

## Richard Roxburgh (Sherlock Holmes)



Richard Roxburgh had few qualms about taking on the role of Sherlock Holmes. “I probably should have,” he confesses, “but I skipped that and went straight into a state of nervous excitement, not because he’s such a well-known character but because he’s such a very complex man. All the books are so detailed and descriptive of who he is. He’s almost entirely cerebral – probably to the detriment of other areas of his life. As Watson points out, he has vast knowledge deficits. He seems to have no interest in having a relationship and that’s ostensibly because it would interfere with his powers of intuition. And he would be a lesser detective as a result.”

*The Hound Of The Baskervilles* is a fantastic composite of terrifying ingredients, Roxburgh believes, and Conan Doyle is a master at putting them all together to make a gothic thriller. “It gets right to the heart of some of our deepest fears, and appeals to us on an ancient, subconscious level – the idea of a big black dog,

something outside the cave, something that could eat you. On top of that it’s set on the wasteland of the moors, which is perilous because if you got lost out there you’d just die. The landscape is treacherous, then there’s someone out there – and we don’t know who it is – who is committing murders. And it’s all happening at night!”

For the 39-year-old Australian, who played the evil Duke in *Moulin Rouge* opposite Nicole Kidman and played Hugh Stamp opposite Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible II*, playing “such an iconic English character is more of a challenge because I’m an Australian.” Being younger than previous actors who have played Holmes “has a bearing on his interpretation of the role”, as does the inclusion of the darker side to his character. “I find it interesting that Holmes was addicted to cocaine, and took a seven per cent solution twice a day. He believed it helped his powers of reasoning and then he had to take morphine to relax. To me this indicates that there’s something missing in his life.”

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Roxburgh calls Holmes and Watson “an odd couple”, and believes that the contrast between them makes them two parts of a whole. “Holmes’s intelligence and phenomenal powers of logical deduction perfectly complement Watson’s heart and humanity. The two complement and offset one another, so the idea of their being shackled up together in Baker Street makes complete sense. Yes, they’re an odd couple in a way, but they make up one unit.

“There’s a linear quality to Holmes, whereas Watson is more rounded – he falls for women, but Holmes doesn’t want that entanglement in his life,” explains Roxburgh. “Nobody is as untainted by life as Holmes is, everybody else is touched by matters of life. Holmes is like a Samurai. It’s always just about solving the case, it’s a perpetual stimulation to him. He’s a practical puzzler. He sets himself extremely difficult targets and almost always achieves them. But you have to ask, ‘What is missing from this person’s life that he lives it like this?’ What are the things that are missing as a result?”

Roxburgh confesses that the 1939 film of *The Hound Of The Baskervilles* with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce is the only adaptation of the novel that he has seen. “I thought that if we were going to try and do something a little bit different, it would be more interesting to claim it as the character that bubbles up out of the books.

“There’s a very strong popular perception of what Holmes is like. If somebody draws a deerstalker hat and a pipe, it’s like an international symbol, like the symbol for the Red Cross – everybody knows what it means,” continues Roxburgh. “Whereas if you read the books it doesn’t, that’s not Holmes. Those symbols are indicative of Basil Rathbone’s portrayal and we’re challenging that. This film is truer to the books. More often he’s smoking a cigarette and wearing a square bowler hat.”

## Ian Hart (Dr Watson)



For Ian Hart, whilst there was no escaping the iconic status of Dr Watson, the trick was to bring a fresh interpretation to the part. “There’s so much that’s known about Watson, you just can’t get it out of your head,” says Hart, “particularly the other versions that we’ve all seen.” He cites the Basil Rathbone film of 1939 with Nigel Bruce as Watson, as well as Jeremy Brett and Edward Hardwicke’s Holmes and Watson for ITV in 1988 as ones that particularly stay in the memory. “I remember them in the same way I remember films like *The Dambusters* or *The Great Escape* – they are films that connected with the audience, they had a way of staying in the mind.

“All of the information is in there and it can’t be ignored, so you might as well use it positively,” he continues. “But by the same token you hope that you’re going to bring a fresh interpretation to it, because it’s a great part.”

Hart, 37, who is best known for his roles as Professor Quirrell in *Harry Potter And The Philosopher’s Stone* and as the father in Stephen Frears’s *Liam*, says he was attracted to the role of Watson because it offered an opportunity to re-invent the character. Hart felt that he was assisted in this by screenwriter Alan Cubitt’s portrayal of the famous detective and his sidekick.

One minute they are seen running after a cab in Baker Street and the next they are pursuing their foe across the Dartmoor wilderness. “In a film, you snap your fingers and a cab appears,” says Hart, “in reality you have to chase the fella. That does ground it, you have to walk from A to B – you can’t just cut from A to B. We’re used to seeing people do things rather than assuming they’ve just done it. Holmes and Watson are very dynamic individuals in the books. The idea of these guys giving chase is not

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only contemporary to us, it feels completely right to the period. In other versions they never even seem to get their feet wet.

