

Sherlock Holmes: Acquaintance

IGOR MASLENNIKOV

1980

From the first title cards of Igor Maslennikov's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson: Acquaintance*, it is clear this is a loving and humorous adaptation. The music swells in a charming tribute to Handel's *Water Music*, summoning up a time when England had an Empire and super-sleuths solved mysteries without the help of police or aeroplanes. It sets the scene for what must be one of the most famous and unlikely 'meet cutes' in Soviet cinema. Sherlock Holmes and John Watson don't let us down. As played by the marvellously cast Vasily Livanov and Vitaly Solomin, this bromance heralded in a series that became the most popular films on Soviet television.

At 221b Baker St, amongst the dark wood and the aspidistra ferns, in a London where little old ladies with upturned noses open doors and beggars knock on them, Holmes and Watson agree to the 19th Century equivalent of a flat-share. Physically, they are dramatically different from each other: Holmes with his peaky nose and Watson with his wide-open face. How is it possible, Mr Holmes, Watson asks, you do not know who Copernicus is? John Watson unwittingly puts his finger on the great dilemma we as an audience are asked to negotiate: is it better to be a specialist or a generalist? Or as Isaiah Berlin so famously put it in his philosophical essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, is it better to live life pursuing one idea or to chase several simultaneously. Are we Watson or are we Holmes? These first few exchanges between the two frame that dilemma and we follow the action taking place on screen accordingly.

Holmes' razor-sharp intelligence is of course a match for the generalist lodger. To Holmes, what use is the knowledge that the earth revolves around the sun, if he can find no use for it in his own line of work. To our surprise, this Watson is not silenced. Watson's riposte, that it would be terrible to live in a world where you cannot talk about poetry, romance, things that are not useful, is what confounds and silences the super-sleuth. Perhaps too the Soviet apparatchiks who insisted on censoring out any mention of Holmes' drug addictions. It is a memorable scene. We literally see Holmes unable to reply. He is taken aback, forced to think over a response. And this is where the real power of this adaptation lies. This is not just a portrait of a Victorian super-hero, but a satisfying

and increasingly unexpected depiction of an odd couple friendship. It is Doctor Watson, as played by Solomin, intelligent, competent, heroically brave, an appealing Everyman, that becomes as much of a star draw as his counterpart. In some ways, John Watson is the series' beating heart. That Livanov's Holmes clearly adores Watson, makes us like his Holmes.

Yet as the film unfolds, we marvel at not only the performances. Care and attention to detail are in every corner of the screen. The dialogue is marvellously faithful. We might wonder how on earth was it possible to summon up Victorian England in 1970s Riga where the series was filmed? Just the images of the lovingly burnished silver as John Watson sits down a boiled egg for breakfast, make you wonder what Soviet audiences must have thought of this? Why even the birds chirp on Baker St?

What is it about Sherlock Holmes and Russia? From Sergei Eisenstein onwards, Russians have had a fascination with the deerstalker super-sleuth, (Just look for Eisenstein's costume designs for a Sherlock Holmes theatre production on the internet). Clearly he appeals to a sense of mystery; and perhaps also a longing for order: and clearly too in his shape-shifting we can read the winds of cultural change.

So it is interesting that it may be the addition of Holmes' fantastic physicality, not his intellect, that also distinguishes this series. In a spectacularly shot scene, Holmes and Watson get into fisticuffs, to box out their disagreements. And if Watson had silenced Holmes with speech, it is ironically Holmes who knocks Watson out with a killer punch. This unexpected role reversal disarms us. And all this before the spectacular arrival of the beautifully back lit damsel in distress Ellen Stoner and the unsolved mystery of the knocking at night. While the solution of Ellen's mystery is never truly horrifying, the sequences at her country house are Gothic and unsettling and the resolution of the mystery, satisfyingly unexpected. Why hadn't we thought of that? Perhaps that is the secret to the success of this series; like the lovingly familiar stories and these two iconic characters, the best things usually present themselves in unexpected ways.