

# Who's On First, It's Not So Elementary

by  
Howard Ostrom

## Part I

While making up some questions for a Sherlock Holmes quiz, I included some questions like, “Who was the first actor to play Sherlock Holmes on TV?”, and “Who was the first Sherlock Holmes performer on stage?”. These questions got me interested in researching who was the first Sherlock Holmes performer in different countries, a subject I discovered was very difficult to research. The more I discussed it with Sherlockian friends from around the world, the more I discovered how very little I knew, and still yet how very little research has been done on the subject. Therefore the purpose of this essay is not to lay claim to the fact that these are the very first Sherlock Holmes performers for a particular country, but they are simply the earliest performers my minor research has uncovered. I present this essay with the hope that the readers of it can supply me with much more information on the subject.

### England - Great Britian

**1893 - Charles Hallam Elton Brookfield (1857 – 1913)** who played Sherlock Holmes on the London stage in “Under the Clock”, was born in London which makes him first ever Sherlock Holmes in any medium AND first Englishman to play Holmes.



**Charles H.E. Brookfield as Sherlock Holmes**

“November 1893, the month before Sherlock Holmes supposedly fell to his death at the end of the adventure ‘The Final Problem’, saw the character make his debut on the stage. ‘Under the Clock’, a one-act musical satire, opened on the twenty-fifth of November at the Royal Court Theatre, London, forming part of a triple bill. The play was written by Charles Brookfield and Seymour Hicks, who would also portray Holmes and Watson respectively (albeit with a strange choice of wardrobe – Holmes wore black tights and sported a full beard, while Watson’s apparel included a monocle and a pirate’s cap). The play and its satirical tone, which was merely used as a front to throw mocking asides at certain members of the acting establishment, was given short shrift by the reviewers as well as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself. Despite this, the play achieved seventy-eight performances before the curtain fell for the final time on the twenty-fifth January, 1894.”<sup>1</sup>

## United States

**1899 - Ferris Hartman (1861 - 1931)** was the 1st ever American stage Sherlock Holmes. Ferris Hartman took to the stage as Holmes on 24th April 1899 in the play “The Man in The Moon”. This means he preceded the legendary William Gillette as the 1st American Stage Sherlock Holmes by nearly 6 months.



**Ferris Hartman**



**“The Man in The Moon”  
Program Cover**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://paulstuarthayes.blogspot.com/2013/11/charles-brookfield-firstsherlock-holmes.html>

“...New York theatrical impresario George Lederer produced “The Man in The Moon” with music by the well-known composer Reginald DeKoven (who wrote ‘Oh Promise Me’) and libretto by Louis Harrison and Stanislaus Strange. Part ballet, part ‘women in lingerie’, “The Man in The Moon” featured both Sherlock Holmes and Arthur Conan Doyle as characters, with Conan Doyle for a reason that is difficult to fathom, affecting a Dutch accent. Before going on tour, “The Man in The Moon” ran 182 performances in New York. Not bad. But the real blockbuster was going to be the Gillette’s play.”<sup>2</sup>

## Australia

**1911- Oliver Peters Heggie (1877 - 1936).** O. P. Heggie played Sherlock Holmes with Claude King as Dr. Watson and Lyn Harding as Dr. Grimesby Rylott in “The Speckled Band: An Adventure of Sherlock Holmes”, under the management of Mr. Arthur Hardy in London at the Strand Theatre, February 6-25, 1911.<sup>3</sup> O. P. Heggie “was an Australian film and theatre actor. He was born at Angaston, South Australia to a local sheep farmer and educated at Whinham College and the Adelaide Conservatoire of Music.”<sup>4</sup> So even though Harry Plimmer (see New Zealand) and Canadian Cuyler Hastings performed Holmes in Gillette’s play first in Australia, and obscure Australian actor J.L. Lawrence played Holmes in “In the Power of Sherlock Holmes” (1912) in Australia, O.P. Heggie I’d label the first native born Australian Sherlock Holmes performer.



