

The real Holmes remains undetected

The Return of Sherlock Holmes
CBS Made-for-television Movie

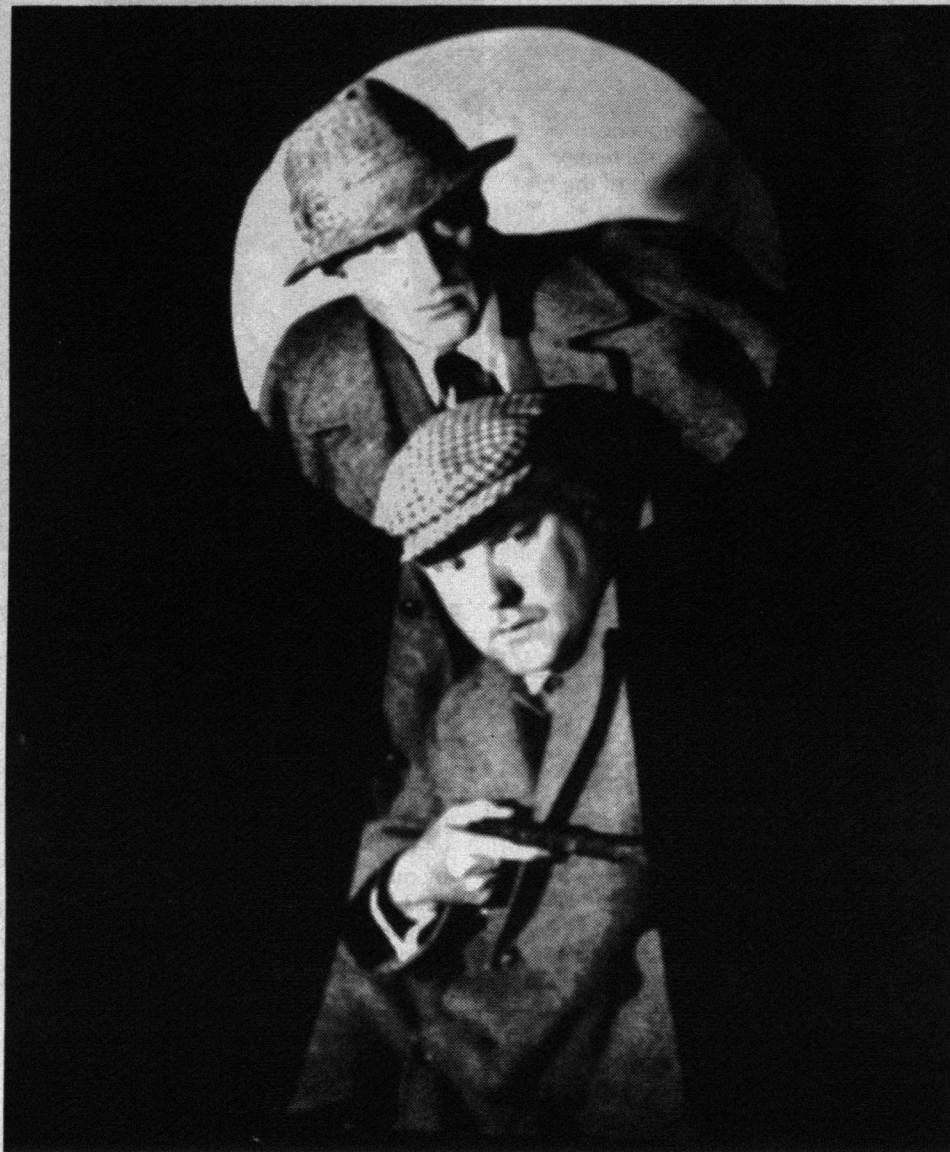
review by Matthew S. McCallum

Nineteen eighty-seven is the centennial of the creation of Sherlock Holmes and numerous tributes and events have been planned to celebrate the legend and carry it into the next century. Unfortunately, sometimes parties get crashed.

The Return of Sherlock Holmes, starring Michael Pennington as Holmes and Margaret Colin as Ms. Watson (God help us!) is without doubt the worst Sherlock Holmes story I've ever had the displeasure to come across. The casting was terrible and the mystery — using the term loosely — was so simple that Holmes should have had it solved by the first commercial break and treated us to a violin solo for the rest of the program. And the premise? Well, I'll let you decide.

The plot hinges on an old Sherlock Holmes story where Holmes receives a deadly package from Col. James Moriarty (not *the* Professor, but his brother who was also named James — kind of like the Darrys in *Newhart*). In that story Holmes deduces that the package, an ivory box, is really a murderous trap and does not open it. For this television program, however, Holmes is an idiot and, opening the box, poisons himself with bubonic plague. Now, since Holmes just happened to be experimenting with cryogenic storage at the time (uh-huh), he just pops himself into the deep freeze to be awakened when a cure is found. Enter 1987, Ms. Watson, and a collection of the obvious 'Welcome to the future' jokes and the equally obvious 'Englander in America' jokes, ie. "He's on the wrong side of the road." In short, it was perhaps the worst two hours of my life since puberty.

Flaws abound. Are we to believe that all those Sherlock Holmes' adventures that happened from 1901 onward didn't (except in the mind of Watson?). And what about all the electric power needed to keep Holmes as a frozen TV dinner for 86 years in secret? To quote Holmes, "If the probable and the impossible have been ruled out, whatever remains, however implausi-



"If the probable and the impossible have been ruled out, whatever remains, however implausible, must be true."

ble, must be true." This may be the case, but even Mr. Holmes would be hard-pressed to accept this premise.

The biggest problem is Dr. J. H. Watson's absence. Let's face it, Watson was an integral part of the Holmes' legend and can't be replaced by Ms. Watson, despite what

the network thinks. Sherlock Holmes without Watson is like Wayne Gretzky without a hockey stick. He could probably still lead the scoring race, but he wouldn't be as much fun to watch.

There have been a number of questionable stories over the years, like the one

where Holmes turns out to be Jack the Ripper while strung out on cocaine. (Author's Note: I realize in that story Holmes was in full possession of his faculties and was killing 'worthless' members of society to confound the police as he had grown tired of solving crimes, but allow me my little delusion. Obviously, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had nothing to do with the adventure.) There was even *The Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in which our hero starred in a collection of tales (and for those of you with unpure minds, offensive pun intended) that tested his powers of deduction and seduction. The above examples might be a little hard to take, but to wipe out some twenty years of stories as though they never happened for two hours of drivel, and then having the affront to title this Sherlock Holmes movie *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, the same title Conan Doyle used for his first all-new collection of Sherlock Holmes stories after Holmes turned up alive after surviving his 'final problem' with Moriarty, that is heresy!

Over the last few years there have been a number of excellent additions to the Sherlock Holmes legend. *The Seven-Percent Solution* was a super book and equally good movie, explaining in a light-hearted way the numerous contradictions that crept into the early Holmes' tales. Daniel Stashover's *The Adventure of the Ectoplasmic Man* where Holmes meets Houdini is one of my best reads in recent memory. The British-produced, PBS-aired adaptations of the best Sherlock Holmes stories last year showed the heights TV can attain. Even the Steven Spielberg-produced *Young Sherlock Holmes*, while with no basis in the Holmes mythos, did nothing to detract from the character. Rather, all these examples add dimensions to Holmes and create an interest in the character, a desire to discover more. Sadly, if my first exposure to Sherlock Holmes had come from this movie, I would be wondering "why all the fuss about this Holmes guy."

Worst of all, the open-ended ending of this movie made it the perfect lead-in for a new fall series. Conan Doyle must be turning in his grave.

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