

SHERLOCK HOLMES ON THE STAGE

by

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
I. WILLIAM GILLETTE AND <u>SHERLOCK HOLMES</u>	3
II. CONAN DOYLE'S SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAYS	23
III. MORE SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAYS	30
IV. THE MUSICAL SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAYS	38
CONCLUSION	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY	46

INTRODUCTION

In 1887 Conan Doyle created his fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes.¹ Six years later, Doyle attempted to write the sleuth out of existence,² but popular demand forced the novelist to revive his creation in 1903.³ During the ten-year period in which no stories were being written, the public was eager for new Holmes adventures in any form. Thus, the proper climate was created for the detective's first stage appearance. This first Holmes drama, Sherlock Holmes by William Gillette, began a succession of plays which spanned more than half of the twentieth century.

In the following pages the writing of the Gillette melodrama and the method by which the playwright transferred Doyle's detective to the stage will be detailed. The process is significant because Gillette's play became the prototype for all subsequent dramas about the sleuth; later plays were as much retellings or continuations of Gillette's work as they were dramatizations of Doyle's stories.

¹William S. Baring-Gould, ed., The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, by Arthur Conan Doyle (2 vols.; New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1967), I, 2. (Hereinafter all references to the introductory notes in this book will be cited as follows: Baring-Gould, Annotated. All references to Sherlock Holmes stories are also from this book and will be cited by author's name and story title; for example: Doyle, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band.")

²Ibid., I, 15.

³Ibid., I, 16.

The stage histories and critical reactions to each of the later professional productions about Sherlock Holmes will then be traced. Finally, an attempt will be made to indicate the fluctuations of Sherlock's popularity on the stage.

CHAPTER I

WILLIAM GILLETTE AND SHERLOCK HOLMES

William Gillette was an American actor who wrote starring roles for himself and then directed his own performances. On October 23, 1899, he opened in his melodrama, Sherlock Holmes, at the Star Theatre, in Buffalo, New York.¹ This play, called "the first and foremost of detective dramas,"² was to enjoy thirty years of stage success; it "continued to thrill many audiences long after they must have familiarized themselves with the story."³

Although Gillette's play was a stage "first," Doyle had written his own dramatization in 1897, four years after he had temporarily ended the Holmes stories. Needing money to pay for a new house and believing that "Holmes on the stage might score a great hit,"⁴ he completed a script and sent it to the British actor-manager, Beerbohm Tree.

¹P. M. Stone, "William Gillette's Stage Career," Baker Street Journal, XII, N.S. (March, 1962), 16.

²"'Sherlock Holmes,' The Prince of Detective Plays," Current Literature, January, 1911, p. 73.

³Ibid.

⁴John Dickson Carr, The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), p. 107.

Tree liked the play, but wanted the starring role tailored to his own abilities. Doyle listened to the actor's suggestions, and then wrote gloomily of his

. . . grave doubts . . . about putting Holmes on the stage at all--it is drawing attention to my weaker work which has unduly obscured my better--but, rather than re-write it on lines that would make a different Holmes from my Holmes, I would without the slightest pang put it back in the drawer. I daresay that will be the end of it, and probably the best one.⁵

Soon afterward, however, Doyle's literary agent learned that the American producer, Charles Frohman, was interested in the property and sent Frohman a copy of the play.⁶ Seeing potential in what he read, Frohman obtained the rights to the drama while in London in 1899,⁷ and then turned the play over to William Gillette. After his initial reading, the actor was "eager to play the part."⁸ As one observer noted,

There can be little doubt that it was the imperturbable personality of Sherlock Holmes which attracted Gillette to his possibilities as a stage character. The detective . . . exactly suited Gillette's style of acting.⁹

Despite his enthusiasm, Gillette wanted to revise the script. Doyle, who had become bored with both Holmes and the play, agreed to let the actor-playwright do what he wanted.¹⁰

⁵Conan Doyle, quoted in Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 107.

⁶Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 107.

⁷Isaac F. Marcossan and Daniel Frohman, Charles Frohman: Manager and Man (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1916), pp. 196-97.

⁸Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 117.

⁹Margaret G. Mayorga, A Short History of the American Drama (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1932), p. 228.

¹⁰Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 117.

After hearing from Doyle, Gillette read for the first time the twenty-six published Holmes stories.¹¹ The character he found there was well-developed, with many traits Gillette could transfer directly to the stage. Doyle described the sleuth as

. . . rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor. . . . His thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were invariably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals.¹²

Gillette's description of Holmes was more succinct: in his script the detective was a "Tall slim man in a long coat--soft hat--smooth face."¹³

The predominant aspect of Doyle's creation was the detective's ability to solve crimes using his powers of observation and his knowledge of criminology.¹⁴ Holmes augmented these traits with his skill at disguise. Concerning the latter, once when Holmes posed as a clergyman, Doyle wrote:

It was not merely that Holmes had changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part that he assumed. The stage lost a fine actor, even as science lost an acute reasoner, when he became a specialist in crime.¹⁵

¹¹Baring-Gould, Annotated, I, 27.

¹²Doyle, "A Study in Scarlet," I, 153.

¹³William Gillette, Sherlock Holmes, in Famous Plays of Crime and Detection, ed. by Van H. Cartmell and Bennett Cerf (Philadelphia: The Blakiston Co., 1946), I.i.16.

¹⁴Doyle, "A Study in Scarlet," I, 156.

¹⁵Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," I, 361-62.

Gillette retained Holmes's skill at detection. In the play, the detective still utilized his knowledge of crime and his powers of reasoning and observation. Likewise, he maintained the ability to disguise himself.¹⁶

The playwright carefully preserved the vices of Doyle's character. In the stories Sherlock was both a pipe smoker¹⁷ and a narcotics addict.¹⁸ Gillette not only pictured Holmes's dependency on morphine and cocaine but also portrayed his efforts to get his friends to join him.¹⁹ Concerning Holmes's smoking, the actor had him use both a cigar and a pipe,²⁰ adding the cigar because it was Gillette's trademark.²¹

While retaining the vices, Gillette changed another of Holmes's more striking elements. In the stories the detective was a confirmed misogynist, who "disliked and distrusted the [female] sex."²² The American author was aware of the fictional character's aversion to

¹⁶Gillette, Sherlock Holmes, IV.1.64.

¹⁷Doyle, "The Gloria Scott," I, 109.

¹⁸Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," I, 347.

¹⁹Gillette, Sherlock Holmes, II.ii.36.

²⁰According to Baring-Gould, Annotated, I, 107-08, the pipe which Gillette used once the play was in production had a curved stem. Although Holmes often smoked a pipe in the stories, it was never one with a curved stem. Nevertheless, Gillette had trouble saying his lines with a straight-stemmed pipe; therefore, he decided upon the curved one, which he apparently found easier to use on stage. It is a direct outgrowth of Gillette's characterization that Holmes is most often pictured smoking such a pipe.

²¹Clayton Hamilton, "The Final Episode of Sherlock Holmes," Theatre, January, 1930, p. 36.

²²Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," I, 346.

women, but he felt that the play needed some romance. Consequently, he sent this telegram to Doyle: "May I marry Holmes?" Doyle, who was then preoccupied with the problems of the Boer War, replied, "You may marry or murder or do what you like with him."²³ After receiving this carte-blanche answer, the American actor supplied romance at the final curtain.

