

Adric may be able to tell the difference but there are parts of *Black Orchid* where the viewers are not entirely sure. When Nyssa and Ann are in identical dresses and taking part in the dance, the viewer needs Adric to help us. By giving Nyssa a physical double the focus can be put on what makes her different; what her identity is. Unfortunately, what this mostly shows is how little the character of Nyssa has been developed since she was introduced in *The Keeper of Traken* (1981). She does at least get the chance to show in *Black Orchid* that she has a fun side. She is certainly up for the game of 'Guess who?' with Ann, she likes to dance and she likes the opportunity to wear more decorative clothes.

This is all enough to confuse George Cranleigh. Unlike Adric, he cannot tell the difference, nor is even aware most of the time that there are two people with the physical appearance of his beloved Ann. Where Adric has developed the experience and insight to be able to recognise the real Nyssa, George Cranleigh has lost his reason to such an extent that he cannot see beyond the physical appearance of what he expects Ann to look like. The person who is himself locked up because of what he looks like, in turn identifies Ann on the same basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Dudley, *Black Orchid*, p55.