From script to screen: *Serious Charge* and film censorship

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IN MAY 1950 the Wheare Committee recommended that a new 'X' category be introduced and applied to films intended for exhibition to 'adults only'. By January 1951, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) agreed to the implementation of an 'X' certificate which limited the cinema-going audience to those over 16 years of age. 'It is our desire', said the BBFC secretary, Arthur Watkins, 'that "X" films should not be merely sordid films dealing with unpleasant subjects, but films which, while not being suitable for children, are good adult entertainment and films which appeal to an intelligent public.'

The difficulties in defining 'good adult entertainment' soon became apparent when, on 5 January 1955, director Ronald Neame informed the British Film Producers Association that he felt 'the "X" certificate was no longer serving the purpose for which it was intended'. 'The British Board of Film Censors had stated at the outset that it was intended to encourage the production of films for adult audiences,' he argued; 'in fact, however, the "X" certificate was being wrongly exploited and was assisting considerably wider distribution of Continental films in this country than might otherwise be possible whilst, at the same time, attempts by British producers to make films suitable for adult audiences had, more often than not, failed.'

The problems encountered by the BBFC and the film-makers in this instance are indicative of the problems that obtained throughout the 1950s with the 'X' certificate and British cinema at large. But the story of British film censorship during the period is also inextricably linked with the system of censorship operated by the Lord Chamberlain over stage productions and

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the theatre. Both the BBFC and the Lord Chamberlain's Office employed a process of censorship which depended as much on the application of pre-production scrutiny as it did on post-production review. Moreover, both regularly informed each other of their respective activities and followed a policy of 'keeping in step'. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Terence Young's 1959 film, *Serious Charge*.

The genesis of this film lay in Philip King's play of the same name which was first presented for consideration to the Lord Chamberlain's Office in March 1953 with an anticipated presentation date of November that year. In time-honoured fashion, one of the Lord Chamberlain's readers, Charles Heriot, began his report of 16 March with a synopsis of the play's essential plot and story line.²

Howard Phillips is a 30-year-old vicar in a village. He is unmarried, lives with his mother, has a flair for interior decoration and rather too obviously repulses the advances of a spinster, Hester Byfield, who is thereafter too liable to believe anything about the parson. A village girl, pregnant by the local bad lad, comes to the vicar for advice and on her way out sees his maid in the arms of her seducer. She flings herself under a car and is killed. The vicar has discovered that Larry Thompson is the man and sends for him to tell him he is morally guilty of the girl's death and to warn him to mend his ways. Larry is thoroughly rotten – the vicar has also discovered him to be a thief and has thrown him out of the choir for 'talking smut' – and, when he hears a ring at the front door, shouts for help and smashes ornaments and furniture. When the visitor enters – it is Hester – he accuses the vicar of trying to make a pass at him. Hester is horrified and disgusted; she is also a gossip. The mischief is done. The village hounds its vicar and matters are reaching a point at which he must leave when Larry visits Hester to brief her about what she may have to say. Unfortunately he cannot keep his fingers out of her cash box. She sees him and in the ensuing row realises that he has lied. He tries to silence her and she defends herself with a pair of scissors. She tries to summon the vicar by telephone but only manages to stammer out a broken phrase before Larry closes with her. The scissors pierce her breast and she staggers out of the room. Larry thinks he has murdered her and collapses. Then the vicar arrives and everything is duly disentangled. Hester is not dead and is able to testify against the unspeakable Larry and save the vicar's reputation.

Interestingly, given its subject matter, Heriot thought the play 'strong and sensible'. 'We are in no doubt at any time that the vicar is innocent of the "serious charge",' he commented, and 'therefore, though the forbidden topic of homosexuality shadows this play, it does so in an inoffensive manner.' 'In my opinion,' Heriot concluded, 'the play is recommended for licence.' To

be sure of his ground, however, he marked the controversial passages in the play and sent it on to the Lord Chamberlain and his comptrollers for further scrutiny. By no means all the theatre examiners agreed with Heriot's judgment.

'How can you pass this if we are to be at all consistent?' asked Brigadier Sir Norman Gwatkin, the Lord Chamberlain's assistant comptroller. 'But I am being consistent,' Heriot responded. 'Here there is no suggestion of real homosexuality – it is all lies.' Gwatkin, adamant in his own conviction that the play transgressed the bounds of propriety, replied: 'This is where we want the Solomon touch.' And he duly passed all comments on to the Lord Chamberlain himself, Lord Scarbrough, for final consideration. Scarbrough sensibly played both ends towards the middle. 'I am not convinced by the retort that because the accusation was untrue no question of propriety can arise,' he argued, 'but neither am I convinced that the relevant part of the play should be cut out or altered.' 'Though it is conceivable that some embarrassment might be caused,' Scarbrough concluded, 'I think on the whole no great harm will be done and that the play should be licensed.'

