

Review: The Hound of the Baskervilles – a confident combination of classic storytelling and experimental staging

Ruth Agnew reviews The Hound of the Baskervilles, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, adapted for the stage by Simon Williams, directed by Ross Gumbley for Canterbury Repertory Theatre, at Elmwood Auditorium, Wednesday 19 November, 2025.

The Hound of the Baskervilles is one of the most popular Sherlock Holmes stories, remaining in print for over one hundred years after Arthur Conan Doyle wrote it, and has been adapted for the screen or stage over thirty times. Canterbury Repertory Theatre has chosen the fast paced, non-naturalistic adaptation by Simon Williams for their production, and director Ross Gumbley has created a moody moors mystery that Holmes himself would struggle to find fault with.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson have been tasked with solving a mystery that has been dogging the heirs of the Baskerville family. Heirs to the estate keep turning up dead, seemingly from fright, with expressions of terror permanently etched on their frozen faces, with few clues to explain this beyond some oversized paw prints and whispers of a huge glowing hound hiding somewhere in Dartmoor. The new heir to the Baskerville estate, Sir Henry, arrives from Canada, and Holmes and Watson are tasked with preventing him from meeting a similar fate to his forebears.

Donning the deerstalker as Sherlock Holmes is Repertory stalwart Michael Adams, fabulously blustery and all-knowing. His partner in solving crime, Dr John Watson, is played by the eminently likeable Mark Derbyshire. These two actors are brilliantly cast, with Adams taking an almost paternal air coaching the younger man through the mists. Together, they form a solid backbone to the show.

Upon entering the theatre, it is clear this is not your average *Hound of the Baskervilles*. Pim van Duin's set uses hanging fabric in a barren space and Ian Harding's shadowy lighting design to create the foreboding moors of Devon. The minimalist design is brilliant, reliant on the actors, lighting, and fabrics coming together to create tight formal sitting rooms, or impossibly wide stretches of mist-covered land. The layered depth of the stage space seems longer than the building we are in, with dark figures floating past in the distance adding to the eerie atmosphere. This is an ambitious undertaking and absolutely stunning when all the elements come together in sync.

The rest of the cast is comprised of many other familiar faces for regular Ōtautahi audiences. Sebastian Boyle is a delightfully affable Sir Henry, slightly dopey and doting (his hair, however could use a comb and some brylcream!). Some clever comedic moments are skilfully managed by Russell Haigh and Dimitri Gibara. The ensemble comes together to evoke the atmosphere, forming growling, howling shadowy shapes. There were a couple of moments where it felt a little like being in a year 11 devised drama assessment, and the rumbling sound of a growling hound became a little bit like a child playing racing cars, but overall, an impressive effect.

This is an impressive rendition of this bastion of Vic Dic Lit. Director Ross Gumbley has often referred to his acting origins in Repertory theatre, and it is wonderful to see him returning to his roots, and with such style and success. His confident combination of classic storytelling with experimental staging has resulted in an outstanding, memorable production. Hopefully this is the first of many such shows, as it is clear there is a wealth of talent available in the am-dram world, onstage and behind the scenes.