

SYNOPSIS

A mysterious, sexy story of love, obsession and the limits of power and control. Steeped in gritty Napoleonic Edinburgh. Saturated with the vibrant colors of India. Driven by suspense. All based on a true trial story, with a shocking twist that will blow viewers away—making SCOTCH VERDICT the cinematic event of the year.

Springtime in Bombay, 1796. The city explodes in music and color, celebrating Holi.

Off the square, there's an oasis at the end of a shaded, trellised passageway. A refuge from the heat and light. A place that welcomes lovers, learners and seekers of all ages. An esoteric studio with its door flung wide open.

Inside stands a gorgeous Italian with the looks of a courtesan and the air of a countess. She only needs to raise her chin for servants to position the priceless Georgian desk being presented by the man in the doorway.

The Scottish **Earl of Kilchrenan**, 50 and very handsome, is amused. They are close. Intimate.

To distract from the spectacle of a flamethrower in the square, she entertains him with magic, producing finches out of thin air for her birdcage and throwing her voice to simulate bees buzzing round his head.

She's an illusionist. And also a Fortune Teller, we learn, as she hands the Earl a box of cards, showing him out the door. Kilchrenan begs her to leave with him because his son mysteriously "needs a mother." Tenderly, the **Fortune Teller** kisses him goodbye forever. That night, her cards foretell what will become of them all ...

Next day at the docks, a feverish seven-year-old boy recovers his senses long enough to make sure that his beloved red chest is being hauled onto a huge ship. Meet Archie Hope. When Kilchrenan lifts him out of a rickshaw, the boy doesn't notice that lots of his colorful, round Ganjifa cards are left behind.

And he doesn't see them being swiped up by Kilchrenan's attractive but brutal English foreman, James Clark.

When Archie realizes his cards are missing, it is already too late. The card theft sets events in motion that lead to gold-smuggling, corruption, revenge and a deadly rivalry that pits James Clark against the mysterious Jewish merchant, Mr. Solomon, with Archie's fate hanging in the balance.

In the meantime, Archie fights for his life as the ship keens for Britain. Kilchrenan shares their stateroom with another sick man he nurses, a great lord called Polkemmet. Dipping in and out of consciousness, Archie dimly registers the sea voyage. James Clark makes a lasting impression by carving distinctive playing cards out of ivory and teaching the sailors to sing all the choruses from Handel's Solomon. Like the Ganjifa cards, the ivory cards and the Handel oratorio immediately weave themselves into Archie's destiny.

One night Archie wakes naked, drenched and raving in the stateroom beside his red chest. There is pounding at the door. Archie's father panics. This awakens Polkemmet, who is clearly shocked by what he sees. But Polkemmet makes a split second decision to keep the secret. He helps Kilchrenan conceal it; they bolt the door and shut the porthole.

As the men argue out of earshot, Archie feels a hand in his own. He looks down and sees the ghost of a pretty girl, his own age, standing beside him. She is half Indian and half European, dressed in English finery, pulling him into the shadows where he doesn't want to go. Meet the ghost of Jane Cumming.

Archie's stateroom has now become Jane's stateroom in a parallel universe that the grownups cannot see. But the children—Archie and the ghost holding his hand—watch as an Indian teenager is raped in Jane's berth by an Englishman who could easily be James Clark. Terrified, Archie turns to his father for help. But the men cannot see what Archie sees, and suddenly Jane's ghost is gone.

The shouting and pounding at the cabin door turns into the pounding of a gavel. The roaring sea becomes the roar of a male crowd. The paneled stateroom attains the grandeur of a capitol courtroom.

Fourteen years later in 1811, we're in the Court of Sessions, Scotland's highest criminal court. Archie is now 22, resplendent in red robes. Virtue vies with beauty and intelligence in the face framed by his white wig. He's almost 20 years younger than his youngest colleague.

When Archie cannot get order with the gavel, he gets it with magic. Dead silence as Archie produces two doves out of thin air. You can hear a pin drop. The two best advocates in the country, Cranston and John Clark, stand in awe before the controlling power of a single young man ruling over the highest court in the land—where women are not admitted.