**O. P. Heggie**

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<sup>2</sup> Panek, Leroy Lad, “The Origins of the American Detective Story”, McFarland & Co., 2006

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lib.umn.edu/scr/bm/ush/volume-3-section-XX>

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O.P.\\_Heggie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O.P._Heggie)

Australian Sherlockian Bill Barnes adds this bit of O.P. Heggie Information. “British provincial and touring company productions: Arthur Hardy’s South Company, Sept 1910-(?)1912 with O. P. Heggie as Sherlock Holmes, Grendon Bentley as Dr. Watson, and E. Vassal Vaughan as Grimsby Roylett.”<sup>5</sup> This would appear to indicate that Heggie played Holmes as early as September 1910, 5 months before he appeared at the Strand Theatre in London in the role.

## Belgium

**1902 - Marcel Myin**, of Flemish ancestry, appeared as Sherlock Holmes in the William Gillette play “Sherlock Holmes” at the Grand Theatre in Amsterdam in 1902. You might say he was Holland’s first Holmes performer too, since the Flanders area of Northern Belgium borders the Netherlands and the Flemish people speak Dutch, and after all he performed in Amsterdam, but we are going to classify him as Belgium’s first Sherlock Holmes performer.



**Marcel Myin as Sherlock Holmes**

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Pointer’s book *The Public Life of Sherlock Holmes* , 1975, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, p.129

## Burma

**1961 - Harry H Corbett (1925 - 1982)** played Sherlock Holmes in “They Might Be Giants” in London, on stage at the Theatre Royal, June 28-July 29, 1961.<sup>6</sup> Harry Corbett was born in Rangoon, Burma.



**Harry H Corbett**

## Canada

**Reuben Fax (1862-1908)** born in Canada of Scots-Irish parentage, had the role of John Forman in the Nov., 1899 - June, 1900, “Sherlock Holmes” at the Garrick Theatre in N.Y.C. What is significant about this is that Fax was the understudy to the great William Gillette. A little known fact is that when Gillette became sick in April 1900 for a short period of time Reuben Fax played the Holmes role<sup>7</sup>, thus making him Canada’s first Sherlock Holmes, rather than the more famous Canadian Cuyler Hastings who toured Canada in the William Gillette play in the early 1900’s.



**Reuben Fax**



**Cuyler Hastings**

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lib.umn.edu/scr/bm/ush/volume-3-section-XX>

<sup>7</sup> “Examier” (Launchston, Tas.) 4/21/1900



## Czechoslovakia

**1923 - Eman Fiala (1899 - 1970)** appeared as Sherlock Holmes II in “The Kidnapping of Fux Banker” (Únos bankéře Fuxe) (1923) a Czech comedy.



### Eman Fiala

“The banker Fux and his creditor Tom Darey want to get married. The banker's daughter Daisy in her father's name, put an advertisement in a paper. She wants father to meet her friend Maud. She, herself, makes the acquaintance of Darey who has her followed by detective Sherlock Holmes II. The latter finds her and tries to kidnap her but he takes her father instead. After a number of intrigues, all ends well. Holmes is let off the hook and Tom and the banker win their girls. ”<sup>8</sup> A Czech version of the Keystone Kops. Eman Fiala would also appear in the 1932 Czech film “Lelicek in the Services of Sherlock Holmes”, but with the more famous Martin Fric playing Sherlock Holmes role. Watch it at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnIjziMsgYg&list=PL500C217F042A037E&index=2>

## China

**1931 - Li Pingqian (1902 - 1984)** appears as Sherlock Holmes in the silent film “福爾摩斯偵探案”, or “Fu er mo si zhen tan an”, or "Sherlock Holmes Detects The Case" or "Stories of Sherlock Holmes" for Shao Zuiweng Films.