“In this film we’ve avoided some of the earlier pitfalls of making Watson a complete bumbling fool,” says Hart. “Here, he’s got a clear and active role which is part of a double act with Holmes. Why have Watson with you if you are the greatest detective of the criminal mind and you know the answer to every question? But Holmes did include Watson time and time again.

“Not only is Watson reliable and straightforward in his thinking, but he is also practical – he saw action and was injured in the Afghan war,” explains Hart. “In a relationship, we always look for the things that are lacking in ourselves. Holmes is thinking on several levels at once, whereas Watson is thinking on only the one level. You need someone to book the tickets – he’s a practical human being.”

Watson doesn’t only make up for Holmes’s lack of practical application, but for his lack of emotional engagement as well. “Holmes just wants to solve the case,” explains Hart. “He keeps his distance and never gets emotional. He would not be so good at his job if he did.”

In his research for the part, Ian Hart learnt that Holmes never understood women. “Whenever Holmes needed information from a woman, it was Dr Watson who was always pushed forward because this was his area of expertise. We’ve made use of that. Whilst Watson’s job is primarily to watch, learn and to send information back from Baskerville Hall to Holmes in London, he’s still human. Like any man who sees a good-looking lady – and Miss Stapleton is a beautiful woman – he can’t really help but react as one would in those circumstances.

“I think that this aspect of Watson’s character makes him more real,” continues Hart. “Watson’s a ladies’ man, and always has been.”

Richard E Grant (Stapleton)



Richard E Grant confesses to never having seen *The Hound Of The Baskervilles* before. “What I was curious about is the fact that there are no stock iconic symbols like the deerstalker hat or pipe that have been in other films,” he says. “So if mine is unlike any previous interpretation of Stapleton, and Richard Roxburgh’s is unlike any Holmes that has gone before, we’ll probably be sued by the Sherlock Holmes Society – I’ll avoid Baker Street for the next year!” he quips.

For the 44-year-old actor, whose numerous credits include *Gosford Park*, *Jack And Sarah* and *Withnail And I*, Stapleton is clearly the equal of Sherlock Holmes. “Stapleton is an archaeologist and anthropologist. He has a very scientific mind and a genuine job on the Grimpen Mire exhuming bodies and skeletons for historical interest,” he explains. “He sees the fastidious and intellectually driven nature of Holmes as being somehow equal. Just like Hannibal Lecter, he finds someone who is worthy of his crimes.”

Stapleton is defined by his interest in anthropology, relics and digging for bones, says Grant. “It’s intended in the story for his nature to come across as macabre. What for Stapleton is perfectly normal – to obsessively examine a human being’s head and to identify what shape it is – is bonkers to anyone else.

“When Stapleton first meets Holmes and Watson, he is genuinely star-struck at their status, they are such celebrated detectives,” says Grant. This contrasts with Stapleton’s life “in the middle of nowhere, in a very isolated and run-down farmhouse. It’s the equivalent of Poirot coming down; he is thrilled that they are there. Holmes being a celebrity only adds to the charge of it. It means that for Stapleton, there’s more of a sense of triumph by the end.”

Stapleton has a menacing authority over Miss Stapleton. “For so many of the scenes he has to appear cheerful and normal, but because of what is known about Stapleton, hopefully this is

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seen as subterfuge and cover-up,” says Grant. “This gives an extra charge to his relationship with Miss Stapleton, which has to be sexual. It’s an intriguing relationship. The power-play between them is very uncomfortable.”

Stapleton is a Darwinian, a rationalist who is bent on revenge, explains Grant. “He has a sense of complete intellectual superiority over the provincials around him, and he utterly dismisses their superstition and belief in supernatural powers.” Secretly, however, he sets out to exploit their gullibility. “On the one hand he says the myth of the hound is rubbish – it’s just strange sounds you can hear on the moor – but on the other hand, he fastidiously works out a way to make the myth real. He indicates to Watson that he thinks it’s a load of hogwash, but underneath it all he’s trying to perpetuate the myth of the hound of the Baskervilles. And he’s prepared to wait as long as it takes. His fatal error is to believe that he’s invincible and is the intellectual superior of all around him – including Holmes.”

## John Nettles (Dr Mortimer)



For John Nettles, who is best known for his leading roles in *Midsomer Murders* and *Bergerac*, the attraction of a role in *The Hound Of The Baskervilles* was to play a character part. “It’s interesting being a character actor,” he says. “I play straight roles on television and that’s what I’m noted for, always policemen for some unknown reason! It’s a great pleasure to play Dr Mortimer – a lot of whiskers and something more than a three-piece suit.”

Dr Mortimer is a country doctor on Dartmoor. He is the family physician and intimate friend of the late Sir Charles Baskerville, explains Nettles. “He loves the family and the whole Baskerville tradition. It is this affection which urges him to bring news of the legend of the Baskerville hound to Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street.