The plot to which he added this love interest was based on three of Doyle's stories: "A Study in Scarlet," "A Scandal in Bohemia," and "The Final Problem." Gillette's "exciting script" concerns "one of the most banal quests in the . . . theatre," the struggle between the detective and "the bad guy to get hold of 'the papers.'"²⁴ The four-act play shows how Holmes continuously outwits a group of villains led by Professor Moriarty, and prevents the heroine, Alice Faulkner, from becoming the pawn of blackmailers. Shifting from Holmes's apartment at Baker Street to Moriarty's underground hideout and the Stepney gas chamber, the drama moves swiftly toward its concluding scene: the former misogynist in the arms of his new love, Alice.

Aside from the skillful use of the original stories, Gillette's revision of Doyle's playscript represented such extensive rewriting that nothing is known about the first version. The show bore the distinct mark of Gillette's craftsmanship. As one observer noted,

In a detailed recital of the incidents of the play, . . . a reader of the book would recognize many of Dr. Doyle's choicest inventions, yet, except for its principal personage, . . . the play is more surely Gillette's than Doyle's. The

²³ Arthur Conan Doyle, Memories and Adventures (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1924), p. 97.

²⁴ Brooks Atkinson, Broadway (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 83.

deftness of construction, the novel use of ancient device, the defiance of established rules of play manufacture, the odd effects of contrast, the lightness and fantasy of it all, are due to the ingenuity and skill of that least conventional of our playwrights.²⁵

After completing the "revision" in the summer of 1899, Gillette still had to secure final approval from Conan Doyle. Gillette wired the Britisher that he would present the finished copy personally and assured Doyle that the play would be a "colossal success" and would make their fortunes.²⁶

Upon receiving Gillette's optimistic telegram, the novelist eagerly awaited the American's arrival. The two finally met at a train depot outside of London. John Dickson Carr recounts the initial meeting thus:

[Out of the train] . . . in a long grey cape, stepped the living image of Sherlock Holmes. . . .

The clear-cut features, the deep-set eyes, looked out under a deerstalker cap; even Gillette's age, the middle forties, was right. Conan Doyle . . . contemplated him open-mouthed.²⁷

Not only was Doyle pleasantly surprised at Gillette's appearance, but he was also enthusiastic about the drama. Although the original script had been revised out of existence, Doyle termed Gillette's version a "fine play," adding that "Two of his acts are simply grand!"²⁸

²⁵Edward A. Dithmar, "Two Successful Plays," Harper's Weekly, November 25, 1899, p. 1183.

²⁶Carr, Life of Doyle, pp. 117-18.

²⁷Ibid., p. 117.

²⁸Ibid., p. 118.

(Conan Doyle later remarked that his enjoyment of the play was greatly enhanced by the expected "pecuniary result.")²⁹

After securing final approval, Gillette returned to America and prepared the play for Charles Frohman. When the drama opened in Buffalo, the New York Times noted its immediate success:

William Gillette plays with great attention to detail the title rôle. Together with a carefully selected company . . . , he scored a decided success, having the rapt attention of a large and critical audience from the opening to the close. The company was called before the curtain at the end of each act.³⁰

Following the tryout, the melodrama moved to the Garrick Theatre in New York on November 6, 1899, where it received "an unmistakable demonstration of approval"³¹ from its audiences.

The New York critics found the play entertaining. Edward A. Dithmar, writing in Harper's Weekly, claimed that he most enjoyed the "general deftness of its construction, the skill in which an involved and impossible story is set forth with a maximum of action and a minimum of talk." He praised the realism in the lighting and off-stage noises which made the performance "as close as possible to the facts of everyday life." Also impressive was Gillette's ability to deal tastefully with murder and blackmail. Dithmar explained that

The play deals almost wholly with crime and criminals and would be harsh and bitter stuff . . . for there is a very small portion of sentimental relief, and that counts for nothing, or next to nothing, until the last scene of the

²⁹Vincent Starrett, The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 115.

³⁰"'Sherlock Holmes' at Buffalo," New York Times, October 24, 1899, p. 5.

³¹"Dramatic and Musical," New York Times, November 7, 1899, p. 5.

last act. But Mr. Gillette's method, which it is easier to commend than to analyze, leaves the subject without a hint of gloom. . . . Even in a scene in the thugs' headquarters, underground, the action goes on buoyantly. One views the burglars, cutthroats, side-alley operators, and the executive criminals without horror, and with as little of the sense of being in bad company as one ever feels, under the influence of romance. . . .³²

Another critic noted the dimming of the lights, which was unusual for its day.³³ The reviewer remarked, "No more novel and effective device has ever been introduced in our theatre. . . ."³⁴

Humor was one of the show's most lauded aspects. Gillette, who never forgot that his play was often preposterous, allowed "a gleam of playful humor [to enter] its grimmest passages." One critic noted that the saving feature of his Holmes was the sleuth's pleasant disposition in the face of danger, a factor which separated Holmes and the play from other stage detectives, who took themselves too seriously.³⁵

The acting in the production, in general, was praised. As one writer commented, each role was played "in a moderate and lifelike way, and each is supplied with a profusion of little touches of 'business'

³²Dithmar, "Two Successful Plays," p. 1183.

³³According to Gilbert V. Hemsley, Jr., "A History of Stage Lighting in America: 1879-1917" (unpublished M.F.A. thesis, Yale University, 1960), p. 62, the standard practice of the period was to raise the curtain on a lighted stage, utilizing borderlights, striplights, and footlights.

³⁴Clayton Hamilton, "Plays: Homemade and Imported," Bookman, February, 1911, p. 601.

³⁵Edward A. Dithmar, "At the Play and With the Players," New York Times, November 12, 1899, p. 18.

which never produce the effect of fussiness or over-elaboration."³⁶ Gillette himself received mixed reactions to his portrayal. Some reviews were quite enthusiastic: "One critic hailed his work in the role as the 'almost perfect personification' of the immortal detective. . . ."³⁷ On the other hand, Edward A. Dithmar, while recognizing the strength of Gillette's personality and his popularity, criticized the actor for his "invariable delivery" and his lack of variety in expression. Although Gillette pleased the audience throughout most of the play, Dithmar remarked that "Mr. Gillette's manner in Holmes's serious moments--sentimental and otherwise--does not seem to perceptibly differ from his manner when he tells [his servant] to bring in the cabman."³⁸

Gillette fared well in the Tribune, while the show itself received its least favorable comments. William Winter, the Tribune's aging critic, deemed the actor "crisp in vocalism" and "sufficiently audacious and formidable to satisfy every reasonable requirement." The drama, however, was "trivial at the beginning and feeble at the end," and had "no lasting value, of any kind whatsoever."³⁹

Brooks Atkinson, who considered Winter a poor forecaster of stage success, wryly commented that Winter's prediction had the effect

³⁶Dithmar, "Two Successful Plays," p. 1183.

³⁷Walter Klinefelter, Sherlock Holmes in Portrait and Profile (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1963), p. 59.

³⁸Dithmar, "Two Successful Plays," p. 1183.

³⁹William Winter, "Sherlock Holmes," New York Tribune, November 7, 1899, p. 7.

of "ensuring [the play's] popular success."⁴⁰ The show enjoyed a run of 256 performances and then went on a lengthy American tour.⁴¹

After 200 performances on the road,⁴² Gillette took Sherlock Holmes to England, opening at the Shakespeare Theatre in Liverpool on September 2, 1901. The London premiere at the Lyceum Theatre came on September 6.⁴³

Gillette and others in the play had a problem being understood on opening night in London even though the American had carefully selected his British cast.⁴⁴ Consequently, the play was not well-received by the critics. The major complaint of the audience, that of not being able to hear Gillette, was described in The Times: "The rather turbulent gallery last night persistently begged Sherlock to speak up. The sacrilege of it!"⁴⁵

Critics also objected to the love interest supplied to the detective. The Times complained:

If Sherlock was bound to make his way into the theatre, we submit that he ought not to have fallen in love there. . . .