Serious Charge was licensed, indeed, and proceeded into production. It opened at the Adelphi Theatre on 8 November 1953 where it was presented by the Repertory Players, with Nigel Stock in the role of Howard Phillips and Alec McCowan as Larry Thompson, and produced by Joan Kemp-Welch. This was a trial run, in effect, but in view of the favourable critical response the play received, not least from W.A. Darlington in the *Daily Telegraph* (9 November 1953), *Serious Charge* was given a full-scale professional production at the Garrick Theatre from 17 February 1955 where it was directed by Martin Landau and starred Patrick McGoohan.³

Even as the play was enjoying the first fruits of its 1955 London run, a film producer expressed interest in transposing it from stage to screen. Such interest was inevitable, of course. The West End theatre was a rich and regular source of supply for British films throughout the 1950s, as ever with British cinema. And, in this instance, it was John Woolf of Romulus Films who was most keen to adapt Philip King's *Serious Charge* for the screen. Within a month of the play's opening, Woolf sent a copy of the script to the secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, Arthur Watkins, with a view to ascertaining whether it would pass pre-production scrutiny or stand much chance of progressing easily into production as a film. 'It would be our intention to use the services of a distinguished director,' he assured Watkins on 17 March 1955, 'and not in any way to sensationalize it.' 'I naturally realize it would fall into the "X" category,' Woolf maintained, 'but think it such a powerful play that it would be worth taking the risk.'⁴

The BBFC moved into action immediately. No less than two film examiners were dispatched by Arthur Watkins to watch the Garrick Theatre production. Clearly, pre-production scrutiny by the British Board of Film Censors entailed extensive theatrical ‘vetting’, as well as the reading of play scripts, when it was deemed necessary. In this instance, however, it was to little avail. The BBFC examiners were not best pleased with the stage production of *Serious Charge* – nor, especially, the likelihood of a film arising from it. They had ‘strong misgivings’ about the whole project and were ‘agreed in thinking the central incident (which is essential to the story) intolerable for “A” and very undesirable for “X”’. ‘It will make it very nearly impossible to reject other films of a melodramatic kind which flirt with the topic of homosexuality,’ they stated, ‘and we think this unsavoury flirting is just as bad as depicting a real homosexual on the screen.’ Though the examiners recognised the play had already been licensed for the stage, in short, they drew a line of divide between what might be tolerated for a small band of theatre-goers and what should be allowed for the mass of cinema-goers. ‘We do not believe the Lord Chamberlain himself would think the story fit for the mixed and immature provincial cinema audience which would see even an “X” film,’ was their considered if jaundiced and distinctly elitist reaction. It was a revealing remark.

Unsurprisingly, Arthur Watkins at the BBFC proceeded to tell producer John Woolf that ‘under no circumstances could any film based on this play be placed in any other than the “X” category’ and that ‘we are not prepared to commit ourselves even to an “X” category without further consideration [of a screenplay]’. Given, however, that *Serious Charge* had plainly caused much controversy within his examiners’ ranks, no less a person than the president of the British Board of Film Censors, Sir Sidney Harris, went along to see the play for himself. His judgments on reading the play script alone then watching the stage production make an illuminating contrast. On 21 March 1955, for instance, he stated:

I am rather surprised that this squalid melodrama was thought worthy of presentation on the stage, and it might be worth while to find out from the Lord Chamberlain whether he received any complaints. It would make a very unpleasant film and one liable to sensational exploitation. For the reasons given by the examiners I think we should have nothing to do with it. The ‘X’ certificate would only exclude persons under sixteen and the greatest risk of damage would be to persons of sixteen and seventeen who form a large part of the average cinema audience. Incidentally, I dislike the picture of the country vicarage with the worldly mother and the ineffective vicar whose method of dealing with Larry is so unwise. We see many films in which Roman Catholic priests appear as dignified and spiritually-minded persons. Why should the British film depict

Anglican clergymen either as figures of fun or of incompetence? This is not entirely irrelevant to censorship.

