

Origin Story: How “Holmes” Became a Play

Who Wrote the Play?

Todd C. Peppers, Henry H. & Trudye H. Fowler Professor in Public Affairs at Roanoke College, had long been fascinated with Holmes. While pouring over the Justice’s letters, Peppers recognized patterns in Holmes’ writing and he began picking out recurring topics and phrases. He compiled a Holmes glossary, including phrases such as “taking a whack at life.” “At some point, the idea of writing about what I was marking up came to me,” Peppers said. “And I thought, ‘Maybe a play.’”

But to form a story and make deeper observations about Holmes’ life, Peppers had to fill in some gaps. “Eighty percent of it is completely accurate. Much of the words are Holmes’ himself, from the letters, but twenty percent of it is what I call ‘informed speculation.’ Some of the most intimate things, you’re just guessing at,” said Peppers.

But he’d never written a play. He shared a first draft with Clare Cushman, Publications Director and resident historian at the Supreme Court Historical Society, who was enthusiastic about the concept of stitching together Holmes’ best anecdotes and witticisms. The Justice “never turned a phrase that was mundane or cliché,” Cushman said.

How did Mary Hall Surface, the Helen Hayes award winning director and internationally produced playwright, become involved?

Cushman referred Peppers to D.C. playwright Mary Hall Surface, whose work she had long admired, to help turn his first draft into something more entertaining and accessible. “When it came to me, it was filled with wonderful material, extraordinary research,” Surface said. “Holmes’ language is so rich and evocative and filled with images, and he spins a good yarn and has some great one-liners.” They set to work turning the script into a theater piece with a

more dramatic structure. Particularly, Surface wanted to see more conflict. She told Peppers about an approach called “the spider under the table.” These are conflicts in people’s lives that are hidden. Then, an event brings that “spider” out into the open—like for Holmes preparing for a radio address on his 90th birthday and facing repressed memories of his Civil War ordeal.

What Was the Role of the Dramaturge?

To persuade Surface to take on the role of director, Cushman agreed to step in and serve as dramaturge. Editor and author of books, articles and documentaries on Supreme Court history, she shaped and pared down the script into a play. In part this consisted of choosing only the most compelling of Holmes’ gems--ones that resonate with contemporary audiences. Cushman was mindful of Holmes’ reverence for concision. He once told Felix Frankfurter that “the art of writing legal decisions... is to omit all but the essentials—‘The point of contact’ is the formula. The place where the boy got his fingers pinched—the rest of the machinery doesn’t matter.”

How Was Kevin Reese Cast As Holmes ?

Mary Hall Surface persuaded Reese, her husband, to tackle the monumental role. Reese is a distinguished actor who has performed at many Washington theaters, including Arena Stage. Most importantly, he has experience with solo performances, having toured internationally with two one-man shows. In his 60s, Reese found it an interesting challenge to play a 90-year-old man. “The script has a lot of wordplay and deals with heavy material about Holmes’ postwar grief and guilt in the second act. That’s a King Lear, a Mount Everest kind of role,” said Reese. The play is performed as a “staged reading” which means Reese, while having fully rehearsed the role, will have access to the script on stage due to the volume of words to memorize.

Why Is There Only One Performance?

Given the difficulty of performing a 75 minute theatrical monologue, the Society, instead of trying to stage multiple performances, has opted to film this one performance in cinema quality to be enjoyed by audiences across the country.

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