Yet, here, at the Lyceum, he has not only a heart, but a very susceptible one. He falls in love at first sight,

⁴⁰Atkinson, Broadway, p. 83.

⁴¹Burns Mantle and Garrison P. Sherwood, eds., The Best Plays of 1899-1909 (Philadelphia: The Blakiston Co., 1944), p. 354.

⁴²Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 148.

⁴³Stone, "William Gillette's Stage Career," p. 13.

⁴⁴Daniel Frohman, Memories of a Manager (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1911), p. 183.

⁴⁵"Sherlock Holmes," The Times (London), September 10, 1901, p. 4.

though to be sure he does somewhat redeem his character by expressing his passion in a stony glare.⁴⁶

Despite the poor reviews, the melodrama played until April⁴⁷ and proved profitable for its London backers, averaging £2,000 a week in receipts.⁴⁸ After closing in London, the company toured the provinces for two months before Gillette returned to America for engagements along the East Coast.⁴⁹

The next year, the play's producer, Charles Frohman, brought a rival company into court. Frohman had begun publicity on a revival of Sherlock Holmes, which was scheduled for the fall of 1902; however, shortly before the production opened, the Hopkins Amusement Company in Chicago advertised a play called Sherlock Holmes, Detective. The Chicago producer was attempting to lead people to believe that his play was the original. Charles Frohman immediately brought suit to restrain the Hopkins Company from advertising or producing the show under the name, Sherlock Holmes. Finally, on October 25, 1902, the matter was settled: an appellate court upheld a lower court decision in favor of the Frohman Company.⁵⁰ Soon after the ruling, which confirmed Gillette's

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷"Lyceum Theatre," The Times (London), November 23, 1901, p. 11.

⁴⁸Frohman, Memories of a Manager, p. 182.

⁴⁹H. Dennis Sherk, "William Gillette: His Life and Works" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1961), p. 90.

⁵⁰"Play Is an Infringement," New York Times, October 25, 1902, p. 7.

primacy as the detective, he appeared in twenty-eight performances of Sherlock Holmes at the Knickerbocker Theatre in New York.⁵¹

Sherlock Holmes, again featuring Gillette, was next revived on March 6, 1905, at the Empire Theatre in New York for fifty-six performances.⁵² On opening night a "packed house" greeted the author-actor.

The New York Times offered this reflection the following day:

That the play has lived through so many seasons is perhaps the best criterion of its worth and the popularity of its star in the title rôle of the famous detective. Last night Mr. Gillette gave his usual subtle performance.⁵³

A humorous sidelight to Gillette's career as Holmes occurred while the revival was running on Broadway. The actor wrote a one-act parody, The Harrowing Predicament of Sherlock Holmes, for a benefit at the Metropolitan Opera House on March 24, 1905.⁵⁴ He repeated the play at a fund-raising performance for the Actors' Society at the Criterion Theatre in New York on April 15.⁵⁵ The plot of the playlet was ludicrous, as can be seen from the following description:

The great man, clad in his celebrated dressing-gown is smoking his notorious pipe on the hearth-rug of his world-famous room in Baker-street when a young lady rushes in and begins an incoherent patter. Apparently she is in dire distress, but so intense is her excitement that she cannot tell a clear story or even sit still in order to collect herself. Darting hither and thither, she breaks Sherlock's

⁵¹Mantle and Sherwood, The Best Plays of 1899-1909, p. 354.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³"Gillette Revives Sherlock," New York Times, March 7, 1905, p. 9.

⁵⁴Sherk, "Gillette: Life and Works," p. 102.

⁵⁵"2,500 for Actors' Society," New York Times, April 15, 1905, p. 20.

celebrated violin, knocks over his tobacco jar (containing the shag, of which all the world has heard), and shivers his illustrious chemical retort to atoms. The impassive Sherlock still smokes in silence. Trying to resume her story, the lady becomes more incoherent than ever. Sherlock scribbles something on a scrap of paper, which he hands to his faithful page, Billy. The lady continues to gabble and Sherlock to smoke da capo. Then suddenly enter two men in uniform, introduced by Billy with the words, "It was the right asylum, Sir." Exit the lunatic lady between her captors, while Sherlock resumes his place on the hearth-rug and indulges in one of his favourite sub-cutaneous injections of morphia.⁵⁶

During the play, Holmes never utters a word.

Later in the year, the one-act made its first appearance in Britain where Gillette was unsuccessfully presenting his latest play, Clarice, at the Duke of York's Theatre. Critical reception of the show was "unkind"; the London reviewers again attacked Gillette's speech. In answer to his critics, Gillette added his one-act featuring a mute Holmes to the bill and retitled it The Painful Predicament of Sherlock Holmes. Although the British "enjoyed the joke," it was not enough to save Clarice.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the success of the spoof led Gillette to replace the faltering play with Sherlock Holmes, which was again "an immediate success." Even European royalty delighted in Gillette's production, as cast-member Charles Chaplin noted in the following anecdote:

During the engagement, Queen Alexandra saw the play, sitting with her in the Royal Box were the King of Greece and Prince Christian. The Prince was evidently explaining the play to the King, and during the most tense and silent moment, when

⁵⁶"The Theatres," The Times (London), October 4, 1905, p. 7.

⁵⁷Charles Chaplin, My Autobiography (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), pp. 88-89.

Holmes and I were alone on the stage, a booming voice with an accent resounded throughout the theatre: "Don't tell me! Don't tell me!"⁵⁸

The Times critic also enjoyed the play and praised it at some length:

This is a welcome revival. . . . We are, therefore, very much obliged to Mr. Gillette for taking care that we shall not forget our old friend and hero. The great man, we rejoice to note, has not turned a hair since we last had the pleasure of seeing him in London. He has precisely the same tired voice and the same cocaine-habit, the same weakness for saying "transpires" when he means "happens," and the same agility in turning his profile to the limelight. It is a triumph of permanence. Nor, so far as we can discover, have any alterations been made in the play itself. It is what it was--an excellent melodrama, with a rapid series of thrills and shocks for each scene, a minimum of sentiment, and a pair of deliciously absurd diplomatists in the last act, of whom we have always longed to see more. . . . The revival was received last night with uproarious applause.⁵⁹

Enthusiastic playgoers kept Sherlock Holmes running until the end of the season and helped to make up some of Gillette's losses on Clarice.

Following the London engagement, Gillette's appearances as Sherlock became infrequent. After a five year hiatus, he revived the play in 1910 and again in 1915-1916. The New York Times said then that it was still "a clever piece of stage carpentry with fewer cracks in the joints than the majority of revived melodramas develop." The audience for this presentation "found itself enjoying again the old thrills. . . . The very fiction of it all determines one to surrender one's reason at the outset and go in for an evening of complete enjoyment." Of the renewed combination of Gillette and Holmes, the Times

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 92.