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<sup>8</sup> Lamač, Ondra, ‘Karel Lamač - Únos bankéře Fuxe 2’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnIjziMsgYg&list=PL500C217F042A037E&index=2>



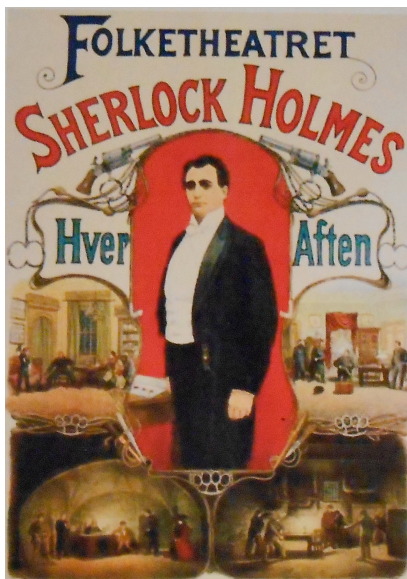
### **Li Pingqian**

“During a burglary of his mansion, wealthy businessman Yang Bofan is murdered. Concluding it happened when he accidentally walked in on the intruders and sent them into panic, the police launch a citywide dragnet for suspects, concentrating on known burglars. But one person apparently uninvolved in the case has doubts: a young woman, a shopkeeper named Shen Liyun, comes to consulting detective Sherlock Holmes and asks him to look into the case. She explains that several months earlier the murdered man had begun regular visits to her shop and gradually made her acquaintance, inquiring into her background, getting to know her, and offering business and financial advice. Her mysterious benefactor even invested in her small business so she could expand it. But while the young woman was puzzled by the older man's attention to her, at no time did she feel his kindness was out of romantic interest. Whatever his motivation, she feels he deserves the investigation be widened to ensure justice is done. Holmes accepts the case, and in a search of the victim's mansion he uncovers clues the police had missed, which lead him to an amusement park. There he finds additional clues that lead Holmes and his friend Watson to a seedy tavern, located at No.13 Waterfront Road, an address matching that on an envelope found in the victim's mansion. The tavern is actually the secret headquarters of a criminal gang, and the two investigators have walked into a trap. They are captured and locked up in a cellar. Holmes is able to find a way out through a tunnel, so the two escape and go to the police, but when they raid the tavern, the police find it cleaned out and abandoned. Holmes and Watson return home to learn there has been an attempt on Shen Liyun's life, for no apparent reason. This strange attack on the young woman steers Holmes into exploring an alternate path of investigation. After further inquiries and serious thinking, he disguises himself as a beggar and enters a cave where many beggars live. After talking to various beggars, he uncovers another clue in one's possession, a pearl stolen during the robbery. When Holmes finds out how the beggar obtained it, he leads the police back to the mansion. There, Holmes explains how the clues led him to this resolution of the mystery: the murder was the real objective and the robbery was actually a diversionary action to cover it up. Also, the mysterious attack on

Shen Liyun was directly related to the crime. The villain behind the plot was Yang Bofan's younger brother Yang Jifan, who hired the gang to commit the robbery and murder. Jifan's motive: his elder brother had learned the young shopkeeper was his long-lost daughter from an early love affair, and after locating his only child and mentoring her in business, Yang Bofan was planning to leave his own business and his entire fortune to her instead of Jifan.”<sup>9</sup>

## Denmark

**1901 - Jens Frederik Sigfred Dorph-Petersen (1845 - 1927)** - Dorph-Petersen's biggest breakthrough in the theater world, was when he performed the first Danish Sherlock Holmes play in the People's Theatre in 4 acts entitled "Sherlock Holmes" after the American actor's William Gillette's famous play of



**Folketeatret, Copenhagen**

**December 26th, 1901**



**J. F. S. Dorph-Petersen**

the same name. Dorph-Petersen himself played Sherlock Holmes, where the actor Emil Helsengreen played arch-enemy Professor Moriarty and the play was a huge success in the People's theatrical history. Even the creator of Sherlock Holmes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was proud of the play, both in the U.S. and

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.chinesemirror.com/index/2013/01/>



Denmark. <sup>10</sup> “The play was a pirate version of the Gillette original, written by the Danish sea captain Walter Christmas. For that reason I doubt that ACD was proud of the Danish play - I don't think he got payed for it. I notice that your source mentions that ACD was proud of it, and I have now contacted the man who has published that web page, to check what source he has for that fact.”<sup>11</sup> (With special thanks to Ted Bergman for the photos!)