But on 24 March 1955, by comparison, after viewing the stage presentation of *Serious Charge* Harris felt compelled to revise his initially hostile opinion:

I saw this play yesterday afternoon and I must allow that I was pleasantly surprised. I found little to complain about. It is admittedly a rather squalid story, but this aspect of it is largely forgotten in the tautness of the play and the good acting. It remains, in my view, melodrama rather than a serious social problem play, though towards the end it does become rather more serious. It might have been a better play if the author had not overdrawn (in particular) the character of Hester Byfield. The whole moral of the play is good and if we are to have a film on such a subject, we might do very much worse. The main trouble is that once we allow this topic we may find it rather a slippery slope, but I do not see how we can possibly refuse this story for the 'X' category.

Having been prompted by Harris to find out what the Lord Chamberlain's Office had thought of the stage play, moreover, Watkins reported back the fruits of a discussion with Sir Norman Gwatkin on 28 March 1955:

He told me that they had received one or two individual letters of complaint about the play since its opening at the Garrick Theatre. They were on the lines of the individual playgoer having been 'embarrassed' at the introduction of the subject of homosexuality into the theatre. Sir Norman added that, in his own personal view, his department had made a mistake in licensing the play and he was opposed to the decision. He remained of the view that it would be better to keep this subject out of plays altogether. He confirmed that the decision to pass the play was based on the fact that no character in the play was actually a pervert and no more than an unfounded charge was involved. At the end of our talk, he confirmed that although some letters had been received, there had been no serious volume of complaint.

None of this was communicated to John Woolf, needless to say, who returned on 28 March 1955 to tell Watkins that he was now set upon purchasing the rights of the play and would submit a film script in due course while reiterating, for good measure, that 'it is not our intention in any way to sensationalize the subject any more than it is in the play'. The screenplay that was tendered finally for BBFC consideration almost four months later, on 23 August 1955, did as much as the producer promised and more besides. It had dispensed entirely with the original 'serious charge' at the heart of Philip King's controversial play and even Woolf was inclined to describe it in correspondence with Watkins as an 'emasculated' version 'which I am sure will please you'. Plainly, despite Woolf's protestations throughout that he would be only too happy to see the film in the 'X' category, given its adult

themes and nature, at the last he was making a desperate attempt with the changes to see whether it might not yet be allowed for an 'A'-certificate rating.

'The curse has been removed,' commented one BBFC reader of the screenplay: 'It is now a girl (Dora), not a boy, who accuses the vicar of trying to interfere with her.' 'I really think the story has lost nothing of value in losing the homosexual element,' the reader continued. 'The "emasculated version" in fact does "please me" (see Mr. Woolf's covering letter) and I really don't care how silly he thinks us to want the change as long as he sticks to the present version and makes the change.' Not that everything was acceptable in the new script as it stood. Profound misgivings were expressed about the fact that the girl was just 17 years of age and only two years out of school. And fears were evident about the proposed ending to the film which all readers felt should be changed yet again: 'We are told that Dora is to "get her deserts", so presumably the lorry driver episode will go (our point would not be satisfactorily met by Dora being raped and killed by the lorry driver, in case that should be what they have in mind).' 'But we are so well out of the homosexual element,' it was noted, 'that it would be a mistake to be too captious.'

Sir Sidney Harris, for his part, felt that something had been lost in the adaptation and was intent still upon further fostering the projected image of the vicar as a salutary and commendable figure, as he pointed out to Watkins on 7 September 1955:

I agree generally but we seem to have got rid of our main preoccupation by exchanging it for a grubby story which can only be saved by good acting. In particular, it would be wise to stress the importance of presenting the vicar as fine character facing a squalid situation in a dignified and manly way. I agree as to the complete revision of the last ten pages. If we are to contemplate an 'A' certificate we should meet *all* the points made by the two examiners and yourself.

In the event, no more work was needed for John Woolf's purposes since he proceeded to withdraw from the project. The reasons why he did so are difficult to fathom with any degree of certainty. Perhaps he tired of the BBFC's continuing vacillations; perhaps he felt that the 'emasculated' version had gone too far down the path, anyway, of selling out on an otherwise laudable idea for a screenplay; or, maybe, he encountered problems in negotiating the rights on King's play.