⁵⁹"Duke of York's Theatre," The Times (London), October 18, 1905, p. 4.

felt that they were both "still as potent to entertain and to thrill, as in the days when both were several years younger." Gillette remained "the suave, resourceful, placid detective. . . . He might have left off playing the rôle Saturday night instead of four or five years ago as far as any perceptible change in his performance is concerned."⁶⁰

This same 1915-1916 revival was billed as Gillette's farewell tour as Sherlock Holmes. However, several more "farewell tours" followed. At Boston's Hollis Street Theatre in 1915, Gillette himself predicted:

There isn't any reason in the world why we can't do as well in this farewell business as any other country on the face of the globe. We have the farewellers and the people to say farewell to. If I can only keep it up I will be even with my competitors by Spring of 1922, and by the Winter of 1937 I will be well in the lead.⁶¹

He did, in fact, renew his portrayal next in 1922, but this revival was the briefest of all: only one performance was given at the Shubert Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut.⁶² Apparently, the tryout did not generate enough interest to warrant another Broadway engagement.

After this appearance, Sherlock Holmes was no longer considered a viable stage product. However, the Gillette script was again presented to New York theatregoers in 1928. But there was a significant difference: Gillette did not play Holmes. The familiar originator was replaced by Robert Warwick, an experienced actor.

⁶⁰"'Sherlock Holmes' Thrills As of Old," New York Times, October 12, 1915, p. 11.

⁶¹"Actor Says Farewell," New York Times, November 24, 1929, sec. 10, p. 2.

⁶²Sherk, "Gillette: Life and Works," p. 162.

The drama was "again crowned with success," although it ran only sixteen performances at the Cosmopolitan Theatre.⁶³ Audiences were pleased, despite the play's length. As one critic noted,

The principal trouble on opening night was that . . . the waits for setting up the very elaborate scenery kept the last curtain till nearly midnight. But even so, the audience--which included a number of very well-known persons not quite so young as they used to be, as well as a large number of younger persons who were more curious than interested when they sat down--seemed to be standing by extraordinarily well. Indeed, people kept on smiling and seemed not nearly so restless as New York audiences usually are in such circumstances.⁶⁴

The production curiously attempted to mix nostalgia and the Twenties. After each act, the orchestra played turn-of-the-century waltzes. Combined with such music was a "modern dress" approach in costuming: the women were "dressed in the very latest and most fascinating manner of up-to-date bobbed-haired queens of the underworld." Nevertheless, the main complaint was not the careless use of both old and new, but "Robert Warwick, [who] . . . was not quite William Gillette."⁶⁵

Although he did not appear as Holmes in 1928, Gillette waited less than two years to return to the stage. In 1929 he began his last

⁶³Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1927-28 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1929), pp. 513-14.

⁶⁴"'Sherlock Holmes' in Modern Dress," New York Times, February 21, 1928, p. 18.

⁶⁵Ibid.

farewell tour in Sherlock Holmes with a week in Boston, followed by forty-five performances at the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York.⁶⁶

Upon his return to the stage, Gillette was more acclaimed by the critics than when he originated the role. One reviewer saw him as having "stepped unchanged from a generation ago. . . . Mr. Gillette himself bridged the theatrical generations."⁶⁷ H. I. Brock, writing in the Times, explained why Gillette continued to be successful as Sherlock:

His recipe, therefore, throughout the entire operation from the sheet of white paper to the performance before the audience, has been the selection of materials of plot and character which gave his own personality maximum effect as a stage instrument.

That is why, for example Gillette and Sherlock Holmes are inseparable in the public mind of the generation which was contemporary to both. That is why every performance of Sherlock by Gillette was as exactly like every other performance as if they had been prints from the same etched plate.⁶⁸

The reviewers agreed that Gillette alone made the show a success. As one critic stated,

It was Mr. Gillette's acting creation, based upon so sure a premise of style, which carried on as a thing of permanence even in a theatre of changing tastes. Still quietly modulated, still under perfect command, it followed a technique of deliberation that deflowered bombast and made artifice credible. In a part that he has played thousands of times, he gave you a sense of the zest an actor has when he is

⁶⁶ Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1929-30 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1930), p. 446.

⁶⁷ Arthur Ruhl, "Sherlock Holmes Returns," New York Tribune, November 26, 1929, quoted in Yvonne Shafer, "A Sherlock Holmes of the Past: William Gillette's Later Years," Players, June-July, 1971, p.231.

⁶⁸ H. I. Brock, "Sherlock Holmes Returns to the Stage," New York Times, November 10, 1929, sec. 5, p. 14.

still exploring a role--even one so limited as that of Conan Doyle's omniscient sleuth.⁶⁹

Although Gillette garnered most of the praise, the play was deemed enjoyable. As a writer in Commonweal noted, the audience was bothered by occasional "antique moments," because stage conventions had altered since the melodrama premiered in 1899. Nevertheless, the dramatic situations still had "ample vitality to challenge any modern detective play."⁷⁰ Stewart Beach emphasized the effect of the dated show on the "modern" audiences of 1929:

To see William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes is to brush aside the years which have brought the theatre from the nineties to the dawn of a third decade of the Twentieth Century. . . . And while its showing is more in the nature of a memorial to Mr. Gillette than a production based upon any intrinsic merits which the play may possess, it is nevertheless an interesting experience to regard a melodrama of the late nineties in the light of our latest season. Inevitably, of course, there hangs about it a flavor of age which cannot be dispelled for present-day audiences. There are speeches which would have been omitted had the play been presented for the first time this year--there are certain bits of "theatricalism" which would likewise have been softened. Yet it is surprising how well the play wears. Though you go in somewhat reverent mood to pay homage to one of our finest actors, you remain to find a genuine interest in his play. . . .

It is Mr. Gillette's farewell appearance, and for that reason alone you will want to go. But beyond that, you will find his play something different from the usual fare. Something delightfully flavored with the impetuosity of an earlier day of the stage and at the same time fresh and entertaining.⁷¹

⁶⁹John Hutchens, "The World of Things Overdone: Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts Monthly, February, 1930, pp. 112-13.

⁷⁰Richard Dana Skinner, "Concerning Sherlock Holmes," Commonweal, December 18, 1929, p. 198.

⁷¹Stewart Beach, "The Editor Goes to the Play," Theatre, February, 1930, p. 68.

Critics were not alone in their praise of the drama. The opening-night audience demonstrated its enthusiasm:

You never heard such a storm of applause as quaked the walls of the New Amsterdam . . . when Mr. Gillette made his unforgettable entrance. . . . Throughout the play the applause was like the firing of heavy guns. In the big scene . . . in the gas chamber, . . . you would have thought the house was coming down. It was that way to the end at every important and significant climax. At other times one sensed the breathless silence that is accorded only the great of the theatre.⁷²

The success in New York extended into the next year, as the show made its final tour with Gillette. What was reported to be the old actor's last performance as Holmes came at the Nixon Theatre in Philadelphia on May 10, 1930. Following the play, there were even farewell festivities and speeches on the stage.⁷³ However, the unpredictable Gillette played the sleuth once more at the McCarter Theatre of Princeton University on May 12, 1930. The event was described by the New York Times in this way:

The house was packed to the last inch of standing room and the curtain calls were numerous at the end of every act. . . .

The occasion passed quietly and without tears or emotional scenes. Between the third and the fourth act the star was called on for a curtain speech and responded in a jocular vein.

"I am sorry there is so much work still to be done," he said, apparently referring to the remaining fourth act, "but I am very glad, indeed to come and talk to you. Speaking as Sherlock, of course, I couldn't get along at all without your sympathy. In such circumstances I generally

⁷²Edwin C. Hill, "William Gillette Returns," New York Sun, November 26, 1929, quoted in Shafer, "A Sherlock Holmes of the Past," p. 230.

