

Silent Sherlock

Sherlock Holmes and the Silent Film Era

by

Howard Ostrom

Part Seventeen (1921)

The best measure for a film's popularity in the silent film era was the length of its run (the period of time it stayed in the theater). Based on run time the most popular Sherlock Holmes film of the silent film era had to be John Barrymore's "Sherlock Holmes" of 1922 which played in theaters for over two years, quite a feat (but no surprise as John Barrymore was the number one box office star). Running a close second with a year and a half run was surprisingly, a little known today Holmes parody, 1921's "Sherlock Brown", starring Bert Lytell as William "Sherlock" Brown. However, when quantity is also added to the mix, with the addition of Stoll Films' "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (1921), "The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (1922) and "The Last Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (1923) starring Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes, with forty-five shorts and two features, one could easily claim the years (1921-1923) were a golden age for the Sherlock Holmes fans. Perhaps present times, with Robert Downey Jr. as Holmes in the theaters, both Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller as Holmes on TV, Ross K. Foad as Holmes on Internet, and Holmes stage plays somewhere every weekend, draws the closest comparison to this splendid time period.

While many think only three of the Stoll's Eille Norwood series still exist, Louise Penn of the U.K. has informed me all but "The Dancing Men" still exist. She said she has viewed six, and will soon view five more, of them at various UK film festivals and at the British Film Institute. In 2015 she said the Barbican shows the two feature length ones, which is very exciting. The copyrights are owned by Andrew Lloyd Webber and the fact he hasn't made them widely available for screening or on DVD is very sad. Still pretty amazing if factual, considering how many silent films have been lost.

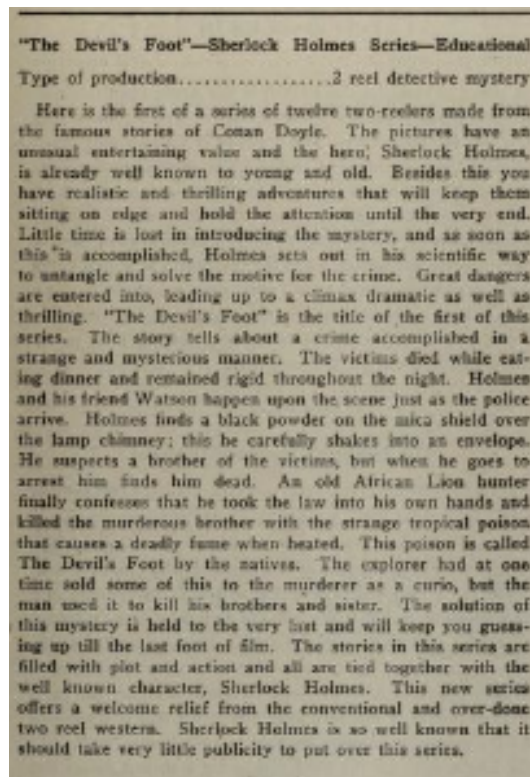
So let us look at the year 1921 and see what films one could see, starting out of course with Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes, in "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes".

Photoplay Magazine commented the advance word on the film series is - "It is the real Sherlock Holmes, done into a number of two reel pictures, each telling a different story, from the worlds most famous mysteries. There is no sticky love interest to be upheld --- this is the cool detective of the test tubes and the many clues --- who works, step by step, toward a solution. The cast is well chosen of English players. Worthwhile."¹

1921 - "The Dying Detective", Eille Norwood (1861 - 1948) as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis (1876 - 1984) as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

"The Dying Detective" can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaxEnONPw-Y>

1921 - "The Devil's Foot", Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).



"The Devil's Foot" can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4kJEneFse0>

¹ Photoplay Vol. 22 Jul - Dec. 1922 pg. 226



"A Case of Identity"—Sherlock Holmes—Educational

Type of production.....2 reel drama

Here is another of the clever series of Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. This time a very able character study is drawn by Edna Flinck, who takes the role of Mary Sutherland, the jilted girl. Mary seeks the aid of Holmes and asks him to please try and find the man who kept her waiting at the church. She explained that she came from a middle class family and lived with her mother and stepfather, and that she had a little income that her stepfather had the use of. While her stepfather was away on a business trip a middle aged man called and made love to her. They were engaged and on the way to the wedding the groom disappeared. The case seems very simple for Holmes. He sends for the stepfather and ask him about the missing man. With the aid of one or two simple tricks and a little deduction Holmes soon discovers that the missing man is the stepfather himself. Fearing the loss of the girl's income he borrowed a wig and mustache and made love to his stepdaughter. Then he jilted her thinking that the experience would forever end her desire for matrimony. Of course the girl feels sorry for herself, but she allows Holmes to cheer her up and remarks that "the butcher's assistant is a very nice young man." The interest is held throughout and the story has a pleasing mixture of comedy and light tragedy. The acting is excellent and the production as a whole will please and should satisfy almost any audience. "A Case of Identity" is filled with mystery and character and has all the elements of a full length feature production.

