

Atypical Holmes tale is a pleasant puzzler nonetheless

By JULIE McHALE - Post Theater Critic

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Randall T. Anderson as Sherlock Holmes, left, and Jim Owczarski as Dr. Watson in "The Secret Life of Sherlock Holmes" by the Milwaukee Entertainment Group.
Submitted photo

MILWAUKEE - A fictional icon, Sherlock Holmes continues to fascinate audiences with his cerebral gift for deductive reasoning and his quirky ways.

Long after his creator Conan Doyle's death, other dramatic artists, such as Jeremy Paul, have kept him alive with new details about his personal life and his relationship with his partner and friend Dr. Watson. Both men are fascinating characters, and Randall T. Anderson, an actor frequently popping up in many theaters, and a less-known actor, Jim Owczarski, capture their personalities and their unusual connection.

In "The Secret of Sherlock Holmes," Watson, in a way, reverses roles with Holmes. He's the one solving the mystery, the mystery of Holmes himself.

Watson has just returned from the Afghan War wounded and is temporarily lost. After being nursed back to health and spending his savings, he realized that he had to change his lifestyle and move to more modest quarters. It was through this search that he was introduced by an acquaintance to Sherlock Holmes, another man looking to share expenses and some level of companionship.

When people decide to share living quarters, there are always some surprising discoveries, even between people who thought they knew each other well. In this story, they were really two strangers coming together, and their co-habitation evolved into quite a unique partnership.

As the play opens, Amanda Hull, set designer, gives us a moderately plush apartment with all the furniture covered in sheets. It parallels the theme of the story itself, the gradual process of uncovering what lies underneath the surface. As Watson is plumbing the depths of Holmes, we are doing the same with both characters. We end up liking Watson more, I might add.

Though not precise in terms of years, these two men lived together twice - once before Watson married, though they still kept in contact and Watson still traveled with Holmes sometimes, and again after Watson was widowed. And then there is a third time - this time an unexpected coming together.

Though there were many surprises along the way, mostly about Holmes and his quirks and habits, the final secret occurs near the end of the play, and I'll leave that one for you to discover for yourself.

Holmes, despite his success, was prone to mood swings and often indulged in cocaine to try to capture the same high he experienced when working on a challenging case. Except for Watson, he was almost friendless and seemingly incapable of much empathy. He lived by his head rather than his heart, and yet was quite attached to Watson and supposedly fell in love once in his life with a famous opera star.

Because both actors were so skillful and engaging, and Paul's dialogue so well-written, we were transfixed throughout. Not a typical Holmes story, but one that provided its own fascination. Each human being is a bit of a mystery, even to himself, and certainly to others.

"The Secret of Sherlock Holmes"

The play runs through Feb. 10 in the Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee.
Call 414-388-9104 or visit tom@milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com.