



the
HOUND
of the
BASKERVILLES

A SHERLOCK HOLMES PLAY

SIMON CORBLE

FOREWORD BY DAVID STUART DAVIES

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The Hound of The Baskervilles

Adapted for the stage by

Simon Corble

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For Trevor, without whom *none* of this would have happened.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who had any part in helping me to create the adaptation of this story, all through its years of evolution - actors, designers, stage managers, audiences. Your names are too numerous to mention. Special thanks, though, must go to Trevor - as if bagging the dedication were not enough - for, (so he claims) prompting me with the idea back in 1992. I am such a magpie when it comes to claiming other people's brainwaves as my own that I can fully believe "it was all his idea in the first place..."

Thanks should go to the custodians who care for the special places in which the play was originally performed - The various staffs of Manx Heritage; English Heritage; The Ranger Service of the Wirral and The National Trust at Brimham Rocks - and especially the former warden, Peter Meese. Thanks to The Isle of Man Arts Council for throwing their full weight behind the play's last (and often I think the best) incarnation at Peel in 2007.

With regard to this long-awaited publication, Trevor must, once-again-and-this-is-getting-tiresome, be thanked for convincing me of its merit. Thanks to David Stuart Davies for his generous advice and support and, last but by no means least, to my lovely wife, Jude, for helping me compile these pages and for pointing out the often glaringly obvious errors and inconsistencies. Thanks to her objective eye, I hope this book will be an entertaining read, as well as a reliable blueprint for a piece of highly enjoyable theatre.

Foreword

By David Stuart Davies

It is very pleasing to have this inventive and atmospheric script available to the general reader at last. It presents yet another facet of Conan Doyle's masterpiece, one that is tangible and terrifying.

One of the remarkable things about this novel is the speed with which it was written. The book was famously conceived on a golfing holiday the author took with his friend Fletcher Robinson in Norfolk in March 1901. The first episode of the story appeared in the *Strand Magazine* in August that year. The idea of the phantom hound and mystery surrounding the Baskerville family inflamed Doyle's imagination in such a fashion that his pen must have flown over the pages in the novel's composition.

In 1902 *The Hound of the Baskervilles* came out in book form and was a tremendous success. It has never been out of print since. It is the most famous of all Sherlock Holmes' adventures and has been filmed and staged numerous times. Indeed the novel, with its cunning blend of detective story and gothic horror, is ideal for dramatisation. The power of the book lies as much in its creation of atmosphere and the description of the bleak Dartmoor location, with its strange tors and its treacherous mire, as that of its characters. Watson's first view of the moor sets the tone for the dark mood that suffuses the story once the action moves to Devonshire:

'Over the green squares of the fields and the low curve of a wood there rose in the distance a grey, melancholy hill, with a strange jagged summit, dim and vague in the distance, like some fantastic landscape in a dream.'

Published on the brink of a new century, the novel cleverly combined the myths and superstitions of the past with the rationality and

scientific boldness of the future, implying that as we embrace the latter, we still cannot necessarily eliminate the former. While we are sure that Sir Henry can banish the shadows around Baskerville Hall with 'a thousand-candlepower Swan & Edison' bulbs, we are not so sure that he can banish the darkness beyond the shadows. Equally we know that if Sherlock Holmes, the supreme logical thinker, dismisses the existence of a phantom hound, we are assured of this fact - until we are taken onto the mist-enshrouded moors at night and hear the spine-tingling baying of a hound. Then we are not so sure.

Simon Corble's clever and imaginative version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* manipulates these elements with great skill and effectiveness. The text for his outdoor production begins brightly - in daylight - but as the evening progresses and the sky darkens so does his narrative until by cloud-wrapped moonlight, the great hound appears. Without doubt this script captures the spirit and the thrill of the original.

About The Author

Simon Corble is a playwright, director and erstwhile actor. He grew up in rural Oxfordshire, the youngest son of a country vicar; the family moved North in 1974, as his father took on a “more challenging parish”, on the banks of the Manchester Ship Canal. Given the chance, aged sixteen, to play Hamlet at Lymm Grammar School, Corble’s determined course “to create dramatic experiences” was set. As part of his professional training at what is now Manchester Metropolitan University, he was given the freedom to experiment and create his own work, which included a dance-drama based on Orwell’s novel “1984”.