1921 - “A Case of Identity”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Yellow Face”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Red-Headed League”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Resident Patient”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “A Scandal in Bohemia”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).



1921 - “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

“The Man with the Twisted Lip” can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic2QcSLOB4M>

1921 - “The Beryl Coronet”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Noble Bachelor”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Copper Beeches”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Empty House”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Tiger of San Pedro”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Priory School”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Solitary Cyclist”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

1921 - “The Hound of the Baskervilles”, Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes and Hubert Willis as Dr. Watson. Stoll Pictures (U.K.).

“Roxie” Rothafel of the
CAPITOL THEATRE
Books F. B. O.’s sensational thriller “The
Hound of the Baskervilles” and
the Capitol is
Packing ‘Em In
all this week

Exhibitors—Don’t miff this one—It’s a bear cat
The greatest Detective story author in his greatest Mystery Story presenting

Eille Norwood AS Sherlock Holmes
in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s biggest and best known mystery story that has
thrilled millions.



Another
Record
Smashed

“THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES”
The picture that will bring you a basketful
of great profits—ALSO
KEEP your eye on F. B. O. We’re going like a hot
pistol. Watch for exciting suspense HARRY CAMP
Special CURTAINS. Make the extra show the biggest in
town. Also watch for ETHEL CLAYTON in “F. I. G. G.
QUEST” a thrilling story in a UNUSUAL DRAMA.
See this show.

F.B.O.
Film Booking Offices of America, Inc.
Main Office—F. B. O. Building
7th Avenue at 48th Street New York
EXCHANGES EVERYWHERE

FOR the first time in the entire history of the picture
business ONE exhibition alone books THE CAP-
ITOL THEATRE ITS ENTIRE PROGRAM for the
week ending Nov. 1. THE HOUND OF THE BAS-
KERVILLES. We feature F. I. G. G. QUEST. TRAY-
LAWSON. CAYEN DE HAVEN COMEDY—That
First Feature. But—our real thing is Eille Nor-
wood the actor who has won the hearts of mil-
lions. He has the same cast and we don’t know how rich, or
how much have looked over the same cast now. All from
F. B. O. At F. B. O. centres. We said “WATCH
UP”—you’re coming into a better show.

Real Atmosphere of Mystery in Sherlock Holmes Story

"THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES"

Film Booking Offices

DIRECTORMaurice Elvey
AUTHORSir Arthur Conan Doyle
SCENARIO BYNot credited
CAMERAMANNot credited
AS A WHOLE.....A perfectly fine number for

those who like to solve riddles or favor mystery stories in their film entertainment

STORY.....A Sherlock Holmes adventure in which the great detective's ability to solve mysteries has to be taken mostly for granted

DIRECTION.....Has concentrated upon telling the story rather than in production values; some good effects

PHOTOGRAPHYAll right

LIGHTINGS.....Usually good; occasionally too dark

PLAYERS.....The men do good work but the girl, Betty Campbell, is poor; Eille Norwood not given much prominence as Holmes; others Hubert Willis, Rex McDougal, Lewis Gilbert and Frederick Raynham, who makes a good deal of small role of butler

EXTERIORSParticularly appropriate

INTERIORSGood

DETAILAmple

CHARACTER OF STORY.....Mystery in deaths of members of certain family, all of which follow the strange appearance of a dog

LENGTH OF PRODUCTION.....5,382 feet

It seems rather strange that a story which exploits the remarkable ability of Sherlock Holmes to fathom mysteries should expose so little of the actual work of the detective. Or perhaps it is just the way in which it is told here that keeps Holmes' method of solving the mystery so much of a secret. At any rate you are asked to take his genius very much for granted while his assistant looks around for clues.

The picture, of English make, offers a perfectly good entertainment for those who like deep mystery

stories with the plot thickening with every foot of film that is unwound, the thrills sometimes uncanny and the characters in constant danger of death. It has been carefully developed and quite coherently, despite the complex situations. But, in order to keep it continually comprehensive, many subtitles have been found necessary, plus the written report of the detective's assistant which is shown to the spectator and cleverly recounts events that have preceded it. In this way incidents, perhaps not clear at the time they occur, are fully explained, leaving no doubt in your mind. The only objection is that it keeps you busy reading. And one criticism that is appropriate right here, and applies to many American films as well, is that it is very difficult to read some of the hand written communications. A legible hand writing should be used and the script reproduced large enough to be read with ease.

