

Sherlock Holmes in Terror by Night

by Emily Soares | March 26, 2008



Basil Rathbone made his first appearance as his best-known and most popular character, Sherlock Holmes (with Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson), in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939) followed by *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939), films which cemented the duo's success and were followed by 12 more films and numerous radio broadcasts over the next seven years.

Terror by Night (1946) is thought by many fans of Rathbone's Sherlock Holmes films to be one of the best of the Universal series. Set on a train, it's a quintessential old-school whodunit, with all the passengers open to suspicion and each one looking guiltier than the last. The plot involves an invaluable diamond - The Star of Rhodesia - cursed, of course ("all who possessed it came to sudden and violent deaths"), and carried aboard the train by its owner, Lady Margaret Carstairs (Mary Forbes) and her son, Roland (Geoffrey Steele). Holmes and Watson have been engaged by the Carstairs to guard the diamond, but Inspector Lestrade (Dennis Hoey) "happens" to be aboard too, ostensibly for a fishing trip. Before long (and there are only 60 minutes to the film, so none to spare), the diamond is indeed stolen (or is it?) and the murders begin piling up, several committed with a poisonous dart - the killer's calling card.

Terror by Night features a great cast of character actors, including some series regulars. Hoey makes his last appearance here as Lestrade. Alan Mowbray, who plays Maj. Duncan-Bleek, played Lestrade to Reginald Owen's Holmes in the 1933 production of *A Study in Scarlet*. Frederick Worlock, who appears as the perfectly crotchety Prof. Kilbane was in a number of Holmes' films, as was Gerald Hamer, who makes his last series appearance, here as a small-time thief.

The film was shot in the final months of 1945, and the script for the next Holmes film, *Dressed to Kill* (1946) was ready to go. But Rathbone had already made the decision to part company with the character to whom he felt his career had become handcuffed. In 1946 his long-term contracts with MGM (who had loaned him to Universal for the Holmes films) and MCA (for whom he did the radio version of the series), were set to expire. *Dressed to Kill* would then become the last time Rathbone would play Holmes, and some believe the light at the end of that tunnel is what made his performance in *Terror by Night* so energetic. And was there ever a more suave Holmes? In many ways he was a precursor to James Bond in his unflappable style: after fighting for his life on the outside of the train in one scene, he smooths his hair as he enters his compartment and tells Watson he had just been "observing the landscape." Equally impressive is the tight direction of Roy William Neill, which had a much more energetic pace than several of the preceding Holmes' films he helmed, an opinion shared by Rathbone and most critics.

Released from his contracts, Rathbone went back to New York and the stage in 1946. The next year, he won a Tony Award for his portrayal of Dr. Swoper in the Broadway play *The Heiress* but was reportedly crushed when he was not asked to reprise the role for the film version. Ironically, by 1951, Rathbone was willing to play Holmes again and did so in a play written by his wife, Ouida. He appeared on and off Broadway throughout the '50s and in a one-man show titled *An Evening With Basil Rathbone*. He continued to appear in television series and films until his death in 1967.

Producer: Roy William Neill, Howard Benedict

Director: Roy William Neill

Screenplay: Frank Gruber, Arthur Conan Doyle (story)

Cinematography: Maury Gertsman

Film Editing: Saul A. Goodkind

Art Direction: John B. Goodman, Abraham Grossman

Music: Hans J. Salter

Cast: Basil Rathbone (Sherlock Holmes), Nigel Bruce (Dr. John H. Watson), Alan Mowbray (Maj. Duncan-Bleek/Col. Sebastian Moran), Dennis Hoey (Inspector Lestrade), Renee Godfrey (Vivian Vedder), Mary Forbes (Margaret Carstairs).

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