



Notes from a play reading

The Sherlock Entreaty

A play by Charmaine Spenser

Directed by Valerie Adami Juhlin

Notes by Alan Rettig

Again and again we realize how prescient Mycroft Holmes was when he observed that he hears of his brother Sherlock everywhere. Today's deluge of new takes on the iconic detective are surely without precedent, and offer endless opportunities for innovation and fun—a feast for modern Sherlockians.

Case in point: a delightful staged reading of Charmaine Spenser's *The Sherlock Entreaty* by New York's non-profit Break A Leg Productions. Sherlockians and friends gathered on September 24 at the cozy Playroom Theater just steps from Times Square for an early look at this comedy, based loosely on "The Naval Treaty."

The comic twist is that there is no Sherlock Holmes, that Watson is the true detective genius, and that he has invented the Holmes character as his literary alter-ego. Eventually this requires him to employ an actor to portray the fictitious Holmes for a "won't-take-no-for-an-answer" client. To be sure, it's a gimmick we've seen before, most notably in the 1988 film *Without a Clue*, starring Michael Caine and Ben Kingsley. In both the film and this play, mayhem ensues—inevitably.

But because the play wisely uses "The Naval Treaty" as its muse, there is excellent motivation for Watson's scramble to cast a West End Holmes. After all, even though he might brush aside entreaties from a stranger, he cannot ignore the plight of his distraught old schoolmate Percy "Tadpole" Phelps. Holmes must take the case—as soon as Watson can find a Holmes.

And he does. Real actor Robert Tekavec enters as West End hack actor Walter Sallowfield who in turn assays Sherlock Holmes for the benefit of Phelps and to the relief of Watson. The lion's share of the show's laughs come via Sallowfield's ineptness, but the script avoids some of the more obvious and cheap character flaws: he's not a drunk and he's not playing a double game. He's just, well, a bad actor, and it takes a good actor to play a bad one. Tekavec did it very well. Many of the laughs come from the newly-minted Holmes's obsession with



stagecraft over detecting. He's not happy with the "clashing" costume elements Watson provides, but does admit in a moment of lucidity that the deerstalker would be all right since they're going to the country. He's continually distracted by what he perceives as bad blocking as Watson tries to "help" him find the missing treaty. And he's always worried that the time taken by the complex case will keep him away from his duties upon the boards. "Tell the understudy to prepare!" he fusses.

After many laughs and a romp through a reasonable facsimile of Conan Doyle's maze to the treaty, Percy is predictably redeemed and the audience is left smiling.

At the conclusion of the performance, Break A Leg hosted a talkback with the audience that featured Priory Scholars Nick Martorelli and Christopher Zordan. It was a lively colloquy that touched on many subjects, from the worldwide popularity of Holmes, to Victorian sensibilities, to the Sherlockian sense of humor, to the Grand Game itself.

Break A Leg Productions comes by its name honestly in a way that goes well beyond the theatrical cliché. When actress Teri Black broke her leg she couldn't even audition for a production of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* at a theater in New Mexico. To keep the creative juices flowing while she healed she hosted play readings in her apartment. Now in New York City, and with the support of Actors' Equity, corporations and individuals, Break A Leg continues to bring people together across the footlights. Teri Black played Lady Holdhurst in *The Sherlock Entreaty* and moderated the talkback afterward.

The Sherlock Entreaty by Charmaine Spenser, directed by Valerie Adami Juhlin, with Mat Labotka, Donna Lee Michaels, Timothy Paul Jobe, Robert Tekavec, Kyonne Smith, Steven Peacock Jacoby, Teri Black. Staged reading produced by Break A Leg Productions at the Playroom Theater, New York City, September 24, 2019.

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