⁷³"William Gillette Ends Stage Career," New York Times, May 11, 1930, p. 25.

wish people a Merry Christmas, so I am wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

"The time has come to say farewell. This is the farewell season. It is a grand feeling, except for the fact that you have to say farewell. The shorter we make it, the better. I am glad to say personally to you a farewell, good luck and Merry Christmas."⁷⁴

Although he later came out of retirement to play other roles, Gillette never again portrayed the sleuth. After more than thirty years and 4,400 performances,⁷⁵ Gillette's "farewell" as Sherlock was final.

⁷⁴"Gillette Is Jocular at Final Performance," New York Times, May 13, 1930, p. 27.

⁷⁵Stone, "William Gillette's Stage Career," p. 19.

CHAPTER II

CONAN DOYLE'S SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAYS

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes were also dramatized by Conan Doyle himself. As already noted, it was Doyle's first play, Sherlock Holmes, which was "revised" by Gillette into the durable classic.

Ten years later the novelist adapted his story about a murderous snake, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," into a full-length play. Again in need of money, Doyle wrote his dramatization, The Speckled Band, in 1910 in an attempt to recoup the losses of his unsuccessful non-Holmes play, The House of Temperly.¹ The plot, based only in part on the story, was described by the New York Times thus:

The story of The Speckled Band is about the efforts of an Anglo-Indian surgeon, Dr. Rylott, to obtain a legacy left to his stepdaughters. The play opens with an inquest of the death of one of the girls, who had died suddenly in her bedroom. Enid, the surviving sister, when suspicion begins to fall upon Dr. Rylott, calls upon Sherlock Holmes to ask his aid in protecting her against a tragedy such as her sister met. Holmes takes up the case, and the rest of the play is devoted to a physical and intellectual conflict between the detective and the murderer, which results in a victory for the former.²

¹Baring-Gould, Annotated, I, 29.

²"Of Interest to First Nighters," New York Times, November 20, 1910, sec. 6, p. 1.

The drama opened at the Adelphi Theatre on June 4, 1910, less than a month after Temperly failed in the same theatre.³ The cast was headed by two experienced British actors: H. A. Saintsbury, who had been playing Holmes in British touring productions of Gillette's original play, and Lyn Harding, who played the murderous Rylott.

Despite the presence of Saintsbury and Harding, much of the public attention centered around the title character, a snake. Contrary to what Doyle and the producers expected, the reptile was not well-received by the critics. Conan Doyle explained the situation in the following way:

We had a fine rock boa to play the title-rôle, a snake which was the pride of my heart, so one can imagine my disgust when one critic ended his disparaging review with the words, "The crisis of the play was produced by the appearance of a palpably artificial serpent." I was inclined to offer him a goodly sum if he would undertake to go to bed with it. We had several snakes at different times, but they were none of them born actors and they were all inclined either to hang down from the hole in the wall like inanimate bell-pulls, or else to turn back through the hole and get even with the stage carpenter who pinched their tails in order to make them more lively. Finally, we used artificial snakes and every one, including the stage carpenter, agreed that it was more satisfactory.⁴

The substitute snakes were "ingeniously jointed," and were operated with invisible threads, which allowed the reptiles to move with "hideous realism."⁵

³Baring-Gould, Annotated, I, 29.

⁴Arthur Conan Doyle, quoted in Starrett, Private Life, p. 118.

⁵Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 205.

Despite the problems with the snake, the play was favorably received by both audiences and critics. First-nighters voiced their approval with "sympathetic gasps and thrills."⁶ Following the performance, Doyle himself was called before the curtain, where he was greeted with "general cheering."⁷ The reviewers termed The Speckled Band "the best melodrama of the season"⁸ and praised the acting of Saintsbury and Harding. The Times claimed the former was "born to play Sherlock Holmes--always imperturbable, glib, and, as the French say, 'somebody,' He . . . took you in . . . completely." On the other hand, Harding's Rylott was "a repulsive ruffian without a redeeming feature, an ogre in fact, but an ogre with an individuality of his own. It was a powerful piece of acting that thrilled and almost frightened the house,"⁹ as he "swept a coldly critical London audience off its feet."¹⁰

After its enthusiastic reception, the play settled down for an initial run of 169 performances at the Adelphi and Globe theatres. Less than three months after the premiere, two touring companies were on the road in England, and a New York production was being planned.¹¹

⁶Clayton Hamilton, "Significant Plays of the Recent London Season," Bookman, October, 1910, p. 147.

⁷"Adelphi Theatre," The Times (London), June 6, 1910, p. 12.

⁸Hamilton, "Significant Plays," p. 147.

⁹"Adelphi Theatre," p. 12.

¹⁰Helen Ten Broeck, "Lyn Harding: A Versatile Player," Theatre, June, 1916, p. 352.

¹¹Carr, Life of Doyle, p. 203.

Despite this success, Doyle abandoned playwriting. His reason was not that it was boring or unprofitable: on the contrary, he found it so interesting and absorbing that it kept his mind from the "deeper things in life."¹²

While Doyle was making his decision, the first American production of The Speckled Band opened in New York at the Garrick Theatre on November 21, 1910. The play, which featured Charles Millward as Holmes and Edwin Stevens as Rylott, received negative reviews. As was almost inevitable, the new play and its star were compared with Gillette's familiar melodrama. The American's drama, according to one critic, possessed more suspense, action, and surprise than its sequel. The same reviewer felt that Millward's Holmes, although a "good straightforward performance," would have been far more effective if he could have copied the mannerisms and drawling vocal methods of Gillette. Such imitation would have "created the best sort of illusion possible under the circumstances."¹³

While Millward fared poorly, Edwin Stevens, as the murderer, succeeded in "conveying the impression of a most unpleasant and dangerous sort of person."¹⁴ In an interview conducted by the New York Times, Stevens explained his approach to the role:

¹²Ibid., p. 206.

¹³"Sherlock Holmes in New Adventure," New York Times, November 22, 1910, p. 7.

¹⁴Ibid.

He is a despicable, abnormal, in fact, degenerate, old beast. . . . I purposely give him a locomotor ataxia walk because I think that's his tendency. He cannot be played in any other way, than as a maniac because only a maniac would act as he does. I temper or intensify Rylott in proportion to the way the audience takes him. . . .¹⁵

While admiring Stevens, the reviewers accused Doyle of producing a weak script. The critic for Theatre probably would have been delighted to hear of Doyle's decision to quit playwriting:

At one time authors of successful books were content to permit their transformation into plays through agency of those expert in such matters. Whether it is a desire for greater honors or the more prosaic inclination for additional royalties is hard to determine, but many writers of books are now becoming their own dramatists. Experience would seem to show that this is a short-sighted policy, and an example in particular point is that of Sir Conan Doyle who . . . has made a play out of The Speckled Band. Its recent limited run at the Garrick demonstrated its inferiority to the Gillette version of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes or that popular interest is waning in the exploits of that dopy yet alert detective.¹⁶

With such reviews greeting its opening, the play soon closed.

Although it never attained popularity in America, the Doyle play continued successfully in Britain, with one revival in 1911 and two in 1921. Both of the 1921 productions were staged by Lyn Harding, who recreated his role as the villain. The first of the revivals was termed a "failure" and lasted for only twenty performances.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the show was again presented in September at the St. James

¹⁵Edwin Stevens, quoted in "Behind the Scenes of a Thriller," New York Times, November 27, 1910, sec. 6, p. 2.

¹⁶"'Speckled Band,'" Theatre, January, 1911, p. xiii.

¹⁷W. Macqueen-Pope, The Footlights Flickered (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1959), p. 74.

