



Above: Sebastian Armesto

BOURNE *free*

Kenny Smith steps back in time as comedy hero Nigel Planer's new series is finally realised...

FOR SEVERAL years Nigel Planer has had an idea sitting in the back of his mind. The actor, known for playing Neil in *The Young Ones*, **Nicholas Craig: The Naked Actor** and Vorgenson in *Doctor Who Live!*, had created a character who can travel through time using only the power of his mind.

And now, this fantasy comedy-drama has taken form in *Jeremiah Bourne in Time*, which is being released next month as one of the new **Big Finish Originals** range launched earlier this year to celebrate the company's 20th anniversary.

Nigel tells *Vortex*: "I've had *Jeremiah Bourne in Time* in my head for a few years now. It's

been through various shapes and forms. I wrote it originally as a book, but later felt it would be best suited to an audio drama.

"I've worked for Big Finish a few times as an actor and always enjoyed it. I was working on *The First Men in the Moon* for them, and I mentioned it to David Richardson, the producer, who picked up on it immediately."

David confirms: "We were recording our audio adaptation of *The First Men in the Moon* last year, and had a quick break. Over a cuppa in the green room, Nigel told me about this audio series he was writing, and asked if I'd be interested in reading it.

"I asked him to email the scripts to me, which he did... and I loved

it. Jeremiah Bourne is funny and exciting and warm and... I kept coming back to the word 'delightful'. I found it absolutely delightful. I suggested the project to Nicholas Briggs and Jason Haigh-Ellery (this was before we had an official **Big Finish Originals** range) and they liked the idea and gave the thumbs up."

Nigel continues: "I'm interested in the idea of genetic memory, the possibility that things might have a sort of 'morphic resonance'. The freaky idea that it might be possible to have unconscious memories of things you've never actually experienced. You know what it's like when you smell something and it sets you off, and brings back memories from your childhood? Or



Above (l-r): Sophie Thompson, Nigel Planer, Sebastian Armesto, Tim Bentinck and Annette Badland

sometimes you see someone and you think you remember their face?

"Well, in *Jeremiah Bourne in Time* we've taken that idea a bit further, so Jeremiah accidentally transports himself back in time as he starts to have memories that aren't his. There's no time machine involved. And he doesn't travel in space – just in time. He stays in exactly the same place, but finds himself... then!

"When I was younger, I used to be really good at remembering a lot of long numbers, like bank accounts and passports etc, but now, with the advent of iTechnology, I don't even think I know either of my sons' mobile phone numbers because all I have to do is tap a screen. Well, for *Jeremiah Bourne in Time*, I imagined a time in the

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future when there's been a digital meltdown and all data has been lost. Or even two or three digital meltdowns, Digi 1, Digi 2 and Digi 3. In those circumstances, people

with big memories would find themselves at a distinct advantage and might end up in control.

"People like black cab drivers before satnav who had to take years to learn every single road in the town [London]. They called it 'The Knowledge'. Well after a Digi meltdown, people like that might form an elite class that survives through its super-memory."

And now the series has taken shape. *Jeremiah Bourne* is a boy with a remarkable gift. He can travel in time. Not by using a time machine, or stepping through a dimensional portal. It just happens to him, as though by accident. One minute he's in the present day, the next, he's a hundred years in the past, standing in the London of 1910.

Jeremiah has two questions; how did he get there – and how can he get back? On his quest for the answers, he enlists the help of Phyllis Stokes of *The Society for Theosophical Research* and her equally eccentric brother, Roger Allcot Standish, magistrate, spiritualist and dedicated nudist. He encounters the sadistic Mr and Mrs Grout and the ruthless Ed Viney, thief, gang member and slitter of throats. And he arouses the disapproval of Clementina Quentinbloom, the head of a home for 'Fallen Girls', by befriending Daisy Wallace, a girl ahead of her time.

ALTHOUGH BEST known for his acting work, Nigel has several previous writing credits. David says: "Nigel asked if we had a script editor who was especially good at plotting, as he wanted some steering on that front. I thought of Jonathan Morris, who was very keen to become involved, and then pretty much left Nigel and Jonny together to shape the series into what it is now (which is delightful!)." Nigel adds: "I have written a couple of radio plays before so I'd had a bit of practice with audio drama, but I was very lucky with Big Finish to be working with script editor Jonny Morris. Jonny really knows how this kind of

adventure story works, structurally. He's done a lot of **Doctor Who** and other sci-fi things. I listened and learned.

"He also helped in terms of the stage directions. For example, you might write something like, 'Jeremiah's in the room with Phyllis Stokes', so Jonny would ask me, 'How do we know that?' It gets you thinking about how you would convey the story only through what people hear."