A brief career as an actor was cut short by a severe viral illness in 1985. Returning to full health, in 1990 he founded Midsommer Actors’ Company, which staged site-specific, promenade performances in atmospheric places. The first project was *The Tempest* on the tiny island of Hilbre, Wirral, with both audience and actors cut-off by the advancing waters. It was after this seminal and therapeutic experience that he set about writing his own adaptations of classic tales for a new form of theatre. 1991 saw *The Woodlanders* take shape, (from Thomas Hardy’s novel) over several miles of forest in West Yorkshire. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, created in verse from the medieval epic poem, toured a succession of wild and rocky venues across the North of England in 1992. Many more adaptations, (and a Manchester Evening News Theatre Award) followed, including *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which began life in 1995 and was last produced by The Isle of Man Arts Council / Found Theatre in 2007.

Working as both a director and writer for a variety of regional theatre companies, he joined forces with Nobby Dimon in 1996 to create *The Thirty Nine Steps*. This has gone on to have an incredibly long life in theatres all over the world, including runs on Broadway

and in London's West End, where it won an Olivier Award for Best New Comedy in 2007.

In the early years of the Millennium, Corble took an extended sabbatical from the theatre, working as a guide on the remote and wild Greek island of Ikaria. It was here that he first forged a friendship with Judy, a colleague to whom he is now married.

He returned to England to focus on the writing of new plays, frequently with a strong environmental theme. *SWARD!* - a musical play commissioned in 2010 by Blaize - told the story of an upland hay meadow in the Pennines. He has also written a number of audio trails for locations around The Peak District National Park, where he now lives with his young family. There are occasional forays back into Greece; a country and culture that maintain a powerful influence on his life and work.

Introduction

If you are new to the story, or enjoy surprises, then read the play first.

I started work on this adaptation in the Autumn of 1994. The original inspiration came not from the novel itself, (though this had been a firm favourite since my teenage years) but from a particular place; Brimham Rocks in North Yorkshire. Owned by the National Trust, this eerie landscape of moorland, rock formations and twisted trees has a low profile in touristic terms. The truth is that it receives more than enough visits from those in-the-know and could not cope with the flood of day-trippers it would surely attract were its fame more widely publicised.

Since 1990 I had been directing an eccentric theatre company dedicated to performing classic tales in atmospheric locations. My first experiment was to stage *The Tempest* on a tidal island in the Dee estuary, stranding actors and audience for six hours at a time, while the story unfolded around various locations - a beach, a cave, a clifftop; the movement of the sea being integral to the action. When I discovered Brimham Rocks, it at once reminded me of Dartmoor - yet more like a concentrated, film-set version of Dartmoor. I knew then that I would have to look at adapting Conan Doyle's wonderful story for performances in this fabulous place, with its large, gothic farmhouse standing in for Baskerville Hall.

Having already cut my teeth on transforming a Victorian novel into a stage play with Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* in 1991, I knew of the pitfalls and challenges that awaited me. These two stories brought with them the same strength; an over-riding sense of place. In the former it was the working Dorset woodlands; in the latter the wilds of Devon's impressive uplands. The presentation of interior scenes had proved "problematic" (in the words of one reviewer) for *The Woodlanders*, so I sought a way of setting everything in an open-air location in and around Baskerville Moor, that central, brooding

presence of the story. This immediately brought a “cut-to-the-chase” urgency to the narrative, which I liked. The novel’s slow build-up of episodes in London and Southampton was jettisoned in favour of an entertaining first scene set at a country fair; this puts across everything we needed to know about the legend of The Hound, before being swiftly introduced to the perils of Dartmoor.

Next I realised that, in order for this thing to work, both as a thriller and as a manageable piece of theatre spread across a square mile of Yorkshire moorland, I needed to draw a large map of Conan Doyle’s landscape. This I then populated with plasticine figures to represent the cast of characters. The modelling in itself was a fascinating process as I physically moulded, (albeit very crudely) the forms of people I was yet to dramatise with any words. The map was not a map of Brimham, as the production itself was destined to tour to a number of similar venues, but it was a diagram that enabled me to make sense of the machinations in the story. As I moved the figures over the table, mirroring the action of the tale, intriguing meetings were made possible, some of which made it into the finished product. I felt very much like a Victorian child playing with a set of tin soldiers or with a toy theatre.

