

The Winslow Boy

UK : 1998 : dir. David Mamet : : 110 min
 prod: Sarah Greene : scr: David Mamet : dir.ph.: Benoit Delhomme
[Guy Edwards](#)
 Nigel Hawthorne; Rebecca Pidgeon; Jeremy Northam; Gemma Jones; Matthew Pidgeon;
 Colin Stinton; Aden Gillett

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⌘	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Absorbing remake of the Terence Rattigan play about a boy in 1910 England who's expelled from school for a petty theft. His father determines to clear his good name - nearly sacrificing his family in the process. As much about social mores and conventions as the case itself, this even-handed film benefits from a superlative performance by Hawthorne as the head of the Winslow household. Neil North, who plays the First Lord of the Admiralty, was the boy in the 1948 movie. ***"

TV Quick review:

"A young boy from a middle-class family is expelled from the Royal Naval Academy for theft. He denies the charge, and his father (played by the late Nigel Hawthorne) takes up the cudgels on his behalf. Hawthorne is so convinced of his son's innocence that he is

prepared to bankrupt himself and bring down disgrace on his own family by taking the school to court, and engages upper-class barrister Jeremy Northam to represent the lad. Terence Rattigan's hit stage play, played out in the stuffy drawing rooms of Edwardian London, was also made into a terrific film in 1948. It's full of little tensions - not all that relevant nowadays - relating to class and gender, and is a snapshot of another age. There was really no need for a remake, but this premiere is a pretty fine effort, Hawthorne is superb as the strait-laced disciplinarian father, Northam is all snooty charm as the dashing barrister, while Rebecca Pidgeon is perkily plucky as the family's suffragette daughter. ***"

"Nigel Hawthorne stars as the father determined to clear his son's good name in this David Mamet-directed version of Rattigan's play, a stalwart of am-drams up and down the land. ***"

Fastidious, impeccably performed period piece which, like the recent remake of "**THE BROWNING VERSION**", leaves one wondering quite why they took the trouble. The case in question, Archer-Shee in 1912, has no particular modern relevance, and hinges on a principle at law which will baffle audiences in the days of the European Court of Human Rights, while the Edwardian middle class world the play evokes seems as alien to the one we live in as a Plantagenet court. This film does evade the cardinal error of that other remake by not attempting to cast the drama in a more contemporary setting, but it compensates by making Rebecca Pidgeon's character as the suffragette daughter the real focus of the drama, thereby no doubt satisfying a target female audience, but hardly commending it to this archive. Pidgeon's Catherine is, needless to say, a far more assertive and self-empowered woman than the character Rattigan actually wrote. All of history, as we continually see, must be reshaped to satisfy contemporary sexual politics.

In my review of the 1948 original I concluded by saying "There is little love on show in so emotionally shrivelled a British film, but the case remains, in one sense, an act of fatherly love, and perhaps with a different treatment that aspect of the whole affair could be brought back onto the centre ground, where it belongs." Mamet, unfortunately, was not interested in Hawthorne's relationship with his son, and certainly made no more effort than Asquith to show how the two-year legal battle would have told on the 14-year old boy at the centre of it. None of the climactic four-day court hearing appears in the film – it is all reported back to us in the Winslow drawing room – and particularly not the two days which Ronnie (Guy Edwards) spends in the witness box being grilled by the Attorney General. What does the boy matter? We have women's rights to discuss, or an endless stream of smitten male suitors to be reckoned with.

This is not to say that the film is not perfectly enjoyable by its own lights. The photography is clean and bright, the attention to minor details of manners, costume and setting is very pleasing, and the whole cast are commendable, not least Rebecca Pidgeon herself. Jeremy Northam has the unenviable task of reprising Robert Donat as the King's Counsel engaged at ruinous expense by the Winslow family, and he makes his character quietly formidable, even though we never see him in court. The interrogation of Ronnie before he accepts the brief remains one of the highlights of the film. Hawthorne is, as one would expect, more moving as the father than Cedric Hardwicke in 1948 but, paterfamilias or no, he must continually retire from the field and cede direction of the legal action to his daughter. The battle for women's suffrage has already been won outright, in his household at any rate. Catherine's natural antipathy to the lawyer (which **was** part of the original play) makes the sparring between them edgy and tart, and the dialogue itself is not interfered with at all, but remains within polite Edwardian constraints.

The obscure legal point I referred to is the "petition of right". Subjects might not sue the Crown, nor any of its agents, because of an implicit assumption in law that the Crown can do no wrong. But a "petition of right" allowed a subject to have his grievance heard in court, without prejudice to the Crown, and seek a finding that no blame be attached to him. The judgement applied in such cases was "let right be done". Since Ronnie's grievance was against the Crown, through Osborne Naval College and the Admiralty, his only legal redress was by granting of this "petition of right". Much parliamentary jaw-jaw is entailed before the Winslows get that far.

The film adds little touches to show how the case caught the public imagination in 1912 – slogans on umbrellas, political cartoons in the press, a popular song calling itself "How Still We See Thee Lie, or: The Naughty Cadet". But a film about a legal action which steers clear of the courtroom altogether is a bizarre premise. **"THE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE"** without the trials would be rather a pointless exercise.

And in the end we come back to the central gripe that the Naughty Cadet in question remains a background character, although it's **his** honour, not his sister's, which is at stake here. It is he who has sustained injury, but he has no more to say about it all than the family cook. Guy Edwards as Cadet Ronald Arthur Winslow pays a high price indeed for one illicit cigarette in the Naval College locker room (in this film Morton is unable to trick that admission from him in the courtroom, so instead he just deduces it by sublime guesswork), and the script contains more than a nudge or two about the "evils" of cigarette smoking. (God, do we have to be lectured on *that* as well?)

Not a bad film at all, if one is looking for a study of Edwardian manners. But can we have one about **"THE WINSLOW BOY"** now? Or how about a remake of **"THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE"**, but making the central character her 13-year old nephew?

See the 1948 original for further comment, and subject index under **TRIALS & COURTROOMS**.