

Granada Holmes Retrospective #1: A Scandal in Bohemia (Directed by Paul Annett)

By Thomas Stubbs

It is with a new and unanticipated sort of excitement that I begin my critical journey through Granada Television's *Sherlock Holmes* series. I have been a Holmes fan ever since my mother gave 10 year-old me her well-worn copy of *The Complete Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*, and when I first discovered this show, starring a certain Jeremy Brett, I remember feeling that I was finally looking at the genuine article: Conan Doyle brought to life. My opinion has changed somewhat in the intervening years, which I will touch on in due course, but what has *not* changed is my conviction that no actor has presented Holmes with same skill, artistry, and aplomb as Jeremy Brett.

Now, I will make a solemn promise early on not to spend every review raving about Brett's performance. I will, however, devote a great deal of time to charting the course that Brett's Holmes takes in terms of character development, something I was too young and awestruck to pick up on when I first ploughed through this series more than half a decade ago. For here, I think, lies the greatest genius of Brett's performance, which keeps it from being consumed by the elements of camp that Brett employs so expertly in small doses. The Holmes we first meet here in *Scandal* is a very different man from the one to whom we will bid farewell in the series' final episode, *The Cardboard Box*. The various ways in which this growth manifests itself will be the primary focus of my take on the series, especially in these early days, when the show's cinematic and tonal elements were so consistent from episode to episode. As that begins to change, I'll be discussing filmmaking more and more. But enough about the future; on to the episode before us.

Wisely following Conan Doyle's lead, the Granada series gets off to a "Scandalous" start; *A Scandal in Bohemia* was the first Doyle short story to be published in the *Strand* magazine, so showrunner Michael Cox decided to follow suit. This seems a sensible decision on the surface; not only does it immediately establish the series' Doylean bona fides, but the story itself seems like such an excellent showcase for any new Holmes. *Scandal* is bursting at the seams with narrative elements and themes that would go on to become mainstays of the Holmes canon: visits from members of the Victorian upper crust with top-secret commissions for the detective, Holmes donning glorious disguises to observe without being observed, the threat of blackmail that hangs constantly over the aristocracy, wronged parties seeking vengeance, Holmes and Watson's "spots of amateur burglary" in search of clues. It's all there, ready to set any competent Holmes adaption off with a bang.

But then there is the matter of Irene Adler, *The Woman*, who pulls the rug out from under all of this frothy detective fun by beating Sherlock Holmes at his own game, leading him along even as he thinks he is doing the same to her, then launching herself into literary immortality when she crows over her victory with the same dramatic flair that the great detective himself might have employed had he been in her position. "Goodnight, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," indeed. It is a moment for the ages.

The more I think about it, the bolder the decision to start with this story seems, not just for the Granada series, but for Doyle himself, who did it first. Unlike the vaunted creators of almost all of Holmes's successors in literary detection, Sir Arthur had the guts to present his sleuth in all his sparkling brilliance, then allow him to fail. It must have seemed an incredibly risky gambit in 1892, especially as *the* introductory short story, the yardstick against which the remaining 55 would be measured, *Strand* readers' first impression of Doyle's relatively untried characters. It paid off of course, a fact clearly picked up on by the Granada team, who worked hard to highlight the degree to which Holmes's failure brings the dramatic rhythm of the episode to a screeching halt...

...aided every step of the way by Jeremy Brett's extraordinary performance. I mentioned at the start of this review that Brett's Holmes underwent a remarkable transformation as the series went on, but I have already undersold him; his Holmes undergoes a remarkable transformation *in just this episode*. Screenwriter Alexander Baron employs a masterstroke by lifting Holmes's "my mind rebels at stagnation..." monologue from *The Sign of Four* and placing it at the front end of the program to serve as our introduction to Holmes. And boy, does this Holmes ever think a whole helluva lot of himself. He spends almost the entire episode being so very pleased with how incredibly intelligent he is, holding the characters around him in contempt. He leads poor Watson on about his drug use while expounding on how wonderful he is when his mind is properly employed (though in all fairness, he is altogether kinder to and more inclusive of Watson than I remember from my last viewing of this episode). He giggles merrily at the Bohemian King's troubles which are, in the grand scheme of things, quite petty, though only someone who holds the social dilemmas of the well-to-do in as much contempt as Holmes would dare admit it. He then throws himself into his work, quite confident that the whole business will be cleared up within the week.

It is only when Irene shows up that Holmes's egotistical bonhomie begins to weaken. Look at the way Brett gazes at Irene when he first encounters her, whilst disguised as the groom. He knows that she is something special, and thereafter his brash confidence seems more put-on, as if to keep growing anxieties at bay. The man laughing hysterically on the steps of 221B after successfully perpetrating his ruse is not merely happy to have won; he had truly feared defeat, and when Irene casually walks by and shatters his entire universe, those fears leap back up to gnaw at him as he bolts inside.

The next morning, the full enormity of his failure crashes down on the detective, and for a moment, he is at a loss. All the intricate plans he had laid depended upon the people concerned behaving as purely mechanical creatures, to whom he could assign definite actions and reactions, but this time, a clever woman managed to brake free. Holmes's tendency to see his clients and adversaries alike as mere pawns in his deductive gamesmanship, stripping them of virtually all their human worth, is a theme that many a Holmes adaption has picked up and run away with over the years. I am not certain that this is as consistent a characteristic of Holmes as many people seem to think, but that is a discussion for another time. Brett's Holmes begins the episode very much in this vein, but the revelation of Irene's triumph over him, coupled with her letter, shake that assumption to its core. Listen to Brett's machine gun delivery falter as he reads aloud

Irene's account of how hard it was for her to suspect the sweet, innocent clergyman whom his Holmes had impersonated the night before. He sounds positively *ashamed* to have mounted such a cold, calculated bid to gain Irene's sympathy, as if it has only just occurred to him that such manipulation might be wrong somehow. Here begins one of Brett's most important decisions regarding his portrayal of Holmes: his definitive rejection of Holmes as the impersonal logician. This ideal will never be far from Brett's performance going forward, so take note of how far back he planted the seed.

Well, here we are. We have a sumptuously produced, period Holmes adaption put together by a team of skilled craftsmen hell-bent on keeping as true to the Holmes Canon as possible, starring an actor whose take on the character was so utterly original, yet so explicitly grounded in the source material, that viewers of all stripes found and continue to find themselves utterly beguiled. Understandable, given this glorious, thoughtful start, which I suspect will never quite leave us as we dive head-first into Granada's *Sherlock Holmes*.