

# The PBS Series “Sherlock”

## A Study in Pink – A Propitious Beginning

by Joe Shannon

My first impression of this new BBC presentation was one of hesitant resistance.

After reading some promotional material regarding the project I really expected the worst.

This anticipatory anxiety may have been, at least partially, brought about by my disappointment with last year’s Sherlock Holmes starring Robert Downey.

A fiasco of such breathtaking proportions I still reel in dizziness whenever I think about it.

But that’s another story.

But back to *A Study in Pink*.

I suppose that my resistance lifted, after about 10 or 15 minutes into the first episode, when I realized that I was becoming interested both in the story and in how the characters were being defined.

Needless to say a pleasant feeling of relief wafted over me as I pushed my purist principles aside and settled down to enjoy this dark but promising presentation.

What was it about this interpretation that I found so enjoyable and thought provoking?

In asking myself that question I recalled David Stuart Davies’ wonderful book entitled *Bending the Willow* which was part Jeremy Brett bio and part history of the making and marketing of the Granada

Sherlock Holmes series of the late 80s and early 90s.

The title of the book was based on a metaphor that Brett used to assist him in facing the challenge of bringing new life and new energy to a character as time honored and prestigious as Sherlock Holmes.

Brett saw the challenge as simply one of bending the willow but not breaking it.

Taking liberties and exploring possibilities but not to the point where the essential nature of the original character becomes unrecognizable.

Going to the edge but never falling off the precipice to use another metaphor.

Even though the new PBS series is both twisted and inverted, the core elements: the masterful deductive abilities, the showman like personality, the peculiarities of temperament, are all abundantly present in this updated and upbeat version.

Isn’t that the exact formula that led to the success of Sherlock Holmes in the first place?

This new endeavor not only modernizes *A Study in Scarlet* and several other stories, but also in the process manages to turn the story line and most of the characters on their heads.

This Lewis Carroll - Through the Looking Glass - 180 degree upending was not only ingenious and thought provoking but was done with thoughtful regard for the original material and thankfully Sherlock’s handlers never allowed the project to capsizelike the Downey film (here I go again) which merely wiped its feet on the canon as it lumbered from one ridiculous computer graphics adventure to another.

Detective Lestrade, played by Rupert Graves is no longer an ambitious and oversensitive spotlight seeker but actually turns out to be an admirer and, on more than one occasion, a defender of Holmes.

Unlike the original Lestrade, the new reincarnation clearly concedes the consulting detective’s superior intellect and talent for deduction.

Also a nice new touch is the addition of Vinette Robinson as Sgt. Sally Donovan who exhibits fiery hostility towards Holmes seeing him not only as a “freak”, and a “psychopath”, but, unkindest cut of all, as an “amateur”.

This malice squares very well with Watson’s comment, in the original adventures, that if Holmes had lived in the middle ages he would have been burned at the stake for refusing to hide his light under a bushel.

Is it Mycroft or is it Dr. Moriarty?

It was noteworthy that they dealt fast and loose with the Mycroft character, played to British stuffy bureaucratic perfection by co-creator Mark Gatiss,

leaving us in a state of confusion until the very end of the first installment regarding the character's true identity.

Our stout Mycroft of the canon is replaced with a thinner and stiffer personage and the original warm relationship between the Holmes brothers is replaced with one of sibling suspicion and overt hostility.

It is interesting to note that enmeshed in this familial conflict is a not so veiled protest against current British middle-eastern military adventures. (I know it is difficult we Sherlockians to break away from our Victorian/Edwardian confinements but for the remainder of this discussion should allow ourselves the contemporary usage of first name designations as this series does).

The rooms at 221 B Baker Street resemble the ones that we have all come to know and love except there is a kitchen alongside the sitting room and the new Mrs. Hudson, played with convincing flightiness by Una Stubbs, is very clear to both Sherlock and John that cooking and maid service are not duties included in the rent.

The modern age has descended upon our boys with a vengeance.

