

FILM REVIEWS

Bob Clark's

MURDER BY DECREE

d. Bob Clark, asst. d. Ariel Levy, 2nd asst. d. Guy Travers, Ken Goch, sc. John Hopkins, ph. Reginald H. Morris, CSC, camera op. James Turrell, sp. ph. effects Michael Albrechtsen, ed. Stan Cole, CFE, sup. sd. ed. Ken Heeley-Ray, asst.

ed. Ian McBride, re-recording mix Joe Grimaldi, Dave Appleby, sd. ed. Patrick Drummond, Wayne Griffin, Dennis Drummond, sd. rec. John Mitchell, p. designer Harry Pottle, a.d. Peter Childs, continuity Marjorie Lavelly, set dec. Denise Exshaw, m. Carl Zittler, Paul Zaza, cost. Judy Moorcroft, casting Irene Lamb, i.p. Christopher Plummer, James Mason, David Hemmings, Susan Clark, Anthony Quayle, Sir John Gielgud, Frank Finlay, Donald Sutherland, Genevieve Bujold, co-stars Chris Wiggins, Teddi Moore, Catherine Kessler, Terry Duggan, Peter Jonfield, Roy Lansford, Ron Pember, Ken Jones, exec. p. Len Herberman, p. René Dupont, Bob Clark, p. manager John Davis (U.K.), Ted Rouse (Canada), p.c. A Highlight Theatrical Productions Corp. Ltd. and Murder by Decree Productions Production, year 1978, 35mm, running time 123 minutes, dist. Ambassador Films Distributors Ltd.

**cinema
canada**



James Mason as Dr. Watson, accosted in London's East End by a prostitute

There's no question that Sherlock Holmes is a folk hero — but as to why, that's anything but elementary. The hawklike features and piercing eyes, dressing gown and pipe, deerstalker cap and magnifying glass — these details are so familiar practically anyone would recognize him at once. His well-known sayings ("It is an old maxim of mine that when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" from *The Beryl Coronet*) and his lesser-known ("The most winning woman I ever knew was hanged for poisoning three little children for their insurance money," from *The Sign of Four*) are world-weary with experience. Perhaps the Holmes' legends endure because they capture the social atmosphere of seeming Victorian security and strength, where, in a romantic chamber of the heart, in a nostalgic country of the mind, it is always 1895, and the world in which we live is not yet born. Or perhaps it is because Doyle practised an absorbing, unselfconscious kind of storytelling no longer much produced.

It is certainly not produced in *Murder by Decree*, a jack-the-rip-off movie written by John Hopkins, and directed by Bob Clark. First with *Black Christmas* (starring Keir Dullea) and now with this, Clark seems to have a fascination for women being stalked and stabbed. The film cost \$5 million, has an illustrious cast (Christopher Plummer as Holmes, James Mason as Dr. Watson, and with Donald Sutherland, Genevieve Bujold, John Gielgud, David Hemmings, Susan Clark, among others, in cameo roles) and is mostly shot in the dark or in pea-soup fog, (there are times when it is impossible to tell who is doing what to whom) and is related in such a fragmented and elliptical manner that is often impossible to follow.

Here are just a few of the holes in the plot: we are asked to believe that the Duke of Clarence once married a servant girl Annie Crook (Genevieve Bujold) and had a child who was raised as a Roman Catholic. Shortly after this child was born, the Duke tired of his wife; she retired first to a convent, and then, in-

explicitly, became a lowgrade prostitute in London's Whitechapel area. Those close to the Duke realized that he had committed a grave indiscretion, and two men in particular (one a court physician, the other destined to become known as Jack the Ripper) decided to protect the Duke and the right of accession to the throne, by incarcerating Annie Crook in an asylum and killing off any of her prostitute friends in whom she might have confided.

Thus the string of Whitechapel murders begins, and Sherlock Holmes enters the case. No one explains why Annie Crook is not murdered herself (if you want to stop a story from spreading, surely you begin with the source). No one explains how one can possibly contain a rumour that is spreading so fast in any case. No one explains why the child — who turns out to be female and far removed from any possibility of claiming the throne — causes the Duke's friends such consternation. Eventually one concludes that **Murder by Decree** is a dark mystery only because its storytellers are resolved not to cast light on it. No one explains why the psychic Robert Lees (Donald Sutherland) who is so perceptive in his hallucinations that he can accurately predict a murder 24 hours before it actually happens, is dropped from the movie early on, having warned Holmes that he "senses grave danger all about him." (You don't have to be psychic to come up with that line.) Why does the camera twice zoom up to Lee's face? (Does Clark think he's telling us something?) Why does he keep cutting away (four times!) to a horse and coach racing through the narrow London streets, while Holmes and Mary Kelly, (Susan Clark) one of the other prostitutes sought by the killers, try to get to safety before being overtaken. The film is visually clumsy and inconsistent in viewpoint; sometimes the film is related through the killer's eye as he stalks with a lumbering gait through the fog and sounds like an asthmatic about to collapse; at other points the movie is related from an omniscient viewpoint. At the film's end, things are in such a muddle that there is a long scene in which Holmes confronts Lord Salisbury (John Gielgud) the

prime minister of England, and Sir Charles Warren (Anthony Quayle) the Commissioner of Police from Scotland Yard, and explains (complete with flashbacks) the entire movie as best he understands it. He claims to have proof that the Ripper murders are linked to the Duke of Clarence, but all he has, in fact, is a marriage certificate, a medical certificate showing that Annie Crook was incarcerated and a birth certificate showing there was a child. He has nothing that would stand up in court concerning the murders. He nevertheless agrees to keep his accusations to himself, providing that the prime minister and his men promise never to harm Crook's daughter (who turns out to be a chubby little six year old safely ensconced at the same convent where Annie Crook once stayed). The film is outrageously illogical — as no Conan Doyle story ever was. As to the acting, most of the talent is wasted, with the exception of James Mason who manages to impart a dignity to the lines that is not inherent in them. There's an amusing moment where he is trying to stab a pea on his plate while Holmes tries to engage his attention in conversation. Finally Holmes reaches over and crushes the pea with Watson's fork, putting an end to the pick-and-miss struggle that has been going on for several minutes. Watson, however, is anything but grateful; a crushed pea is a destroyed pea. The look of distaste on his face is probably the highlight of the film.

Murder by Decree is a bad movie that is currently making a lot of money and has drawn favorable reviews based on mental laxity. There is no creative progress from **Black Christmas** to this — except for the talent that \$5 million buys — and as Sherlock Holmes' movies go, **Murder by Decree** is a careless betrayal of all that is good in the legend. Sherlock Holmes once said (in **The Red Headed League**) "My life is spent in one long effort to escape the commonplaces of existence." In **Murder by Decree** he does not escape from the commonplaces of bad scriptwriting and clumsy filmmaking, but he will survive it — he always has.

John Hofsess

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