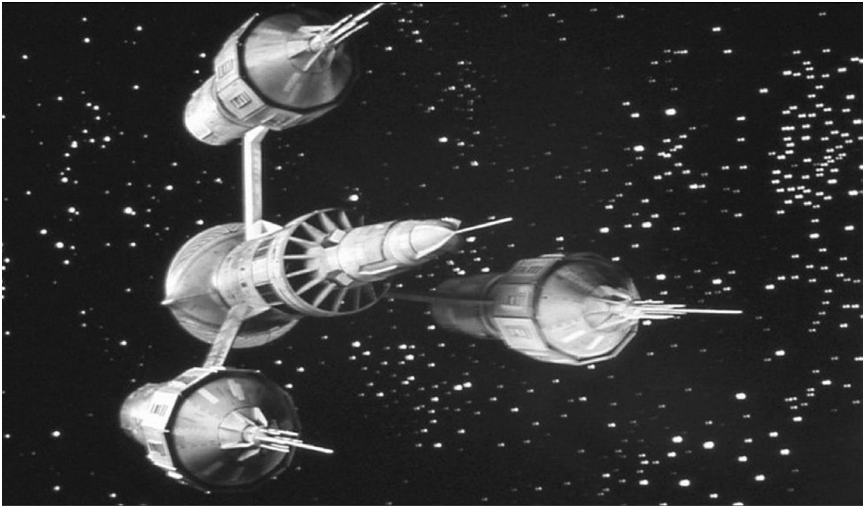


Blake's 7:
*An Oral History of the classic
UK sci-fi Series*



By
Joe Nazzaro



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Blake's 7: An Oral History

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Chapter I:

Staging a Rebellion

Blake's 7, the popular BBC science fiction action-adventure series, was the brainchild of Terry Nation. A prolific scriptwriter, best known for creating the Daleks in *Doctor Who*, Nation's numerous credits included *The Champions*, *The Saint*, *Department S*, *The Avengers* and *The Persuaders* before creating the post-apocalyptic drama *Survivors* in the mid-seventies. Although *Survivors* would ultimately run for three seasons, Nation moved on by the end of season one, having butted heads repeatedly with the show's producer, Terence Dudley, who had a very different idea in mind for the series.

His *Survivors* departure notwithstanding, Nation was invited to submit proposals for other series. As the writer is fond of relating, he walked into the BBC with the idea for a science fiction series based on the notion of 'The Dirty Dozen in Space' and walked out with an order to write 13 episodes of *Blake's 7*...

Terry Nation (Writer/creator): The criminal element was very important, but I said to my wife, 'I think I've got myself into deep trouble; they like the idea!' I actually remember the phrase; I said, 'I've sold another show to the BBC-goodbye again!' because what it means when you've sold a show is you've committed to a long period of time.

That period became even longer when Ronnie Marsh, who was Head of Drama at that particular time, and bought the idea, called my agent and said, 'Yes, we will do the series if Terry writes them all; all 13 hours of it!' I very blindly said- and this is born out of ego and super confidence- 'Yeah, I'll do them all.' So I now was committed to 13 hours, and that's when I said goodbye to my wife, and settled down to write them.

The first few scripts came fairly quickly, because they kind of grow as you enlarge things. There were mistakes in the early episodes

that had I had them to do over; I guess Columbus could say the same thing; I mean, he made a few wrong steering points until he got to where he was looking for. During that 13-week period, I ran out of ideas entirely. I'd sit there or walk around for days saying, 'There are no more ideas; that's it, I've shot it all, and they're gone!' but then something comes up, you get an opening scene, and you get the feeling that there's something there.

Armed with his 'Dirty Dozen' idea and a 13-episode order, Nation started assembling his cast of characters. The initial group included 'Rog' Blake, Vila Restal, Jenna Stannis, Arco Trent, Olag Gan, Kerr Avon, Brell Klein and Tone Selman, the latter two characters to be introduced in later episodes.

Nation: With Blake, I wanted a good, straight hero, although later, when it was probably too late, Blake started taking on a kind of neurosis. There was a craziness about what he was trying to do, and that would have been better. I wish I got that earlier on, but in a funny way, from where I began, I had to have him started as a kind of wiped out, drugged-out idiot, who slowly became aware of what the situation was, and grew angrier and angrier. Had I followed that other course, I could have made him work earlier, but I didn't see it in time. I kept on writing Erroll Flynn, and that didn't work. It was my fault; if he didn't work; indeed, anything in that show that didn't work was my fault. You can't evade that responsibility, so I take it all.