## Estonia

**1998 - Marko Matvere (1968 - )** played Sherlock Holmes in "Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson" on the stage of the Tallinn City Theatre. Tarmo Tamm played Dr Watson. Marko Matvere is an Estonian actor, born in Pärnu, Estonia. (Thanks to Sherlockian Ray Wilcockson - for this entry.)



**Marko Matvere and Tarmo Tamm**

## Finland

**1976 - Kurt Ingvall (1925 - 1987)** Kurt Ingvall played Sherlock Holmes and Göran Schauman Doktor Watson, in William Gillette's "Sherlock Holmes", at the Svenska Teatern, (December 30, 1976-?), in Helsinki

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<sup>10</sup> [http://sherlockholmes.beboer2650.dk/jens\\_frederik\\_siegfred\\_dorph-p.html](http://sherlockholmes.beboer2650.dk/jens_frederik_siegfred_dorph-p.html)

<sup>11</sup> Bostrom, Mattias, e-mail

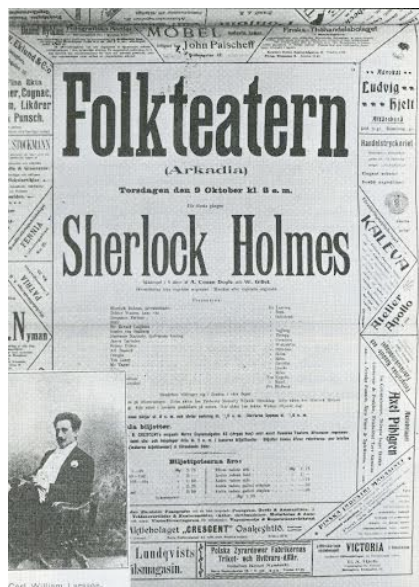


Kurt Ingvall som Sherlock Holmes.  
Svenska Teatern i Helsingfors.  
1976-12-30

## Kurt Ingvall

Surely someone out there must have an earlier Sherlock Holmes performer for Finland than 1976? I sure don't, but I'm waiting eagerly for your suggestions.

Yes we have an attempt at an answer on Finland from Sherlockian Elina Karvo of Sherlock Finland who tweeted me, "Gillette's play was performed in Finland already in 1905 with C. William Larsson playing Holmes. That's earliest one I know. It's this bilingual country of ours, the play was at Folkteatern in Helsinki. It was an extremely successful, so the play run for 5 years at least, I think. Larsson's portrayal was very well received." The one problem being the play may have been in Finland but William Larsson was Swedish. The search continues.



Carl William Larsson.



Carl William Larsson

**C. William Larsson**  
**Folkteatern in Helsinki**

(Photos from Ted Bergman)

From Sherlockian Ted Bergman more on William Larsson. “William Larsson (1873-1926) appeared as Sherlock Holmes in Gillette’s play at Folkteatern (Arkadia) in Helsingfors (Helsinki) in Finland for 32 performances, starting on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1902. The play was performed in Swedish which, beside Finnish, is still an official language there. Finland had been a part of Sweden for 600 years when the two countries separated in 1809.”<sup>12</sup>

**1957 - Jalmari Rinnes (1893 - 1985)** born in Asikkala, Finland as Jalmari Ivar Gröndahl, was Sherlock Holmes in, “Sherlock Holmes ja kaljupäisten kerho” (1957) “Sherlock Holmes and The Club of Bald Headed Men”, a Sumoen TV movie. (Found by Sherlockian Roy Lewis & translated by Sherlockian Elina Karvo). Interesting unrelated fact, the Japanese originally translated ‘The League of Red-Headed Men’ as “The League of Bald Headed Men” because they all had black hair!



**Jalmari Rinnes**

## **France**

**1907 - Firmin Gemier (1869 - 1933)** appeared as Sherlock Holmes, in William Gillette’s “Sherlock Holmes, in 1907 at Théâtre Antoine in Paris. Despite his lack of physical resemblance to Sherlock Holmes, Firmin Gemier was well received well by the public and praised by the critics.

