

'BASKERVILLE'

a melodramatic take on Sherlock Holmes



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Sherlock Holmes (Frank Jagodnik), right, and his trusty assistant, Doctor Watson (David Sweeney).

By Katherine Lacaze
For Cannon Beach Gazette

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's beloved crime-solving duo, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, will get a melodramatic makeover at the Coaster Theatre Playhouse this summer in "Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery," running through Saturday, Sept. 1.

"The whole play itself is a valentine to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's text, but also to theater itself, because there are a lot of theatrical devices audiences normally don't see in modern theater," said Director Jenni Tronier, who loves "a good murder-mystery" and directed Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile" in 2015. "There is a lot of suspension of disbelief required on the part of the audience."

In writing the script, American playwright Ken Ludwig

closely followed Doyle's original work, "The Hound of the Baskervilles." What is needed to transform this literary classic — brimming with action, adventure and dozens of interesting characters — into a stage production are theatrical, sometimes farcical devices: absurd props, breaking the fourth wall, quick changes into new costumes both on and offstage, and plenty of sound and light cues.

The show's small cast of Coaster Theatre veterans includes Frank Jagodnik as Sherlock Holmes, David Sweeney as Doctor Watson, Slab Slabinski as Actor One, Ryan Hull as Actor Two and Emily Dante as Actress One.

Under the guidance of Tronier, they have been given vastly different tasks: Jagodnik and Sweeney must breathe new life and distinction into a famous duo already portrayed a dozen times over, while

Slabinski, Hull and Dante must keep the audience up to speed on who's who while coming on and offstage depicting a revolving lineup of more than 35 supporting characters.

The iconic duo

To reincarnate Sherlock Holmes — who holds a Guinness World Records title for "Most Portrayed Literary Human Character in Film & TV" — Jagodnik studied the mannerisms and character choices made by well-known actors who depicted the iconic sleuth, but he is also relying on his own interpretation and instincts.

"You have to go with what you have," he said. "It's you doing it, it's your voice, it's your body. You can't be Jeremy Brett, even though you want to be. You can't be Basil Rathbone or Benedict Cumberbatch."

For Watson, Sweeney is focused on two watchwords:

chronicler and observer. "Much of what I try to do is respond to what's going on around me, more reactive than proactive," he said.

In "Baskerville," Watson and Sherlock already have an established friendship and professional partnership, which is the heart of the show.

"Their relationship is the key to everything they do," Tronier said. "They're yin and yang." On his face, Sherlock is not a particularly endearing character — he's addicted to drugs and smoking, can be volatile and has sociopathic tendencies. Watson, however, "sees the humanity in him, he sees the brilliance, the mind," Tronier said. Sherlock's "wicked habits," which are referred to in the play, help bring him down a notch.

"Because Sherlock is flawed, he's more relatable," she said. "If he was just this



Coaster Theatre actors (from left) David Sweeney, Slab Slabinski, Frank Jagodnik in 'Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery.'



From left: Slab Slabinski, David Sweeney, Frank Jagodnik and Emily Dante star in 'Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery' at the Coaster Theatre.

brilliant detective who was a nice guy, I don't think people would like him as much, because there wouldn't be a relatable aspect to him."

Jagodnik and Sweeney emphasize the importance of artfully portraying the co-dependence and loyalty between the detective and his sidekick, whose relationship has served as a template for other buddy cop duos for more than a century.

Like a musical

For the other three actors, the focus is breadth rather than depth. During the start of the rehearsal process, they individually met with Tronier to discuss each of their individual characters and conceptualize how that person would talk and move, or what idiosyncrasies could define them.

"I encouraged them to explore physically, as well as vocally," Tronier said.

While the costumes Judith

Light has created for each character will help evoke and distinguish them, the onus is on the actors to endow each one with a different voice or accent, physical characteristic or other mannerisms.

"There are a couple scenes where each of us are playing two different characters in the same scene and even speaking two lines back-to-back as different characters," Slabinski said.

Some characters make a single appearance in a short scene; others weave their presence throughout the show's approximately 30 scenes. From an audience perspective, Dante said, "you really have no idea who's going to pop out from behind the curtain."

Performances begin at 7:30 p.m. Visit coastertheatre.com for a full show and event calendar, or call the Coaster Theatre box office at 503-436-1242 for tickets.

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