

## Document Citation

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Although both of tonight's films can loosely be termed "court-room dramas", both are entirely different in content, mood and approach. The British, it would seem, from films like "Action for Slander", "The Winslow Boy" and "Carrington V.C.", are far more concerned with the principles of justice than the mechanics of it. The issues involved are often quite picayune, important more in the sense of involved honor and integrity. The courtroom methods lean to ritual and tradition rather than expediency, and despite the use of scorn and sarcasm by opposing counsels, both seem quite aloof and disinterested in the client as an individual. He often seems but a peg on which to hang a legal exercise, and the key requirement is not so much that a man's guilt be proven or disproven, but that a kind of abstract justice triumphs. (This is particularly true of one of the best of all courtroom dramas, "One More River" - a Hollywood film but from a British story and a British director - in which the innocent accused are in fact adjudged guilty). The American court-room, at least according to Hollywood, is far different. Cleverness, tricks and showmanship seem to rate higher than the truth, the defense attorney the star, the prosecuting attorney the villain, juries prone to be swayed by emotion rather than the facts. Happily, this is not usually the case in actuality -- but so consistent has the Hollywood version been, that many Europeans take its theatrical bravura as fact, and European films containing American-located trial sequences invariably enlarge on already grotesque Hollywood stereotypes, as witness the French "Law of the North". Tonight's two films are not selected as trying to prove the superiority of one approach over the other; they are both just very good films in their own right, which do happen to illustrate rather nicely these very different styles.

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ACTION FOR SLANDER (United Artists-Alexander Korda, 1937) Directed by Tim Whelan; produced by Victor Saville; Screenplay by Miles Malleon from a play by Mary Borden; 9 reels; Camera, Harry Stradling.  
With Clive Brook, Ann Todd, Margaretta Scott, Arthur Margetson, Ronald Squire, Athole Stewart, ~~Perry~~ Marmont, Frank Cellier, Anthony Holles, Kate Cutler, Arthur Margetson, Enid Stamp Taylor, Morton Selten, Francis L. Sullivan, Felix Aylmer, Lawrence Hanray, Gus McNaughton, Gogie Withers, Albert Whelan, Allan Jeayes.

Perhaps what one 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 this 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. Director Tim Whelan was a good and versatile director, but the film so much reflects Saville's own taste and style that one can, I think, assume a 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 to Saville as the director in his review, 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 listen to good dialogue, beautifully spoken, that it hardly seems to matter. As in "The Winslow Boy", the court case is built solely around a question of honor - in this case, 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 in Ireland and elsewhere, 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, from my own British army years I can confirm 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 also 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 Marlene! I don't mean to poke fun at Brook's stolidly honorable professional soldier, but even though the films are so different, there is such a strong similarity between the Brook of "Shanghai Express" and the Brook of "Action for Slander" that the point is worth making. For the rest, the film is flawlessly type-cast, and here the phrase is used in an approving sense. Arthur Margetson is just right as the rotter, and Francis L. Sullivan, with glowering brows and dramatically pointed pencil, is again ideal in the courtroom. Only Peter Bull, often cast as a sadistic, brow-beating attorney, was capable of presenting a more formidable image beneath the wig and gown of the lawcourts.

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