

Sherlockian Theatrical Society

A non-Judgmental Play Appreciation Society

Number 33

April 27, 2024

"The Adventure of the Abbey Grange"

"The Adventure of the Copper Beeches"

Adapted By Max Bush

St. Paul, Minnesota

In the closing days of April, far-flung Uncritic #010 ventured all the way to St. Paul, Minnesota for a Sherlockian double feature at the University of Northwestern (not to be confused with Northwestern University in Chicago). The university theater department presented dramatizations of not one but two classic Holmesian adventures, The Abbey Grange and The Copper Beeches.



The university campus is small but beautiful, nestled among hills, trees, and lakes north of St. Paul. The theater is a black-box affair with tiered seating on three sides, offering a good view of the minimalist stage from all angles. Sets and props were evocative of the era and easy to shift for quick scene changes.

Both dramatizations were extremely faithful to the original stories. At the opening of each, the relationship between Holmes and Watson (Jon Haven and Krister Kahl) was cleverly established. In the Abbey Grange, Inspector Stanley Hopkins (Carter Lambert) clearly hero-worshipped Holmes, while Lady Brackenstall (Elizabeth Stuebs) gave an impassioned and heart-rending denouncement of British divorce law of the time. Her relationship with Captain Crocker (Nick Frese) was tender yet conformed to the Victorian demands of virtue. The director (Meghan Malley) avoided the problem of long passages of exposition from Crocker by dramatizing the events of Lord Brackenstall's death with the help of some clever lighting and set design.

The Copper Beeches, directed by Mikaela Taylor, was equally engaging and provided still more insight into the relationship of the main characters. Dr. Watson chafed at Holmes's criticisms of his storytelling, and insisted on being allowed to finish his dinner - both of which endeared him to this Uncritic's heart! Violet Hunter (Annika Mossberg) was baffled but plucky and resourceful in her strange employment as a governess with unusual duties. Jephro Rucastle (Isaiah Johnson) was the perfect balance of oily-and-ingratiating with sinister-and-threatening, as the occasion called for. Mr. and Mrs. Toller (Joshua Fisher and Kaylee Selin) played Victorian servants with some divided loyalties (hers to Mr. Rucastle's daughter, his to Mr. Rucastle's liquor collection). The Copper Beeches offered more comic relief than the Abbey Grange. I always wondered what the funny stories were that Mr. Rucastle used to keep Violet amused while she wore the blue dress. Thanks to this production, now I know! It turns out that in his youth, Rucastle was an actor, and he had a stock of hilarious anecdotes from his time treading the boards.

As a happy extra, the playwright, Max Bush, was in the audience and I was able to have a spirited discussion with him about the finer points of Sherlockiana, including whether Watson was ever divorced (he thinks so, I think not) and what jokes would have been consistent with the Victorian era. Both Max Bush and Jon Haven, the actor who played Holmes, were delighted that Dallas has a lively Sherlockian community and that a member of that community had come all the way to St. Paul to see their performance. Yet another proof that a live production of a Sherlock Holmes play is never too far away!

As a reminder, The Sherlockian Theatrical Society is a non-judgmental society. It is our belief that any play about Sherlock Holmes is worth attending. We love Sherlock Holmes and we love live theater, so nothing will deter us off of our chosen path.

Break a leg!!!

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