Theatre, with Saintsbury taking the role of Holmes. The second production was more successful, running for ninety-two performances at the St. James¹⁸ before transferring to the Royalty.¹⁹ Following the 1921 revivals, the play was seldom performed again.

The Crown Diamond, Doyle's third and final drama about Holmes, was composed during a brief return by the author to playwriting. Enjoying little of the success of The Speckled Band, the play was such a failure that it is now almost forgotten. When a manuscript copy of the one-act was found among Doyle's papers after his death in 1930, the discoverers thought they had uncovered a new work. However, careful inspection revealed that the show had been produced. In fact, it was presented twice in the same year, 1921.

Producer Stanley Bell opened a week-long engagement of the "hitherto untold exploit of Sherlock Holmes in his earlier days" on May 16 at a music hall, the London Coliseum, with British actor Dennis Neilson-Terry as Holmes.²⁰ The play was popular enough in its initial run to be given a return engagement for an additional week, beginning August 29.²¹

Judging from the lack of excitement or attention in the press over The Crown Diamond, many people felt that Doyle's decision to

¹⁸Barry Duncan, The St. James's Theatre: Its Strange and Complete History: 1835-1957 (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964), p. 302.

¹⁹"The Theatres," The Times (London), December 12, 1921, p. 8.

²⁰"The Theatres," The Times (London), May 12, 1921, p. 8.

²¹Baring-Gould, Annotated, II, 750.

present a new Holmes drama was unfortunate. The author apparently agreed. After The Crown Diamond, Doyle again withdrew from writing plays about Sherlock, never to do so again.

CHAPTER III

MORE SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAYS

Doyle had no aversion to allowing others to write plays about Sherlock, although he had quit doing so. Following The Crown Diamond, Doyle preferred to let others venture their money on the risky prospect of a theatrical success. Doyle's chief concern was that he have an opportunity to make a profit.

The first of the new plays to be produced "by arrangement with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle" was The Return of Sherlock Holmes by J. E. H. Harold Terry and Arthur Rose.¹ The four-act drama opened October 9, 1923, at the Prince's Theatre in London, following a week-long tryout at the New Theatre in Cardiff.² The role of Holmes was taken by a British film star, Ellie Norwood, who also directed the play. Although The Return of Sherlock Holmes was Norwood's first stage appearance as the detective, the film star was familiar with the role: he had played Sherlock in more than forty-seven motion pictures. One of Norwood's admirers was Conan Doyle, who wrote that

Norwood has that rare quality which can only be described as glamour, which compels you to watch an actor eagerly even when

¹"The Theatres," The Times (London), September 27, 1923, p. 8.

²"The Theatres," The Times (London), June 14, 1923, p. 12.

he is doing nothing. He has the brooding eye which excites expectation and he has also a quite unrivaled power of disguise.³

With Norwood bringing his experience to the production, The Return of Sherlock Holmes enjoyed a run of more than 130 performances.⁴ Furthermore, the drama was considered durable enough to be revived thirty years later in 1953.⁵

A decade after The Return of Sherlock Holmes, a new production, The Holmeses of Baker Street, opened at the Lyric Theatre, London, on February 13, 1933.⁶ This three-act play by Basil Mitchell was the first full-length comic treatment of Holmes's exploits. Mitchell wanted to show the result of the romance at the end of Gillette's Sherlock Holmes. The new comedy depicted Holmes as a sixty-year-old widower with a grown daughter named Shirley. With Sherlock in retirement, Shirley Holmes and Mrs. Watson were willingly drawn into solving the "mystery of the stolen pearl."⁷

Despite this improbable situation, the play received favorable reviews in London. Most of the credit for the success went to Felix

³Conan Doyle, quoted in Baring-Gould, Annotated, II, 30.

⁴Baring-Gould, Annotated, II, 29.

⁵According to Who's Who in the Theatre (12th ed.; London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd., 1957), p. 72, the revival was a revised version of the play, with the revision done by Rose and Ernest Dudley. The revival opened January 19, 1953, at the New Theatre at Bromley.

⁶Who's Who in the Theatre (8th ed.; London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd., 1936), p. 27.

⁷"Lyric Theatre: 'The Holmeses of Baker Street,'" The Times (London), February 16, 1933, p. 10.

Aylmer's portrayal of Sherlock. The Times assessed his performance in the following way:

It is Mr. Felix Aylmer who makes the evening's success, developing the character he represents as carefully as if he were playing in a masterpiece, avoiding melodrama, rigidly avoiding burlesque, giving to the whole adventure precisely the right balance of seriousness and amusement. As a study of detail, a light essay in interpretation, and an entertainment it is a flawless piece of acting.⁸

Although there were deficiencies in the other actors' performances, the play was deemed

. . . an admirable one with just the smooth excitement that one expects of a Holmes adventure and decorations of humour that are not only verbally ingenious but afford naturally with what is already known and what Mr. Mitchell now tells us of Holmes's character.⁹

Despite such praise, the play closed after a brief run. One writer noted the reason: audiences could not accept the familiar detective as a father who was more devoted to beekeeping than to the solution of crimes.¹⁰

Ignoring the failure in London, American producers decided to open the show in New York. However, the play was revised for American audiences by William Jourdan Rapp and Leonardo Bercovici before making its initial appearance at the Masque Theatre on December 9, 1936.¹¹

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰J. C. Trewin, The Turbulent Thirties: A Further Decade of the Theatre (London: Macdonald, 1960), p. 56.

¹¹Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1936-37 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1937), p. 439.

Unlike the friendly British critics, American reviewers disliked The Holmeses of Baker Street, especially when comparing it with the more popular Gillette melodrama. They complained that plays about Sherlock had "fallen off a good deal, socially and intellectually" since the original. The New York Times again felt that only Gillette could play Holmes convincingly. The reviewer lamented:

If Sherlock, the sleuth and cynic, is still the wonder-boy of Baker Street and Broadway, William Gillette will have to put on that old two-way hunting cap again. Or, at any rate, Cyril Scott [who played Holmes in the American version] will have to learn to speak his lines with a clearer head and a readier tongue.¹²

Suffering from poor critical reaction and a public still devoted to William Gillette, The Holmeses of Baker Street closed in New York after only fifty-three performances.¹³

Twenty years elapsed before Sherlock again appeared in the professional theatre. Then, in 1953, Holmes returned in three different productions. One of these shows, a ballet, will be discussed in the next chapter. A second was the previously mentioned revival of The Return of Sherlock Holmes. The fictional sleuth made his final appearance of 1953 in Sherlock Holmes by Ouida Rathbone. The new drama featured the author's husband, Basil, in the title role. Like Ellie Norwood before

¹²"Sunset in Baker Street," New York Times, December 10, 1936, p. 34.

¹³Mantle, The Best Plays of 1936-37, p. 439.

him, Basil Rathbone was familiar with the character, having impersonated the detective on the screen in sixteen films and on radio for seven years.¹⁴

In order to display the range of her husband's talent, Mrs. Rathbone sought to create a melodrama highlighting Holmes's illustrious career. In doing so, she used more of Doyle's original characters than had other dramatists, combining those from four Doyle stories: "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans," "The Final Problem," "His Last Bow," and "A Scandal in Bohemia."¹⁵ The resulting plot

. . . begins with an intrigue about Secret Papers, follows with a murder, continues with the wrestling match in which Sherlock and the Professor plunge over the Swiss abyss and concludes with Holmes' triumph over a dirty band of international spies who have plotted to steal Britain's plans for an underwater boat.¹⁶

To incorporate the stories into one play, Ouida Rathbone employed a flashback technique. During most of the drama, the characters talked about past events. Occasionally, the action being discussed was portrayed; then, the play returned to more talk about Holmes's exploits.¹⁷

¹⁴Robert Coleman, "'Sherlock' Is Authentic with Nostalgic Touch," Daily Mirror, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, November 9, 1953, p. 235.

