

the Wonderful Mystery of

Sherlock Holmes

Scrawl is proud to present this interview with the late Jeremy Brett in which he talked to Jeremy Dean about playing the definitive Holmes

Late in 1989, I had the great privilege to meet and talk with Jeremy Brett, one of the great British actors. I still recall the event with great clarity and pleasure. I conducted the interview for *Outlook*, a small London-based journal, and it was to be the lead feature for an up-coming issue. Unfortunately, the music editor convinced the publisher that a new chart-bound pop duet, were more 'hip' and would appeal to the young readership the magazine so desperately courted. Hence, Brett was dropped from the cover to be replaced by Soho, and the feature was hacked down to a single page. Now, more than a decade later, Soho are perhaps remembered by very few for their one chart hit, the publisher of *Outlook* has moved onto other things, and Jeremy Brett is, tragically, no longer with us. Or to put it another way, Soho gone, *Outlook* gone, Jeremy Brett still a household name, immortalised in particular for his masterly rendering of the definitive Shelock Holmes, loved by millions of fans across the globe... and finally, I get the chance to present the interview as intended.

"We're reaching the end of a century where the rich get richer and the poor become evermore neglected."

Jeremy Brett quotes a line from the play *The Secret Of Sherlock Holmes*, in which he brought to (larger than) life the character that he developed in the popular Granada Television series, *The Adventures Of Sherlock Holmes*...

"It's almost a mirror image of today. When I say that line each night, you can feel a chill run through the audience. And then you come out of the theatre and find the people getting ready for the night – and there is that enormous extreme.

"I don't think we'll ever go back, thank God, because we have no idea just how unbearably poor it was, and remember that women have moved much faster – now men and women can be friends. Then, they were worshipped, put on pedestals, the men went off to their clubs and women sat and had tea. Now that's all changed, and I'm very glad about that, although man's relationship with man has become very threatened – [gentlemen's] club life is the bastion that women long to burn down because they don't know what happens in there...

"It's no longer palatable to see two men arm in arm. Holmes and Watson used to walk around linking arms – like a father and son crossing the road – and it has been suspect for years, they must have been the original 'odd couple'. I think the value of the play is showing friendship in its purest

naivety and simplicity. It's a play about two men, both lonely, both lost. One is a genius, one a good man. Both have lived a bit. And their friendship is there like a pool of clear water to see right through, that purity and all those old fashioned things like honour, trust, consideration, manners. So many things were valuable then, and that's changed."

Jeremy Brett sits in the window of Solange's Wine Bar, partaking of his pre-performance ritual: a good steak. "You have to be very careful with yourself. Keep fit. Keep well." Something he learned from Laurence Olivier, a great role model of his, with whom he worked at the National Theatre and who said of his interpretation of Holmes, "You've made the part your own – stick with it." But is Brett wary of becoming typecast?

"You can't be worried about typecasting, otherwise you wouldn't be able to play anything. I've been typecast as Hamlet and Max DeWinter, the next thing they'll be asking me to play is *Doctor Who* and I'd be typecast as that!

Fortunately, I look nothing like the way I look as Holmes and I had a reputation before I took the part. But if I'm going to be typecast, let's be typecast as a genius – that's wonderful. I don't mind!"

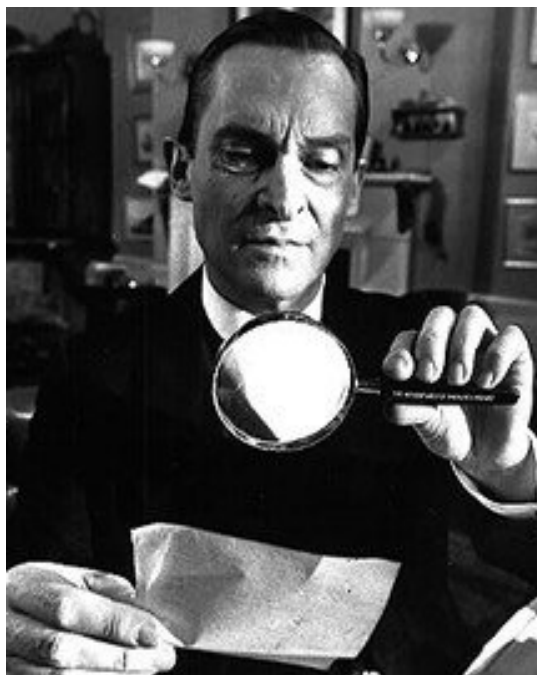
JEREMY D: But what part would you most want to play in an ideal world?