Director Elvey has obviously given the best of his effort to telling the story and in that respect he has succeeded splendidly. There are a lot of individually good touches and the manner in which he handles the more uncanny bits shows good restraint. There was plenty of room for exaggeration and gruesome touches but they have been passed by. The ending is a trifle too abrupt.

The acting is not especially noteworthy, although everyone fulfills requirements and is well suited to the part. Eille Norwood looks the part of Holmes but has little to do. The performance that seems to stand out most is contributed by Frederick Raynham, as the butler, Osborne. Betty Campbell is a poor choice as leading woman.

Story: Several masters of the Baskerville estate had died suddenly of heart disease, each death following the mysterious appearance of a hound, seen at midnight on the estate. The new master puts the matter before Sherlock Holmes who conducts a secret investigation arriving at the solution that a distant relative, in hope of eventually inheriting the estate, had caused the deaths.

Use the Author's Name and Let Them Know What It's About

Box Office Analysis for the Exhibitor

You know pretty well just what a picture of this type can do for you because you also know whether or not your patrons like mystery stories. If they do, you couldn't give them one that will set them guessing any more than "The Hound of the Baskervilles" will. In case they may not know it, be sure to say it is one of Sir Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes adventures.

Because of the recent publicity which Doyle received for his theories regarding spiritualism, and because he is noted as the author of the famous detective stories, give his name plenty of prominence and in case the title may not be definite enough, play it up with explanatory catchlines relative to the dog who appeared at midnight and following each appearance a death occurred. If they want detective stories, don't miss it.

"The Hound of The Baskervilles" - "An English-made film built around one of A. Conan Doyle's best Sherlock Holmes tales. Remember the story of the mysterious deaths and the weird dog flashing fires on the moors? There is considerable suspense although the thing is maladroitly told. Dr. Watson has to write fearfully long letters to Holmes to get the plot along."²

² Photoplay Vol. 22 Jul - Dec. 1922 pg. 594

You know the stories, you've read the stories, I'm not going to rehash all the plots of this series. The series tried to stick to the original plots. Still after having read numerous just so-so reviews (like the one above), and having watched the few films that have survived, I can't say I'm much of an Eille Norwood fan. The films had very short runs, most two weeks or less, but I'm not sure if that was due to the next in the series coming so quickly, the poor product, or the distribution problems (a story for a different essay) which had the films tied up in the courts on more than one occasion. Quantity not quality is the feeling I get for this series of films, although others, such as the aforementioned Louise Penn, whom I have viewed many more than I have, praised it.

With the Stoll films dominating the screens, there wouldn't be a lot else produced to compete with them. We have only found a couple of parodies and a few foreign films left to mention for the year 1921.

1921 - "Saetta piu forte di Sherlock Holmes" or, "An Arrow Stronger Than Sherlock Holmes". Eugenio d'Endremont as Sherlock Holmes?. Seatta Films (Italy).

1921 - "Das Detektivduell" or, "Harry Hill contra Sherlock Holmes" or, "The Dueling Detectives" or, "Harry Hill versus Sherlock Holmes". Actors unknown. Arnheim Films (Germany).

1921 - "Lya als Sherlock Holmes" or, "Lya as Sherlock Holmes". Actors unknown. Albert Löwenberg (Germany).

1921 - "The Hick on The Trail", Actors unknown. Clever Comedies Films.



The above "The Hick on The Trail" Ad says Philo Gubb as Sherlock Holmes in disguise and uses Sherlock Holmes' name in description.³

Wikipedia tells us - The character of Philo Gubb was created by Ellis Parker Butler and first appeared in the May 1913 issue of Redbook magazine. Philo Gubb attained such a high level of popularity that the author's attempt to kill the character off was derailed by public pressure. Philo Gubb is a small-town paperhanger who learned his deductive technique by correspondence course, and admires Sherlock Holmes.

Last, but hardly least, we have the Holmes parody "Sherlock Brown", the film I mention earlier which had an impressive year and a half run.

1921 - "Sherlock Brown", Bert Lytell (1885 - 1954) as William Sherlock Brown. Metro Films.