¹⁵Richard Watts, Jr., "Sherlock Holmes on the Trail," New York Post, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, November 9, 1953, p. 235.

¹⁶John Chapman, "'Sherlock Holmes' an Affectionate and Very Handsome Production," New York Daily News, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, November 9, 1953, p. 236.

¹⁷William Hawkins, "'Sherlock' Opens at the Century," New York World-Telegram and Sun, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, November 9, 1953, p. 234.

This rather static play opened in New York on October 30, 1953, at the New Century Theatre¹⁸ to unfavorable reviews. Many of the writers were displeased with Rathbone's portrayal. While one critic called Rathbone's acting "suave, polished and knowing,"¹⁹ another reviewer saw his interpretation as "complicated, busy and lacking in style."²⁰ One Rathbone admirer, who disliked the characterization, placed the blame on Mrs. Rathbone, rather than on her husband:

[Basil] . . . is defeated before the evening begins by Mrs. Rathbone's dramatization. He talks and he talks and he talks. He seems to ask people thousands of questions. If he occasionally slurs a syllable it must be that the muscles of his tongue and lips are simply fatigued.

There is little action designed for him, so little brilliance of mind to display, that he is forced repeatedly to vary the picture by acting with his back to the audience. Since his pale, lean look is one of the play's few virtues, this is a pity.²¹

While some critics found excuses for the hawk-faced Britisher's acting, no one praised the overall production. Reviewers used a variety of derogatory terms to describe the play. It was loosely constructed, implausible, and "confused," according to the Journal American.²²

¹⁸Louis Kronenberger, ed., The Best Plays of 1953-54 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1954), p. 314.

¹⁹Coleman, "'Sherlock Is Authentic,'" p. 235.

²⁰Brooks Atkinson, "Basil Rathbone Plays 'Sherlock Holmes' in a Detective Drama Written by His Wife," New York Times, October 31, 1953, p. 11.

²¹Hawkins, "'Sherlock' Opens at the Century," p. 234.

²²John McClain, "Fun for Loyal Fans But Play Lacks as Detective Meller," New York Journal American, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, November 9, 1953, p. 236.

Brooks Atkinson of the Times found the play "cumbersome and uneven,"²³ while the reviewer for the Post felt that it failed to "arouse a great deal of excitement."²⁴

The reasons for such comments were varied. One problem arose from the flashback sequences. The time-honored technique did not work in this play, because the action in the flashbacks was "rarely more visual, physical or interesting than the conversation that was just blacked out."²⁵ Walter Kerr of the Herald Tribune also complained about the lack of action, as evidenced in the following:

[Mrs. Rathbone] . . . has been liberal with her exposition and light on fanciful excitement. A scene may open with chairs and tables overturned, and an encouragingly dead body in full view. In no time though, it has settled down to talk, and the heavily detailed catechizing isn't wittily enough done to merit its wearying length.²⁶

Still another reason for the play's failure was that Ouida Rathbone wrote a drama without a point of view. In his review Brooks Atkinson asked the following:

Is Mrs. Rathbone affectionately satirizing the genre of superman detective fiction, or the stuffy manners of Victorian society, or is she taking Holmes' exploits at face value? There are occasional scenes that are dryly comic and some lines of dialogue so trite that they are funny, too. . . .

But affectionate satire is not the point of view after all. For some of Sherlock Holmes is cloak-and-dagger bravura in the old-fashioned tradition. . . . There is a confusion of styles that dissipates the story.²⁷

²³Atkinson, "Rathbone Plays 'Sherlock Holmes,'" p. 11.

²⁴Watts, "Sherlock Holmes on the Trail," p. 235.

²⁵Hawkins, "'Sherlock' Opens at the Century," p. 234.

²⁶Walter F. Kerr, "Theatre: 'Sherlock Holmes,'" New York Herald Tribune, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, November 9, 1953, p. 234.

²⁷Atkinson, "Rathbone Plays 'Sherlock Holmes,'" p. 11.

Atkinson concluded his review with inevitable comparison. He speculated: "Probably William Gillette's melodrama about Sherlock Holmes would seem creaky today. But in retrospect it seems to be sharper and more coherent than its current descendant."²⁸

Not only critics, but also the audiences were displeased with the play. As William Hawkins of the World-Telegram noted,

Last night on the stage at the Century, the great detective, he of the ingenious observation, the brilliant, daring, and the spitfire action, talked himself into exhaustion and the audience into lethargy.²⁹

Producers realized that much of Sherlock's appeal on Broadway had disappeared, when the melodrama closed after only three performances. More than ten years elapsed before an American producer again attempted to make a financial success of a play about the Victorian sleuth. This last Holmes play contained an element which American audiences had never seen in connection with Sherlock. His exploits were set to music.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Hawkins, "'Sherlock' Opens at the Century," p. 234.

³⁰Kronenberger, The Best Plays of 1953-54, p. 314.

CHAPTER IV

THE MUSICAL SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAYS

The first stage presentation to employ music and dance to tell the adventures of Conan Doyle's detective was a ballet, The Great Detective, presented by the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet in 1953.

The Great Detective, which was also the first professional stage effort for both its composer, Richard Arnell, and its choreographer, Margaret Dale, centered around the most standard of Holmes themes, "the struggle for supremacy between the Great Detective and his Arch Enemy, the Infamous Professor."¹ One unique feature created most of the interest in the ballet: the parts of Holmes and Moriarty were danced by the same performer, Kenneth Macmillan.² When the ballet premiered on January 21, 1953, the reaction to this unusual double-casting was negative. What had been promised to be "screamingly funny," became instead "only a Victorian jumble."³ Although The Times praised Macmillan for dancing "with virtuosity," the dual role was termed an "artist's fiction,"⁴ which did not remain faithful to Doyle's original characters.

¹Hugh Fisher, The Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1956), p. 60.

²Ibid., p. 230.

³Ibid.

⁴"Sadler's Wells Ballet Theatre: 'The Great Detective,'" The Times (London), January 22, 1953, p. 10.

Critics differed markedly in their views about the success of other elements of the ballet. The favorable review in The Times expressed this opinion:

Miss Dale's own humorous dancing . . . is reflected in the athletic grotesquerie of her choreography, and some of her ideas are cleverly comical. Perhaps Mr. Robb, who has designed the gay scenery and costumes, must claim part of the credit. . . . Arnell's music suits the world here evoked, in its staid yet full-bodied and also kindly gaiety.⁵

Ballet critic Hugh Fisher was not nearly so appreciative. He criticized Miss Dale for her scenario, which was not "well selected or well planned." Fisher went on to state:

The ballet lacked development, and it had no real climax. It was good fun in parts, and the audience found it highly amusing, but it went on far too long. The dancers made the most of the slender characterisations offered them, and they were not helped by the scenery against which they danced. This was far removed from the familiar Strand Magazine illustrations, an essential part of the atmosphere of the Sherlock Holmes saga. The music was excellent ballet music, and underlined the action with a nice wit.

