

Devilishly clever *Sherlock Holmes* at Theatre Three

Review by Martha Heimberg

From the British military encampment in colonial India to the darkly lit opium dens in London, Theatre Three's production of *Sherlock Holmes in The Crucifer of Blood* is a devilishly clever entertainment – one that the quirky detective himself would applaud. Certainly on opening night the audience clapped loudly for the whole cast – and especially for Chuck Huber's brilliant and drug-damaged Sherlock!

Paul Giovanni's 1978 adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four* is directed by Jeffrey Schmidt, who keeps the gears cranking swiftly on the often intricate plot mechanisms, staying focused on the hilarious and often creepy Victorian characters confronting the famed detective as he deduces who killed whom and why.

The action begins in India in 1857, where three British officers obtain a cask of glittering jewels, and take a ghastly blood oath to work together to get the treasure to England, where they can all share in the enormous wealth. Early obstacles are the violent half-caste servants, dark mumblings of a fatal curse, and the possibility of treachery among the officers.

When the scene shifts to 211-B Baker Street, it's thirty years later, and Sherlock Holmes is playing his violin upside down, with screeching violence -- and shooting up with cocaine. Dr. Watson (a most mild-mannered *Curtis Raymond Shideler*) pleads with his friend to stop muddling his brain. Sherlock, of course, insists, his drug use sharpens and clarifies his astonishing insight. Still, he admits that he's frustrated and his mind is desperate for a puzzle to solve. "I'm a slave to my faculty," he confesses.

Instantaneously, a knock comes at the door – and in rushes the beautiful Irene St Clare (white-skinned and wild-eyed *Hilary Couch*) distraught because her father, a retired British officer, has become an opium addict. Moreover, his life is mysteriously threatened by a document written in blood!

Pacing in his dressing gown, Holmes swings into action, and begins deducing all sorts of background details – based on a good ear for accents and a bit of red mud! The game is afoot, and Sherlock fans perk up their ears, move to the edge of their seats to watch the detective and his colleague unravel a thousand clues and weave the results into a masterful solution!

Of course that's going to take another whole act – and many dark alleys, female shrieks in the night, lepers, and even a lost Pygmy tribe, complete with poisoned thorns and arrows. Comic relief also abounds – in the person of the dull-witted Inspector Lestrade (a natty and numb-skulled *Jackie Cabe*). Lestrade gets many a smart and funny come-uppance from Holmes for his too-hasty assumptions.

But lepers, lying ladies and the vengeful old Major Alistair Ross (a quivering and spiteful *Greg Lush*) not withstanding – we trust in the amazing reasoning powers and considerable bravado of our anti-hero to track it all down and make sense of what we are seeing. Huber is wonderfully astute in his delivery of these wildly detailed and farcical deductions -- and incredibly, we believe him utterly!

Aaron Patrick Turner's period red-and-black-themed costumes work perfectly – and his female boots and sequined naughty dresses are enticing. Director Schmidt also designed the set and props – all extreme and fun in themselves. I loved the Victorian wheelchair, with its ornate trim, and golden oxygen tanks attached to the back. *Amada West's* lighting design is sometimes stark, and often deliciously murky – especially in the candlelit opium dens of the city.

It's hard to fault this fast-paced fantasy-driven show; it ends a bit before you want it to – which is saying much for any production. Theatre Three delivers a satisfying escape mystery for their 2010-2011 season opener.

Sherlock Holmes in The Crucifer of Blood runs through September 5 at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh Street. Tickets are \$10 to \$40; for reservations, cal 214-871-3300 or check www.theater3dallas.com