

Dorset Theatre Festival, Dorset, VT

Ms. Holmes & Ms. Watson - Apt. 2B Cheerfully desecrating the stories of Sir Arthur

Conan Doyle by Kate Hamill; Directed by Aneesha Kudtarkar.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I think you will find a solution.”

Dorset Theatre Festival transports us back to a gentler time in its new production of Kate Hamill’s play “Ms. Holmes & Ms. Watson - Apt. 2B.” Unlike other Sherlock Holmes plays that take us to the 1870s and 1880s, this one takes us back to 2021 and that’s the biggest joke in the script. Ms. Hamill has used the most famous Sherlock Holmes cases to create a new play about a female Holmes and a female Watson (Dr. Joan) and has cast two other actors in six roles. These two, Michael Frederic and Francesca Fernandez, are the best reasons for seeing this production.



Michael Frederic, Sara Haider, Francesca Fernandez, Nessa Norich;

Photo: Joey Moro

Sara Haider, who was a wonderful Susan in this company’s “Wait Until Dark” as Sherlock (French for Shirley) Holmes, manages to take Ms. Hamill’s stage instruction to heart in all the worst ways. “*Holmes need not be British, but she is not American,*” reads the script and Ms. Haider has adopted an accent and speech pattern that is often difficult to understand which makes much of the first act difficult to follow. She speaks rapidly as though only she needs to understand what she is saying, something I hope will change if the audience’s sake. She is lovely to watch and that seems to be what concerned the director of this flawed production.

Dr. Joan Watson, who won’t be called “Doctor,” is played by Nessa Norich, an actress who makes dissembling an art. At times this character is so annoying you just want to crumble

up your program and head home earlier than anticipated. She is a good actress, but her role is just as unpleasantly impersonal as they come. The playwright says Watson is “struggling to find herself, feels broken. Reflexively defensive.” Norich plays this quality perfectly and it makes her character very hard to sympathize with which is very much needed in this production.

Under Aneesha Kudtarkar’s direction the two principal actors suffer through a long first act during which very little of interest seems to take place. At least I couldn’t follow Haider’s remarks and responses, but these scenes were saved by Michael Frederic’s fine work as Inspector Lestrade (British) and Elliott Monk (American). Monk is an American politician being blackmailed by Irene (pronounced Ireenee) Adler, a sex-worker in this version and not an actress.

This is the actor’s smallest role played with a sense of passion that was delightful.



Nessa Norich, Sara Haider, Michael Frederic;
Photo: Joey Moro

His largest role was Lestrade, a brash, young lawman who has yet to get his feet wet in a major case. Frederic truly shines in this guise and his blumpling cop is wonderful to watch and hear. He latches on to Holmes and Watson and quickly becomes a better man for the association. Frederic’s autocratic welcoming narrator turns out to be none-other than that criminal mastermind, Moriarty, a role that dominates the second act of this play. The actor makes this role a personal treasure, well-worth waiting for and watching.

Francesca Fernandez starts off the play as Holmes’ landlady, Mrs. Hudson, a clumsy, chatty woman who is only too happy to betray her tenants’ secrets. The character, in a wig by costume designer Mariko Ohigashi presumably, is truly

comical and very much in the spirit of the writing of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author who created Holmes and his associates. Fernandez does a nice job as the widow Mr. Drebber, a throw-away role in act one, only to quickly transform herself into Irene Adler, a woman of secret passions who does her best to seduce Holmes away from Watson who couldn’t care less. Again, in a wild, erotic red costume by Ohigashi, the actress comes close to stealing the show away from the principals. It seems to me that she never for even a moment was still on the stage, but physically kept being seductive and comical and raw, all at the same time. I loved this actress’s work.

Having first appeared in Doyle’s short story “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Adler became the only woman ever loved by Sherlock Holmes. She was the leading lady in the Holmes musical, “Baker Street” in 1965 played by Inga Swenson.

The cleverest aspect of this show is the set designed by Sarah Karl, a single unit defined by three doors with a moveable door that gave the stage a remarkable flexibility. Holmes' home is where much of the story takes place but with the aid of stage-hands in blacks, it was easily transformed into Adler's place of business and half a dozen other locations without ever losing its main identity.



Sara Haider, Nessa Norich; Photo: Joey Moro

Michael Costagliola used sound design to help us understand what was going on in the lives of Watson and Holmes and their scene of disguise and delusion is one of the funniest in the play, well-worth the time and money for the tickets. Charolotte Bydwell is credited as Movement Director and if it is the trafficking of the play she was responsible for she did an excellent job. If it was the very silly dance number she did that well, too.

Hamill's script gives the company much leeway in its performance and Kudtarkar has taken that permission and made it a mandate. Or you might call it a mania. I think the play is flawed, less than original and only given a mediocre interpretation which is a shame. There is much that is good about it, just not enough for me.

+ 08/13/2023 +

Ms. Holmes & Ms. Watson - Apt. 2B plays at the Dorset Playhouse, 140 Cheney Road, Dorset, VT through August 26. For information and tickrts go to dorsettheatrefestival.org or call (802) 867-2223.