From Avon's point of view, I wanted this apparently heartless, emotionless character, who had a mind like a machine; not a million miles away from a Dalek in the sense that he really thought with absolute tunnel vision, and was dedicated to that. You wouldn't want him as a friend, and yet somewhere within, there had to be something else; maybe there was a good guy in there as well.

Vila would be the light comic relief. He also had the skills of a thief; in fact, I'd like to have had him have some sort of hand-conjuring skills that he could bring a penny out from between his fingers. He was the comedy relief of our situation.

I knew very clearly about Gan, the big guy, who was the enormous physical presence, with great physical strength, but kind of the gentle baby of the piece, based a little, I suppose, on Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*. The first of the girls was the real hard broad with the heart of gold, Jenna. Cally was going to be the icy cold, slightly weird one. We had a big fight about her, because I wanted her to have contact lenses, and she would go into a trance-like situation, where we would change the lenses on her eyes. She was from another race and another people, and I wanted to make her different.

Those are broad terms; the key words that I had to say to myself. I now had to make them less corny, and enlarge on them, giving them other dimensions, but those were the broad keys that I started out with. Essentially, what you're looking for is an admix of people that conflict with one another, but also cooperate with one another.

I suppose the one that had the least thought but should have had the most was Blake himself. I kind of figured, here we had the heroic idealistic guy, and that should have been easy to write. He was supposed to be swashbuckling and dashing, and all of those things, and I never found it; I never really gave him a chance. I recognize now that it is very much tougher to write a good hero than it is to write a good villain; I wrote wonderful villains throughout the piece.

Although Nation had pitched the series as ‘the Dirty Dozen in space,’ it wasn’t long before that concept began to give way to another well-known group of historical antiheroes and then something else entirely...

Nation: I thought by the time I had the makings of a space series, any story I wanted to do could now fit in. I had a group of renegades, and I could do an adventure every week, where they got involved with something. I didn’t have anything else at that point other than they were being pursued, but it’s no good having something as amorphous as the Federation; you have to give the Federation face and arms and legs and a body. That’s the only way you can see them.

You can't just talk about the Federation, so I had Travis and Servalan kind of representing them.

Once I had my pursuit set up, I had my heavies going and my conflict going on within the ship, so every week, you would only need an idea like 'We've got to get to Alpha Centauri because...' so it actually should have worked very easily from then on. You should be able to do a plot every week without too much trouble.

The trouble was that the characters kept growing and enlarging on themselves, and they started taking on newer dimensions; almost intellectual and on occasion, moral dimensions, so that screwed things up a little bit. What set out to be a good, old-fashioned rousing adventure yarn started turning into something quite different.

If you grew up when I did, it was simple to read stories about Robin Hood, where Robin was the good guy and Prince John was the bad guy; very simple: Prince John was a wicked fellow, while Robin Hood stole from the rich to give to the poor.

Okay, so the world has gone on, and now there are Arab terrorists, who believe they are the patriots of their country. There is the IRA; there are bodies all over the world that claim to be not terrorists, but honorable patriots of their country, doing what they have to for their country. Suddenly my little show is no longer Robin Hood. We were terrorists. We were actually fighting against the organized form of government, so new dimensions kept appearing. With these new dimensions appearing, new thoughts were coming into my mind, so that's how that part of the show developed.

The producer of *Blake's 7* was David Maloney, who had been on location directing the *Doctor Who* story 'The Talons of Weng Chiang' when he was offered the opportunity to produce the BBC's new science fiction series. Maloney's *Doctor Who* experience made him the perfect choice to produce a modestly-budgeted BBC science fiction series.

David Maloney (Producer): We had been shooting in an old Victorian house in Twickenham; Robert Holmes had created a sort

of Sherlock Holmes character for Tom Baker in that six-part story. He also created the part of a 'Watson' for Trevor Baxter who played that part, and I think that was the character's house, in Twickenham.

It was while we were on location there that I got a message from the Head of the Series department, asking if I'd be willing to see him, and would I like to produce this low-budget series that he wanted to do with Terry Nation, called *Blake's 7*? He knew my work, so it was an invitation and a challenge to do something I hadn't done before, which was to produce a new series. He didn't have any scripts yet; well, I think he had one.

