

"VOICES FROM THE DARKNESS"

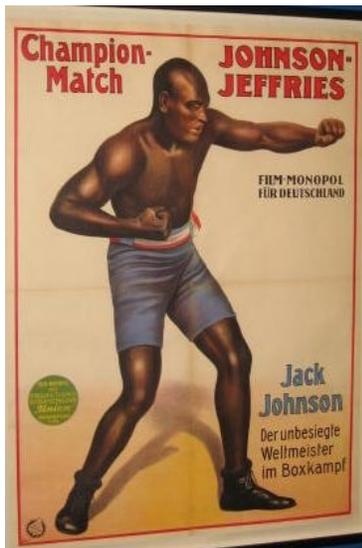
African-America & Sherlock Holmes
by
Howard Ostrom & Ray Wilcockson

Part One

Prelude 1909.

In the latter half of 1909, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle devoted considerable time and energy to writing, lecturing and lobbying on behalf of the victims of what he called "The Crime of the Congo". Chapter VI of his October pamphlet of that name was movingly entitled "Voices From the Darkness" indicating his prime motive – to articulate the silent suffering of the Congolese people at the hands of King Leopold of Belgium. In so doing Doyle revealed enlightened attitudes to Black Africans years ahead of their time. "The Crime of the Congo" may be read here:

http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/crime_of_congo.pdf



Perhaps it was some sense of this, of Doyle as a unifying "Citizen of the World" that informed the invitation from America, in December of that same year, to referee the forthcoming World Heavyweight Contest between Jim Jeffries, the old, undefeated, retired, white champion and the new, negro title-holder, Jack Johnson. As it transpired, Doyle, reluctantly, refused. The story may be read here:

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1134899/1/index.htm>

Five Years Later: (Silent) Voices from the Darkness of A Cinema.

While doing research on Sherlock Holmes in silent films I came across an interesting film titled "The Tale of a Chicken" (1914). This film was released as a split reel along with an animated cartoon titled "Another Tale". What made this one reeler so interesting was that it had an all-black cast, and Sherlock Holmes was a prominent character in the storyline. Yet, my large Sherlock Holmes in the media reference library had no mention of this silent film.

"Deerstalker! Holmes and Watson on Screen", by Ron Haydock, states "... 'A Black Sherlock Holmes', featured an all-black cast of players, and the film is believed to be one of the earliest, if not the very first of ALL all-black films of any kind ever made." Wait a minute now, "A Black Sherlock Holmes" was made in 1918, that's four years after "The Tale of a Chicken"! "Sherlock Holmes Screen and Sound Guide", by Gordon E. Kelley, states, about "A Black Sherlock Holmes", "...was possibly the first of all black Sherlock Holmes film made." Steinbrunner and Michaels, "The Films of Sherlock Holmes", Barnes, "Sherlock Holmes on Screen; The Complete Film and TV History", Pohle & Hart, "Sherlock Holes on the Screen", Pointer, "The Sherlock Holmes File; The Many Personae of Sherlock Holmes, on Stage, in Film and in Advertising", and the list goes on, but never a mention of Afro-American Sherlock Holmes performances among any of these media experts. The time has come to make amends to this situation and discuss Afro-American Sherlock Holmes performers and performances. I'm not claiming to be all inclusive in this discussion, but I will, as a film collector and Sherlockian, share some of the unusual but entertaining facts I have with you.

I'll start my discussion with the aforementioned split one reeler which contained "Another Tale" and "The Tale of a Chicken". The comedy film, "The Tale of a Chicken", released by Lubin Manufacturing Company, on April 28th, 1914, is probably the true first all-black Sherlock Holmes film. Not only does it hold that distinction, but the cartoon sharing the reel with it, "Another Tale" is probably the first animated appearance of a Holmes character on film. "Another Tale" precedes the animated "The Adventures of Mr. Nobody Holmes" (1916), the earliest animated Holmes on record by two years. "The Tale of a Chicken" precedes

Ebony Film's "A Black Sherlock Holmes", previously regarded as possibly the first all-black Sherlock Holmes film by four years.

The cast for "A Tale of a Chicken" was:

Maha Raja as Sherlock Jackson Holmes

John Edwards as Sam Johnson

Luke Scott as Raskus Hudson

Mattie Edwards as Mandy Jones.

Part of Sherlock Jackson Holmes is credited to Maja Raja (probably a name used by actors who didn't want their real name associated with the particular production).

Here are the plot summaries and reviews for the films. Be warned the plot description and reviews sound quite racist from today's perspective.

"Another Tale' - (Lubin) - April 28 - Sam Bug & Raskus Bug are suitors for Mandy Bug. Her intentions are strong for Sam, so she gives Raskus the 'cold shoulder'. Raskus Bug's blood is aroused and he loses no time in telling his troubles to his gang, the leader being no other than "Gyp the Bug." They cook up a scheme whereby they kill a silkworm which is very much against the law in Bugland. They put the silkworm in the rain barrel near Sam Bug's sweetheart's home, then they get a Bug cop and Sam Bug is arrested. Mandy knows it is the work of the gang and gets Sherlock Bug, the great detective, who gets on the trail, traps the gang by blowing up the gang's den, puts them all in jail and Sam Bug is released.

