

## Theatrical Elements - John Brannigan - BA Theatre Class of 2023

On February 16, 1965, *Baker Street* opened on Broadway at the aptly-named Broadway theatre. The original production, directed by Hal Prince, ran until November 14, 1965 for a total of 311 performances. *Baker Street* is set in late 1890's London and is based on Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, entitled "A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Final Problem," and "The Empty House." *Baker Street*'s run began around the same time as other famous musicals, namely the original productions of *Hello, Dolly!* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Although both of these shows are grandiose in nature, in stark contrast to *Baker Street*'s realistic style, they give a good look at the capabilities of the technical side of theatre in this time period: lighting, extravagant and intricate sets and costumes. (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/c9cbc2a0-99fe-0137-0d37-6d5d7f72e5a3>).

To begin, the scenic design (by Oliver Smith) of *Baker Street* is generally split into two sections: indoors and outdoors. There are two large-scale, two-point perspective fabric paintings that serve as backdrops for the outdoors: one of a street intersection, and the other of the outside of an elegant building, pleated banners draping across the windows of every story. Conversely, the settings of the indoor scenes have much more variety. There is a study-like room with bookshelves, globes, and a large phrenology poster, a laboratory with beakers and a chemistry apparatus, and a parlour with axes hanging above a mantle, just to name a few. The most impressive aspect of *Baker Street*'s set is how well it is incorporated into the show. In many scenes, the physical proximity of the characters as a result of the set design, whether that be confined or open, can help inform both the acting and the stakes of the scene, and can possibly elevate both. The scenic design received a Tony Award in 1965. In addition to the scene design, the next technical element, lighting, also interacts with the set throughout the show.

The lighting of *Baker Street*, designed by Jean Rosenthal, can be summed up in one figure of speech: "Less is more." There were no colored gels used to light the show, so they relied on changing the intensity and the location of the light to provide an equivalent effect (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/c9cbc2a0-99fe-0137-0d37-6d5d7f72e5a3>). These changes were all that was needed; using dim vignettes and spotlights to call attention to a single part of the stage or isolate characters, increasing the intensity of the light on indoor scenes to make the lighting feel more artificial, and decreasing the intensity of the light on outdoor scenes to make the lighting feel more natural. The design is clearly simplistic, but it is perfect for the show.

Finally, the costume design of *Baker Street*, designed by the Motley Theatre Design Group (made up of Elizabeth Montgomery, Margaret Harris and Sophia Harris), is not as grandiose as the other shows of the time, but was more than adequate for this production. *Baker Street* is a realism period piece, and the costumes perfectly reflected that. The women's costumes consisted of modest dresses with patterns ranging from polka dots to floral patterns; if head pieces were worn, they were incredibly ornate. The men were placed in three-piece suits, some pinstripe, some without the suit jacket, etc., and some wore the occasional overcoat. Headwear use for men was also inconsistent, as it was utilized to imply status and character. The assumed lower-class ensemble members wore flat caps or bowler hats, if hats were worn at all, while Sherlock Holmes wore his iconic deerstalker. Footwear was fairly uniform, regardless of gender, with

each character wearing their respective dress shoes or character boots. This costume design was nominated for the Tony Award in 1965, one of Motley's nine nominations, but ultimately lost to *Fiddler on the Roof*.

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