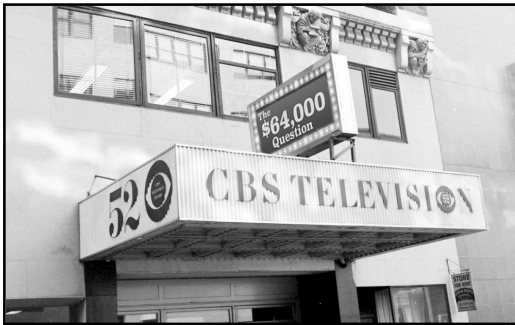


A SCANDAL IN MANHATTAN

SHERLOCK HOLMES A VICTIM OF FOUL PLAY ON THE GREAT WHITE WAY

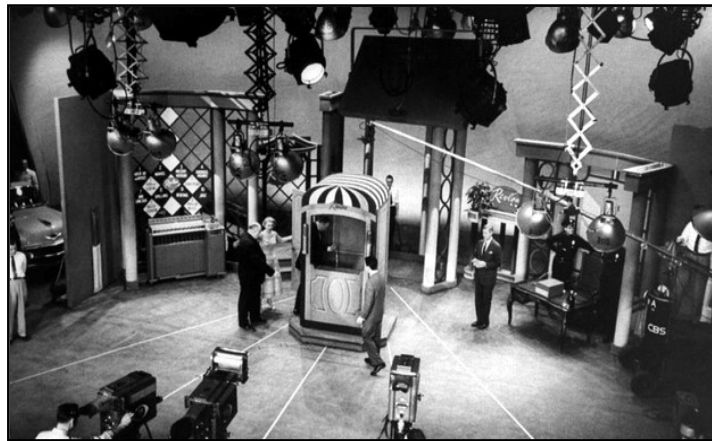
BY ALAN RETTIG

1956 was a banner year on Broadway. On the stages hugging Times Square theatergoers could see *Bells Are Ringing*, *Li'l Abner*, *The Most Happy Fella*, *Candide*, *Auntie Mame* and a host of other celebrated musicals and plays. The biggest hit of 1956 opened on March 15 at the Mark Hellinger Theater. *My Fair Lady* was a sensation and an instant sellout that would run for years. Getting a ticket in the early days of the run was both difficult and expensive.



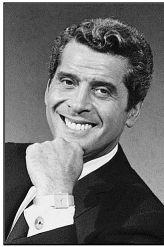
Three short blocks from the Mark Hellinger stood another theater, smaller and much less opulent than *My Fair Lady's* palatial digs. Built in 1927 as the Gallo Theater, it had been renamed The New Yorker until CBS converted it to a radio studio and gave it the workaday name "Studio 52." With the advent of television the network added cameras, and the theater quickly became the home of many

CBS-TV variety programs and quiz shows. At 10pm on Tuesday June 7, 1955 the lights came up on a new tenant at Studio 52. It was another quiz show to be sure, but one that would become an instant nationwide sensation and an unparalleled ratings bonanza for CBS. *The \$64,000 Question* offered that formidable sum to contestants who could answer a series of increasingly difficult questions over a number of weeks on a subject chosen by them. The show became "must see TV" for a huge swath of America and warmed the heart of its only sponsor, Revlon.

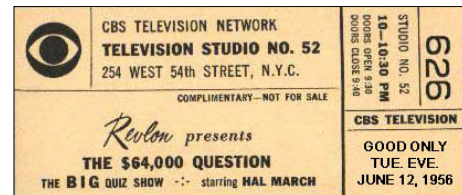


Why the fuss? The top reason was the allure of the biggest cash prize in quiz show history. Those \$64,000 in the mid-50s translate to more than \$570,000 today thanks to an 800% cumulative inflation rate. An unheard of payday like that was heady bait to hook an audience. Then there was the imposing "isolation booth" where contestants were locked away to sweat out the answers. Nearby was the newfangled IBM card sorting

machine that spit out questions in dramatic fashion, and the no-nonsense gentleman who was the custodian of the answers. Next, audiences marveled at contestants' ability to answer questions that seemed beyond the ken of mere mortals. Finally, there was the genial master of ceremonies, Hal March, who won instant fame as the smiling quizmaster. A true overnight sensation, during its first season *The \$64,000 Question* shot to the number-one show on television. Its 47.5 rating topped *I Love Lucy*'s 46.1 and Ed Sullivan's 39.5.



On June 12, 1956 *The \$64,000 Question* celebrated its first anniversary, and tickets to sit in Studio 52's audience, although free, were as scarce and as coveted as seats for the brand new hit *My Fair Lady* around the corner. On this night, Air Force Captain Thomas O'Rourke and his wife Bobbye were "climbing the golden staircase." They'd each won \$16,000 the previous week and had reached the \$32,000 plateau, the last step before the final \$64,000 question. Each had to decide whether to take the \$16,000 and walk away, or risk it by trying for \$32,000. It was unusual and perhaps unprecedented to have a married couple competing individually for separate piles of cash. And on this night, the game was afoot—or at least the game *show* was. That's because both O'Rourkes had chosen the same subject: Sherlock Holmes.



