

JEREMY BRETT ON SHERLOCK HOLMES

By John C. Tibbetts

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JOHN TIBBETTS: Jeremy Brett. Well, you say in the play it is a great chore to make yourself one foot shorter for a period of days. Here on stage with "The Secret of Sherlock Holmes," can you as an actor indicate what is the chore for several days, to paraphrase Holmes now. What is the hard part of this?

JEREMY BRETT: The hard part is past. The hard part was the first five years. I find him the hardest person to get into and explore, and create from inside, myself, because he's the most complex character I've ever played and I'm, I have played Macbeth and I have played Hamlet, and this is the most private creature, isolated creature and a genius to boot, (?) very difficult to actually find within oneself if one's just a mere human being.

Lady Doyle indicated to me that at first she wasn't quite sure if she, if she took to your characterization. Now has she changed, has your characterization changed, what?

I don't really know what's happened because I'm subjected to it, but when she said that I was the Sherlock Holmes of her childhood, I mean I went home and I must be honest, I had a bottle of champagne on that because it's a very, very personal thing. I mean everybody's Sherlock Holmes, and I didn't realize this to begin with. Every child, every girl, boy, woman, man, everybody is Sherlock Holmes and all I can do, rather like taking a brass rubbing in a church, is to indicate it and not upset their image that they already have as Holmes which could be a little bit of Robert Stevens, it could be a little bit of Basil Rathbone, it could be a little bit of Peter Cushing. It could be a phantom of a dream of William Gillette, whatever. Therefore all I'm doing, all that's happened is the torch passed to me and of course it will pass on to the next person. There's nothing ever that can touch Sherlock, the great, brilliant detective. He lives on. Only we poor thespians aim and very often fall flat on our faces endeavoring to play him.

He says at one point that, "Watson, I fear maybe I really want to be found out." Now, without divulging too much of the play, how might you reinterpret that for listeners who have not yet seen it?

Well, the secret is, I suppose. I'll tell you one of the secrets, I suppose, is the fact that Ted Hardwick, Edward Hardwick (?) have been playing it for three years. Therefore it's rather like being seeped (steeped?) in the characters. I do believe that my darling Edward is the greatest Watson that has ever been because he has combined all the elements, I believe. He's not the buffoon, he's a quizzical, wise, humorous good friend, a man of medicine and a soldier. And (?) has achieved all that and plays him with tremendous dignity and a certain boyish charm which is marvelous because it gives him that youthful thing that I always think that the optimism of Watson balances the pessimism of Holmes. And the secret is really trying to find out, without being too explicit, what makes Holmes tick and what are some of his lonelier moments all about.

Although there's an occasional great guffaw of laughter.

That amazed me. I didn't expect there to be so much humor and I'm thrilled about that. I mustn't pay any attention to that. The most important thing in the world is not to guy (guile?) him ever or them, or the Victorian period. And I must say thank you to Granada Studios because I think their tapestry of the background of the Victorian England, if you remove the Holmes and the Watson from the Granada series for the moment and just look at what *they* have achieved, with their researchers, their designers, is absolutely stunning.

How many of the stories now have been filmed for television?

Twenty-six.

Now the plans are afoot, as they say.

Yes, we are going to do this play. I think we're taking it to The States next year. We're also going to do, I think, a couple of specials next year for Granada. We were actually thinking of doing it for theatrical release but I think that would be sad, it would not reach so far, and the most important people are the ones that are not able to get to the cinema because what this has done is, I think, because we're doing the original stories, is to reopen the book and if we've done nothing else in our endeavors, it is a hope as I'm gauging from the children that are coming to see the show and waiting for me at the stage door, they all have their full Sherlock Holmes canon and they're going back to reading. And that, I think, is a good idea when there are so many people who have taken Doyle apart and just used the names and not really done the stories. If they're going back to reading Doyle, then Doyle lives on and the twenty first century has their heroes.

Would you place this moment in time now. What time is it now, where are we, what happens within just a few moments. Walk me wash pants and a t-shirt, tousled hair to what?

Well it becomes what I call my penguin transformation and I go into the black and white face and now, because I've been playing him for five years and it used to frighten me very much to play him because he's so isolated and so removed and I now don't find that a threat at all, and it's a quick dash into him and now before I have time to think, I leap onto the stage and I'm healed of course by the audiences.

Is it fair to say that there's a certain choreography to your movements, not just in the bows that you take, but everywhere, there's a dance-like quality. Is that accidental or...

