

Production History and Creation

Abigail Dean - Class of 2023 - FSU-Teach (Mathematics)

On February 16, 1965 a musical written loosely based on the Sherlock Holmes stories opened at the Broadway Theatre. The musical, *Baker Street*, opened under the direction of Harold Prince. Its book was written by Jerome Coopersmith and the music and lyrics were written by Marian Grudeff and Raymond Jessel. The musical was based on the Holmes stories “A Scandal in Bohemia,” “The Final Problem,” and “The Case of the Empty House” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Before its close, the musical was transferred to the Martin Beck Theatre (since renamed the Al Hirschfeld) (Playbill “Look Back at Baker Street”). The musical closed on November 14, 1965 after a short run of 311 performances (Robinson 55). Seymour Herscher told Nadia Lerner that the schedule was for *Baker Street* (as of January 29, 1964) to be in the Shubert Theatre from October 24th– October 31st, the Colonial Theatre from November 2nd– November 28th, and the O’Keefe Centre from November 30th– December 19th (Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3).

Baker Street is a hate-child, born from a long 30-year battle between Alexander H. Cohen and his successful rival, David Merrick. Merrick literally looked down upon Cohen from the St. James Theatre while Cohen resided at the Shubert Theatre. Cohen had a few flops in the industry before he felt ready to take on and beat Merrick. In his mind, the best way to do this was a musical spectacle focused on the Sherlock Holmes short stories. Cohen went overboard with ostentatious marketing campaigns and went so far as to demand that audience members adhere to a strict dress code; a dress code in which women wore gowns and men wore suit and ties. Although, after the show received mixed reviews, this strict and ritzy dress code was abandoned in favor of the added business.

Despite the angst behind its creation, *Baker Street* would have been impossible to produce without a strong creative and production team. During its out-of-town tryouts, the show faced quite a few problems that in turn led to the addition of Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock to the production team. The two were known for their success in composing for *Fiddler on the Roof* and contributed to the song list for *Baker Street*. They added “Cold Clear World,” “I Shall Miss You,” and Irene Adler’s song, “I’m In London Again,” which was only used on opening night and was dropped and replaced by “Buffalo Belle”.

Alexander H. Cohen sent many letters to potential investors giving them the potential production cost of the show and unit of participation costs. In a letter written in April, 1964, Cohen writes, “The production will be capitalized at \$450,000. Each unit of participation will represent an investment of \$9,000, which is subject to a twenty-five percent overall. You may, of course, invest in partial or multiple units, with the minimum participation being \$500” (Cohen Papers Box 33 Folder 4). According to correspondence in April 1965 between Cohen and investing partners in *Baker Street*, the total production cost of the show totaled to be less than the anticipated full capitalization and each week up to that point had proved to be profitable. In this particular letter, he expresses that the extra funds were spent on extra advertising and publicity, which proved to be effective. He states, “(t)he indications are that this was well spent because in spite of our mild critical response, our mail orders and box office daily business have been increasing since the beginning of the advertising campaign” (Cohen Box 33 Folder 4).

Like all commercial productions, *Baker Street* required a lot of correspondence between investors, potential actors, and others of the theatre community. The preview dates as of March 25, 1964 were December 2, 3, and 4 (Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3). This information is found in a correspondence letter between Roy A. Somlyo, the general manager of the production, and Virginia Burkhardt. Also in this letter, Somlyo briefs her with descriptions of where everyone is working in the production of the show. He says, “Hal Prince will be direction, Fritz Weaver is the star, Oliver Smith is the set designer, Motley is the costume designer, Don Walker is the orchestrator and, as you know, the book was written by Jerome Coopersmith with music and lyrics by Marian Grudeff and Ray Jessel” (Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3).

At the point that Fritz Weaver signed his contract papers, he actually was said to have signed his contract papers in invisible ink and Roy A. Somlyo had to resend the contract so he could sign the papers in what he called “conventional ink” (Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3). This letter from Somlyo was sent on April 1, 1964 to Ellsworth Wright. Seemingly amusing, Somlyo says that Weaver was “keeping with his character, naturally used invisible ink to sign his contract” (Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3).

In addition, there were also a lot of questions about casting for Irene Adler. There was a struggle to find an American girl for the role. A letter written to Hal Prince mentions,

“We really have not found an American girl who can do the role. You suggested Georgia Brown and I didn’t think she had enough “class” to play Irene...what about Julie Andrews? Why does Irene have to be American? Isn’t it possible that Sherlock Holmes living in England could have run into an English girl in a music hall ...Julie Andrews would be a sensation. Do you think we’ll be compared to MY FAIR LADY – and what’s the matter with that. I don’t think we should be afraid of suffering any comparisons – as long as we get a girl with star quality.”

(Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3)

It seems the sender of the letter was convinced that they were not going to find a female to cast for Irene and that was postponing the show by a great deal. In this letter there is also mention of Martyn Green for the role of Watson but the sender had reservations about him in the role due to age discrepancies, a wooden leg, and calls him pretentious (Cohen Papers Box 24 Folder 3). As these documents demonstrate, there are many remaining questions about the creation of this production.

Works Cited:

Robinson, Mark A.. *The World of Musicals: an Encyclopedia of Stage, Screen, and Song [2 Volumes]*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/lib/fsu/detail.action?docID=1691167>.

Skethway, Nathan. “Look Back at Baker Street on Broadway.” *Playbill*, PLAYBILL INC., 19 Feb. 2019, www.playbill.com/article/look-back-at-baker-street-on-broadway.

The Alexander H. Cohen Papers, *T-Mss 1969-001. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.