

GREATREX

Treatment

Format: Feature Drama / Crime Thriller

Genre: Historical Crime Drama

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Logline

A transported convict with the instincts of an actor and the soul of a fraud repeatedly reinvents himself across continents — from colonial Australia to Victorian Britain to America — until his most ambitious deception, a major banknote forgery, brings a relentless Scottish detective onto his trail.

Overview

Greatrex is a sweeping historical crime drama built around a charismatic and deeply dangerous chameleon: John Henry Greatrex, a gifted impostor whose greatest skill is not forgery, photography or performance, but self-invention. He is a man who slips through systems by understanding what each world wants to see in him — actor, businessman, husband, preacher, gentleman — and delivering the role with unnerving conviction. The film follows his long arc from transported convict in Port Phillip to celebrated colonial performer, from respectable family man in Britain to architect of a sophisticated counterfeiting scheme, and finally to hunted fugitive fleeing across the Atlantic as the law closes in.

This is not simply the story of a criminal enterprise. It is the story of a man addicted to becoming someone else — and of the cost borne by those who believe him. *Greatrex* seduces investors, landlords, assistants, lovers and even his own wife into supporting each new reinvention. He thrives in periods of social and technological change, constantly positioning himself at the edge of modernity: theatre, photography, banking, transatlantic travel, mass print culture. Every innovation becomes, in his hands, another opportunity for fraud. Opposing him is Superintendent Alexander McCall, a young but formidable detective who understands that modern crime demands modern intelligence. Their collision turns the film into both a character study of deception and a transnational pursuit thriller.

Tone and Style

The tone is intelligent, propulsive and morally slippery: part prestige historical drama, part cat-and-mouse thriller. *Greatrex* is often entertaining, persuasive and even funny in his audacity, but the film never mistakes charm for innocence. It understands the thrill of watching an operator improvise, while steadily revealing the emotional wreckage he leaves behind. The visual world should evolve with *Greatrex*'s reinventions: the harsh glare and dust of colonial Port Phillip; the theatrical glamour of Queen's Theatre; the cramped aspiration of London and Glasgow studios; the procedural cool of police offices and banks; and finally the bustling, anonymous energy of New York as the walls close in.

Treatment

Under a brutal Australian sun, a convict ship unloads its human cargo into Port Phillip. Among the shackled men is nineteen-year-old **John Henry Greatrex**: filthy, broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed and already studying the system that holds him. When asked his trade, he answers not with the practical skill expected of a convict, but with something audacious: "actor." It is the first signal of who he is. Even in chains, Greatrex understands that identity is a performance. Assigned to work at Queen's Theatre rather than the road gangs, he enters a world of velvet, rehearsal and illusion — a world he instinctively recognises as his natural terrain.

At first, Greatrex is little more than a servant and dogsbody, but he watches, listens and learns. When an actor falls ill mid-rehearsal, Greatrex seizes his chance, stepping into the role with complete confidence. What follows is a leap worthy of myth: a convict servant becomes a performer, then a star, his name rising on theatre bills as applause feeds his appetite for status. But the same instinct that makes him a compelling actor also makes him a born swindler. Flush with confidence, he dupes his manager, Mr Chambers, through forged documents and false cheques, pushes too far, and is ultimately convicted of fraud after a violent confrontation involving the McEnroe brothers and his landlord, James Newberry. He is sentenced to five years hard labour, his ascent abruptly shattered by the law.

On the roads, among chain gangs and dust, Greatrex does what he always does: he adapts. Recognising that literacy and cunning are worth more than brute strength, he engineers a prison injury with the help of fellow convict Liam Keeler, secures lighter work in an administrative environment, steals what he needs, and manipulates his way toward escape. For Greatrex, imprisonment is not punishment but another stage from which to improvise an exit. When he finally slips free, he re-emerges not as a broken man but as someone even more convinced that the world belongs to those willing to counterfeit it. In a saloon, he encounters **Jessie**, a young Scottish woman whose warmth and decency stand in stark contrast to his opportunism. He courts her with ease, wrapping his flattery in the language of romance and possibility.

Years later, Greatrex has remade himself again. Married to Jessie, father to children, he presents as a respectable family man and entrepreneur moving through Garston and then London with growing confidence. Photography, the perfect trade for a self-inventor, gives him a new identity: modern, artistic, technical, respectable. Yet beneath the image lies the same restless deceit. Greatrex lives beyond his means, keeps creditors at bay with fresh lies, and pursues pleasure in brothels and gambling rooms while Jessie tends to home and children, still trying to believe in the future he promises. His business never quite stabilises; each new venture seems only to create fresh debt. When pressure mounts, Greatrex simply reinvents again — selling equipment, dodging investors like Richard Hicks, uprooting Jessie to Glasgow under the promise of a brighter future.

