

# HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 20 MARCH - SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2019

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## Hound of the Baskervilles (Der Hund von Baskerville) (1929)

HippFest Community Screening: Saturday 16 March 2019

&

Encore: Thursday 21 March 2019

**Performing live: Mike Nolan**

Richard Oswald's *Der Hund von Baskerville*, the last silent film starring Sherlock Holmes, has been less a legend than a rumor among cinephiles and Sherlockians. This seven-reel film, with its long German pedigree that even included a movie written while Germany was fighting against the detective's homeland, has long been considered the most important of the *Hounds* made in Europe.

*Der Hund* was directed by Richard Oswald, a respected filmmaker with a long connection to both Holmes and the *Hound*. In a prolific career, Oswald wrote, produced, and directed thrillers, horror films, historical romances, romantic farces, spicy sex exposes, and after sound came in, musical comedies and operettas. *Der Hund* was one of his last silents, marked by an international cast, and even though made by a small Berlin studio (some might say fly-by-night), lavish sets and bravura camera work. His Holmes was Carlyle Blackwell, an American with a colorful acting career starting as matinee idol for Vitagraph in 1910, and more recently playing leading roles in British features. He plays off George Serov's bashful Watson, in arguably the first Holmes film to make the Holmes-Watson friendship a central part of the story. The best-known actor in the cast, however, is Fritz Rasp as Stapleton, Germany's ubiquitous film villain. But Rasp too is overwhelmed by the film's true scene stealer: the Hound's moor, a vast indoor set built inside the abandoned Staaken zeppelin hanger, surpassing in enormity even what 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox built for Basil Rathbone ten years later.

The film never came to the UK, but it played from one end of the continent to the other. The film did well enough that Pathé then released a shortened version for the home movie market on 9.5mm. Finally, the Nazis re-made it in 1937, produced by screen star Anny Ondra. This was the version found in Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden.

What British and American audiences missed was a strange, fascinating hybrid: part Conan Doyle, but mainly descended from a uniquely German line of adaptation. Oswald himself was an important part of that tradition. He had written a stage version of *The Hound* in 1906, and thanks to his brief career at Berlin's Deutsche Vitascope Company, worked on the highly popular Sherlock Holmes series starring Alvin Neuss.

These became Oswald's bizarre Teutonic templates – almost unrecognizable as Conan Doyle's story. By 1929, the now-seasoned director had calmed down considerably, and the film that emerged was not only now recognizable as a Sherlock Holmes tale, but a highly



effective thriller. However, the earlier German productions ride merrily along on its back. The secret panels, the suit of armor with moving eyes, and Stapleton's diabolical booby traps are all still here, with new add-ons. Stapleton now has a bow and arrow; Baskerville Hall has a portrait of the hellhound, a cross between a dog and a dragon; Holmes is slimed in an underground mud slurry; and a telephone with an extra-long cord is turned into a diabolical tool.

So, Conan Doyle purists are hereby warned. But what makes this fun, rather than simply absurd, is the great sincerity and energy with which it's made, perfectly capturing the pleasures of a Saturday morning entertainment.

Our print – a 35mm nitrate original with Czech intertitles – was found in 2009 in the Polish industrial city of Sosnowiec, stored in the basement of a parish priest. Sensibly the collection was donated to Poland's Filmoteka Narodowa (National Archive) in Warsaw, where *The Hound* remained untouched for the better part of a decade. Financial and political factors prevented the Archive from attempting an immediate restoration, but a partnership in 2016 with the San Francisco Silent Film Festival broke the Gordian knot. True, a reel was missing, but some of that footage has been supplied from a 9.5mm Baby Pathé print held by a film collector in Vienna. Almost ninety years after its original release, the unleashed *Hund* is at last ready for a new run.

**By Russell Merritt.** *Russell is the Associate Producer of the Hound of the Baskervilles (1929) restoration and Adjunct Professor, Department of Film and Media, University of California, Berkeley*

This programme note is a précis of a longer essay originated in the San Francisco Silent Film Festival 2018 programme book.

Dir. Richard Oswald | Germany | 1929 | N/C PG | b&w | English intertitles | 1h 5m (+ short accompanied by Stephen Gellatly) & Barony Players short performance.  
With: Carlyle Blackwell, George Saroff, Fritz Rasp

Restoration & screening material courtesy of the San Francisco Silent Film Festival & Filmoteka Narodowa – Instytut Audiowizualny

