

TCM THIS MONTH



HOLMES FOR CHRISTMAS

SPECIAL EVENT

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES

Featured Films

The Hound of the Baskervilles (1939)

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock Holmes' Fatal Hour

The Hound of the Baskervilles (1959)

A Study in Terror

Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror

Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon

Sherlock Holmes in Washington

Sherlock Holmes Faces Death

Sherlock Holmes and the Spider Woman

The Scarlet Claw

The Pearl of Death

The House of Fear

Pursuit to Algiers

Sherlock Holmes in Terror by Night

Sherlock Holmes in Dressed to Kill

The Scarlet Claw



The Scarlet Claw (1944) is sixth in the series of twelve Sherlock Holmes films that Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce signed on for with Universal and is also considered one of the best entries by fans. At the risk of the franchise's success, Universal decided to update Holmes to the '40s, from the Victorian period that Twentieth-Century Fox had so lovingly and daringly created for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939).

In 1939, with the winds of war reaching U.S. audiences, escape to a kinder, cozier period of Hansom cabs and gaslight was a profitable gamble. In fact, Fox's two films were the first to attempt placing Holmes in his literary period. By 1942, Universal thought the setting would be too dated, and decided to modernize the story. Would the audience accept the retirement of Holmes' deerstalker and cape for a more contemporary outfit? The studio was nervous, but the general audience didn't mind the change and the series was a great success, following on the heels of the Fox films and the radio version of the franchise.

The Scarlet Claw, however, did not impress critics of the day. Howard Barnes of the *Herald Tribune* (May 20, 1944) was bored: "Basil Rathbone plays Holmes with a rather tired approach to the project of solving several murders in a village near Quebec. Nigel Bruce...does almost nothing to enliven the proceedings."

But the cast and crew were enthusiastic about the project, perhaps enlivened by the fact that this was the one and only time that the series' well-regarded producer-director Roy William Neill co-authored a Holmes screenplay. In *Basil Rathbone: His Life and His Films*, the film's editor, Paul Landres, recalls: "Everybody involved was very excited about this film because we all knew that it was far superior to anything else in the series."

The tiny hamlet of La Morte Rouge is a perfect setting for Holmes and Watson, with the marshes of the Canadian countryside standing in for the moors of Britain. As the duo search for the key to a series of grisly murders, the parade of village characters they encounter could be found in any English pub. With its quaint setting and gothic-style murders, **The Scarlet Claw** feels more authentic than most of the other films in the Universal series, many of which have Holmes wrestling with wartime themes.

The creepy atmosphere of the film is underscored by the unforgettable image of the glowing figure that menaces Holmes in the mist, the work of Academy Award-winning special effects treasure John P. Fulton, who was a studio mainstay until his death in 1966.

For Rathbone, the success of Holmes was a mixed blessing, and



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31 Days of Oscar

Highlights for Feb. 13

Russell Crowe stars in a tale of revenge set in ancient Rome in **Gladiator**, the Best Picture winner of 2000. Other featured Academy Award honorees include **Blow-Up** (1966), **Roman Holiday** (1953) and **Jezebel** with Bette Davis & Henry Fonda.

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31 Days of Oscar Highlights for Feb. 10

31 Days of Oscar Highlights for Feb. 25

31 Days of Oscar Highlights for Feb. 17

31 Days of Oscar Highlights for Feb. 14

31 Days of Oscar Highlights for March 3



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ultimately, an unwelcome burden. In his biography *In and Out of Character*, he recalls feeling trapped by the role, "more completely 'typed' than any other classic actor has ever been or ever will be again." What's more, Holmes' superman abilities eventually alienated Rathbone from the character he brought to life: "[T]here was nothing lovable about Holmes....It would be impossible for such a man to know loneliness or love or sorrow because he was completely sufficient unto himself....One was jealous of his mastery in all things, both material and mystical....Yes, there was no question about it, he had given me an acute inferiority complex!"

Producer: Roy William Neill

Director: Roy William Neill

Screenplay: Edmund L. Hartmann; Roy William Neill; Paul Gangelin (story); Brenda Weisberg (story); Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (characters)

Cinematography: George Robinson

Art Direction: Ralph M. DeLacy, John B. Goodman

Music: Paul Sawtell (uncredited)

Film Editing: Paul Landres

Cast: Basil Rathbone (Sherlock Holmes), Nigel Bruce (Doctor Watson), Gerald Hamer (Potts), Paul Cavanagh (Lord Penrose), Arthur Hohl (Emile Journet), Miles Mander (Judge Brisson), Kay Harding (Marie Journet), David Clyde (Sergeant Thompson), Ian Wolfe (Drake), Victoria Horne (Nora).

BW-85m.

by Emily Soares



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