

In this Victorian fantasy, *Young Sherlock Holmes* (Nicholas Rowe, left) and the not-yet-a-detective Watson (Alan Cox) meet as students in an English boarding school.

By KAREN E. BENDER

Nicholas Rowe & Alan Cox
**YOUNG
SHERLOCK
HOLMES**
& Junior Age Watson

Those teen detectives tackle the English education enigma, the pretty boy puzzle, and a mysterious murder spree in Victorian England.

For Sherlock Holmes, every problem had a logically deducible solution.

The great detective would easily estimate how far a piece of parsley could sink into a stick of butter on a hot summer day and use such seeming trivia to nab the mastermind of a brilliant diamond theft or uncover the perpetrator of a baffling homicide. But for Nicholas Rowe and Alan Cox—the actors portraying *Young Sherlock Holmes*, and his pre-medical school sidekick, John Watson—solving problems isn't quite so simple.

Sure, young Sherlock and John can unravel a complex diamond robbery as easily

as their adult counterparts and a murder mystery may be a simple riddle, but for two fledgling teenage actors, figuring out how to fit a career into the demands of the stubborn English school system is hardly elementary.

"It's not something that's readily understood in America," says Rowe, 19, the star of *Young Sherlock Holmes*—an affectionate speculation about what might have happened if Holmes and Watson had become friends during their school years. "In the U.S. if someone gets a part at age 13, it's 'Wow, that's it!' But within the English schools, many people are very much against students

acting in films while they're still in school."

It might seem odd that educators were unresponsive to *Young Sherlock Holmes*, which is *not* the typical teen vehicle where the youths exist only to be slashed by yellow-eyed zombies in ski masks or to have their clothes ripped off at fraternity beach parties. Instead, *Young Sherlock Holmes* follows the two youthful companions on their first thrill-

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ing criminological adventure—investigating the murders of several Londoners, including a batty professor obsessed with inventing his own Heath Robinson-style flying machine.

Besides, *Young Sherlock Holmes* was being mounted by some of the brightest talents in the business: director Barry (*Diner*) Levinson, screenwriter Chris (*Gremlins*) Columbus (STARLOG #86) and production designer Norman (*Return to Oz*) Reynolds. The entire project came from the sure hand of Amblin Entertainment (producer Mark Johnson, executive producers Steven Spielberg, Frank Marshall and Kathleen Kennedy). Yet, when the casting directors approached England's most prestigious public schools for budding Holmes and Watsons, their doors remained securely closed.

Elementary Solutions

St. Paul, the school that 15-year-old Alan Cox attends, balked at the idea of letting talent scouts comb their campus. "They said no, flatly no," recalls Cox. "They wouldn't let them come and visit. They wouldn't let them meet any of the boys."

"My school, Eton, was quite against it as well," says Rowe. "They were only offering people in their last year the opportunity. They were quite adamant that they didn't want to get involved since taking part in a movie very much interrupts one's education."

Cox adds that this disruption is discouraged because the English school system is "very much a fixed set of courses." Even the boy's parents—actors Brian Cox and Caroline Burt—were not, as he puts it, "keen when the part came along because they didn't want me to miss the term."

Nevertheless, the young actors were encouraged to audition by friends and acting coaches, and, out of 4,000 applicants, won the leads. Their schools' attitudes about the

profession seem to have made a deep impression on them, however, and made the intricacies of combining acting and education even more difficult to resolve.

"Life today is not very safe if you don't have any sort of qualifications when you're young," says Rowe. "You hear of so many actors who started careers early and then, when they're 24, no one wants them."

Cox claims that his parents got him started acting in hopes that he would later abandon it. "I've been acting since I was five, but my parents have never been keen on it," he says. "The original idea was, 'Well, if we let him do a bit of acting now, he'll decide not to later.'" "And you still hate it, don't you?" Rowe interrupts.

"It's a hard profession, much harder than anyone thinks because there are so many actors around," Cox continues. "You have such large periods of being out of work. But my parents were never totally against it. They weren't saying, 'Don't be an actor, ever,' because they hoped something like this film would come along. And *Young Sherlock Holmes* is a large break—it could set me up."

Even with their doubts about job security, Rowe and Cox have each managed to compile impressive lists of acting credits. At Eton, Rowe was active in college dramatics; he had a major role in a student production of Moliere's *Tartuffe* and played Barclay in Julian Mitchell's *Another Country*. He also had a small role in the film version.

Cox took part in the TV productions of John Mortimer's *A Voyage Round My Father* (in which he played Laurence Olivier's son) and Emily Bronte's *Jane Eyre* with Timothy (*Flash Gordon*) Dalton, and the

is the youthful Holmes (Rowe) fearless or just plain stupid to take a rest in such a final resting place?

BBC series *Divorce*.

