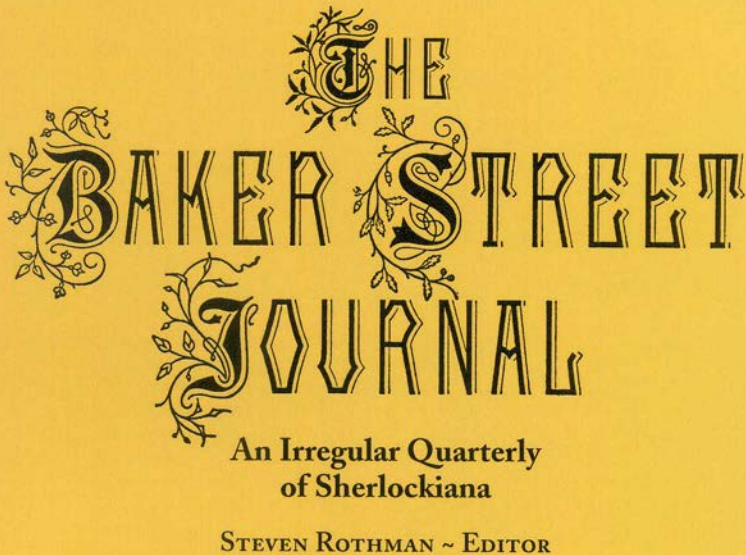


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by Curtis Armstrong

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AN ACTOR AND A RARE ONE

by CURTIS ARMSTRONG

In *The Sign of the Four*, a querulous, doddering old apparition—a masterpiece of whining, snapping senility—shuffles into the Baker Street rooms, deceiving both Dr. Watson and Inspector Athelney Jones for a considerable time before dramatically revealing himself as Sherlock Holmes. “You’d have made an actor and a rare one,” proclaims Jones, and even Watson could only sputter in disbelief. One suspects that the inspector’s exposure to the theatre may have been limited to the livelier music halls and Scotland Yard smokers, making his unsupported expertise on the subject doubtful; but we have ample evidence throughout the Canon: Holmes’s theatrical gifts were breathtaking and undeniable.

In Sherlock Holmes we have a genuine anomaly: an actor who doesn’t like to talk about himself. Either from his own innate secrecy, or perhaps from Watson’s editorial discretion, Holmes was, to say the least, not forthcoming about his theatrical past. Even allowing for the fact that this was a man who took seven years to tell Watson he had a brother, his reticence on the subject of his time on the stage is so total it almost raises the question of whether he was really an actor at all. Honestly, show me the thespian who, over a late-night whiskey and soda, doesn’t occasionally say with a reminiscent smile, “Reminds me of something that happened during that production I did at the Lyceum back in ’79 . . . ?” Holmes doesn’t—never once. We know about the after-dinner monologues on the Buddhism of Ceylon, warships of the future, and the life of Paganini, but what about the time he was playing Iago and the fellow playing Othello was constantly drunk, so Holmes had to memorize all of Othello’s lines so as to be able to cue him? We have it on Watson’s authority in *The Sign of the Four* that Holmes was highly conversant on the subject of miracle plays, but medieval religious pageants sound more like the subject of an arcane Holmesian monograph than rollicking real-life touring stories we’d really like to hear.

What about the case of the scurrilous actor/manager who had fled in the night with the company’s payroll? In this early case, Holmes was able to track the scoundrel from a boarding house in Plymouth to a Glasgow gin-shop using nothing but a pair of the fugitive’s cast-off trousers, all the while disguised as a Swedish sea-cook named Erlandson. Could he resist recounting to Watson the curious incident involving the Actress, the Junior Cabinet Minister and the hideous contents of a theatrical trunk? It was during a production of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, it may be remembered, that the celebrated beauty playing Nora disappeared completely during the opening night performance when, after exit-

ing and slamming the door at the play's conclusion, she was never seen again on this earth. The scandalous details of this dramatic case, reaching as they did into the very highest levels of government, would have made fascinating reading, but, alas, it was not to be.