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<sup>12</sup> Bergman, Ted, e-mail

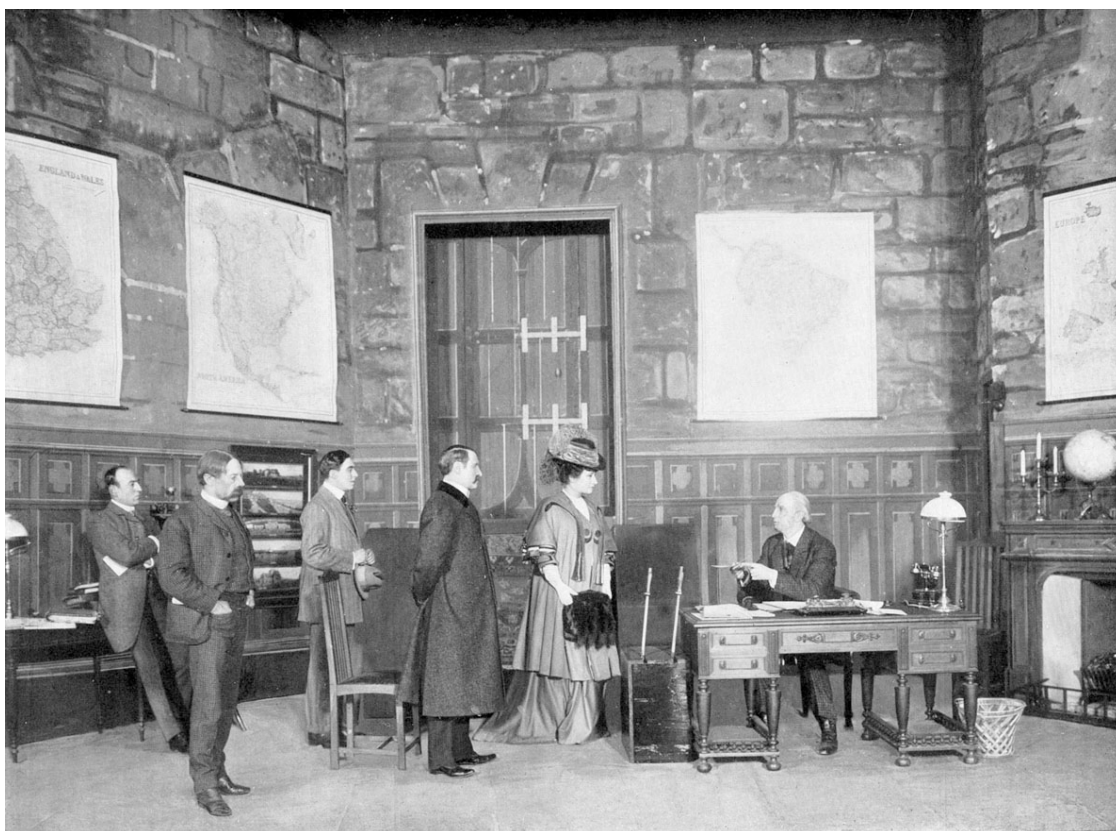




## Firmin Gemier

Ted Bergman has succeeded in securing the three stage stills which follow, from the stage of Theatre Antoine in France with M Gémier as Holmes.





*Photo Larcher.*

LE PROFESSEUR MORIARTY  
(M. Harry Baur)

SHERLOCK HOLMES  
(M. Gémier)

THÉÂTRE ANTOINE. — SHERLOCK HOLMES. — ACTE III

**Firmin Gemier**



One of the problems I have in naming the first Sherlock Holmes performer of a country is whether to pick the first to perform the detective IN that country or the first actor FROM that country to play him. As you can see in Part I (i.e. Belgium, Australia, etc.) I've chosen to do the latter. Two further problems I have, as you will see in the next country, Germany, are, first, whether to divide the country into East and West and second to wonder what to do when more than one performer acted Holmes in a given year where I have no specific dates. I shall simply present my findings which are anyway, as I said, provisional.