It will be interesting to see how this plays out in future packages because it seems from the first show that neither Sherlock nor John take seriously Mrs. Hudson's pronouncements regarding her limited responsibilities.

Among other turnabouts we have John's brother's watch being replaced by a cell phone, the word "Rache" really standing for a name rather than revenge as in the original *A Study in*

*Scarlet*, John Watson and Stanford, prior to Stanford introducing John to Sherlock, having Starbucks's coffee (yes they do have Starbucks in London) in a park rather than the pair having a light repast at the Holborn Restaurant, the cabbie being the villain of the tale rather than the heroic Jefferson Hope of the original story, Sherlock's magnifying glass being replaced by a Barnes and Noble zoom magnifier, the street urchins who made up the original Baker Street Irregulars being replaced by London's homeless, and on and on.

And let's not forget that *fin de siecle* sexual mores are replaced with more contemporary sexual activity when our new John Watson, finally in the third installment, "gets it on" with Sarah played by Zoe Telford.

But what would certainly win the prize for the best modern readjustment of all is Sherlock exchanging his meerschaum pipe (Cherrywood actually) for nicotine patches.

"This is a three patch problem."

Only the most hardened Sherlockian purist could not be won over by such an environmentally and politically correct innovation.

Benedict Cumberbatch (the name may be the making or the breaking of this actor), with frenetic and riveting intensity, succeeds in capturing the sociopathic nature of this twenty first century Sherlock.

Cumberbatch's high energy performance makes the character's desperation to escape the mundane of life so tangible that at the end of the first installment we believe the cabbie when he tells Sherlock that it is Sherlock's obsessive and addictive

nature which will finally be his undoing.

Martin Freeman plays second fiddle with loyal but stiff resignation, which is exactly what we want from a Watson.

Now regarding the second and third installments:

*The Blind Banker*; A Sad Interim:

*The Blind Banker* starts quite well but after the first half hour it sadly allowed itself to fall prey to Chinese acrobats, circus tricks and swordplay.

On the whole it was strikingly non-impressive and certainly not on par with *A Study in Pink*. 3.

*The Great Game*; A Full Recovery

*The Great Game* is an ingenious amalgamation of *The Five Orange Pips*, *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans*, and *The Final Problem*, with occasional references to *A Study in Scarlet*.

It was obvious after the first few minutes of the third installment that the Baker Street duo had fully recovered and had returned with a vengeance.

An important reason for this miraculous recovery is the project's handlers wisely deciding to bring back Rupert Graves as Detective Lestrade and Vinette Robinson as the acidic Sgt. Donovan both of whom had such a positive effect on the first installment and were sorely missed in the second.

It was nice how the third installment updated Sherlock's lack of knowledge of the solar system, which is

discussed at length in the original *A Study in Scarlet*.

The new version decided not to make Sherlock unaware of the solar system but rather that he consciously deleted this useless astronomical information because it was taking up needed space in his limited, albeit superior, intellectual hard drive.

Now that is good and let's face it the original proposition that Sherlock was unaware of the workings of the solar system was always a little too much to swallow.

Also Sherlock's updated comment that he would be lost without his

"blogger" nicely replaces the original Holmes' reference to Watson as his Boswell.

We should also take note of the fact that Sherlock's emotional exterior begins to show signs of cracking when he is struck almost speechless (a rare thing for our Sherlock) by John's willingness to exchange his life for his at the end of this episode.

But the most important and successful updating in the third episode is the introduction of Andrew Scott who portrays this mephistophelian James Moriarty with snarling (he really does snarl at one point) perfection.

Scott leaves an indelibly nasty impression even though his screen time is limited to a brief exchange in the beginning of the installment and a five minute confrontation at its conclusion.

The final moments of the third episode gave us a cliffhanging (should we say Reichenbachian) experience par excellence.

Hopefully the Holmes and Moriarty relationship will be resolved in the next group of stories, which is scheduled (take note yahoo calendars!) for August 2011.

Jolly Good Show!

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