Descended from country squires and destined to become the world's greatest consulting detective, how was Holmes drawn into the theatre in the first place? Baring-Gould,¹ drawing on mysterious sources, has suggested that Holmes's friend Langdale Pike, an aristocratic thespian from Holmes's college days, talked him into it. He also allows that Holmes, within two years of first treading the boards, had achieved extraordinary popular fame, under the stage name of William Escott. This, as Watson might say, is a proposition I take the liberty of doubting. Any sort of widespread fame as an actor might have imperiled his ability to work anonymously as a consulting detective, a goal since his college days. How awkward to be trying to get pertinent information from a truculent bootblack or nervous kitchen maid, only to have them turn out to be fans of his. Dakin² has dismissed the possibility of Holmes's professional acting career out of hand. Drifting aimlessly into the life of a strolling player was something one might expect from a flake like Neville St Clair,³ but hardly from one as focused as Sherlock Holmes.

Yet clearly he had toiled hard in the theatrical vineyards, achieving notable skill as a makeup artist in addition to evolving into a brilliant technical actor. Why? For the same reason he dabbled in poisons, studied tobacco ash, and beat subjects in the dissecting room with a stick—he knew that these were talents that would stand him in good stead once he became a detective. For Sherlock Holmes, acting was a means to an end, never a goal in itself. A mastery of the performing arts—acting, costume, and makeup—was an essential part of his training. (Plus, it was probably reassuring to have a solid trade to fall back on in case the consulting detective business didn't pan out.)

Certainly a closer look into the theatrical life of Sherlock Holmes may shed light upon one of his most puzzling and disturbing characteristics. Holmes was given to making misogynistic generalizations about women, and he must have gotten these opinions from somewhere. Where better than the theatre? He would have had much wider exposure to women there than his college years or his monastic life in Montague Street could ever have afforded him. "I was never a very sociable fellow, Watson," he remarked in "The *Gloria Scott*," "always rather fond of moping in my rooms and working out my own little methods of thought. . . ." Not an ideal way of getting to know the opposite sex. The theatre, on the other hand, offers myriad opportunities for expanding one's sexual horizons (or so I'm told). There must have been such encounters, whether with the stage-struck damsels who watched his performances in the provinces, or with

their more hardened cousins, the soubrettes of the London stage. Of course, explicit details of such adventures would have been out of the question, even with Watson. Holmes was far too chivalrous to bandy a woman's name, even an actress's.

What one finds so remarkable about Holmes the actor is his ability to disguise himself and perform with such conviction that he was able to fool even close friends and associates while standing a scant few feet from them. Holmes seemed to do this to Watson almost as a matter of course. This is an astonishing accomplishment.⁴ It necessitates not just flawless makeup, but altering those high, strident vocal tones with which Watson would have been so familiar. In "A Scandal in Bohemia," assuming the role of the "simple-minded Nonconformist clergyman," Holmes had to create a character makeup, plus the blood effect, both of which had to stand up to a street fight as well as close inspection by Irene Adler, an accomplished actress herself. It is in this adventure that Holmes draws praise from Watson that forever establishes our view of him as an actor: "It was not merely that Holmes changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part that he assumed." It is significant that at no time in the Canon does Watson or anyone else comment on Holmes as a great makeup artist. They refer to him as a great *actor*.