'The Tale of a Chicken' - (Lubin) - April 28 - Sam Johnson & Raskus Hudson are suitors for the hand of Mandy Jones, but Mandy's intentions are strong towards Sam. When Mandy gives Raskus the 'cold shoulder' his negro blood is aroused. Raskus loses no time in telling his troubles to his gang. They decide to cook up a scheme whereby they steal a chicken and hide it in Sam's house. They also put some feathers in Sam's pocket. They then inform the owner of the chicken. He gets a policeman and has Sam arrested. The chicken is produced in the courtroom and the feathers are found in Sam's pocket. Sam is thrown into jail, much to the delight of Raskus and his gang. But Mandy, knowing Sam's innocence, presses into service the great detective of international fame, Sherlock Jackson Holmes. Sherlock

finds a trail of chicken feathers and in the course of a couple of hours he traps the gang in their den. He marches them to the court, where they are thrown into a dungeon and Sam is then released. Sherlock receives his reward a smile from Mandy."¹

The reviews of these two films are not very nice, a sign of the times perhaps? Here they are:

"'Another Tale' - On the same reel with 'A Tale of a Chicken'. An animated cartoon of 'Bugdom'. Senseless.

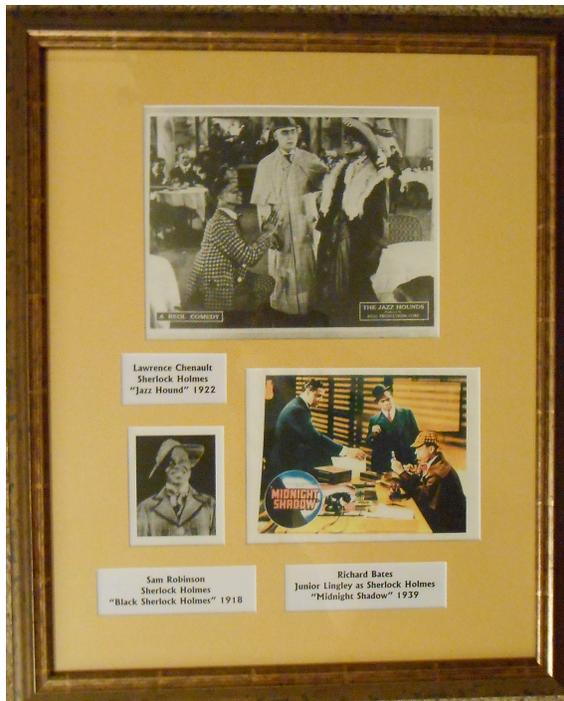
'A Tale of a Chicken' - A photoplay that should be captioned 'A Tail of a Chicken'. This is a burlesque of "Sherlock Holmes", and intended to be "cute," evidently. If the cruel abuse of a speckled hen can be construed as a comedy then this misnomer is funny. The actors are colored individuals."

So for my money the first Afro-American Sherlock Holmes performer was the mystery actor who billed himself as Maja Raja, and the first animated Holmes was none other than Sherlock Bug. Unfortunately we have no photos from the film and there is no known copy.

The next Afro-American Holmes performer we know of is Sam Robinson, the brother of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. The film was "A Black Sherlock Holmes," the first production of the newly reorganized Ebony Film Corporation, released in April, 1918, and distributed by the General Film Corporation of New York City. The plot focuses on Knick Carter (your black Sherlock Holmes), portrayed by Sam Robinson, who believes he is a great detective. He and his assistant Reuma Tism (your Dr. Watson), portrayed by Rudolph Tatum, attempt to save a kidnapped young woman, Sheeza Sneeze, portrayed by Yvonne Junior, and the daughter of inventor, I Wanta Sneeze, played by George Lewis. Knick eventually saves Sheeza, who is able to marry her true love. The film was directed by R. G. Phillips and runs for 12 minutes.² The film exists, and is a part of the Sherlock Holmes Collection at the University of Minnesota's Anderson Library.

¹ The Moving Picture World magazine Vol. 20 Apr. - Jun. 1914, pages 568/570 - Licensed Film Stories

² <https://www.lib.umn.edu/pdf/holmes/v7n1SixOh.pdf>



The review I've found for "A Black Sherlock Holmes" (1918) is: "A Black Sherlock Holmes' - (Ebony) - The main feature of this reel, the first Ebony comedy, also a new brand on The General Film program, is the fact that the cast is composed entirely of colored players. It is a burlesque on the Sherlock Holmes stories, and while there are some amusing scenes, there is a tendency among all the players to over act. Its strongest point is the novelty of the players."³ According to Julie McKuras, A.S.H, B.S.I., the film's failure to overcome Black stereotypes received criticism from Black audiences.

