

The Hound of the Baskervilles

Adapted from the Arthur Conan Doyle story for the stage by Simon Williams
Canterbury Repertory Theatre, Elmwood Auditorium, 19 November 2025
Reviewed by Jordon Jones

Of all the many Sherlock Holmes stories, none has captured the general imagination to quite the extent of The Hound of the Baskervilles. It pits the great logician, Holmes, against a foe who seems to be the stuff of spectral legend made horribly real and makes us question whether the bounds of reality are quite as firm as we think they are. In Canterbury Repertory Theatre's staging of the tale, directed by Ross Gumbley with Annette Searle, we are gifted with an evocative and creative retelling that plays expertly with the unshakeable presence of a phantom threat.

Upon entering the theatre, you can immediately see that realism is not on the cards. Pim van Duin's set design is pared back to the minimum, being dominated by a series of hanging fabrics which can be manipulated and lit to hint at an environment around the few key pieces of furniture. The placement of the hangings also provides plenty of opportunities for the actors to conceal themselves and get "lost on the moor" amongst them; the effect is almost oppressive for the audience (in a good way, I promise!). The combination of set and lighting knit together well throughout to develop a strong sense of place for each scene, whether it's safe and cosy by the fire in Baskerville Hall or a dangerous night-time venture into the wilds of the moors. The sparseness of the set really lets the lighting have its moment in, if you'll forgive the pun, the spotlight. Ian Harding's creativity is immediately identifiable in the hanging bulbs and lanterns (how atmospheric!) and the shell lights lined up across the front of the stage like a Victorian vaudeville hall (how whimsical!). The lights hidden within the shells also allow for the actors to be lit from below, which I'm sure we all can agree is the perfect thing for a ghost story. The third element of creating a suitably menacing and eerie atmosphere is, of course, sound. Within Jonathan Hill's sound design, this production featured original music by Amelia Hill, as have a number of recent Repertory shows. I think she's outdone herself with her work for The Hound of the Baskervilles; it perfectly captures the heart-hammering tension of the story and highlights her increasing skill. I look forward to hearing what she creates next!

Now that I've firmly established the feel of the piece, it's time to move on to the performances. As a general note, everyone did a great job of balancing the grim, overbearing dread that fills most of the play with enough moments of levity to ease the tension and keep the energy up. There's a particular bit of business between Dimitri Gibara and a tea set that was pure gold, but it was far from the only bright spot in the darkness. I noticed a bit of lines difficulty from some of the actors at times, but they covered it well enough to avoid disruption, and the dialogue should get tighter as the run progresses.

The production's Holmes and Watson, Michael Adams and Mark Darbyshire, are brilliantly cast. As Holmes, Adams is wry and teasing when he isn't fully absorbed in the case, at which point he switches into an intense, focused energy that showcases the character's determination. Darbyshire is a perfectly quintessential Watson, blustery but very enthusiastic about the work ahead of him, evil spirits notwithstanding. The chemistry between the two

leads is a driving force of the play, and these two actors have got it down. Adams takes lines that would normally be patronising of Watson and infuses them with genuine warmth and only the occasional moment of condescension, better communicating the value he places on his companion. In return, Darbyshire's Watson is fittingly effusive about Holmes, practically besotted, but also has moments of stretched patience with the detective that can only come from deep familiarity. The two bounce off of each other with ease, and it was a joy to watch them together.

The remainder of the cast forms a powerful ensemble that acts as a backbone for the performance. I understand that this is a departure from the original script by the directing team of Ross Gumbley and Annette Searle, and by thunder the production is much better for it! The tight ensemble group moves flexibly in and out of minor characters as needed, but remains onstage when out of those characters to provide fluid scene changes, onstage sound and lighting effects (including a particularly wonderful use of silhouette at one point), and even Baskerville family portraits. The ensemble looks chilling, lurking anonymously in the background of every scene in dark, heavy woollen coats, courtesy of Nelleke Passchier's busy wardrobe team. (A moment of sympathy for the actors is warranted in this regard, as Elmwood Auditorium is quite warm this time of year even if you aren't under the lights!) Searle's choreography work for the ensemble is simply incredible. The movement is not overly complicated for the most part, but it works very effectively to communicate both the underlying sense of threat pervading the story and the moments where that threat becomes active. And when executed crisply and clearly by the performers, it's easy to forget just how much work goes into those group movements.

There are a couple of performances from the ensemble that I want to make special note of. The first of these is Sebastian Boyle as Sir Henry Baskerville, the newest lord of Baskerville Hall and next prospective victim of the family curse, i.e. the spectral hound stalking the moors. Boyle's performance is full of optimism and energy, providing a beacon of hope amongst the despair surrounding his character's family name. Michele Johnson plays Dr Mortimer, whose cautious stability grounds the mystery in reality; her friendly, level-headed presence does the same for the play. And finally, John Ashton is deliciously unsettling as Stapleton, contrasted nicely with the warmth that Jenny May brings to Stapleton's sister Beryl.

Overall, the way the production leaned away from straight realism was one of its biggest strengths. The way the titular hound is suggested is particularly phenomenal—I won't give it all away now, but it really lifted the terror of the moments it came into play. I also really appreciated some of the foreshadowing for the twist ending, which I won't spoil either, but as someone intimately familiar with the story it delighted me to see those choices as they happened. The reveal itself was perhaps a bit hammy, but I don't think anyone minded, and it did get the point across clearly. I want to commend the team, especially Gumbley, for taking what may have easily been an ordinary production and making it extraordinary. This is a great example of theatre doing what theatre does best, and I can't praise it highly enough.

So what are you waiting for? Go get your tickets now, and prepare yourself for a night of juicy, thrilling fun.

The Hound of the Baskervilles runs from November 19–29, Wednesdays to Saturdays.