Critics have questioned the probability of Holmes successfully pulling off these disguises when he must have been buried under layers of the notoriously heavy greasepaint of the period. Some have even suggested that Holmes never really fooled Watson at all, that the makeup would tip off anyone who stood in close proximity to him. In fact, with one or two possible exceptions, Holmes would scarcely ever have had to employ heavy theatrical makeup in his disguises. Wigs and beards, the most realistic form of disguise, were the order of the day when Holmes needed to change his physical appearance—the rest was costume, uncanny vocal dexterity and talent. His ability to "take *a foot* [my italics] off his stature for several hours on end" shows the punishing extremes he sometimes went to in physically inhabiting these roles.⁵ To a tall man, the loss of twelve inches of height did more to disguise him than the most artfully applied makeup. In addition, Holmes's craggy, ascetic, angular features were a God-given gift to a character actor. A little delicate shading or fine pencil work would be sufficient to emphasize the ravages of age or illness. In the event that something a little extra was needed, Holmes might have utilized a trick later employed by the great Boris Karloff: By removing his dentures, he was able to give the appearance of sunken-cheeked decrepitude.⁶ Holmes was also keenly aware of the importance of lighting when a more complex makeup was necessary. In "The Dying Detective," for example, the gas in the sickroom remains low

throughout the adventure, so as to ensure that neither Watson nor Culverton Smith would see the disguise clearly.

Michael Harrison, in a monograph that focuses on Holmes's theatrical experiences,⁷ claims that Holmes's performance as Altamont, the Irish-American spy in "His Last Bow," was his greatest of all. The stakes were certainly high and the performance was flashy (the Uncle Sam look was a nice touch), but Holmes, we suspect, was never at his strongest playing American parts. It was good enough to fool Von Bork, for whom an elegant English was a second language, but one can't help wondering how it played in Buffalo, among real Irish-Americans, who had a lifetime to permanently defile their wells of English.

As vigorous as his performance was in "His Last Bow," Holmes's greatest performance must have been in "The Dying Detective":

[T]here is nothing which a sponge may not cure. With vaseline upon one's forehead, belladonna in one's eyes, rouge over the cheek-bones, and crusts of beeswax round one's lips, a very satisfying effect can be produced. . . . [A] little occasional talk about half-crowns, oysters, or any other extraneous subject produces a pleasing effect of delirium.

The beeswax is interesting; it would have been applied molten. The effect would be striking when it hardened to a crust on the lips. Red beeswax would add the suggestion of internal bleeding that would make all the difference. As for the delirium, picking the "occasional talk" was important, but it would mean nothing if it couldn't be sold. Holmes never flags: from landlady, to best friend, to murderous villain, he has his audience in the palm of his hand.

Actors love death scenes, the more protracted the better. But a dying scene that lasts three days! Add to that an impressive makeup design and great dialogue with incoherent ramblings about oysters, batteries, and what not. Imagine an actor literally starving himself for three days in order to make his performance more effective. "The best way of successfully acting a part is to be it," said Holmes. "I give you my word that for three days I have tasted neither food nor drink. . . ."⁸ As T. S. Blakeney noted, this case "witnesses not to Holmes' deductive powers, but to his capabilities as an actor, and he could with justice speak of his pretence having been 'carried out with the thoroughness of the true artist.'"⁹ Holmes winds up this extraordinary adventure by commenting to Watson, "Malingering is a subject upon which I have sometimes thought of writing a monograph." Surely "Stagecraft and Its Relation to Crime" would have been at least as worthy a subject.¹⁰

Indeed, while on the subject, it is impossible to celebrate Holmes as an actor without taking into account his audience. With an audience, the actor is

whole, but audiences can be unpredictable things. Sometimes they hate you. They talk during your big speech or boo you during curtain calls. They rattle candy wrappers. Sometimes they don't show up at all.¹¹ But in Watson, Holmes had an audience who would never walk out on him. Among his many other sterling qualities, he was an actor's dream audience.