JEREMY B: "I'd like to get this one right! It's a life-time thing, like *Hamlet* – you just never get to the bottom of it. The only thing I've managed to do is the stories that Doyle wrote. Some people are absolutely aghast at what I've done: I've turned women on to him, I don't know what Doyle would think of that! To portray Holmes as a romantic is disgraceful, – I didn't mean to."

"I've learned from the theatre audience that kids idolise him. He's the 'earthbound superman'. I think he's the one who started it all off. Obviously *Batman* comes from it, and *Columbo* – I can't think of many modern ones that don't have Holmes, and Watson, running through them."

"Holmes is a hard one to do because he's such a private creature. How do you let the camera, the audience into this privacy? How do you give the impression of his genius and the speed of him – brilliant boxer, fencer? Of someone who's that brilliant and also in that disarray: his pipe, smoking, his cocaine and morphine... And he's such a comedian!

"I always find something different in him, all sorts of colourations."



So, what other role could possibly be challenging enough for Brett, after he has perfected Holmes?

"I've decided I must play Lear, with the heaviest Cordelia in the world! Everyone finds the lightest actress so they can carry her, so I'll get a huge Cordelia, do some weight lifting and have her strung with wires so I can actually amaze people!"



When Brett talks of Holmes it is from a viewpoint within the character, the viewpoint of the method actor. How does he reconcile this with his admiration for Olivier, who denounced the method school of acting?

"I don't really know what's meant by 'method'. I do become the character, which can be extremely dangerous – if you're to method act, make sure it's someone nice and charming, not difficult like M.A.C.B.E.T.H. You really have to throw everything you have into it. Try to become the creature and erase yourself. I've always worked like a sponge, wrung myself out and drawn the character in.

"Olivier was a little perverse about 'the method', but he's the only one I ever saw actually become a part – and I know, because I was there when he did it. Whatever he said, he certainly didn't practice what he preached – he was not an external actor. He was a primitive.

"You can't leave blood out of the primitive. He could be so outrageously frightening, wonderful, so powerful! Fearless! He could whiplash his voice. Nothing he could not do. You couldn't put him down. And now he's left us a wonderful mystery that will never be solved. And you can see it, thank God for film. Put *Edward IV* and *Richard III* side by side and you see two completely different people – you cannot believe they are the same person – that's how much of a method actor he was."

So, it seems like Brett would continue playing Holmes, until all the stories are produced for television or cinema...

"What's so nice is you don't really know what's going to happen – you can't really cast yourself – other people see you from a different angle you don't know about. When I was first offered Holmes I was surprised. I thought, 'my nose isn't that big, why me?'. It was probably because I'd been Max DeWinter in *Rebecca*, or been Dracula on stage, or the film of 'the Scottish play'...So I'm looking forward to the next surprise!"

"There's been so much talk about a movie, but I feel the one hour slot is better for the stories. I've been told that Jack

Nicholson is very interested to play Moriarty – he's got the forehead for it! He's also one of my most favourite actors in the world..."

Sherlock aside, what does Jeremy Brett care about, what makes him angry?

"Well there are things that make us all steam – but if you go on steaming, you'll just die in steam. The boy swinging his bag in front of a tank is in my mind all the time, and the fact that they swept the square over... We're losing another city, Beirut. But how do you live with that? You may have a universal conscience, but what to do?"

"If you don't feel it, you're among the brainless. If you come out of the tunnel of a dream and find that you're weeping and trace it back, and you've been running down a street in Beirut... I'm always glad that sensibility has come with me into the subconscious..."

"It's very dangerous to talk about these things in a kind of way, because I don't mean them to sound flip – they're not! They are profoundly important.

"...There's no time to be like a swallow and hover in the air, you've got to be busy, busy, busy! No time just to stop and contemplate, you've got to get your act together. A lot of people don't know what to do about it, and when the chips are down, it's really terrible that people are daunted into living for money. It's not the right god.

"People ask, 'what are you going to do?' too soon. You can't just take a pencil and a sheet of paper and doodle until it comes to you... To say, 'I have nothing to put in its place, but I just don't want to do *this*,' – so difficult

"When my stepson, Caleb, said, 'I don't want to do this,' while studying for his third degree, I was guilty of asking, 'Well what are you going to do?' and he said, 'When my ambition crosses my destiny, then I'll know'. God bless him, he's got it! He's right. But that's not allowed to happen enough in the push-and-shove.

"I've been spoiled, you see, I've been allowed to work in my chosen profession and it's never let me down. I adore it."



Jeremy Brett died in his sleep during September 1995 after an illustrious acting career that culminated in his portraying Holmes for ten years in 41 television adaptations of the original stories. His last broadcast was a BBC Radio 4 appeal on behalf of the Manic Depression Society in which he spoke of how he had lived with the affliction and coped with its violent mood swings.