No, I'm afraid it's even more pathetic than that. It's to do with trying to look as though he's an athlete. I mean Doyle's given any actor this impossible task to be a brilliant fencer, a brilliant boxer, a brilliant athlete, a brilliant mind, a genius so what I do is I use the movement to indicate not only speed of mind but enormous fitness. I mean I don't think he ever does any press-ups ever in the books.

And is a rather mercurial kind of movement too. It's unexpected sometimes.

Yes, well it's, I think that's a way to try to indicate. He's also got double hearing I've decided. I mean, he hears ahead of time, I think. And very often he knows what Watson's going to say before he says it, and I try and do that three times in the play. But he's, it's his brain is of such proportions and speed. That's why I paint my forehead wide (white?) to make it look there's something in it.

Interesting. Take us to a time when you were a boy maybe, first encountering these stories. Then or sometime later you said, "Nah, no, this doesn't live for me. It doesn't work."

Well it never appealed to me. I mean, I was frightened of him to tell the truth and I, also, I suppose I was nervous of being rejected by him because it's like climbing a monument to play him. A mountain face, and without equipment, and I thought if I ever met him, he would just walk straight past because that's the genius and the brilliance of the man, and that's the way he is, unless I had a case for him. He would not be interested in an actor at all. Therefore I had to go, I started a long way away from him and had to come towards him. I was always much more, I was much closer to Watson. I played Watson, I was at Charlton Heston of the Amundsen Theater in 1980, I think it was, in Los Angeles and I really loved playing Watson. Holmes I found much more complicated but playing Watson was very useful because it taught me so much when I came to playing Holmes because they're really two halves of the same fan's imagination. But the genius is Doyle. I mean the genius is Doyle and all we can do is to raise our hat to him and thank God for him because it's, he's one of the greatest writers of the nineteenth century, not fully recognized I don't think as yet. I think he stands with Dickens and because they're thrillers they're put into a separate compartment and it's not actually accurate and I think what was so good about the play is we don't have a case so it's really about them and I have some of the most beautiful writing that Doyle has ever written because Jeremy Paul (?), our author, has incorporated so much of Doyle. I mean, the Rose speech, for example, from the Naval Treaty (?) is one of the most beautiful speeches. And then there are lots of little insights about his childhood, what his childhood was like and I'm able to say on stage what I, how grateful I am to Watson, which I'm not allowed to do in the canon, but only because Watson is writing it.

And what a set, like your thoughts, quicksilver too, it changes, turns. It's like a facet.

I think one of most (?) moments is when we have this domestic scene when Holmes says, "It makes it easier for me to propose, you should have come away with me on the Continent to Switzerland." And the (? Rackenback ?) suddenly smashes the entire theater down. I love that. He comes right into the domestic scene and takes all the furniture and the lot and floods the theater. It's quite amazing.

It must be such a joy to get back to a continuity of performance instead of being broken up by the exigencies of camera and lighting for the television.

No. Well, film is fascinating. It's like building the most enormous mosaic. It is the most

brilliantly exciting medium, I think, but what is so lovely about the theater is that you do have the warmth of the people being there. Also you learn the play and then there aren't any more lines to learn for a while, whereas if you're doing it on film you're learning *all the time*.
(laughter)

Finally, some hard facts now about the play. When did you first hear about it, did you have a part in the writing of it, and how long has it been in preparation?

I commissioned the play last year and I did eight hours on tape, all my internal actor's notes to myself to try and bring life to my characterization about his childhood, about my feelings for Watson, about my feelings for Moriarty, who Moriarty might be, and elements about his father and his mother and his, and Jeremy's within six weeks produced this incredible play. And we did it for one night last year and I bought a theater for Sunday night and we did it in front of friends, and we were trying to decide whether it was a recital or whether it was a play, and Duncan Weldon our wonderful producer said, "It's a play, it's a play, it's a play," and so here we are.

And when Watson takes that covering off the couch after you've returned, and with a flourish throws it off the couch with joy, that's a great moment.

Yes, it is.

And it's his moment.

I tell you what I think is wonderful. I mean the play, forget the coup d' theatre (?), because we can't tell that, which is fascinating and very dangerous. What is terribly exciting is the friendship, which we all know is there, is allowed to be demonstrated. Now friendship between men is very unfashionable at the end of the twentieth century. In the beginning of, at the end of the nineteenth century, men were living in their clubs and the women were on pedestals, and they moved between pedestal and, I'm afraid, the whorehouses or whatever, or the opium dens, but the men were clubs and units, and I think it's so refreshing to see friendship demonstrated on the stage. Two great friends. And I think that's really what, if there's a poem in this, and I think there is, I think it's about that the play is about friendship. And I hope we leave our darling friends intact for the next century.

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