Whatever the deciding factor as far as Woolf was concerned, the film censors had not heard the last of *Serious Charge*. It resurfaced again exactly three years later in the hands of Mickey Delamar of Alva Films. Much had changed during the intervening period in the fabric of British society, of

course, not least with regard to its burgeoning youth culture. Delamar consciously sought to appeal to that quarter and, much to the film censors' consternation, reverted to Philip King's story line for the inspiration of the screenplay he tendered to the BBFC early in September 1958. 'The story point is the same as in the original stage play,' noted one script reader on 8 September, 'i.e., it depends on a charge of indecent assault by the vicar upon a youth.' But other matters were noted besides:

The only important divergence from the stage play is that in the film script the vicar's mother persuades the frustrated Hester to trap Larry into damaging admissions by vamping him and then staging a struggle which is interrupted by the vicar, Larry's father and other witnesses arriving just as Larry is protesting that the scene is a parallel to the trumped up business at the vicarage. The picture of small-town life is filled out by rather unedifying sidelights on the life and loves of Larry and other potential Teddy-boys and girls; and the script has been, on the whole, somewhat vulgarized; but the vulgarization of motion pictures intended for older teenagers has proceeded so fast in the past three years that it does not seem anything out of the way now.

John Trevelyan, who had taken on the position of BBFC secretary in July 1958, did not like the script at all and made that very clear. 'I do not consider the play as a serious exploration of a serious problem,' he stated: 'It is pure melodrama and should be treated as such. I think a good many adolescents will snigger at it, and it may, I suppose, give some of them an idea of how easy it is for them to do a bit of easy blackmail.' But he felt wedded in principle, at least, to extend to Delamar the same commitment to consider the project for the 'X' certificate that had been forthcoming to Woolf previously. Ironically, any homosexual connotations to the assault were now deemed less troublesome in prospect, always provided the film-makers for their part were willing to contemplate an 'X' as well. 'We have not yet accepted the theme of homosexuality for anything other than the "X" category,' Trevelyan told Delamar, 'and I see no likelihood of our changing our policy.' His parting words were reserved for repeated admonition, however, that 'from the angle of censorship it would be helpful if the vicar were shown as a thoroughly admirable person, effective at his job but landed through no fault of his own in a position of great difficulty'.

The problem for Delamar was that from the outset he was set upon securing an 'A' rating for his film and an 'X' would not do. Given, especially, that his intention was to cast the young British pop star Cliff Richard in the newly written part of Larry Thompson's brother, Curley, Delamar felt certain an 'X' certificate could only serve to deny him the guarantee of the idol's many teenage fans among audiences for his film. At the face-to-face

meeting with Trevelyan which followed on 22 September 1958, producer Mickey Delamar and director Terence Young clearly did as much as they could to convince the BBFC of their willingness to compromise where necessary in order to achieve the desired result. As Trevelyan reported:

We discussed the present script in some detail and I was told that this was only a preliminary script which Mr. Young intends to revise personally. He has in mind modelling the parson on the David Sheppard type and wants either Anthony Quayle or Peter Finch for the part. He is quite prepared to tone down the Teddy-boy hooliganism and erotic behaviour with girls, and he wants also to alter the part of Hester considerably since he feels that at present it is overdrawn. Furthermore he proposes to have a completely different ending in which the parson realizes that he must stay in the place because he is able to intervene successfully when one of the boys from his club is threatened with Borstal; indeed he wants to use this film to show what a live and forceful young parson can do with a boys' club.

Both Mr. Young and Mr. Delamar realize that the nature of the 'serious charge' is a major difficulty, but they will consider whether it would not be possible to make the nature of the charge intelligible to the thinking adult and unintelligible to the child who knows nothing of such things. For instance, there might be the implication that the parson has physically attacked the boy rather than assaulted him sexually. All unnecessary emphasis on the nature of the charge ... will be removed and the whole thing will be treated carefully and discreetly. I said that, in view of their proposed alterations, the only thing that really stood in the way of an 'A' certificate was the nature of the charge and that if this could be treated in a way that made it acceptable for the 'A' category so much the better, but I could not give any guarantee about it at this stage.

In the ensuing correspondence with Trevelyan, Delamar repeated that he was determined about making 'an intelligent adult film of quality' and that he was 'hoping to get your "blessing" for the "A" (as against the "horror and sex" we want to steer clear of)'. Yet in the final analysis, neither party was able fully to deliver on their promises, as became instantly apparent when a rough-cut version was delivered to the BBFC for viewing, on completion of production, in January 1959. Delamar had secured the services of both Cliff Richard and Anthony Quayle, and Andrew Ray for the part of Larry, as well as Sarah Churchill for Hester. But he had failed to resolve the screen depiction of the 'serious charge' to satisfaction and, moreover, his finished film now posed profound new problems for the censors besides.