This is only the pre-trial hearing in the days before jury trials, but already the seven male justices—a roster that includes Lord Polkemmet, who will cast the deciding vote—are divided on a scandalous lesbian sex case. Balancing the old conservatives on the bench is Archie's youthful friend, the naughty Adonis, Lord Meadowbank. Meadowbank's a libertine vying for Chief Justice of Scotland after Archie's expected tenure. He advised Archie to seek a transfer from such a politically damaging trial. But now they learn that Archie's transfer has been denied.

Two schoolmistresses are accused of sexual misconduct by Lady Gordon, Scotland's richest woman, who relies on advice from her ravishing spiritualist—*the Fortune Teller!* Lady Gordon repeated tales of the teachers' wrongdoing from her Indian granddaughter, Jane Cumming, a student. When other mothers pulled their daughters from the school, the business collapsed on hearsay. Now the teachers are penniless, suing for slander. Archie considers it a constitutional case, since there is no British law against lesbianism.

How can the teachers, Miss Pirie and Miss Marianne Woods, be convicted of a crime that does not exist? What, if anything, are they truly guilty of? If Jane is lying, then why? The facts revolve around sex at the school. Pornographic cartoons about the case are already selling like mad all over Edinburgh. And the trial hasn't even begun.

When Archie rules to ban pornographic “evidence” and lock up the trial transcript, he instantly creates a black market that spins the lurid case out of control with the power to destroy the seemingly perfect life Archie has built with his childhood sweetheart, his cousin Ollie Courtenay.

But Archie’s obsession with control—he will not even allow himself to be touched—hints that his perfect life may, itself, be a carefully crafted illusion.

When Archie slaps his loyal clerk, Dundonald, for indiscretion, Archie’s modus operandus is clear: Reveal nothing. Or lose everything.

In a race to end the trial before his own secret catches up with him, Archie’s only way out is to prove the innocence of both parties. Hunting for hidden facts, stalked by the deadly tropical fever that steadily overtakes him while Jane’s ghost takes possession of his brilliant mind, Archie must descend into his own haunted childhood and the dark past he shares with Jane.

Going back and forth between the courtroom drama and the Indian mystery that Archie needs to unlock, SCOTCH VERDICT seamlessly interweaves four main threads from memory and reality into a rich, dense indigo fabric.

Archie & Ollie. Archie returns from Bombay to news that he will inherit a boundless estate in the Scottish Highlands. His father grooms him from boyhood; they have an unusually close partnership shrouded in secrets that adult Archie must reconcile in order to solve the case. Archie and Ollie fall in love at first sight as children, but as their stormy passion ignites, their romantic future grows uncertain, because Archie cannot sire the children required for the equally highborn Ollie to pass inheritance in their bloodlines. Ollie’s quest to win Archie’s love parallels Archie’s maturity from boyhood to manhood—his virtuous pursuit of a low-status career in law—his exceptional scholarship—his loss of innocence and the devil’s bargain they both make for Ollie’s sake, to preserve the privileges both lovers assume as their birthright.

Jane’s story. Fifteen year-old Jane Cumming, by contrast, is stripped of the wealth and status she enjoyed as a girl in Bombay. This permanent shock was delivered the minute she returned as an orphan to live with her haughty, greedy grandmother on the outskirts of

Edinburgh. Jane's ghost finally reveals to Archie, in his feverish state, the point where their parallel destinies diverged from the Indian childhood they shared with the Fortune Teller. Finally armed with the truth about Jane, will Archie rescue her—or sacrifice her? Archie is a noble inheritor hiding secrets; Jane is a disinherited teenage rebel with secrets of her own; and their paths now lead irrevocably to a meeting in Archie's courtroom that could destroy them both.

The trial. Meanwhile, the unfolding trial grounds SCOTCH VERDICT in wit and laughs, even as it embroils the vulnerable teachers, Pirie and Marianne, in suspenseful plots by James Clark and Solomon, competing to destroy Archie and take control of his wealth.