Jonny says: "I was very thrilled, because – obviously – I am a massive fan of Nigel's work, not just **The Young Ones** and the alternative comedy stuff, but his **Nicholas Craig** shows. I even saw him in *We Will Rock You*. But once the process began that was all put aside, because working with Nigel was just like working with any other writer. He was extremely receptive to suggestions, even when they meant more work, and not at all precious. Nigel had already spent some time developing



Above (l-r): Sophie Thompson, Nigel Planer, Sebastian Armesto, Tim McInnerny and Helen Goldwyn



Above (l-r): Annette Badland and Tim Bentinck

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the idea, he already had all the characters worked out and so on. My role was to use my extensive audio-based sci-fi storytelling experience to pull it all together into a strong, logical story. So I helped develop the plot and how it approached the 'rules' of time travel stories. After that, as Nigel delivered the drafts, it was a normal script-editing process of checking, 'Wouldn't character X be worried

about Y at this point? Can we have a reason why they don't just do Z?"

Jeremiah Bourne in Time has a cast that any radio play, theatre production or TV show would be envious of. It features a host of British acting greats, including Celia Imrie, Tim McInnerny, Christopher Ryan, Siobhan Redmond and Sophie Thompson.

Nigel says: "Casting was really good fun. I was lucky to get a lot of mates interested in it. Sophie Thompson, Chris Ryan, Tim McInnerny, Celia Imrie. I've heard the first edits and they are just phenomenal. They bring it off the page in a way that I could never have imagined. And some are playing multiple roles.

"Celia, for instance, who you would expect to be playing someone posh like Clementina Quentimbloom (which she does brilliantly), is also playing old Mrs Tandy. Everybody just joined in. And everyone wanted to be the voice of Dryden the parrot. We had a 'best parrot' competition, but, you know, listening to the edit, I can't tell who won!"

The titular character is played by Sebastian Armesto, and director Barnaby Edwards says: "There's a special thrill to a new project. You're creating everything from scratch – the feel of the story, its pacing, its tone, its characters, its humour. You're the one setting the precedents, determining the rights and wrongs of this brave new world. That's simultaneously exciting and daunting.

"I'm delighted to say that Nigel was a huge help all along the way. From the outset, he told me

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"You're the boss' and he let me cast and direct and sound design everything as I wanted to – but he was a wonderful sounding board and always happy to offer an insightful suggestion when I was hovering between possibilities.

"In terms of casting I wanted actors who would 'get' the brilliance of Nigel's scripts: their humour, their pathos, their period quirkiness. I knew I wanted Nigel as the icy Henry Davenant Hythe and he suggested Sophie Thompson (with whom I'd always wanted to work) for the eccentric Phyllis, so I based the rest of the casting on those two roles. I often do this as it helps give an audio drama a unified – and unique – tone. There are plenty of great actors out there, but it's working out how they'll operate

in combination with each other that's the tricky part of casting.

"Anyway, that's why there are lots of other actors who, regardless of their long and successful careers in TV, film and theatre, also happened to have starred in hit 1980s 'alternative comedy' TV shows: Tim McInnerny, Celia Imrie, Siobhan Redmond, Christopher Ryan, Annette Badland and so on. For the younger cast members, I sought out similarly fresh and quick-witted minds with immaculate

"It was great fun, and I think the end result is rather special. It's very colourful, vivid and funny, and a little bit outrageous. There's also a magical **The Box of Delights** quality to it. It's such a strong idea it has the potential to go even further. It could be a TV series or a film! There is certainly scope for a second series. So I hope this is just the beginning, and having developed such a good working relationship with Nigel, it would be nice to keep going!" Nigel



Above (l-r): Nigel Planer, Sophie Thompson, and Tim McInnerny

comic timing, foremost among them the gloriously mercurial Sebastian Armesto who turns in a superb central performance as our reluctant time-traveller. I've known Seb for nearly two decades – before we worked together on **Doctor Who** TV episode *Bad Wolf* in 2005 – and it was his voice I heard in my head as I first read the scripts.

"I know one shouldn't have favourites, but this cast were really special. I can rarely remember enjoying a recording more. And I'm delighted to say that this spirit of fun has translated into the finished drama – the comedy and inventiveness of the cast effortlessly carry us through this extraordinary time-hopping rollercoaster of an adventure. Here's hoping we do a sequel!"

Jeremiah Bourne in Time is a four-hour release, and Jonny adds:

concludes: "I'm really hoping people will like it – I've already worked out a storyline for series two. It won't necessarily be set in 1910 like the first series; there are lots of other areas to explore. I'm walking through Blackfriars right now, which is where Jeremiah lives.

"The history comes up at you from everywhere. Some of these roads have been here for hundreds of years. There are bits of the city, still visible now, that are over a thousand years old – a wall here, a stone there. Blackfriars Bridge, for instance, is over 250 years old. The traffic I'm hearing today, would disappear, as I drift to, say, 400 years ago, and I can hear horses and carriages and street vendors' calls. We could go to the 18th century, the 16th, the 15th... back to Roman times. There are so many opportunities." **VORTEX**