On cue from director Cort Steen, announcer Bill Rogers began the proceedings. . .

Readers may view the entire kinescope film of this episode here:

<https://archive.org/details/64riggedquestion>



Both Bobbye and Thomas O'Rourke easily answered their 14-part questions,¹ which centered on aliases used by characters in the Sherlock Holmes stories. The questions were read once,



after which they had 30 seconds to think over their answers. There was virtually no hesitation at all as they each breezed through the answers flawlessly, in some cases giving more information than was required.

Could such a performance be possible? The author submitted the actual questions used on the show to thirteen Sherlockians and Holmesians of today,² asking them to report back on how they fared. Twelve of the thirteen reported mediocre scores, getting

¹ The O'Rourke's \$32,000 questions and answers will be found in Attachment A

² Elaine McCafferty, Daniel Stashower, Jon Lellenberg, Dana Richards, Catherine Cooke, Peter Blau, Marcus Geisser, Helen Dorey, Ross Davies, Carla Coupe, Les Klinger, Julie McKuras, Roger Johnson

somewhere around half the answers right. Only quiz aficionado Roger Johnson, longtime stalwart at The Sherlock Holmes Society of London, did markedly better, missing only one pair of questions. And as all the respondents noted, they had a huge advantage over the O'Rourkes: they could stare at their computer screens for as long as it took to come up with the answers!

And yet, here was a couple from Ohio, apparently heretofore (and hereafter) unknown in Sherlockian circles, showing up on West 54th Street and answering strings of baffling questions in a performance that cannot be matched by a reasonable cross-section of today's well-credentialed devotees. The Sherlockian luminaries of the day, from their perch at the Algonquin Hotel's watering hole and de facto clubhouse, had almost nothing to say about the noteworthy feat being carried out just a few blocks away. Edgar W. Smith did make a passing note in the *Baker Street Journal*, but mostly there was silence.

So it was no surprise that later developments confirmed what some suspected all along: *The \$64,000 Question*, along with many other big money quiz shows that followed it, was rigged. Answers were given to contestants on a selective basis according to how well the sponsor "liked" the contestants, how strong the ratings were, and in the case of *The \$64,000 Question*, how many tubes of Revlon lipstick were flying off the shelves. These sub rosa activities were referred to as "contestant controls" among the sponsors and producers.

When the O'Rourkes returned on June 19, 1956 they both declined to try for the last question, worth \$64,000 to each of them. Given the ease with which they answered their \$32,000 questions this probably means that the producers declined to give them the answers to the final questions. Why? There could be many reasons, but the most obvious is that since they were a husband and wife competing individually against the house, the producers may have felt that forking over \$128,000 to one couple would be viewed by the folks at home as unfair. Whatever the reason, the O'Rourkes headed for the stage door with their combined \$64,000.

By the time they left, "contestant controls" were the norm not only at *The \$64,000 Question*, but at its brand new companion show, *The \$64,000 Challenge*. Less than three months later, another big money quiz premiered on NBC.



Called *Twenty-One*, it was rigged from the second week onward. *Twenty-One* became famous for many things over its short life, not least the defeat of frumpy Herbie Stempel by the suave Charles Van Doren. Stempel was an obsequious ex-serviceman working his way through the City College of New York on the GI Bill. He had been popular for several weeks, but ultimately the sponsor, Geritol, deemed him too annoying and sentenced him to quiz show death. The producers forced him to "take a dive" to the charming Van Doren, a young assistant professor at Columbia, the son of Pulitzer Prize winning writer and professor Mark Van Doren and poet and author Dorothy Graffe.

Van Doren remained on the program for fifteen weeks. His phenomenal performance broke all quiz show records, showering him with \$143,000 (well over a million of today's dollars). He received some 2,000 letters a week at NBC, along with 500 marriage proposals. And he sold many gallons of Geritol. He was carefully coached from beginning to end, because he brought the kind of ratings bonanza to NBC that *The \$64,000 Question* had delivered to CBS. There is reasonable conjecture that when he finally did lose, he did so intentionally. During and after his time on *Twenty-One* Van Doren was a pop culture icon, written about and talked about nonstop. Desperate to keep him on the air after his defeat, NBC hired him to do cultural pieces on Dave Garroway's *Today Show* at a salary of \$50,000 a year.



But even as Van Doren was reveling in his celebrity, storm clouds were forming over the burgeoning assortment of quiz shows. Herbie Stempel was not pleased about being forced to lose to Van Doren, and went to reporter Jack O'Brian at the *New York Journal American* with his tale. The paper's lawyers nixed the story for lack of corroboration, but by then there was a strong undercurrent in the media that the shows might be fixed.

The dam broke not on one of the prime time big money shows, but on a much more modest daytime quiz called *Dotto*. This was an answer-the-question, connect-the-dots and identify-the-picture game that debuted in early 1958 and was another instant hit for CBS. Just a few months into its run, a standby contestant waiting in the green room, Edward Hilgemeyer, found a notebook. In it were the very questions and answers being used on the air at that moment, which he soon took to the defeated contestant, advising her she'd been cheated. They both approached the producers and demanded hush money, which the producers were more than happy to provide. However they made the mistake of giving the defeated contestant \$4,000 and Hilgemeyer just \$1,500. Hilgemeyer found out about the discrepancy, which sent him instantly to the New York District Attorney.

