

Newest Sherlock film destined to be a classic

(The writer is a member of the Baker Street Irregulars and teaches a University of Michigan course on Sherlock Holmes.)

By MARK McPHERSON



Notwithstanding the 79 years of films having to do with Sherlock Holmes, "Murder by Decree" — the latest wide-screen entry — promises to become a classic.

Intended along the lines of yet another "unpublished chronicle" of the great detective's career, by his friend, Dr. John H. Watson, the new film attempts to explain a Watergate-ish conspiracy concealing the identity of Victorian London's gristliest of malefactors, Jack the Ripper.

Certainly any cinematic effort pitting Holmes against such a villain as the Ripper ought to be decent viewing fare. As it turns out, the new film does succeed, perhaps more by virtue of its being true to Sherlock Holmes than sacrificing the character of the Victorian sleuth to the sensations of the present day.

THERE ARE, of course, sensations.

Take, for example, the identity of Jack the Ripper himself, a much-debated issue since the actual murders of 1888 passed away, unsolved. In "Murder by Decree" we are offered a solution, and like Holmes himself, a list of suspects which includes the Prime Minister, key governmental officials, even the heir apparent to the British throne.

Then, of course, we follow Holmes in his dogged pursuit of "Saucy Jack" through a maze of fog-shrouded alleyways.

The film's director, Bob Clark, does well in depicting the squalid realities of what were the conditions of London's East End, particularly the Whitechapel district where the Ripper's atrocities were committed. Overall, he managed to convey a vivid panorama, succeeding best when capturing the essence of the unpleasant or horrific lurking behind the doorways of Victorian propriety.

Add to this that the Clark film, based on an original story conceived by him and written by John Hopkins, is grounded in fact. Moviegoers may wonder about the presence of such a cast of characters in the case as the English prime minister, corrupt Scotland Yard

officials, even a spiritualist medium employed to track down Jack the Ripper. Were they there in 1888?

The answer is yes, and the stellar cast of "Murder by Decree" portrays them admirably. The line-up here of some of acting's best includes John Gielgud, Frank Finlay, Donald Sutherland, Anthony Quayle, Genevieve Bujold, David Hemmings and, of course, Christopher Plummer and James Mason as Holmes and Watson.

IT MAY BE, though, that any review of this film penned by a member of the Baker Street Irregulars (the major Sherlockian society) must be a bit one-sided.

However, there will be no harsher critics of "Murder by Decree" than those for whom the name of Sherlock is sacred. Given this, there will doubtless be irregular outcries of "This is not our Sherlock!" concerning the portrayals of their idols by Plummer and Mason.

Barely cast in the now-classic molds of Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, who are forever stereotyped for fans of this early "dynamic duo," still we have in the Plummer-Mason team a believable and lifelike pair of portrayals.

Plummer as Holmes, for all his analytical mannerisms, is both human and likeable, seeming ever about to crack a smile. This factor may annoy some Sherlockians, who would prefer Holmes to maintain the constant countenance of a wooden Indian.

Instead, we see humanity brought to the role, as well as a certain sadness behind the smile. Plummer conveys a more mature Sherlock, who, as a man alone, realizes that his stronghold against evil-doers is rapidly eroding. This perhaps is a significant trait of

"Murder by Decree," showing us Holmes and others within their age, which for its Victorian trappings of morality or honor, is in fact little removed from our own "modern" period.

AS DR. WATSON, James Mason represents the traditional friend and biographer, displaying all the dependable characteristics, minus the lap-dog bumbling of the lovable Nigel Bruce.

Mason's portrayal is of a Watson slightly older than Holmes, and this is projected as a subtle world-weariness, coupled with the wry ability of putting up with, no less countering, the edicts of Holmes.

As a Sherlockian epic, it is hazardous to compare the merits of "Murder by Decree" to the classic 1931 "Hound of the Baskervilles," regarded by many as the ultimate Holmes saga. Each may lay claim to that title in time, but if so it will be due to the faithfulness of their re-creations of the gas-lit world of Sherlock Holmes.

Based upon the success of such recent Victorian vintage set-pieces as "The Great Train Robbery" and television's "Edward the King," "Murder by Decree" will likely prove popular as another retreat to the time when Britannia ruled the waves. Reflecting this, the key for a successful Sherlockian film would seem to be that of keeping Holmes alive within his own age.

There is a tendency today among film makers and authors of the "newly discovered" manuscripts of Dr. Watson to feel compelled to present a Holmes



Christopher Plummer (right) stars as the legendary detective, Sherlock Holmes, and James Mason, co-stars as Dr. Watson.

Review

tivate readers the world over.

As his era's "man of steel," the famous detective of 221 B, Baker Street, prevails not as Superman but as a good thinker and as a man of action. "Murder by Decree" shows us this.

There is no overelaboration of Holmes' brief penchant for cocaine, as was the case in the recent "Seven Per Cent Solution," nor is there buffoonery where it should never be, as seen in

tailored for the present day, as did Universal Studios in its wartime propaganda series starring Basil Rathbone in the 1940s.

TODAY, THE FOUR novels and 56 short stories involving the exploits of Sherlock Holmes still manage to cap-

"Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Younger Brother."

If there must be a comparison, let us use the fine English film "Study in Terror" as a complementary measure for "Murder by Decree's" approach to the Ripper killings. Also there is the badly cut version of Billy Wilder's masterpiece "The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes," which like Bob Clark's film, treated Holmes from the standpoint of character in an adventure unchronicled by Dr. Watson or his "literary agent," Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

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