## Germany

**1906 - Ferdinand Bonn (1861 - 1933), Franz Schwarwhenka, or Philipp Lothar Mayring (1879–1948)** will be the real first German Slim Sherlock, please stand up, please stand up!



## Ferdinand Bonn

Screenshots from the play “Sherlock Holmes” by Ferdinand Bonn, with the author in the lead role. Performance of the Berlin Theatre, (1906).



**Franz Schwarwthenka**

Sherlock Holmes in Germany's production of William Gillette's "Sherlock Holmes" (1906).



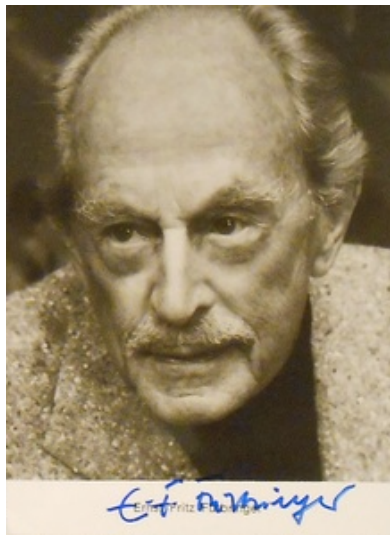
**Lothar Mayring**

Lothar Mayring of Allemagne played Sherlock Holmes in William Gillette's "Sherlock Holmes", in Munich at the Münchener Volkstheater, (1906), with Otto Kustermann as Dr. Watson.

From Sherlockian Roy Lewis, "Universal Sherlock Holmes lists Bonn performing on July 2, 1906 and Mayring on July 24, 1906, if correct wouldn't this eliminate Mayring as Germany's first Sherlock Holmes, but still leave Bonn and Schwarwthenka?" Perhaps Allemagne's then?

If we think of **West Germany** as a different country for a period of time then West Germany's first Sherlock Holmes performer would be:

**1954 - Ernst Fritz Furbringer (1900 - 1988)**, who portrayed Sherlock Holmes in two television productions. First in 1954 in an 40 min episode of "Die Galerie der großen Detektive", a German series which ran from 1954-1955 with each episode covering a different story from popular crime writers including Charles Dickens and Agatha Christie. The episode was entitled "Sherlock Holmes liegt im Sterben" (Sherlock Holmes Lies In Death) and his Watson in the episode was Harald Mannl. Furbringer would later reprise the role in the 1958 comedy television movie "Dr. med. Hiob Praetorius" but this time his Watson was played by Fred C. Siebeck.



**Ernst Fritz Furbringer**

## **Greece**

One of Conan Doyle's fifty-six short stories is named "The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter". I think I may need a Greek interpreter to find Greece's first Sherlock Holmes performer! For now we will go with this recent but obscure play sent to us by Ray Wilcockson.

**2013 - Leonidas Kakouris** played Sherlock Holmes, with Sapountzis Christos as Dr. Watson, in "The Christmas of Sherlock Holmes" at the Megaron Mousicis (Concert Hall), Athens December 2013.





**Leonidas Kakouris**



**Leonidas Kakouris, Panos Stathakopoulos, Sapountzis Christos**

“A stolen jewel, a lost hat, and a turkey ... These are the three elements of an unresolved, Christmas mystery that no one can find a solution. This will call the one and only detective of all time, Sherlock Holmes, who will arrived to answer the riddle of the weapons sharp mind, the agony and original music. This is the show "Christmas Sherlock Holmes" which presents the Concert Hall for the little ones and adults theatergoers with adventurous spirit. The show is based on the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle -with known and unknown cases of the famous British ntentektiv-, as well as the original story «The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle» Sherlock Holmes.”<sup>13</sup>

Now most assuredly there must be an earlier Greek Holmes performer than this?

<sup>13</sup> <http://tospirto.net/theater/play/2740>

So ends Part I with Greece and Part II of “Who’s On First, It’s Not So Elementary” will continue forward starting with Holland.