The DA went public with Hilgemeyer's story, CBS president Dr. Frank Stanton cancelled *Dotto* on the spot, and with a parallel case now in the news the *Journal American* published Herbie Stempel's accusations, which were flashed nationwide and became an instant sensation. Even though a grand jury was convened and some 150 witnesses gave testimony,³ at the time there was simply no law against rigging a quiz show. Unable to indict, the grand jury issued a voluminous presentment with the details of its findings, which the judge promptly sealed lest "innocent" people be smeared. This, in turn, caused such a public commotion that Congress was forced to hold hearings on the matter. During the hearings *The \$64,000 Question*, *The \$64,000 Challenge* and *Twenty-One* were accused of rigging, along with some 30 other shows. But the producers and most contestants—including Charles Van Doren—steadfastly maintained their innocence, until it was time for Mr. James Snodgrass to testify.

James Snodgrass had been a contestant on *Twenty-One* some weeks after Van Doren's loss, had been given the answers, and had sent himself copies of those answers

³ There is no evidence that the O'Rourkes testified.

via registered mail, postmarked days before the live broadcasts. In answer to why he had done this Snodgrass said only, “I felt I needed to cover my ass.” With dramatic flair he opened one of the envelopes in front of the Committee, and the quiz show world came tumbling down.

In light of the Snodgrass testimony producers and contestants alike had no choice but to come clean. Van Doren told the truth and was fired from Columbia University and the *Today Show*. He never taught again. Herbie Stempel lost his winnings when he gave them to a Florida ex-convict for the purpose of setting up an illegal gambling operation in the Sunshine State.

Now unmasked, the producers adopted a new set of talking points. Far from admitting to a morally bankrupt and fraudulent deception of the American people, they claimed they were just doing their job: entertaining the viewers. They held that show business was simply about spectacle and illusion, and that “we are no worse than professional wrestling.”

The New York District Attorney estimated that 100 of the 150 people who testified before the grand jury had lied. Eighteen of them were indicted for perjury. Then as now, it’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up—but it is now a federal crime to rig a quiz show.

By the end of 1958, *The \$64,000 Question* and all the other big money quiz shows had disappeared. Born in a blinding flash, they burned like magnesium and were gone in what seemed like an instant. Was their story a mid-century morality play, or just a show biz footnote? Perhaps we should look to the advice of Sherlock Holmes himself in “The Five Orange Pips” . . .

. . . hand me over my violin and let us try to forget for half an hour the miserable weather and the still more miserable ways of our fellowmen.



Appendix A

\$64,000 Question

June 12, 1956

Questions to Mrs. Bobbye O'Rourke

Concealment of identity under an alias is a feature of many of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. For example, Hugh Boone, the beggar, proved to be the respectable Mr. Neville St. Clair in the case of "The Man with the Twisted Lip." For \$32,000, I will give you seven names. You must provide the title of the story and give another name by which this character was ever known.

| | Also Known As | Story |
|--|---------------|-------|
| Waldron | | |
| Señora (Signora, <i>sic.</i>) Victor Durando | | |
| Henry Peters | | |
| Jack McMurdo | | |
| James Winter | | |
| Vandeleur the schoolmaster | | |
| James Armitage | | |

Questions to Captain Thomas O'Rourke

Concealment of identity under an alias is a feature of many of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. For example, Black Jack of Ballarat was the assumed name of John Turner in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery." For \$32,000, I will give you seven names. You must provide the title of the story and give another name by which this character was ever known.

| | Also Known As | Story |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------|
| Arthur Harry Pinner | | |
| Sutton | | |
| Mrs. Norlett | | |
| (Don) Juan Murillo | | |
| Hosmer Angel | | |
| Sergius, the nihilist | | |
| Mr. Cornelius | | |

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| | Also Known As | Story |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Waldron | Rodger Prescott | 3GAR |
| Señora (Signora, <i>sic.</i>) Victor Durando | Miss Burnet | WIST |
| Henry Peters | Holy Peters/Dr. Schlessinger | LADY |
| Jack McMurdo | John Douglas/Birdy Edwards | VALL |
| James Winter | Killer Evans/John Garrideb/Morecroft | 3GAR |
| Vandeleur the schoolmaster | John Stapleton/Rodger Baskerville | HOUN |
| James Armitage | J. P. Trevor | GLOR |

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| | Also Known As | Story |
|-----------------------|---|-------|
| Arthur Harry Pinner | Beddington | STOC |
| Sutton | Blessington | RESI |
| Mrs. Norlett | Carrie Evans | SHOS |
| (Don) Juan Murillo | The Tiger of San Pedro, alias Henderson and Marquess of Montalva | WIST |
| Hosmer Angel | James Windibank | IDEN |
| Sergius, the nihilist | Professor Coram | GOLD |
| Mr. Cornelius | Jonas Oldacre | NORW |