Both the BBFC president and secretary, along with two more examiners, watched the rough cut of *Serious Charge* on 13 January 1959. They were convinced the film could only be considered for the 'X' category, after all, and even then cuts should have to be made. Lines of dialogue like 'A bunch

of creeps and fairies' and 'Who are you calling fairies?' would have to be excised for a start. The scene in which Larry tried to rape Hester when she was seeking to frame him would require to be shortened. So, too, would an opening scene where Larry and the village girl he seduced were shown dressing after making love. 'We are inclined to think that this scene is in fact unnecessary since their relationship is well enough established later, and that it starts the film off on the wrong note.' Shots of the vicar being threatened by youths armed with a flick-knife and bicycle chain would need to be reduced. 'We want to keep flick-knives and bicycle-chains (and all such weapons) out of films as far as possible,' Trevelyan told Delamar, 'since we do not wish to encourage any extended use of things of this kind.' In particular, the censors were now distinctly worried about the introduction into the proceedings of a nude bathing scene in which teenage girls, especially, were seen 'naked to the waist'. These, certainly, had to be removed.

Some things were easily dealt with. The word 'fairy' was replaced by 'cissy' (sissy) on the two occasions in question, though Delamar regretted this could only be achieved at the expense of lack of lip-synchronization, 'I am afraid it is noticeable but that's our bad luck.' He also managed to shorten or eliminate the 'bicycle chain' shots. Three cuts were made to the nude-bathing sequence and he promised to further darken the grading of the final-release print being processed in the laboratories in order to lessen its impact. Most of all, however, Delamar was distraught that his film might still end up with an 'X' rating, as he told Trevelyan on 9 March 1959:

Finally, I would like to mention that so far people in the Trade who have viewed the picture privately have been kind enough to congratulate me on making a sincere and intelligent film of quality – and were most amazed when I told them you could only give it an 'X' certificate. In this day and age when we have to compete in Foreign markets to survive, and in view of the fact that *Serious Charge* is a meticulously 'clean' film with a moral lesson, it should most certainly not be classed with Sex and Horror pictures but receive an 'A' certificate. So I sincerely hope that you can reconsider your last decision in this respect and in view of your kind help and encouragement to date I am sure that your sense of fair play will help me in this matter, particularly in view of the fact that otherwise respectable families and teenagers under sixteen will not be able to see a film meant for them.

Ironically, it was judicious leaks to the press about the censorship done to the nude-bathing sequence that most captured attention when the film was given its première on 14 May 1959 before being put on general release in ABC cinemas from 29 June 1959 – not least when it was revealed that the version made for overseas distribution had, in fact, retained the scenes

intact. But in Delamar's eyes the major damage had been done at the point when the BBFC determined upon an 'X' certificate.

Little was to change in Delamar's fortunes, moreover, when he returned in March 1962 seeking consciously to capitalise on what he saw as the principal setback. He now asked for complete restoration of the nude scenes in view of the fact his film was being considered for reissue and because it had, after all, already been given an 'X'. The case was made that 'the Board's attitude to screen nudity has changed considerably since this film was first passed and, under today's standards, scenes such as this are, of course, commonplace in many full length nudity features presently under distribution'. It made scant difference in the BBFC's opinion. 'I can tell you quite definitely that we would not accept the original "swimming pool" footage under an "X" certificate today,' was the Board's reply. 'Such changes as we have made in our policy on nudity do not relate to a scene of this kind in a feature film.'

Changes were afoot at the BBFC from the early 1960s, to be sure, as is evident from John Trevelyan's liberal-minded attitude to the advent of the British 'New Wave' cinema and his enlightened policy, thereafter, throughout the rest of the 1960s. But *Serious Charge* was arguably an unfortunate victim during a period of cautious transition in British film censorship between the 'doldrums era' of the 1950s and the height of the 'swinging sixties'.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre, 1955-1965* (Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 18, which discusses the question of the 'X' certificate and 'quality' cinema at length.
- 2 Lord Chamberlain's Plays Correspondence Files, Department of Manuscripts, British Library, *Serious Charge* 1951/5355, play reader's report (16 March 1953) and other memoranda or correspondence related to same. All references hereafter to the Lord Chamberlain's Office come from this file.
- 3 Newspaper reviews for the stage production of *Serious Charge* are held in the dossier for the play at the Theatre Museum, London.
- 4 British Board of Film Censors file, *Serious Charge*, letter from Woolf to Watkins (17 March 1955). The remaining BBFC references to *Serious Charge* cited subsequently are taken from this same source. My thanks go to the British Board of Film Classification for their kindness and helpful support in making the file available. The British Film Institute Library also holds Guy Elmes's screenplay for the 1959 production (12 October 1958: S 10429) and a breakdown for the film comprising set lists, dope sheets, location and studio shots, with inserts (S 10428), as well as a microfiche of all newspaper reviews.