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Shakespeare company has a head for Holmes

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By Press Telegram Staff Writer

A desolate moor and a family curse. A spectral dog and a shrewd detective. These are not things one would expect to find in Bixby Knolls, but as of Friday - and for the next month - they will inhabit the Richard Goad Theatre on Atlantic Boulevard.

The Long Beach Shakespeare Company is premiering its newest adaptation of [Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles,"](#) which runs through Oct. 22.

"We did the show a long time ago in Whaley Park," said company artistic director Helen Borgers, who adapted and directed that version in 2002, and adapted and directs the latest version as well. "This was before we had our own permanent space, and did shows in different venues."

But those who saw the last "Hound" should not expect the same "Hound" in 2011. This one is sleeker, faster and more subtle, Borgers said.

"(In 2002) I was totally wedded to the text," she said. "I included practically every scene. I understand that you don't have to have every scene to be true to the text. This show is two hours, and it moves very quickly. I'm proud of my growth as an adapter."

The 2002 show also was a bit more literal, in that it had a physical dog - well, a man in a dog costume, Borgers said. Though she would not say how (or even if) the hound will be revealed this time, there will be no men in dog costumes.

There also will be no elaborate sets, though the fact that "Hound" has a lot of action on a deserted moor helps.

"Hound of the Baskervilles" tells the tale of a country squire, Sir Charles Baskerville, who dies mysteriously on the grounds of his estate. His only heir, who comes from America and has never known his roots, must take over. But is he the next to die? And how is this connected to a family curse that says male heirs are doomed to be killed by a demonic dog?

Only Sherlock Holmes and his collaborator, Dr. John Watson, can help solve this mystery.

"Hound" is the latest of about a half-dozen Holmes-inspired shows staged by the company (the most recent full production was 2009's "A Scandal in Bohemia"), which prompts the question: Aren't you the Long Beach Shakespeare Company?

"Holmes is very Shakespearean," said Borgers, pointing to Conan Doyle's attention to plot and dialogue, and that both are often as intricate as the Bard's. And the dialogue, in particular, is to be respected, which is why even the sleeker "Hound" contains intact chunks of text.

Borgers also was not eager to go against Conan Doyle's very specific descriptions of Holmes' physical appearance, particularly when it came to the shape of his skull. When Conan Doyle wrote the story in 1901, phrenology, a now-debunked theory that claims character traits and intelligence can be gleaned from just looking at people's skulls, was enjoying a resurgence.

Holmes, of course, has the kind of skull that denotes intelligence and shrewdness, but when hunting for an actor with those traits, Borgers found that requirement a bit of a pain.

"All these people were auditioning for me with little round heads," Borgers said.

But then she saw Richard MacPherson. "He was perfect!" she said.

MacPherson, who moved to California a few years ago after living in Hawaii for several decades and appearing in island-based TV shows such as "Magnum, P.I." and "Lost," had no idea he had such a Holmesian head. In fact, he had come to auditions after seeing an online ad, with his sights on an entirely different role - the Baskerville butler. Instead, he wound up with the lead.

"They told me right there I had the part," said MacPherson, who had no inkling that Borgers was initially after his head - though he doesn't seem to mind.

"Whatever it takes," said the longtime Holmes fan. "I was always interested in Sherlock Holmes and read the stories."

MacPherson's take on Holmes? "He is either a fox or a hound. That is the starting point for me."

Casting for the show's other roles was less of a headache for Borgers. She cast Carl Wawrina as John Watson. "He was our Watson in 'Scandal in Bohemia,'" Borgers said. [Read Full Article...](#)

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