There were the obvious set pieces from the novel which were a sheer joy to dramatise - Stapleton’s chase with the butterfly net, for example, which involved the actor in question starting his entrance from a quarter-of-a-mile away across the heather. In the second half, with darkness falling all around, the signal light from the house is answered by Selden’s flash out on the moor. When this was staged at Peel Castle on the Isle of Man, “Selden” was a good half-mile away on the dusky hillside, drawing an audible gasp from the audience.

There were other forces in the story helping to pull all of the action into the open air. Sir Henry, being a man of the wild frontier, enjoys the fresh environs of his estate far more than the dusty confines of his inherited pile and so conducts his social entertaining at a tea party in his garden. This, located on the very edge of the moor, is much to the staid Mrs. Barrymore’s disdain and Doctor Watson’s anxiety. Laura Lyons is transformed from a typist, (in the novel)

to a florist, (in the play), giving another pretext for setting a scene outside, with the moor surrounding the action. Murphy the gypsy horse-dealer, who only gets a brief name-check from Conan Doyle, becomes a key figure in the action, linking isolated pieces of action and somehow being a human embodiment of the genius loci. The moor might be “sparsely inhabited”, but there is always some figure moving across the scene, some vaguely suspicious activity going on.

Another indoors-to-outdoors twist was in dramatising the famous episode where the “stranger” living in one of the prehistoric huts is revealed to be none other than Holmes himself, keeping an eye on the action. In the novel, Watson wanders into the empty hut and sits in wait, with his revolver at the ready. Dramatically, the audience is “with” Watson, not Holmes, so it made better stage-sense to engineer the denouement by putting Holmes in the hut, with Watson outside, alongside the spectators. Instead of waiting, he takes Murphy hostage in order to coax the inhabitant to show himself. He is shocked that it is not Mr. Barrymore who emerges...

Which brings us to my strange treatment of *The Barrymores*. A play can develop by a series of happy accidents - and I am a great believer in being “open to the hand of chance”, as I like to put it; it was, after all, an actor who first gave Holmes a curly pipe, so as not to have his hand obscure his face. Sometime before the start of rehearsals I got a phone call. Steve Grihault, the actor lined up to play Barrymore, had got an offer from elsewhere that he simply could not refuse on financial grounds, but this would mean his pulling out of *“The Hound”*. During the course of our rambling conversation I excitedly dropped Mr. Barrymore from the story, realising as I did so that I was solving a number of other issues within the play to do with tension and suspense. Steve’s predicament was a blessing in disguise. Of course, we wanted the audience to still expect Mr. Barrymore’s appearance at any moment, so included him in the cast list along with a photo of myself, bearded, and the name “Justin Mire” for the actor playing him. A short biography went on to list a series of other characters that Justin Mire had played

for various companies, including the title role in *Waiting for Godot*. Barrymore's removal adds to his wife's ongoing anxieties, fuels her suspicions about this strange man Watson and also opens the door to the inclusion of a housemaid, Symonds. She now provides some comic relief and becomes an impish go-between for Sir Henry and his difficult housekeeper.

While there are many such changes in detail to the story as presented in the novel, the bones of it are the same, though concentrated into roughly three hours of dramatic action.

The play has been produced four times, to date, as a piece of open-air promenade theatre, but there is absolutely no reason why it should not work on an indoor stage. Indeed, my first public presentation of the work was with costume only, on a bare stage, in front of an invited audience. The principle aim of the exercise was to ascertain whether we had got the story-telling right, but at the same time it became clear that the play would work very nicely on a simple staging to suggest the moor, with only a few added extras to further identify Sir Henry's garden, the prehistoric hut, etc. This frees any designer from the difficult task of having to switch between Baker Street, Dartmoor, Southampton and Baskerville Hall's interior; normally quite a tall order. With the clutter gone, the company can then concentrate on what really makes the piece work as a theatre play - the wonderful, eccentric characters.

