

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Murder</b>
Author(s)	Jonathan Rosenbaum
Source	<i>Monthly Film Bulletin</i>
Date	1975 Jul
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Murder!, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1930



# Murder

Great Britain, 1930

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

st—A. dist—BFI. p.c—British International Pictures. p—John Maxwell. s.d—Frank Mills. sc—Alma Reville. Based on the play *Enter Sir John* Clemence Dane [Winifred Ashton], Helen Simpson. adapt—Alfred Hitchcock, Walter Mycroft. ph—J. J. Cox. sup. ed—Emile de Ruelle. ed—Rene Marrison. a.d—J. F. Mead. asst. a.d—Peter Proud. m—excerpt from Prelude of "Tristan und Isolde" by Richard Wagner. m.d—John Reynders. sd. rec—Cecil V. Thornton. l.p—Herbert Marshall (*Sir John Manier*), Norah Baring (*Diana Baring*), Phyllis Konstam (*Doucie Markham*), Edward Chapman (*Ted Markham*), Miles Mander (*Gordon Druce*), Esme Perry (*Handell Fane*), Donald Calthorp (*Ion Stewart*), Esme V. Chaplin (*Prosecuting Counsel*), Amy Brandon Thomas (*Defending Counsel*), Joynson Powell (*Judge*), S. J. Warmington (*Bennett*), Marie Wright (*Miss Mitcham*), Hannah Jones (*Mrs. Didsome*), Una O'Connor (*Mrs. Grogan*), R. E. Jeffrey (*Jury Foreman*), Alan Stainer, Kenneth Kove, Guy Pelham Boulton, Violet Farebrother, Clare Greet, Drusilla Wills, Robert Easton, William Fazan, George Smythson, Ross Jefferson and Picton Roxborough (*Jury Members*). 3,375 ft. 94 mins. (16mm.).

Actress Edna Druce is found murdered in the presence of Diana Baring, a player from the same repertory company, in the latter's flat. At the trial, Diana pleads her innocence, claiming not to have been conscious while the murder took place and refusing to reveal the nature of her argument with the victim that preceded it. After some deliberation, the jury reaches a guilty verdict and the death sentence is pronounced, but one of the jurors—Sir John Manier, a celebrated actor—continues to have doubts, and decides to conduct an amateur investigation of his own. He summons the repertory stage manager Ted Markham and his wife Doucie, former neighbours of Diana, for assistance, offering positions in his own theatre

company in return. They describe the curious disappearance of a policeman and the appearance of another one on the street the night of the crime, and take Sir John to the rooming house where he establishes that Diana's landlady, Miss Mitcham, may have heard a high-pitched male voice rather than a female one in Diana's room. After examining the repertory theatre, Sir John sleeps in the flat of a local policeman; the next day he speaks to Diana, who inadvertently reveals that the man about whom she and Edna quarrelled is a "half-caste". Suspecting Handell Fane, an effeminate actor in the repertory company now working as a trapeze artist, Sir John calls him to his office with the offer of a part in a play based on the murder case and asks him to help supply the missing details. After Fane retreats in embarrassment, Sir John and Ted call on him at the circus; in the course of his trapeze act, he hangs himself with a rope, leaving behind a letter which reveals that he killed Edna and escaped from the scene of the crime in a policeman's uniform used at the repertory theatre. Released from gaol, Diana stars with Sir John in his next production.

Hitchcock has described *Murder* as his "first and only whodunit", accounting for his antipathy to the form with the complaint that it "contains no emotion", and bringing to mind Edmund Wilson's comparison of reading several with unpacking "large crates by swallowing the excelsior in order to find at the bottom a few bent and rusty nails". Certainly the most evident lack in this 1930 movie—apart from the creakier aspects of the play which it adapts—is the sort of emotional continuity and momentum of controlled viewpoints which sustained *Blackmail* so brilliantly the previous year, and the more dubious cerebral rewards offered in their place are not quite enough to fuse its comparable experiments into a consistently workable style. After an effective, rather UFA-inspired opening (prompted, no doubt, both by Hitchcock's work at the German studio in the mid-Twenties and by the fact that he concurrently shot a German version of *Murder* entitled *Mary*), which features a lengthy dolly past the windows of neighbours responding to a mysterious commotion, the film mainly tends towards a stagier conception of dialogue units which the various stylistic departures often inflect rather than unify, thus usually registering as isolated 'touches'. Hitchcock recalls asking his actors to improvise some of their lines in certain scenes; an examination of the shooting-script suggests that one instance of this method occurs in an early scene between Doucie and Miss Mitcham while the latter prepares tea—a shot nearly two minutes long and including six trips between a kitchen and adjoining room, whose expository function is not appreciably lightened by impromptu remarks about the brand of the tea. Similarly, Herbert Marshall's once-celebrated voice-over soliloquy to the strains of the "Tristan" Prelude seems notable today chiefly because it raises the question of why Hitchcock felt it necessary to record the orchestra live on the set when Marshall's stentorian tones were added on a different occasion. Rather more interesting, at least historically, are an odd subjective shot (Sir John imagining a sumptuous dinner table as he prepares to spend the night in a commoner's lodgings) and, more generally, the multiple use of theatre motifs in the *mise en scène*, whereby Hitchcock contrives to convert Diana's cell and Sir John's office into stage settings—matching the 'play-within-a-play' mechanisms in which Sir John exposes Fane and the latter hangs himself. The adept backstage handling of the repertory company's farcical production, glimpsed obliquely in counterpoint to a police investigation, ensures that our first and only glimpse of a play from the audience's vantage point occurs in the film's final shot, which unites hero, heroine and the Markhams under the same proscenium. Apart from such games played against the more mechanical developments of the mystery plot, the principal sustaining thread of *Murder* is a conventionally arch comic treatment of class consciousness between Sir John and everyone else, which—like the long jury scene in which he first appears—is coldly amusing in places but awkwardly dated in overall conception.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

MURDER (Reviewed M.F.B. No. 498, p. 165): This film is based on the novel *Enter, Sir John* by Clemence Dane and Helen Simpson, and not a play as printed.