With a better contrived story, the ballet might have been a success.⁶

With mixed opinions greeting its arrival, the ballet survived for only twelve performances in its initial run, but it was later used in the repertory for the Sadler's Wells Ballet's 1953 British tour. In addition to its eleven road performances, the ballet was danced five more times during the coronation festivities for Queen Elizabeth II. The ballet was then withdrawn from the company's repertory.⁷

⁵Ibid.

⁶Fisher, Sadler's Wells Ballet, p. 60.

⁷Ballet Annual: 1955 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), p. 137.

Following the Holmes ballet in 1953, Sherlock was not featured in another musical production for almost twelve years. But in 1964, Sherlock reappeared in a musical comedy, Baker Street. The new show was the most ambitious and costly Holmes play of all: by the time it opened at the Broadway Theatre on February 16, 1965, production costs exceeded \$600,000. A cast and crew of 125 were required to operate the play.⁸

The plot of the extravaganza resembled a musical version of William Gillette's original melodrama. Authors Jerry Coopersmith, Marian Grudeff, and Raymond Jessel combined comedy, song, and dance to tell once again how Holmes outwitted Moriarty in obtaining the secret papers from the attractive heroine.

The New York critics objected to many aspects of the play, including its overworked story. The Journal American deemed Baker Street a "muddled" play with a "hokey" plot that did not "stand still long enough to get acquainted with its characters." The same critic, John McClain, attacked librettist Coopersmith thus:

He didn't seem to be able to make up his mind about an attitude toward the great detective. Holmes was not an imbecile, and those of us who have been brought up to love and revere him cannot fail to be offended when he is presented as a sort of poor man's Dick Tracy.

The feeling here is that the author missed the boat in not playing it straight for sentiment, allowing the old sleuth to solve a problem equal to his capabilities, and keeping alive the nostalgia of the gentle era.⁹

⁸Sam Zolotow, "\$610,000 Invested in 'Baker Street,'" New York Times, February 18, 1965, p. 28.

⁹John McClain, "They Didn't Do Right by Sherlock Holmes," New York Journal American, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, February 15, 1965, p. 375.

McClain also felt that the performances were misdirected. Fritz Weaver, the singing Sherlock, played the role as a "condescending idiot," while Watson was simply a "dolt."¹⁰

Other reviewers spoke of "halting action, uncomfortable pauses and scenes which go flat when they should sparkle."¹¹ Critics recognized the attempt at capturing the spirit of Conan Doyle's stories, but noted that the play "refuses to come to life as either drama or comedy."¹² Other weaknesses were a forced love interest for Holmes and a predictable score.¹³ Walter Kerr of the Herald Tribune complained about the overuse of "trickery," as is evidenced in the following:

The eye that winks grows tired, and such devices as two funeral corteges which bump head-on and a dance of mourners around a casket filled with jewelry call attention to what we are watching: not so much a love affair with the ghost of Holmes as a passion to ransack the theatrical warehouse.¹⁴

The New York Times summed up the major problem quite succinctly: a lack of "taste and style." Baker Street was called both

. . . charming and amusing when it has . . . [taste and style], disappointing when it doesn't. One guesses that a strong, uncompromising, shaping hand would have made a difference.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Norman Nadel, "Irregulars Help Solve 'Baker Street' Problems," New York World-Telegram and Sun, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, February 15, 1965, p. 376.

¹² Richard Watts, Jr., "'Sherlock Holmes' Musical Career," New York Post, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, February 15, 1965, p. 376.

¹³ Nadel, "Irregulars Help," p. 374.

¹⁴ Walter Kerr, "Walter Kerr Reviews 'Baker Street,'" New York Herald Tribune, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, February 15, 1965, p. 377.

Although the theatre, particularly a big musical, is a collaboration of many elements, a coherent viewpoint toward a production must be established and maintained. . . .

Baker Street falls short of consistency of style. When the style is right, the musical is enjoyable. It could have been a joy all the way.¹⁵

Despite much negative criticism, reviewers did find some enjoyable or successful elements in the play. The action scenes¹⁶ and choreography¹⁷ were both highly praised. One reviewer found merit in some of the performances, particularly that of Weaver.¹⁸ Julian Wolff of the Baker Street Journal felt that the musical's outstanding feature was the excellence of the sets.¹⁹ However, as Walter Kerr noted, when the scenery for a drama is the element which most impresses, the play is on "dangerous" ground.²⁰

Even though the musical was not popular with critics, it did well at the box office and appeared to be a "powerhouse."²¹ Much of the early success was the result of a million-dollar advance from nostalgic Holmes fans. The play's popularity was also enhanced by one of the most expensive publicity campaigns ever mounted for a theatrical

¹⁵Howard Taubman, "Master Sleuth by Half," New York Times, February 28, 1965, sec. 2, p. 1.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Nadel, "Irregulars Help," p. 374.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Julian Wolff, "Baker Street Irregular Looks at 'Baker Street,'" Baker Street Journal, XV, N.S. (June, 1965), p. 90.

²⁰Kerr, "Kerr Reviews," p. 377.

²¹Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., ed., The Best Plays of 1964-65 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1965), p. 11.

production. The show's producer used magnified slides of scenes and a sixty-foot animated sign outside the Broadway Theatre to publicize the musical.²² The \$75,000 which was spent on publicity seemed to be working to bring in capacity houses. Before the season ended, Baker Street broke all Broadway records for weekly gross income.²³

Publicity and Holmes fans, however, were not enough to keep the show going indefinitely. Baker Street closed in November, 1965, after 313 performances. Despite its record-breaking early grosses, the play was so expensive to operate that its backers lost \$350,000.²⁴ The failure of the Holmes musical seemed to be an indication of Sherlock's waning popularity. The closing of Baker Street marked the end of the series of productions about the sleuth, which had spanned all of the twentieth century. Since Baker Street, no new Holmes play has been produced professionally.

²²"Film to Be Made of 'Baker Street,'" New York Times, February 11, 1965, p. 42.

²³Guernsey, Best Plays, p. 11.

²⁴"'Baker Street' to Close Sunday," New York Times, November 12, 1965, p. 59.

CONCLUSION

The continuous proliferation of Holmes plays, despite their many failures at the box office, can be traced back to William Gillette. He enjoyed unparalleled popularity in the role for several reasons: not only did he resemble most people's idea of Holmes, but also he began his impersonation at an opportune time. The early enthusiasm of his appreciative audiences, especially those in America, helped to build an almost legendary aura around his performance. Late in Gillette's career, audiences were going to Sherlock Holmes to see the legend, rather than to watch the adventures of the sleuth.

Although Sherlock's popularity in England was strong enough during the 1920's to make successes of The Speckled Band and The Return of Sherlock Holmes, Americans only wanted to see Gillette play Holmes. Evidence of this fact was the early demise of the 1928 New York production of Sherlock Holmes, in which Gillette did not appear.

Even after Gillette retired, however, producers attempted to capitalize on what they thought was the public's enthusiasm for Sherlock Holmes. These men failed to realize that most of the success was Gillette's rather than Holmes's. Without Gillette to bolster the theatregoers' interest in the detective, Sherlock's popularity on the stage continued to wane. The reason was a simple one: not enough people attending the theatre were Sherlock Holmes fans. Even in

England, Holmes plays such as The Holmeses of Baker Street and the revival of The Return of Sherlock Holmes were early casualties.

The final indicator of Holmes's decline as a stage hero came with the closing of Baker Street. A devoted number of Holmes fans and nostalgia-seekers kept the musical running for almost a year; but, when the receipts were counted, it was a financial failure. Sherlock's base of support among theatregoers had shrunk so much as to make a play about the detective unprofitable for the modern theatre.

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