"Sherlock Brown" - The secret formula for the world's most powerful explosive has been stolen from the U.S. government. William Brown (Lytell), a clerk who aspires to be a detective, has just received his badge from some anonymous Midwestern agency (he paid all of 25 dollars for it), and manages to get himself embroiled in the intrigue. And he doesn't do too badly -- he actually gets his hands on the missing envelope, but then he's tricked by the thieves into giving it back to them. Instead of receiving his reward, he is ridiculed and his tin badge is soundly crushed. But all is not lost -- he remembers that the woman in possession of the envelope was wearing sandalwood perfume. He puts his olfactory senses to work, and after he's smelled just about everything he can find, he recovers the

³ "The Film Daily" June 8, 1921 pg. 1324

document again, gets a real detective badge, and wins his girl (Ora Carew)."⁴

THE *Film* DAILY

Sunday, June 4, 1922 5

Secret Service Story a Mixture of Melodrama and Farce

Bert Lytell in
"SHERLOCK BROWN"
Metro

DIRECTOR	Bayard Veiller
AUTHOR	Bayard Veiller
SCENARIO BY	Lenore Coffee
CAMERAMAN	Arthur Martinelli
AS A WHOLE	Mixture of melodrama and farce.
	Exciting and has plenty of laughs
STORY	Ordinary crook story with secret service stuff. Runs into many climaxes
DIRECTION	Very good. Gets a good deal of humor out of simple situations
PHOTOGRAPHY	Good
LIGHTINGS	All clear
STAR	Does first rate comedy work in this one. Role fits his character
SUPPORT	Adequate. Cast includes Ora Carew and Sylvia Breamer
EXTERIORS	Suitable
INTERIORS	Good
DETAIL	Enough
CHARACTER OF STORY	Pricedless secret envelope stolen from U. S. Government. Amateur detective gets on trail with very comical results
LENGTH OF PRODUCTION	4,800 feet

"You can't shoot us," cries the boob detective at one of the climaxes of this offering, "because I hold a bottle of nitro-glycerine." He banishes the bottle and saves the party. As soon as they are out of danger the boob detective shows you that the bottle contains only castor oil. This is typical of the many scenes contained in this offering. The changes from melodrama to farce are sudden and abrupt. The dramatic work is serious and intense while the comedy work broad farce. The mixture of the two makes a

satisfactory entertainment though it keeps one guessing right along. It steers two courses and is divided against itself.

Whenever the star appears the comedy begins, and as soon as the star goes off the picture drops back to serious drama. If you can imagine any first rate comedian as the hero of a very serious Sherlock Holmes drama, you would have a pretty good idea of the character of this Metro picture. Clever titles inserted in the serious sections would have helped greatly to hold the production to a more even level.

The star does first rate comedy work throughout the entire picture. He has been careful to give his work some intimate touches and some very appealing detail. The role fits him exceptionally well, and enables him to do some of his very best work. The interest is centered upon the star at all times, and he is supported by Ora Carew, who makes a very satisfactory leading lady. The cast is cooperative and adequate.

The offering is well directed and ably photographed. The exciting episodes will hold the attention and the comedy business is certain to get plenty of laughs.

Story: The formula for the world's most powerful explosive is stolen from the U. S. Government. The secret service is baffled; but William Brown, who got his badge from a Kansas detective agency, picks up the clue. He recovers the missing envelope but gives it to an accomplice of the thieves. Believing the envelope safe he proceeds to claim the reward from the chief of the secret service. He is exposed, ridiculed and his tin badge crushed under-foot. Once more he picks up the trail. He remembered that the woman to whom he gave the envelope used sandlewood scent. He smells everything and everybody until he recovers the missing documents and wins the reward of a real detective's badge, and the love of the girl.

Comedy Work and Star Certain To Please

Box Office Analysis for the Exhibitor

While the story presents little that is different in any way from the typical detective yarn you can nevertheless be certain that the comedy business and the work of the star will please and entertain your audience. Your big talking point is the boob detective idea. Play this up and use the star's name in your advertising. He does good work and is certain to satisfy.

Many exploitation angles present themselves. The title is a good one and will attract. Arrange a tie-up with the corner drug stores for a display of various perfumes to link up with the sandlewood episodes. Catch lines could read: "He was only a boob detective with a tin badge but he had a nose for crime. See how 'Sherlock Brown' smells his way to fame."

Give them an idea of the mystery as it is presented by the crime in the opening shots of the picture. Also tell them how the boob got his detective badge from the fake agency.

⁴ Janiss Garza, Rovi

"Sherlock Brown" must have been a very funny film to have that long of a run. In the description reprinted above, we see that this was one Sherlock who had a 'NOSE' for detection and actually 'SMELLED' his way to success.

End of Part Seventeen
(1922) Begins in Part Eighteen