It is my belief that a well known Afro-American performer named Lawrence Chenault (1877 - ?) portrayed the Sherlock Holmes type character in Reol's two-reel comedy "The Jazz Hounds" (1921). "Lawrence Chenault was an American vaudeville performer and silent film actor. He married film actress Evelyn Preer in 1924. He appeared in 24 films between years 1920 and 1934. His brother Jack Chenault was also a film actor."⁴ "Both censorship records and lobby cards for the film suggest that Reol's two-reel comedy 'The Jazz Hounds' (1921) borrowed liberally from the Ebony Film Corporation's popular Black

³ The Moving Picture World magazine, page 745, Critical Reviews and Comments May 4, 1918

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Chenault



Sherlock Holmes character. The Chicago Board of Censors' synopsis describes the plot of 'The Jazz Hounds' as 'Fake detective's episodes'. One lobby card depicts a lighter-skinned Black man in a deerstalker cap and matching cape interrogating two 'zip coon' characters, who consume fried chicken with gusto in another still."⁵ Unfortunately, as is often the case with silent films, no known copy exists.

Adrienne Herndon (1869 -1910), although not a Holmes performer, she did serve a major part in bringing a serious Holmes production to the Afro-American community at the turn of the century. Adrienne was an important African American woman in Atlanta, Georgia. She married Alonzo Herndon, who was born a slave, and became the first black millionaire in Atlanta. Denied being the actress she wanted to be by racism, "she brought Shakespeare to the South, presenting the University's first Shakespearean production; Herndon directed the Atlanta University's theater offerings and gave Atlanta's black community access to serious drama with professional stage sets and costumes. Moreover, she opened the university community to the



American theater world, hosting the William Gillette Theater Company of New York in a performance of Sherlock Holmes in the Adventure of the Second Stain. She engaged others at the University in her work

⁵ Petersen, Christina -Film History | July 1, 2008 | "The 'Reol' story: race authorship and consciousness in Robert Levy's Reol Productions, 1921-1926"

W. E. B. Du Bois, her colleague on the faculty, served as the stage manager for the Gillette production.”⁶

The next Afro-American Holmes I will discuss is Richard Bates as Junior Lingley, in "Midnight Shadow" (1939). The long-lost black-cast whodunit "Midnight Shadow", was discovered in a vault in Tyler, TX, and preserved by the Southwest Film & Video Archive of Dallas. A showman known as Prince Alihabad the Great (John Criner) suddenly shows up in a quiet, all-black Oklahoma community and is welcomed by Dan Wilson (Clinton Rosemond), who readily accepts that the obvious charlatan begins courting his pretty daughter, Margaret (Frances Redd). But when Dan is found murdered after brandishing the deed to an oil field, Margaret takes matters into her own hands and hires aspiring private eye Junior Langley (Richard Bates) and his jive-



talking sidekick, Lightfoot (Buck Woods), to solve the case. The trail leads to Shreveport, LA, where the murderer is caught despite the bungling of the case by "Sherlock" Langley and his inefficient "Dr." Lightfoot. "Midnight Shadow" is available on DVD, and as seen in the color lobby card card, Bates appears at a desk in deerstalker cap, matching cape and with magnifying glass. A slow paced short feature fascinating more for its historical significance than its story, "Midnight Shadow" is more competently done than a lot of independent black productions of the era. The producer and director was George Randol. To learn more about him and the film check out the website: www.weirdwildrealm.com/f-midnightshadow.html

⁶ www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/adrienne-herndon-actress-and-designer

Next we have William Henry "Bill" Cosby Jr. (1937 -). Yes that's right, Bill Cosby, the famed Cosby Show star and veteran comedian threw on an invernness cape, deerstalker and pipe for a little Sherlockian Skit with the Gold Digger Dancers before his main act on the "Dean Martin Variety Show" (1966). Bill was a famous spy at the time, as Alexander Scott on the hit show "I Spy", so we might guess that's where Dean's



writers came up with the idea. You can check out Sherlock Cosby and "The Women" on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=p&v=84YKD1CienQ>

Not Holmes, but on more than one occasion appearing Dr. Watson, was Levar Burton (1957 -). Burton starred as Geordi La Forge, a lieutenant commander and the chief engineer for the USS Enterprise-D in "Star



Trek: The Next Generation". As Geordi, Burton took on the role of Dr. Watson in season 2 episode 3, "Elementary, Dear Data" (1988), and then again in season 6 episode 12, "Ship in a Bottle" (1993). Brent Spiner, as android lieutenant commander Data, portrayed Sherlock Holmes. "Asked about his favorite scenes, Burton answered that he especially liked the holodeck adventures: 'The Holmes and Watson' episodes for Data and Geordi... were a lot of fun for us. I think the holodeck was a very cool concept, you know. You can create a three dimensional reality ... I mean, how cool is that?"⁷ Well I'd say, that's almost as cool as Levar Burton was when he portrayed Dr. Watson.

End Part One

⁷ ["Interviews | LeVar Burton | The Acting of Science"](#). BBC Cult. 8/30/2013.

