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Menis, Susanna (2019) Witness for the Prosecution (2017). Directed by Lucy Balley [theatre production]. UK. Eleanor Lloyd Productions and Rebecca Stafford Productions. [Book Review]

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Abstract: This theatre review addresses the question of the law and male hierarchy in this courtroom drama adaptation to Agatha Christie's novel. This recent play has been termed a 'revival' of Christie's work; thus, making sense of some of the embedded cultural norms presented in the story is of fundamental interest for those seeking to grapple with socio-legal concerns reflected in the relationship between law and society.

Key words: courtroom drama, oppressive hierarchies, love, deception, justice, English law

**Witness for the Prosecution (2017). Directed by Lucy Balley [theatre production]. UK.
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There appears to be a revival of Agatha Christie's novels, in the cinema with *Murder on the Orient Express* and in the theatre with *Witness for the Prosecution*. 'Revivals' are considered a good thing, because they bring back into the spotlight forgotten themes, often lost perhaps in what is more frequent than not, our black-letter law teaching.

The recent theatre production of the *Witness for the Prosecution*, directed by Lucy Bailey and produced by Eleanor Lloyd and Rebecca Stafford is played in the breath-taking London County Hall, the Edwardian Baroque building on the South Bank. The play has been shortlisted for the Best Play Revival in the What's On Stage Awards; it has been so popular that its original run due to end in December 2017 has been extended to September 2018. The

reviews received for this production have been overwhelmingly positive, and I cannot but mention the praise I heard from those in the theatre sitting behind me.

I have read all of Agatha Christie's novels and of course I knew of the twist in the tail of this story. It is perhaps for this reason that I found the literal representation of the novel disappointing. I was certainly not expecting blocks of ten to twenty minutes of uneventful dialog from all of the possible witnesses' evidence. Yet, I recommend seeing it, not least because the simplicity of the production challenges one not to take the story of the law at face value.

Witness for the Prosecution is a story about legal justice, truths, love, and authority. The story could be told as a murder story, or alternatively, as a love story. In either way, it results in two corpses and a woman in prison (although this last detail is for us to assume). This is a story about, what Helen Cixous (1996) called, oppressive hierarchies. Two of which are considered in this review: the oppressiveness of the law and the oppressiveness of men.

Witness for the Prosecution is a courtroom drama set in 1957. The core of the story is simple: the illegitimate wife of a man who has killed his Lady-friend for her money attempts to convince the jury of his innocence. This she does by way of casting doubt on the truth of her evidence. The ruse is successful, only to find out that he intends to leave her for another woman. Discovering this she stabs him on the spot and he dies. Some have argued that, as with many other courtroom dramas, the storyline is supposed to reflect the irony and cynicism towards the law (Corcos, 2003). However, there is more to it.

The first twist in the story, where Christine Vole, the illegitimate wife of the murderer, Leonard Vole (this is the reason why she is able to testify against her non-husband), procures incriminating evidence against herself so to prove her husband's innocence- this action has at its core the oppressiveness of the law. It is for this reason that Christine is successful. We are

told from the beginning that ‘the testimony of a devoted wife does not carry much weight’.

Indeed, the hierarchy constructed by the law in this story is ironical, not least because, in taking one example, it is the evidence by the murderer that bears greater value than the only other available witness’s evidence available to the defence- the murderer’s (non) wife.

However, we learn at the end of this court drama that Leonard was lying whilst Christine was telling the truth, that is, that he did kill his Lady-friend; and it is this truth which secures his acquittal.

Here further lays the oppressiveness of this hierarchy: love is perceived as an irrational emotion, and thus a challenge to the positivist order of the law (Grossi, 2015). Goodrich (2002) talks about the ignorance of the law about love, the ignorance of the masculine norm. Indeed, Christine is able to deceive the law because of this ignorance. After all, she is an actress by profession. Indeed, Sir Wilfrid, Leonard’s Barrister, grew to dislike her; he was expecting a ‘hysterical’ wife- instead, Christine presents herself as cold and calculated. But she assured Sir Wilfrid that she will give convincing evidence in front of the jury- as one expects from a loving wife: ‘Do not worry Sir Wilford, I will give him an alibi and I shall be very convincing. There will be tears in my eyes...’.

However, the problem that we encounter here is the ambiguity of the law. Love is not good enough to stand in front of the jury but neither is non-love. So much so that Sir Wilfrid decides not to have Christine as a witness for the defence, because the prosecution will ‘break her down in no time’. It is love which brings back Christine to the witness stand, and it is her non-loving behaviour which brings about Leonard’s acquittal- this being exactly her intention. Reviewers of court dramas have focused on what appears to be the purpose of this sort of story, that is, to ‘confront and question assumptions about the legal system’ (Corcos, 2003:504). Corcos (2003) suggests that *Witness for the Prosecution* reaffirms ‘scepticism

about society's ability to create a legal justice that will do justice'. But is this really the case here?

If irony and cynicism are present in this story it is not so much towards the law as it is towards the attempt to trick the oppressive hierarchy of the law and of men. What Agatha Christie really tells us is that hierarchy is here to stay. The first clue is to be found in what Christine says to Sir Wilfrid about Leonard, that he 'has a way with women'. At this point Christine comes across as ironical, as if, in fact, she is the one in charge. However, by the end we learn that Leonard does have his way with women: Christine has served him well, but now that he is free he leaves her for another woman.

As the witness for the prosecution Christine in fact tells the truth, that is, that Leonard killed his Lady-friend; she is not committing perjury although this is an unchallenged theme across the story. This is because the law has its way with women too. There is an assumption here that Christine's duty as a wife has not been fulfilled; she is untrustworthy and socially and legally inadequate. Sir Wilfrid tells her that in 'this country we are inclined to take a rather more serious view of marriage'; he asks her: 'in the ceremony of marriage itself you swore to cherish your husband, that too was a lie?'. It is this preoccupation with an un-natural woman, as put by Smart (1992), which threatens the moral and social order, rather than with the actual murder. However, Christine thinks she can undermine this hierarchy and at the same time maintain her integrity. Indeed, she is able to avoid perjury: as a loving wife, she did not need to give evidence and as an un-loving wife, she told the jury the truth. But it does not end there; as a loving wife she procures for the defence (using her acting skills and pretending to be an ex-lover of Leonard) recriminating love letters between her (Christine) and her (inexistent) lover. These letters suggest that Leonard did not kill his Lady-friend and that Christine was lying as a witness to the prosecution so to get rid of him. This time, on the witness stand, Christine fulfils the law's expectations. She finally subscribes to the feminine

stereotype: she is emotional, hysterical and violent. She cries. She is believed. And the murderer is found not guilty.

'Leonard is free, and we did it', Christine tells Sir Wilfrid at the end. 'You do not understand at all, Sir Wilfrid, I knew he was guilty [...]. Only I could save him'. A shocked Sir Wilfrid replies: 'and you saved him, a murderer...?'. 'Again, you do not understand' says she, 'I love him'. However, rather than a cynicism towards justice, Agatha Christie gives us a final twist. To the couple Sir Wilfrid says: 'you made a mockery of English Law' and 'the scale of justice ultimately balances out'. And it does. Hysterical and provoked by the news that Leonard merely used her and that he is off with his new lover, Christina, using Sir Wilfrid's words, 'executed him'. This is how this story ends. Authority, hierarchy and oppression are restored. Justice, as we know it, is achieved after all.

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