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Author(s)	William K. Everson
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TWO BRITISH DRAMAS

**ACTION FOR SLANDER** (United Artists-Alexander Korda, 1937) Directed by Tim Whelan; Produced by Victor Saville; Screenplay by Miles Malleson from a play by Mary Borden; Camera, Harry Stradling. 83 mins. (Last NS showing: April 23 '75)  
 With Clive Brook (Major George Daviot); Ann Todd (Ann Daviot); Margarette Scott (Josie Bradford); Arthur Margetson (Capt. Bradford); Ronald Squire (Charles Cinderford); Athole Stewart (Lord Pontefract); Percy Marmont (William Cowbitt); Frank Cellier (Sir Bernard Reper); Morton Selten (Judge Trotter); Gus McNaughton (Tandy); Francis L. Sullivan (Sir Quinton Jessops); Anthony Holles (Grant); Enid Stamp Tayler (Jenny); Kate Cutler (dowager); Felix Aylmer (Sir Eustance Cunningham) and Lawrence Hanray, Albert Whelan, Allan Jeayes, Geogie Withers, Edgar Miles.

Perhaps what strikes one most about "Action for Slander" today is its at least superficial similarity to Renoir's "The Rules of the Game". For a large part of the film, the setting is the same: a weekend party at an aristocratic country house. There is the same juxtaposition of class-conscious behaviour between the elite and the semi-comic servants; there is even a shooting match with sly innuendoes about the rules. But whereas Renoir was cynical about rules of conduct, this British film is deadly serious; Renoir lets adultery slide into near slapstick, whereas the British dispose of it discreetly before the film even starts, and merely refer to it casually via the thrown-away line of dialogue. I don't want to make too much of the affinity between the two films, but it does seem entirely possible - even probable - that Renoir saw "Action for Slander", or the play on which it was based, and saw some of it as a framework for his own story. ("The Rules of the Game" is a 1939 film, so the situation couldn't have been reversed).

"Action for Slander" was produced by Victor Saville's own newly set-up company, releasing through Korda and using his production facilities. (American) director Tim Whelan was a good and versatile director, but the film so much reflects Saville's own style and taste that one can assume a strong personal participation in the film. In fact Graham Greene, in his days as a critic, and who liked the film very much despite a long sustained vendetta against Korda, referred quite casually in his review to Saville as the director, making no mention of Whelan; either a mistake or an unfair slight, but certainly an indication of how strongly the film bears Saville's stamp. It is all pretty undisguised play-into-film, but it is such a pleasure to watch such stylish acting and to listen to good dialogue, beautifully spoken, that it hardly seems to matter. As in "The Winslow Boy" the big court case concerns abstract justice and a question of honor - in this instance, whether a respected army officer did or did not cheat at cards. Such issues may seem rather old-hat today - which is a pity, for they shouldn't. The British Army probably has more pressing matters to worry about today, but the Regular Officer who would sell Government secrets, or defect, is precisely the kind of individual who would cheat at cards, so maybe the issues aren't so outdated after all. In any case I can confirm from my own British army years (where the class system gave me no opportunity to cheat at cards!) that the type played by Clive Brook was (and almost certainly still is) very much present in the Army set-up. He's the kind of officer one respects but never really likes... there's a snobbism that one expects to be there, but a certain priggishness that irritates. Brook's performance is quite perfect, and seems almost an extension of his 'Captain Harvey' in "Shanghai Express". One can almost visualise the years in between, dull plodding work in a peacetime army, a low rate of pay and increasing boredom after those exciting years in China with Dietrich! I don't mean to poke fun at Brook's stolidly honorable professional soldier, and the films are both quite different, but the point of similarity is worth making. For the rest, the film is flawlessly typecast, and here the phrase is used in an approving sense. Arthur Margetson, Britain's own Monroe Owsley, is just right as the retter (he had a very brief Hollywood career too), and Francis L. Sullivan, with glowering eyes and dramatically poised pencil, is again ideal in the courtroom.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---