The two have discovered that such credits, hard work and ability are not always the most important factors in getting roles.

"I'm aware that success is often due to your face—how you're suited to a part and not necessarily your acting ability," says Rowe. "I find that very unnerving."

"There are many pretty boys," adds Cox. "They're handsome in the way Harrison Ford is handsome. There are those who aren't particularly good actors, but are very pretty and they do a couple of films, lose their looks, and that's it." He grins. "And I guess I can safely say that Nick and I are *not* the most stunning young actors around."

"If you're not particularly handsome, you're usually successful because you have a different quality that's much more useful than good looks. It may be a certain amount of mystery or a dangerous quality or a sense of humor—many of the qualities I've seen in Nick."

Rowe shoots him a glance with the dry skepticism of a 19-year-old who doesn't quite believe the compliment.

"It's true," says Cox enthusiastically.

Story Solutions

Once the actors actually began preparing for their parts, the problems they had to solve became somewhat easier. They began the type of investigation that they, as actors, are familiar with—the process of discovering the personalities behind the characters. In this case, Holmes and Watson.

Cox began preparing for the role before he even knew it existed. "When I wrapped *A Voyage Round My Father*, John Mortimer gave me a book—*The Complete Works of Sherlock Holmes*," he recalls. "I was about 10 when I finished them."

After winning the Watson role, "I reread

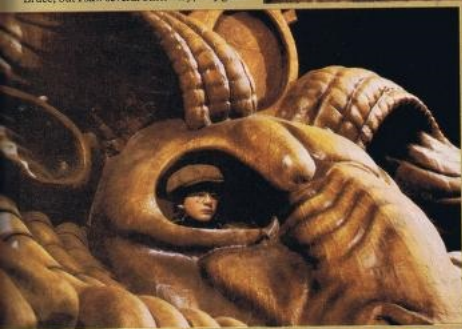


John Watson (Cox) proves his wits at a game of chess with Elizabeth (Sophie Ward).

some of the stories, concentrating on the first couple of pages of each one. That's where you see what Holmes and Watson are really up to—you see what clubs they frequent and what they do in their spare time, which is all part of building a character.

"I also watched the old Basil Rathbone films. Everyone says the archetypal Holmes and Watson are Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, but I saw several other very, very good

Sometimes the adolescent detective (Rowe) acts more like the swashbuckling Zorro than his cerebral older self.



Watson (Cox) hides out in the eye of gargoyle at London's own Temple of Doom—and it's not a Soho nightclub.

Holmes films which were actually better. One of my favorites was *Murder By Decree*, with Christopher Plummer [as Holmes] and James Mason [as Watson]."

Through his investigations, Cox has developed clear ideas as to who Watson is. "Watson is the sort who is the same when he's five as he is when he's 60—very serious and down to earth," Cox says. "He's in a dream world sometimes, but he's not a stupid, bumbling idiot. That's what I didn't like about Nigel Bruce's portrayal—he made him a complete fool who didn't get anything right."

Rowe also saw the Rathbone films, but credits director Levinson for providing him with a good idea about how the student sleuth should be played.

"Barry emphasized that he wanted a schoolboy, not Holmes to start with," Rowe explains, "but someone who had potentially the same characteristics—the same intelligence, impulsiveness, wit—without being Basil Rathbone at age 17. The young Holmes makes mistakes in this film, which is good."

"There are definitely traits of the older Holmes and Watson in the characters," says Cox. "What is quite good about the way Holmes is written and the way Nick has portrayed him is that he's not as cold and withdrawn as he is in the later adult stories. In this film, it's explained why he claims up and becomes a much more private person."

When Cox and Rowe actually began work on *Young Sherlock Holmes*, their main

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obstacle was neither the school system nor the superficial aspects of acting, but, instead, foam. In the movie, young Watson is a pudgy boy, addicted to custard tarts. Cox, however, is quite slim, and to make his clothes fit snugly, he spent the duration of lensing fattened up—encased in foam padding.

Cox found the outfit a bit arduous. "I fell over a lot," he reveals. "It was very difficult to walk around with the padding because I didn't have any sense of my own largeness. Also, there weren't any soles to my shoes—they were just very shiny hard wood. I slipped everywhere."

"Alan would rush out of a room and forget he had a big scarf on and it would get

stuck in the door—you would see Alan being pulled back by the scarf just like a cartoon character," adds Rowe.

With *Young Sherlock Holmes* due to premiere this month, the young actors are ready to face perhaps their most unfamiliar problem yet: fame.

Rowe shrugs. "Fame doesn't appeal to me," he says. "If it happens, it happens."

And Cox has a perspective on fame that makes you believe that, for him, this dilemma will be elementary.

"I don't know what'll happen," he observes. "But if people come up to me and say, 'You're Alan Cox, aren't you?' I'll just look at them and say, 'Yes.' "

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