In "The Creeping Man," late in their relationship, Watson describes his "humble rôle in our alliance" by comparing himself to Holmes's "violin, the shag tobacco, the old black pipe, the index books, and others perhaps less excusable." But Watson's role as audience goes unmentioned. Whether spontaneously applauding the show-stopping presentation of the black pearl of the Borgias or silently marveling at the theatrical appearance of a stolen naval treaty beneath a breakfast cover, Watson was always fresh, always surprised, and ever generous with his applause. He was intelligent enough to appreciate Holmes's genius, but never so intelligent that he gets ahead of the play. His descriptions of Holmes's classic "reveals" sometimes border on the supernatural. As the decrepit Italian priest in "The Final Problem" or the opium addict in "The Five Orange Pips," Holmes alters his entire physical being in a moment as sunken cheeks fill out, lines in his face disappear, and dull eyes regain their fire. This isn't simply a comment on Holmes's ability. It is also a noble testament to the audience to whom Holmes played in a successful run lasting seventeen years. With Watson around, it's little wonder Holmes never missed the exhilarating rigors of the theatre and the audience's erratic whims. As the actor Paul Newman once said, in an entirely different context, "Why go out for hamburger when you can have steak at home?"

Considering he is generally regarded as the greatest detective who ever lived, it is surprising how many people seemed to think he would have been better suited to another profession. McMurdo, the pugilist gatekeeper in *The Sign of the Four*, believed the ring was his proper place. Holmes himself seemed to think he could have made an admirable criminal. Watson, of course, concurred with old Baron Dawson, mentioned in "The Mazarin Stone," who, the night before he was hanged, declared that "what the law had gained, the stage had lost" when Holmes became a detective. As an actor, though, to paraphrase his biographer, he would have placed himself in a false position. That great, omnivorous, questing brain was meant for a greater stage than the Stage. A life in the theatre would never have done for him. It simply wasn't enough of a challenge.

The few other actors we encounter in the Canon were, likewise, supremely gifted, to the point that we wonder: if this handful of examples were representative of the whole, then it may be truly said that giants walked in those days. Irene Adler and Neville St. Clair are the best known, but what about the unnamed prodigy who bearded Holmes in his own lair—a young man, according to

Holmes—carrying off the gold wedding ring in *A Study in Scarlet*, while dressed as an old woman. “The old crone,” as Watson describes her, squinted, fumbled, and shook nervously as she croaked on about her daughter Sally and her husband Tom Dennis, “[H]e being short enough at the best o’ times, but more especially when he has the drink.”

This was a performance that equaled any of Holmes’s in the Canon, and his inability to see through it stung his professional pride. “Old woman be damned!” he cried with palpable envy. “We were the old women to be so taken in.” Indeed. He might have added, “Now *that’s* acting!”

NOTES

1. William S. Baring-Gould, *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1962.
2. Martin D. Dakin, *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*, London: David and Charles, 1972.
3. It says something about the world when Neville St. Clair rejects two careers—as actor and journalist—because begging paid better. In this case, at least, it can be truly said, “It is always 1895.”
4. An actor myself, I once attempted this using a fake beard, glasses, and a limp, while dropping my voice to an insinuating whisper as Windibank did in “A Case of Identity,” and got nothing from it but a good laugh all around.
5. “The Empty House.” Watson refers to “the poor old bibliophile” as “deformed,” with a “curved back.” Holmes may have used Corporal Henry Wood’s deformity, with bent legs and curved back, as a template for this disguise. See “The Crooked Man.”
6. Charles Goodman, “The Dental Holmes,” *Profile by Gaslight*, Edgar W. Smith, ed., New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944, pp. 85–96.
7. Michael Harrison, *The Theatrical Mr Holmes*, London: Covent Garden Press, 1974.
8. Here Holmes anticipates the groundbreaking work of a certain then-obscure Russian actor/director by nearly a decade. Konstantin Stanislavsky, who rejected stylized theatrics in favor of a more realistic, psychologically nuanced approach, would not co-found the Moscow Arts Theatre until 1898.
9. T. S. Blakeney, *Sherlock Holmes, Fact or Fiction?*, London: John Murray, 1932.
10. See Val Andrews, *The Uses of Disguise in Crime Detection: A Monograph by Sherlock Holmes*, New York: Magico Magazine, 1984.
11. This explains the actors’ sometimes-violent terminology in describing an audience: “We killed them tonight” (a good thing) or “They’re dead out there” (strangely, not a good thing).