

# British Theatre Guide

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## Sherlock Holmes and the Whitechapel Fiend

Toby Hulse and Ross Smith

Barn Theatre, Cirencester

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29 January–9 March 2024

The Barn, an intimate 200-seater venue, has earned a reputation for outstanding productions that far exceeds what one might expect from a small commissioning theatre in the Cotswolds.

Its latest venture, a madcap play setting the fictional Sherlock Holmes to catch a fictionalised version of Jack the Ripper, certainly lives up to recent form, thanks to the inspired inventiveness of award-winning Adam Meggido, director of hits such as *Peter Pan Goes Wrong*.

Writers Toby Hulse and Ross Smith seek to distinguish between the Whitechapel murderer, believed to have killed eleven women in the 1880s, and the character and his victims as represented at the time by lurid headlines. They also interpose appearances by modern day students and fairground operators peddling his legend: "Get your Ripper mug here."

The Barn aims to encourage new writing, in this case with modest success. The piece plays on a few literary jokes: characters confess to living in a "fictional cliché-ridden Victorian London" and admit walk-on parts to those from Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson.

But the writing can be heavy-handed, and the running jokes only limp along. Nearly all the laughs—and there are quite a few—come from a manic sequence of stage props that include the celebrated Giant Rat of Sumatra. The best moments are non-verbal, a re-enactment of a murder scene, re-re-enacted "by better actors with better accents" and above all in the final despatch (and resurrection) of Jack himself, whose identity I am sworn not to reveal.

The four actors, Joseph Chance, Helen Foster, Phillip Pellew and Chloe Tannenbaum, do a commendable job, switching roles and the much-sought-after deerstalker hat throughout the show, although I suspect they could feel a lack of responsiveness from the audience before the interval.

The set by Jason Denvir, who also designed the costumes, is highly effective, a succession of circular steel girders, variously coloured by Alex Musgrave's lighting, that gives them the appearance of anything from a dangerous tunnel to the rings at the end of a Looney Tunes cartoon. It's that sort of show.

Hulse and Smith save a last literary joke for the end, an actual report by Arthur Conan Doyle himself, supposedly here to the master detective, that he had seen sprites at the bottom of his garden. He really was off with the fairies.

Reviewer: [Colin Davison](#)