

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The Falls and Rise of Sherlock Holmes

BY Mark Shanahan



Sherlock Holmes had been murdered, and there was no question as to whodunnit. The culprit was none other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself.

By 1893, the author had grown so weary of his literary creation's fame that he decided to rid himself of Sherlock Holmes once and for all and focus on more high-minded writing projects.

"He takes my mind from better things," Doyle complained to his mother. And so, the author concocted "The Final Problem," published in the December issue of the Strand Magazine. Within that short story, Doyle sent Sherlock Holmes and his nemesis Professor Moriarty hurtling over the Reichenbach Falls, plunging both to certain doom. "Killed Sherlock Holmes," Doyle noted in his diary without fanfare. However, the public reaction to Sherlock's demise was unlike anything Doyle

could have expected. Hate mail poured in. Readers begged him to reconsider. "Keep Holmes Alive" campaigns thrived as fictional obituaries were written in newspapers across the globe. The Strand barely survived the outrage, with 20,000 readers canceling their subscriptions. It is said the young men in the City wore black armbands to mourn the detective.

But Doyle held fast, assuming the outrage would subside. "He lies at the foot of Reichenbach Falls," he maintained. "And there he shall stay." The author had moved on from 221B Baker Street and he expected his readership to, as well. There would be no more Holmes or Moriarty, no more Inspector Lestrade or Mrs. Hudson. And, of course, without Holmes, there would be no more John Watson.

In many ways, readers were as much achingly deprived of Watson as of Holmes. As the other half of literature's most famous duo, Dr. John H. Watson had always been a perfect surrogate for the reader. Nearly all of Doyle's Holmes adventures were told from Watson's point of view. Stalwart, loyal and fearless, Watson brought a humanity



to the Holmes tales which offset the detective's cold reliance on facts. Holmes himself knew the value of their friendship, once exclaiming, "Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age!"



The partnership was a perfect study in contrasts. Whereas Holmes was calculating and exact, Watson could often be romantic and headstrong. Though he may not have possessed Holmes' genius for observation and deduction, Watson routinely marveled at Holmes' astounding abilities with admiration. Holmes recognized Watson's talents in return. "It may be that you are not yourself

luminous," Holmes once remarked. "But you are a conductor of light." In other words, "I couldn't do it without you, old buddy."

When Doyle sent Holmes over the Reichenbach Falls, Watson was as heartbroken as any fan. He eulogized his friend as "the best and the wisest man whom I have ever known." It had seemed that the duo's adventures had come to an abrupt end. But if only the good doctor had learned to be a little more observant, he may have deduced that the case was not quite closed just yet.

After all, no body had ever been found. Had Conan Doyle given himself a convenient out with Holmes' "offstage death?"

Try as he might, Doyle could not shake the fans' determination for more Holmes stories. In 1902, he revisited the character in *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*, set in a time before the character's death. But eventually (and with the offer of a great deal of money from his publisher), Doyle relented. "Very well," he scribbled on a postcard to his agent. And just like that, Holmes returned to life in 1903's "The Adventure Of the Empty House." Readership was thrilled. So was Watson, who was so astonished that he fainted when he first saw Holmes back from the grave.

Doyle revealed, somewhat improbably and with no apology, that Holmes had faked his death and had spent several years traveling the world incognito, fighting Moriarty's gang. But now



Photo by Lynn Lane

he was back home in London, back at Baker Street, and once more Watson was at his side.

Holmes had defeated death at the hands of his own creator. In a real sense, this victory proved he could survive any challenge. Adapted in every conceivable medium and with no end in sight, the detective has, much to his originator's chagrin, arguably become the most famous character in literature. Holmes' adventures continued for the rest of Doyle's writing career and onwards, through the many further iterations and adaptations the character has undergone in print, on screen and on stage.

Happily, Holmes has long been a recurring fixture at the Alley Theatre. Audiences have come to expect a grand adventure from any play featuring "The World's Foremost

Consulting Detective." Jeffrey Hatcher's wonderful new offering, *Holmes and Watson*, examines the heart of this enduring friendship during those years Holmes went missing following his "death." Was there more to Holmes' disappearance than even Doyle was willing to divulge? Hatcher begs us to consider just how far the famous duo might go for each other and how well anyone, even the closest of allies, can ever truly know one another.

One thing is for certain, though. The deep friendship Doyle invented over a hundred and thirty years ago is as strong as ever. And there is no mystery as to whether it will endure. For fans of *Holmes and Watson*, it's elementary.