

## FINDING YOUR INNER SHERLOCK

By John C. Sherwood

As an actor, I've spent a lot of time in the character of Sherlock Holmes.

In fact, I've played the part more than any other living person. In so doing, I've spent more professional time in the role than Jeremy Brett and Basil Rathbone managed – combined. Robert Downey Jr. has nothing on me.

I'm not trying to impress anyone, really. William Gillette holds the record for the most time spent in the role, and I imagine that his record will never be broken.

However, like Gillette's great achievement, my own small claim to Sherlockian distinction was achieved simply – one performance at a time. And it began with my own utter shock that any audience could imagine *me* as Sherlock Holmes.

In the early 1980s, I was a performer in a series of Christmas parlor programs at The Victorian Villa Inn, near Union City, Michigan. The owner, Ron Gibson, had hired me to do my magic act, and my friend Brooks Grantier to provide the music. At first, our wives were part of the program, but over the years the gig became a two-person variety act.

Whenever Brooks and I sensed a certain staleness, we looked for fresh material to entertain repeat guests. In 1985, I proposed a brief Sherlock Holmes skit, which turned out to be something of a hit. As a result, our boss Gibson had one of those Big Ideas.

He asked us to develop a mystery-weekend format for the inn, during which guests could solve cases with Holmes and Dr. Watson. We would perform it several times over the course of the year, thus extending our professional presence at the Villa well beyond Christmas. Wow! Great!

In the face of such deathless performances as those by Rathbone and Brett, however, I was terrified. Who was I to try to re-invent the role? What's more, who was I to try to write cases for the Master to help modern Baker Street Irregulars to solve?

Fortunately, my real-world work had been as a journalist, and I'd long reported on police and crime news. While I wasn't a mystery buff, I'd read the Holmes stories several times. What was needed was a focused *re-reading*, and I spent the next few months studying little but the stories and other's writings about them.

Gibson, Grantier and I decided not to dramatize existing stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or other writers. After all, some guests might have read these, and know their solutions. The Villa's cases had to be new works, but true to the format that Doyle had established, of real-world dilemmas fairly solved in a real-world manner.

Also helpful was the fact that a large number of the Holmes stories had been placed in a manor-house setting, and those particular stories inspired us to find new twists from which we could develop new mysteries. There was much to iron out, and we did so.

And yet, to me, the real challenge was presenting Holmes himself properly and believably.



Everyone, it seems, has a notion – whether caricatured or otherwise – about Holmes and his abilities. But certain things are set in stone by Holmes's deepest admirers, people who've re-read and memorized the details of each of the stories as well as the informed conjectures by such writers as W.S. Baring-Gould.

We adopted such "facts" as Holmes's birth on Jan. 6, 1854, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, the existence of his more intelligent brother Mycroft, and his retirement in 1903 to keep bees in Sussex. And we kept Holmes and Watson alive in the modern era by inventing an elixir Holmes distills from the royal jelly his bees produce, but they would wear clothing reflecting their Victorian roots.

The first mystery event was launched in mid-1987. The script had withstood questioning, revision and study. Actors had been hired and rehearsed. But I still had precious little faith in myself as Holmes.

I was so unconvinced that anyone would believe me as the character that I made myself ill. In fact, during that first dinner, I spent an hour lying on a restroom floor, trying to regain my equilibrium after too much tobacco (I'm not a smoker!). So, here's a big tip to others who tackle the part: Use that pipe as a *prop* rather than as a *pipe*.

It also took me several attempts to grow comfortable in the role and to allow it to "possess" me. Eventually, I came to understand what Doyle, Rathbone, Brett and others have meant when they've said the character has a disconcerting life of its own.

In time, I gained a new admiration for Conan Doyle's ability to conjure up plots, which he did as frequently as once a month. I found it tough to produce a new script once a year. Over time, however, we developed 13 distinct mystery events that we've performed repeatedly at the Villa over 22 years – approximately 110 performances in all – for groups ranging in size from six to 100.

During each of those weekend performances, Brooks and I maintained the personas of Watson and Holmes for some 18 to 20 hours, typically without relief – or breaking character. It has been the most intense acting experience of my life, and the most satisfying.

Is there a "trick" to playing Holmes? Well, there's more to playing him than sticking a pipe in your mouth and a deerstalker on your head. For me, the challenge is to be recognized as Holmes *without* such stereotypical pieces of equipment.

Certainly, having read all of the Conan Doyle stories repeatedly provides an advantage. Memorizing some of the famous quotations is a plus (you *definitely* should be able to rattle off "*When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth*"). It also helps if you're a man, if you happen to be slender and about six feet tall, and if you can manage a reasonably cultured British accent!

But none of these factors is essential to conveying the character completely. A short, female teacher certainly can portray Holmes in order to teach her students something about logic. The character is *universal*, and therein lies the key to portraying him.