For indoor staging purposes, the opening scene should be set in a Victorian music hall theatre; the large canvas backdrop map of Dartmoor is then flown out, or otherwise removed, to reveal "the real thing" behind. Small additions are then all that is needed to set the individual scenes.

Finally, to one puzzling change of detail, and the only one which seemed of concern to a visitation from the Sherlock Holmes Society at an early performance of the play: Why does Beryl Stapleton appear as "Christina" in my version? Actors, even highly professional ones, are too easily prone to fits of giggles. "Beryl!" for some reason, proved to be a name too comical for a drowning man to call on in

distress, (see the closing of the play) and so it had to change. A small price to pay for straight faces.

Simon Corble, July 2012.

Persons represented in the drama

The Ottercoombe Players - rural types from Devon who put on a short melodrama,

“The Curse of Baskerville Moor” - cast as follows:-

Narrator/MC - N.B. he speaks all the lines given in *italics* during the melodrama.

Sir Hugo - an early 18th Century, country noble.

Gimbert - his sidekick.

Liza Grey - “a dark eyed farmer’s daughter”.

Shepherd - played by the MC.

Basil &

Rufus - two ne’er-do-wells and drinking chums of Sir Hugo’s.

Dr. Watson - a military doctor; thirty-to-forty years of age; athletic.

Sherlock Holmes - a detective, tall and lean; a distinctive figure.

Murphy - a gypsy horse dealer; rustic and roguish.

Dr. Mortimer - a medical doctor and amateur archaeologist; in his late forties.

Captain Evans - a captain of the local militia; not very bright.

Sir Henry Baskerville - a Canadianised baronet; in his thirties.

Mrs. Eliza Barrymore - the housekeeper; sombre and imposing.

Symonds - a maid; bright, lively and amusing; in her early twenties.

Perkins - the gardener-cum-coachman; mute.

Mr. Stapleton - a naturalist and ex-school teacher; an athletic thirty-something.

Miss Christina Stapleton - a dark-eyed beauty; in her late twenties.

Mr. Frankland. - an eccentric country character with means; fifty-something.

Patrick Selden - an escaped convict; (mute role).

Mrs. Laura Lyons. - a successful florist and daughter to Mr. Frankland.

The play was first performed at Royden Park, Frankby, Wirral, 26th July 1995.

The cast was:-

Glen Kinch MC / Shepherd / Sir Henry Baskerville

Patrick Bridgman Gimbert / Doctor Mortimer / Inspector Lestrade

Will Travis Sir Hugo / Captain Evans / Jack Stapleton

Bethan Morgan Rufus / Christina Stapleton

Catherine Bass Basil / Mrs. Barrymore

Catriona Martin Liza Grey / Symonds / Laura Lyons

Dominic Brunt Murphy / Frankland

Tim Beesley Sherlock Holmes / Perkins

Simon Kirk Doctor Watson

Patrick Selden and The Hound were played by members of the stage management team.

Act One, Scene One

A Victorian country fair, Exeter; August 1900.

(See introduction for alternative ideas on staging the production on an indoor stage).

Every conceivable kind of trade is going on in a fairground; animals being sold; farmers eyeing up lines of prospective workers come for the hiring; fortune tellers; fire eaters; shooting gallery; jugglers; dancing; people selling snack food, etc.

On a large cart, a temporary stage has been constructed. At the rear of the stage, we can see a crude depiction of Dartmoor - tors, mire and moorland - painted on the backcloth, like an illustrated map; a great gothic house stands in the midst. It also features:- Merripit House, Lafter Hall and, at one edge, the prison of Princeton.

Whilst the fair activity is still in progress, The Ottercoombe Players, a troupe of rustic actors, make ready to present their seasonal melodrama, which is a traditional, annual event at the fair. Gradually, the audience is encouraged to move from the fairground to the area before the stage; drawn thither by a display of juggling or clowning, perhaps.

Once a crowd is assembled, there is some rudimentary attempt at the National Anthem, from the musicians in the company lined-up on stage, holding whatever instruments they think they can play.

The musicians depart and the MC/Narrator takes the stage. From hereon, the actors provide all the live music, (however rusty that may be) as well as rustic sound effects from behind the backdrop - suggestions to these effects are given in square brackets,