The schoolteachers. The tender love story between the two working girls, Pirie and Marianne, contrasts the hot, erotic intensity of Archie and Ollie, the aristocrats. We follow “the ladies” from their first meeting as art students, to the blush of first love, to professional partnership in the school they build with the support of Lady Gordon, to the grim reality of being blacklisted, humiliated and criminalized. Their future literally lies in the hands of their brilliant, quirky and crippled defense counsel, John Clark, Scotland's top lawyer who has taken the case pro bono. His courtroom duels with the second best lawyer in Scotland, Mr. Cranston, representing Lady Gordon, pepper the scenes with witty ripostes.

The purity of both adult couples—Pirie & Woods; Archie & Ollie—is in turn contrasted by the edgy eroticism of the teenage Jane, launching into her own sexual maturity in trial scenes that play out key events that took place at the school.

Watching as Archie gathers evidence but finds himself more and more gripped by fever, we begin to wonder if he has lost grip on reality. Archie crosses significant boundaries when he puts himself in John Clark's hands, revealing the illegal gold-smuggling ring behind the forces of corruption that benefit from tainting the trial. Is it wise or unwise when Archie tells John Clark that the rich, pirateering father who abandoned him, James Clark, is at the helm of the plot to profit from Lady Gordon's victory?

Archie pushes his luck even further. He risks a delay in the trial and rides 140 miles nonstop cross-country to seek his father's counsel. But it's too late. Kilchrenan is on his

deathbed, attended by Solomon, who knows more about Archie's affairs than Archie knows himself. Solomon calmly reveals plans to take control of Archie's wealth after his father's death. Blackmailed, Archie makes an uneasy truce with Solomon who advises him to leave the country and save himself from the downfall that cannot be forestalled. But Archie refuses to abandon the trial on principle, even though he believes the ladies are lovers who "took the wrong risks."

Is it wisdom or insanity when Archie decides to take the biggest risk of his own life, hoping it will force the win-win conclusion he craves? One night we find him on his knees in Lady Gordon's garden, praying with Jane's ghost, before breaking into Lady Gordon's house to confront Jane with the facts he has uncovered. It's a move that could get him disbarred for life. Archie offers Jane a new legacy, a fresh start. But will she take it? Will Archie's bet pay off when Jane takes the stand tomorrow?

Thanks to John Clark's deft lawyering, it does pay off, but victory is short-lived. Archie celebrates with Ollie in a climactic scene of gorgeous lovemaking—sex on wheels in a way never before captured on film—when their scandalous secrets are finally revealed. Then WHOMP! Their sumptuous carriage is attacked. By James Clark! Working in league with Ollie's own father—Charles Courtenay, the dead Earl's cousin! Archie tries but fails to defend himself with the illusions he learned in Bombay from the Fortune Teller. Ollie watches helpless as Archie is beaten within an inch of his life.

Archie awakes at dawn in the pillory in Edinburgh's public square, exposed and alone and vulnerable to the deadly dangers Solomon had warned him of. He must deploy his few remaining assets and rely on the loyalty of every ally he ever betrayed to help him escape. What's more: Ollie has been kidnapped. The Times of London reports that she is to marry James Clark tomorrow!

The exciting climax brings all the threads together as the action alternates between Archie's escape from the pillory and the trial that races to conclusion in the courtroom across town, where the justices must now cast their votes in the case.

Is the richest woman in Scotland guilty of slander? Will her “black” granddaughter become a social pariah along with her? Or are the bluestocking ladies guilty of criminal lesbianism?

The justices are locked in a split decision. Only Lord Justice Polkemmet can determine the fates of Pirie and Woods, of Jane Cumming and of Archie and Ollie, still fighting for their lives. But how can he cast a vote if he’s never set foot in the courtroom for the entire trial?

Production notes. SCOTCH VERDICT reinterprets two hits of stage and screen.

Fifty years ago in 1963, Shirley MacLaine won the Oscar for best actress in THE CHILDREN’S HOUR playing Marianne Woods. That script had been adapted from Lillian Hellman’s 1934 Broadway hit, “The Little Foxes.” But until now, nothing has been told about the shocking 1811 trial that inspired both dramas.

The ensemble cast supports an Academy-award winning performance by the female lead. If the identity of SCOTCH VERDICT’s lead actress is concealed on a closed set, in support of the audacious plot twist, there will be huge hype around this movie, on par with THE CRYING GAME.

