

SEASON-ENDER BRILLIANT

Sherlock enthralls

By JOHN CHARLES

When Dr. Watson cheerfully offers a shopworn phrase, "It's darkest before the dawn," Sherlock Holmes, insufferably knowledgeable above all, can't let it pass.

"Actually, around 4 a.m. is the darkest," he intones, as Watson wilts once again.

Charles Marowitz' brilliant play *Sherlock's Last Case* is Northern Light's enthralling season-ender at the Kaasa. It's a perceptive, relentless look at one of literature's most famous relationships. The play is not a send-up, although it's very funny. The humor comes from those elegant, solemnly breathless Victorian turns of phrase which Marowitz handles expertly — as does the cast.

It's 1893, and with the arch-fiend Moriarty dead, Holmes (Shaun Johnston) lacks a worthy enemy and is moody and high-strung. Watson (Michael Spencer-Davis) endures the master's sarcasm, when a threatening letter from Moriarty's son turns up. Then Moriarty's daughter Liza (Judith Haynes), visits, revealing a diabolical plot on the great sleuth's life.

Marowitz's story is spellbinding, and director Gyllian Raby expertly captures that pell-mell forward motion.

Ironically, it's probably the strongest piece of theatre Raby has yet given us, although she prefers more mixed-media events. She's got everything pulled together here, from a real life carrier pigeon to the season's most ingenious and stunning set, by Morris Ertman. It's a tantalizing arena of mirrors, reflecting surfaces, and a dark, dank secret that vividly embodies the play's psychological zones.

Johnston is a revelation, since his previous roles have been lean and mean. His nervous gestures are sometimes reminiscent of TV's Jeremy Brett, but always apt, and his funny scenes are disarmingly off-hand. Spencer-Davis is also outstanding and eloquent, especially in the last scenes.

A few big monologues are not sustained sufficiently, and Judith Haynes isn't always distinct in Act II. But Anne McGrath makes a delightfully weepy housekeeper, and Tim Hine is convincing as the inspector.

Sherlock's Last Case plays through May 27.