



*Witness for the Prosecution* is a September, 2024 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.

16 of a possible 20 points \*\*\*\* = a superior film

United States 1957 black-and-white 116 minutes live action feature drama  
Edward Small Productions Producer: Arthur Hornblow, Jr.

Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

**Points:**

- 1 Direction: Billy Wilder
- 2 Editing: Daniel Mandell\*
- 2 Cinematography: Russell Harlan\*  
Stills Photography: Madison Lacy
- 1 Lighting  
Special Effects: Lee Zavitz
- 2 Screenplay: Billy Wilder\* and Harry Kurnitz\*, adapted by Larry Marcus\*  
from a play by Agatha Christie  
Script Supervision: John Franco
- 1 Music: Matty Malneck Arrangements: Leonid Raab  
Conductor: Ernest Gold  
Song: "I May Never Go Home Anymore" by Ralph Arthur Roberts and

**Jack Brooks**

**2 Art Direction: Alexandre Trauner\***

**Set Decoration: Howard Bristol**

**Costume Design: Edith Head, Joe King**

**Makeup: Gustaf Norin, Harry Ray, Ray Sebastian, Wally Westmore, and  
Charles Gemora**

**2 Sound: Fred Lau**

**Dialogue Direction: Noel Coward and Bert Steiner**

**Casting: William Maybery**

**Technical Advisor: Basil Bleck**

**1 Acting**

**2 Creativity**

**15 total points**

**Cast: Tyrone Power (Leonard Vole), Marlene Dietrich (Christine), Charles Laughton\* (Sir Wilfrid Robarts), Elsa Lanchester\* (Miss Plimsoll), John Williams (Brogan-Moore), Henry Daniell (Mayhew), Ian Wolfe (Carter, Sir Wilfrid's butler / valet), Torin Thatcher (Mr. Myers), Norma Varden (Mrs. Emily Jane French), Una O'Connor\* (Janet MacKenzie, Mrs. French's maid), Francis Compton (judge), Philip Tonge (Inspector Hearne), Ruta Lee (Diana, Leonard's girlfriend), Marjorie Eaton (Miss O'Brien), Ottola Nesmith (Miss Johnson), J. Pat O'Malley (shorts salesman), Jack Raine (doctor), Leoda Richards (hat shop saleslady), Molly Roden (Miss McHugh), Norbert Schiller (spotlight operator in German café), others**

**A courtroom drama based on a hit play by Agatha Christie, *Witness for the Prosecution* is engrossing, entertaining and quite superficial. Director Billy Wilder found its last act plot twists intriguing and astonishing.**

**However, for this reviewer, those sudden unearned transmutations of character felt unpersuasive and mechanical, wholly structural in function. Tyrone Power's lead performance, alternately ultra-cool and overwrought, was similarly devoid of credibility. Charming drollness of Elsa Lanchester's garrulously maternal nurse Plimsoll, fussing endlessly over hubby Charles Laughton's crusty barrister, Sir William Robarts, insufficiently compensates for**

absence of character development and undue reliance on identifiable stock types. No major character, with the single debatable exception of Una O'Connor's acid-tongued Janet MacKenzie as maid to ditsy Mrs. Emily Jane French, is remotely recognizable as reproduction of a genuine human being. Supporting roles are invariably played with satisfactory gravity.

Yet even exuberantly witty banter among cast principals fails to offset overriding plot triviality. Screeners are given no reason to identify with people in the film, robots artificially moved from event to event according to dictates of a storyline rather than by psychological or physical drives.

A secondary complication involves Marlene Dietrich as a manipulative displaced person with acceptable, if undistinguished, singing talent. Her no-show spouse is introduced in a café scene, recalled later in Old Bailey during Leonard Vole's trial, then left hanging. Was Christine legally married before meeting Lothario Leonard and accompanying him to England? If so, where is the first husband? The first of these questions is answered in the affirmative. Not so, the second. Such negligent plotting is leaky, assuredly not the watertight communication vessel Billy Wilder claims.

Russell Harlan's cinematography admirably opens up potentially stagebound drama, taking viewers back to Germany in a flashback and later forward to an appointment at Euston railroad station which appears to be an authentic blackmail scene. It isn't, though, as later episodes will prove.

Misinterpretations of actions and conversations abound, eventually catching even such an astute analyst of motives and frauds as Sir Wilfrid in a trap set by amoral lovers. One of whom happens to be a two-time cheater. Conveniently, at the film's climax justice is doled out and Sir Wilfrid gets handed another chance to preserve the life of a homicidally inclined pretender.

Dialogue direction by uncredited Noel Coward and Bert Steiner provide numerous snappy exchanges nicely contrasting with a background of observable ambiguous behaviors and unseen criminal activity. A woman is murdered and her apartment ransacked, both off-camera. Seemingly random encounters at a millinery shop and travel agency turn out to have lethal consequences.

All these devious excursions in and out of illusion are edited with consummate skill by Daniel Mandell, a master at maintaining maximum suspense through deliberate withholding of critical scene context. Streamlining action by refusing to allow time for explanations of ambiguous statements, he

also capitalized on repeated inquiries of Sir Wilfrid about whether testimony presented was persuasive. These plant suspicions in auditors that some responses just heard were either enigmatic or downright prevarications. For formidable achievement here, Mandell was rewarded with an Oscar® nomination.

Sound recording captured vocal nuances and inflections flawlessly, with credit for that due Oscar® nominee Fred Lau. Note particularly how skillfully he handled Laughton's interrogation of unbendingly traditionalist Janet MacKenzie.

Lighting throughout is of satisfactory quality, showing us plenty of secondary activity thoroughly humanizing Laughton's Sir Wilfrid, who's ultimately shown to be not half so clever as he imagines himself. Pointlessly dawdling with pills, for example, the amateur investigator is unable to reach valid conclusions about anything. He also fails wretchedly to detect an imposture in the foggy atmosphere of Euston Station.

Matty Malneck's music, as arranged by Leonid Raab, does what it is supposed to and nothing more. The sole song featured in *Witness for the Prosecution* came from the team of Ralph Arthur Roberts and Hack Brooks. "I May Never Go Home Anymore" wasn't even a dark horse candidate for Oscar® recognition.

Further highlights of the production are Alexandre Trauner's art direction and costuming by Edith Head and Joe King. Trauner's sets, such as the millinery shop, Euston railway station, and Sir Wilfrid's law offices, are teeming with realistic detail, supplemented cagily by Stanley Detlie's props.

This Kino Lorber Studio Classics dvd release also includes a three-minute hyperbolic trailer and an unfortunately meandering six and one-half minute interview of Billy Wilder by fellow film director Volker Schlöndorff. Wilder demonstrates either a studied vagueness or a disappointing incoherence in discussing his work, the former being more likely.

*Witness for the Prosecution* is a stellar example of the extremely polished, thoroughly captivating Hollywood studio drama. It's unsuitable thematically for youths and children, pleasantly rewarding for adults.