I honestly can't remember how far Terry had mapped it out at that point, but not very far. He had a good situation and it started well, but I don't think he had developed it through at the time, particularly to the end of the first series. We just took off, and made it up as we went along. We had conferences, and we saw what was working and what wasn't working, and that's how it continued. Chris Boucher will tell you that the concept of a second series was done by Terry or it might have been done in conjunction with Chris, but certainly by the end of the third series, Terry had gone to America and Chris did the concept on his own; obviously under license from Terry, but Chris was behind the developing storyline and Chris and I worked on it together.

With Nation writing all 13 first-season episodes himself, he needed a script editor to polish each incoming script and making sure they were ready to shoot. Maloney enlisted fellow *Doctor Who* alumnus Chris Boucher to act as script editor. A freelancer for such shows as *Braden's Week*, *Dave Allen at Large* and *That's Life*, Boucher was recommended to Maloney by former *Doctor Who* script editor Robert Holmes.

Chris Boucher (Writer/Script editor): What basically happened is David went to Bob Holmes, who told me that the last thing he wanted to do was work with Terry Nation! He hadn't got on well with Terry while he was doing *Doctor Who*; he hated the Daleks and

thought they were an abominable idea, and he also resented Terry a little bit. I can't imagine that he'd ever fallen out with Terry, because Terry is a nice man and smooth as Caffrey's, but Bob had done *Doctor Who* and he really didn't want to do it anymore. He wanted to move on to something different.

David was going into producing for the first time, and I think it quite appealed to him. I had done a couple of *Doctor Who*'s by then, and Bob knew I was looking to leave my proper job, which I hated, and wanted to get into something more interesting, so he suggested me to David, so that was how I got the job.

I went along in my business suit to meet David, and as far as I can remember, he thought the suit was highly amusing. It wasn't an interview as such; more of a 'Are we going to hate each other or not?' that old phrase they used to use at the BBC, 'clash of personalities' when people couldn't work together. We were in the East Tower at Television Centre, and it was amazing for me to be working there, because you'd go through the car park and you'd stumble across [film critic] Barry Norman, and I remember seeing [journalist] John Pilger in his safari suit; I was amazed by the people you would run across.

Looking back, it was the golden time. I knew very little. I knew how to write, but that was it, so it was all learning, it was all novelty, it was all exciting, and it was all fun. I've worked with some nice producers, and I've worked with some bastards, but of the nice producers, David was certainly in the front running. It was a golden time, and I loved it.

When David asked me if I fancied the job, he gave me a couple of Terry's first drafts, and at the time, I didn't know that Terry only did first drafts. They were on that lovely yellow paper that Terry used, and I enjoyed them a lot. I didn't know what was involved; all I knew in my innocence was that I could do it. Terry was a consummate professional, and what he had to do was 13, 50-minute episodes, and that's what concerned him. He was interested- quite rightly- in making sure there were 13 episodes with his name on it,

and he said to me on one occasion, that *Blake's 7* was going to be his pension, so that was perfectly reasonable.

Having said that, I suspect Terry was a lot more hurt about the whole thing, a lot angrier than I understood at the time. I would certainly understand it better now, but he did on one occasion say, did we want rewrites or did we want the next episode? We naturally said we wanted the next episode, so that left me with the rewrites. Terry came up with the characters, and with 13 good stories, but he didn't come up with the dialogue. He's not a good dialogue writer, and I don't know if he would have argued that with me, although he might. But I was obviously the script editor, so David went to discuss developments with Terry. Terry had a county seat, so David went down for dinner and stayed for the weekend. Terry was a rich and successful player, and Frank Maher once told me that when he was working on *The Baron*, Terry was writing on the lot, and Frank was the stunt coordinator, he said Terry had an office on the lot. He said, 'We were waiting for the pages, and people would walk past the office and Terry would work with the door open, and he'd say, 'Come in and have a drink!' He'd have a bottle of white wine there, and he'd still be typing, and we'd still be waiting for the pages to come, and people would be in there chatting, and Terry would still be working, and then the pages would come off- and they'd be total crap! At the time, I was more than happy to be working and making things work that weren't working. It didn't bother me, and it still doesn't, strangely enough.

I remember when David came back from an early screening of *Star Wars* and he was white. He sat down in the office and said, 'We're finished! There's no way we can make the series now!' I was all bright-eyed and bushy tailed and said, 'Don't worry, we can find our way around it!'

Maloney: In later series, we commissioned several writers at the same time, but of course in the first series, we had to wait for Terry to lay each 'egg!' We were always waiting for Terry to bring a new script in, and then revising it and then moving on, but he was a good