“Mortimer sets up the story and is a potential suspect,” adds Nettles. “Holmes, with his finely tuned sensibilities, is attracted to Mortimer’s story of this enormous beast and its methods of killing and sends Watson to Baskerville Hall, a

vast grey mansion in the middle of the moor, to find out the truth of the matter.

“Mortimer knows there’s something going on at Baskerville Hall but he’s uncertain and disquieted by the happenings. He can find no rational explanation for it, and that is why he goes to Holmes,” says Nettles.

He regards his wife, who dabbles in the occult, “with a kind of removed wonderment,” explains Nettles. “He’s very fond of her, but he doesn’t take her spiritual practices very seriously. It’s very difficult for a man of science to publicly endorse a popular superstition. Superstition and magic are alien to his way of thought. It is alien to the discipline which he practices – that of medicine.”

Nettles is a huge fan of the gothic thriller genre: “I love to be chilled and thrilled, and have blood spilt on the living-room carpet!” It is fascinating, he believes, to see how different actors have portrayed Holmes over the years. “My favourite until now was Jeremy Brett’s interpretation, which gave the part a quivering romanticism.”

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**Geraldine James (Mrs Mortimer)**



“Mrs Mortimer is something of a medium and has an ability to contact people from the other side,” says Geraldine James. She is asked by Sir Henry Baskerville to see if she can contact his uncle, Sir Charles. “There are strange happenings as the spirit of Sir Charles is brought into a seance and reveals that it was the famous hound that killed him.”

The seance is an invention of screenwriter Alan Cubitt’s, and does not feature in the novel. Producer Christopher Hall explains, “The scene is a screen-writer’s device to dramatise the tension between the natural and the supernatural and it is where we first glimpse the hound. Is the hound real or is it a spectre? During the seance, the audience identifies each of the character’s beliefs or non-beliefs in the supernatural world.”

As research for the part, Geraldine James spoke to Danish medium Marion Dampier-Jeans. “She

was extraordinary because she was completely matter-of-fact about the whole thing. She said, ‘Oh yes, I had Dicky at my shoulder at a dinner party the other night.’ I said, ‘Who’s Dicky?’ ‘Oh, Conan Doyle was known as Dicky,’ she said.”

According to James, Dampier-Jeans had contacted Arthur Conan Doyle some two years ago. “She’d already contacted him at a dinner party in Denmark when he had a message for a relative of his great niece,” she says. “Then, 18 months later, she was approached by the production to help me with my research.

“Talking to her was very helpful because she explained to me what a medium is. I’d always thought they were rather mysterious, but they’re not. Whilst Mrs Mortimer is quite eccentric, she is sincere. She is able to empty herself to allow any spirit that wants to come and speak to someone in the room to use her – literally – as a medium.”



James describes mediums as being “busy” and as coming across as being “quite out of it.” “Even when she’s shopping, standing in a queue, all the while a medium will be deciding what she can and cannot take on board. There’ll be centuries of spirits humming around her all the time.”

Geraldine James, whose extensive credits include *Crime And Punishment*, *The Sins* and *Band Of Gold*, is no stranger to spiritual or irrational experiences herself. “I used to say I could read people’s minds when I was a schoolgirl,” she says. Some six months before her mother died, James was sitting down to Sunday lunch with her family. She had spoken earlier to her mother, who had told her daughter that she wasn’t going to make it to lunch. “As we were sitting down I knew that I had to go and see her. When I arrived, the house was empty, the gas rings were on and she had wandered out to Putney Heath – she suffered from Alzheimer’s.”

James confesses to having “a real problem with horror of any kind.” After seeing *The Others* with Nicole Kidman, she became “frightened of the horrible aspect of people who have been on the other side coming and sitting by the window. I have a terribly overactive imagination, and I really dislike horror!”

**Additional character sketches**

**Sir Henry Baskerville (Matt Day)**



Peculiar things confound Sir Henry from the first moment he arrives in London from Canada: a new boot disappears, dire and anonymous warnings are delivered to his hotel, a bearded man stalks him. It seems he is coming into an inheritance fraught with danger.

**Beryl Stapleton (Neve McIntosh)**



Wild-eyed and breathless, Miss Stapleton delivers ominous warnings to Sir Henry. His life

is in great danger, he must leave Dartmoor at once. But when love blooms she is caught between the attentions of Sir Henry and the sinister intentions of her brother.

**Barrymore (Ron Cook)**

Bearded butler at the forbidding Baskerville Hall, Barrymore is full of secrets. His brooding presence has a forbidding air. Creeping around corridors in the dead of night, he signals to someone on the barren moor. Are his intentions malevolent or innocent?



**Mrs Barrymore (Liza Tarbuck)**

By night, the passageways of Baskerville Hall are filled with the sound of a woman sobbing. By day, Mrs Barrymore goes about her duties red-eyed and unsmiling. She shares some guilty secret with her husband which Watson and Sir Henry must unravel.

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