To me, the true "trick," if one exists, is to shove one's own personality aside and gently allow the character to speak and behave for itself, in whatever fashion your informed imagination will permit.

Deep down, there's a bit of Sherlock in each one of us – a rational, methodical self that's somehow wiser and more cautiously insightful than we otherwise might tend to be. The more you allow that side of your nature to emerge, the more "Sherlock" you will become.

I didn't realize this at first, and discovered it only after portraying Holmes for a few years. Often, and eerily, I found myself saying surprising – and unscripted – pronouncements that seemed uttered by an entity quite different from my own self.

As a result, I've been accused of "channeling" Holmes, and to a certain extent I imagine that's what happens at a purely psychological level. One must allow one's inner version of Holmes to emerge, and let him have his say.

If someone says, "I don't think Sherlock Holmes would say that," don't back off. You could respond: "Well, he just did." Being masterful is part of the game.

Despite my earlier intimidation, in time I developed this knack. As a result, a certain "fan club" emerged around my version of Holmes at the Villa.

I was the recipient of gifts and honors, including oil paintings and sketches of myself as Holmes, invitations to give away brides at weddings – in character, of course – and a reputation that preceded me when I moved my home from Michigan to the East Coast; there, my version of Holmes found new life as a frequent dinner guest and speaker at school functions from Baltimore, Md., to Savannah, Ga.

A wonderful magic occurs at such events, especially when young people gather round to ask questions, or to bask in the Victorian glow that streams from this wonderful character.

I've often said that Sherlock Holmes is Santa Claus for grownups. After all, he lives at a specific address, smokes a pipe, has a coterie of small assistants and a white-haired lady who runs the house, and often leaves home to dispense justice and rewards.

Psychologically, I imagine the parallel resonates with young people, too – and Holmes is a focus of fascination for children from a very early age. There are extremely few characters in 19th century British fiction – except perhaps for Mr. Hyde – who hold such interest for young students today.

As a result, when my Holmes and his Watson stroll into a school library, or the streets at a book fair, they often are approached by children ranging in age from 8 to 13 who not only have read many of the stories – notably "*The Speckled Band*" – but who seem to know many Sherlockian details far more accurately than the adults.

It's an honor to *become* Sherlock for these growing minds, and to give them a chance to meet one of their heroes in the flesh – even if we all understand that it's just pretend.

But, for honors and distinction, nothing can surpass a curious incident that occurred at the Villa during one of those first mystery weekends.

A guest was a distinguished retired judge in his mid-70s who'd spent several hours taking part in the mystery. On the second day, he and my version of Holmes were seated alone in the Villa parlor while the rest of the guests were "out sleuthing."

"Mr. Holmes," the judge said. "I have something to say to you."

"I am all attention," I replied as Holmes

"When I was a boy," he said, "I discovered Dr. Watson's accounts of your career, and I read every one. Your adventures were an inspiration. They were so exciting, and the way in which you solved each case so plausible and understandable, that I made up my mind then and there, as a boy, that I would study criminal law.

"I firmly believe that reading those stories helped me to choose my career. And, long ago, I vowed that, if I ever had the opportunity to meet you, I would tell you how grateful I am to you for having put me on the right track. So, Mr. Holmes, thank you – *thank you very much.*"

I was utterly thunderstruck, almost immobilized. On the outside, as Holmes, I was gracious, and thanked him for his kind words. On the inside, I realized that something magical had happened.

My own self, as an actor, had *disappeared*. I was serving as a conduit – not just to the character of Holmes, but to this man's boyhood, his memory of his aspirations, and his self-understanding.

Then I heard myself channeling Holmes again. I was saying that, given this man's nature, he would have found his proper course, whether or not "I" – that is, Holmes – ever had existed.

I insist that this thought and these words had not occurred to John Sherwood. This was *Holmes* speaking now, offering wisdom and insight from the deep well of the logical human psyche.

The judge, deeply moved, suddenly appeared so much like a boy, as if the years had melted from his face. He stood up, shook the hand of Sherlock Holmes, and thanked him profusely.

He left the parlor, and I took Sherlock Holmes out for a little stroll around the Villa, to help ourselves come to terms with what had just happened.

Such extraordinary experiences don't happen to actors confined to a stage. As performers separated from all others by theatrical convention, they can barely see their audiences beyond the footlights. They can only hope to hear appreciative applause and perhaps receive some thanks in the green room.

Personal, profound magic happens between individuals, face to face. To create such an experience with another person who is utterly in earnest is nothing but stunning and unforgettable.

Was it make-believe? I don't think so. It seemed too *true*. And yet I wouldn't have experienced it, had it not been for this sweeping, make-believe adventure, set into motion by Conan Doyle in 1887.

Your own adventures are bound to be different, but no less memorable. Rest assured that it's well worth discovering your inner Sherlock. There are likely to be invaluable treasures there, to be shared – and cherished.

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