

## Reception History

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On February 16, 1965, a new musical opened at the Broadway Theatre titled *Baker Street*. The musical draws its inspiration from Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels. It was a highly anticipated production by the public and was expected to be a fairly popular musical. Overall, the show played 311 performances, closing early on November 14, 1965.

Of all the creative team, there were two figures whose actions and decisions influenced the audience's reaction to the musical the most: Harold Prince and Alexander Cohen. Harold Prince, more commonly known as Hal Prince, was the director of this show and Alexander Cohen was the producer. Cohen was responsible for the advertisement of the show. The choices they made regarding the direction and the advertisement of the show were essential in developing the anticipation for it and the mixed opinions on the overall show. After its opening, *Baker Street* was met with mixed critical responses to various aspects of the show, such as the casting, score and set design. Often, it is recognized as an over-hyped show that did not live up to the expectations set for it.

Cohen launched a full scale advertising campaign to promote the show as much as possible. He promoted the show to the extent where some claim that it was over-promoted. One reporter, Sam Zolotow, wrote, "As is customary with attractions put on by Mr. Cohen, intensive exploitation methods are employed" (Zolotow). Signs were placed on the marquee facing both the north and south side of the Broadway Theatre, an animated sign was utilized to display an advertisement for the show. Furthermore, Cohen was already collaborating with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in order to produce a movie version of *Baker Street* prior to the opening of the show, proving that the creative team had high hopes for the success of the show that they were projecting onto the public (Film to Be Made of 'Baker Street'). The combined use of all these methods of promotion were effective in building up the public's anticipation of the show, as over \$965,300 had already been made through advance sale five days prior to the opening of the show (Zolotow).

According to Cohen, this advertising campaign was successful. In one of his correspondence he claims that, "...each operating week in New York has been profitable. Since the opening we have appropriated a good deal of money for extra advertising and publicity" (Alexander H. Cohen Papers). Cohen goes on to acknowledge the "mild critical response" to the show, but it is worth noting that at the time there was audience approval prior to April based on the fact that the show has turned a profit. The same cannot be said for the summer, where the show began to struggle financially. As a result, a summer only "entertainment package" was developed and sold where when people bought the package, they received a ticket for the show, a dinner in one of the finest New York City restaurants, a souvenir booklet, and an original soundtrack from M. G. M within the package. (Alexander H. Cohen Papers). This was an advertisement tactic used to bolster the summer sales for the show as it would potentially draw audience members in and boost the sales of the show. In his papers, Cohen notes that the show was cutting production costs right before the summer, indicating that the show might have been struggling to make ends meet, despite the audience interest in the show (Alexander H. Cohen Papers).

The show was not overly popular with the critics, who found it to be an average show instead of the spectacle the Cohen was advertising it to be. One critic said, "If you are a strict constructionist of the Sherlock Holmes canon, you won't like the early crudities of this show...And if you'll relax, like Holmes with his fiddle, you'll enjoy more than half this musical." (Taubman). Through this comment, Taubman provides an example of the mixed reviews of the critics. There were many aspects of the show that were not considered satisfactory, many of which relate to the plot and the score. Taubman believes that the production numbers "try too hard" and that the plot "adds imaginative touches", but "some of the inventions one could do without" (Taubman).

Taubman provides two contrasting points of view on the show, denoting the mixed opinions on the show. He expresses content with the plot, yet acknowledges some of the inventions in the plot are not necessary. This informs us that the show is one dimensional with no overt attractions rather than ornate and extravagant. The show was falsely advertised to be a spectacle through Cohen's advertisement campaign, when it would be better classified as a piece of entertainment. Part of the disappointment from the show came from the fact that high expectations were set for the show by the audience and critics through Cohen's advertising campaign. It raised the expectations up to a point that the show could not live up to, causing increased disappointment as the audience expected it to be a better show than it actually was. This is a significant factor as to why the show failed financially and closed early. In addition, the audience's disinterest in the show could be a main reason why the *Baker Street* movie musical was never made.

By October, 1965, it was clear that the production was struggling more than Cohen had originally anticipated. This is reflected through Cohen's correspondence during the period, as he mentions how it was his "intention to stay in New York at least until Thanksgiving and then tour the production, providing that we can cast it with names of specific box office stature." (Alexander H. Cohen Papers). When a production is struggling to generate income, they will sometimes use the tactic of casting popular Broadway actors or well-known actors in film as an attempt to produce more interest in the show from the public. Cohen utilizing this strategy to lure the audience into buying tickets for the tour production implies that *Baker Street* was not as successful as it was expected to be. If the casting is what Cohen is using to make the production attractive, then it is implied that the score and the script of the show are not as appealing to the audience, which concurs with what critics, such as Taubman, were criticizing the production for.

Based on Cohen's letters, it can be inferred that *Baker Street* was popular among the audience members for the first couple of months after it opened. From the perspective of the critics, it received mixed reviews, most likely because of the score and the plot. Once the show's run entered the summer, the audience count began to dwindle, causing the show to have to cut production costs multiple times. Moreover, the *Baker Street* movie did not materialize, possibly because of the lack of audience interest in the musical version. Even the tour fell through, despite different theatres around the country believing that the show might be an attraction that would bring audience members in. All of this builds the portrait that *Baker Street* was not a critically approved show, causing the audience and interest in the show to diminish quickly into the run of the show, as it was not renewed. Without enough audience and critical interest in the show, it cannot make the money needed to sustain the show, turn a profit, and keep the doors to the Broadway Theatre open.

Works Cited:

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