In Glasgow, Greatrex's life splits in two. Publicly, he is a photographer, husband and father. Privately, he begins an affair with his assistant **Jane Weir**, seducing her with the same theatrical conviction he uses on everyone else. At the same time, he stumbles on the opportunity that will define the second half of the film. When bank clerk **Andrew Neilson** visits his studio to ask whether a newly issued Union Bank note could be reproduced photographically, Greatrex instantly recognises the scale of what is possible. For him, technology is never neutral; it is always a tool for transformation. The camera becomes not just a machine for portraits, but the first step in manufacturing money itself.

To execute the forgery, Greatrex recruits Lancashire brothers **Thomas and Sewell Grimshaw**, craftsmen skilled in printing and engraving, men vulnerable enough to believe his promises and talented enough to make them real. Greatrex identifies in them the same combustible mix that drives him: frustration, ambition and hunger. Working in secret in the basement of his Glasgow studio, the three men develop a counterfeit operation based on photographed banknote detail, engraved copper plates and specialist loan paper. Greatrex frames the scheme as a temporary act of genius — print a controlled quantity, move it carefully, convert it to gold, disappear before suspicion can take shape. He presents himself as strategist, visionary and benefactor. To the brothers, he offers liberation. To Jane, he offers a new life once Jessie is behind him. To Jessie, he offers reassurances while increasingly treating her with contempt whenever she questions him.

As the operation intensifies, the film shows how Greatrex's genius depends on collateral damage. **Elizabeth Robertson**, another employee, overhears too much and recognises the shape of the crime. Greatrex dismisses her with a generous-looking cheque that he knows will bounce. Jessie, still loyal in spite of years of disappointment, senses the rot but remains trapped by family, children and the residue of love. Agnes Grimshaw, Sewell's wife, stumbles upon the engraved plate and realises her husband is involved in something illicit, but the men close ranks, silencing her with promises of money and escape. Around Greatrex, everyone is either being used, lied to, or prepared for abandonment.

When the forged notes are finally distributed, Greatrex insists on caution. He wants a limited run and careful circulation through smaller towns. Thomas wants more, revealing the central fault line within the scheme: Greatrex is reckless in life, but meticulous in crime. The brothers carry forged notes into Helensburgh and then Dalkeith, trying to convert them into goods and gold, but the very system Greatrex seeks to exploit begins to push back. Shop assistants, bank tellers and local traders notice irregularities. One false note passed in a tailor's shop sets off a chain reaction. The Grimshaws are arrested in Dalkeith with forged notes and gold in their bags, and suddenly what had seemed a perfect scheme becomes a national incident.

Enter **Superintendent Alexander McCall**. If Greatrex is the great improviser, McCall is the perfect counterweight: calm, legally astute, modern in method and utterly uninterested in appearances. Newly celebrated for his intelligence and diligence, McCall immediately grasps that the two men in custody are not the masterminds. The counterfeit notes are too sophisticated, the operation too well resourced. Where others see a local forgery matter, McCall sees a network. With his young officer **Audley Thomson**, he traces the crime outward through banks, shops and statements, steadily assembling the pattern Greatrex thought he could outrun. Neilson's recollection of his seemingly innocent conversation with a Glasgow photographer provides the crucial name: **John Greatrex**.

From there, the film becomes a pursuit thriller. Greatrex, sensing risk almost before the law fully arrives, dismantles the studio, disposes of equipment, sends Jane north to Aberdeen and moves Jessie and the children out of his immediate orbit. He liquidates assets, gathers forged proceeds and gold, and prepares to flee. But his haste now reveals his weakness: the more rapidly he reinvents, the more vulnerable he becomes. Elizabeth's bad cheque, Jessie's anger, creditors at the door, and the arrested Grimshaws all create witnesses who can finally see him clearly. McCall interviews Jessie and finds not merely a wronged wife but a woman who understands her husband's deepest flaw: he cannot stop lying because he cannot bear being ordinary. Jessie points him toward Jane. Agnes Grimshaw confirms the engraving operation. The circle tightens.

Greatrex flees first to Aberdeen, then to London, using hotel rooms, shipping offices and split travel plans to keep one step ahead. Even in flight, he remains theatrical. He books separate passages to New York, sending Jane after him while he departs earlier, still chasing the illusion that one more ocean crossing will secure his freedom. Jane, increasingly frightened, starts to understand that the future Greatrex promised her is built on panic and theft. Yet she follows, because he has trained her to believe that loyalty will soon be rewarded. Their relationship curdles into something tragic: not a romance, but the aftermath of seduction.

McCall pursues across borders with the same precision Greatrex once used to evade local law. The hunt now stretches beyond Britain and into the Atlantic world, underscoring the film's larger point: Greatrex is not just a petty fraudster but a modern criminal shaped by an increasingly connected age. Telegraphy, railways, steamships and print culture all create new possibilities — for commerce, for law, and for crime. McCall uses the tools of this modern world better than Greatrex does. By the time the detective reaches New York, he is no longer merely chasing a man; he is proving that no reinvention can erase a pattern.

In New York, amid crowds, bands and public celebration, Greatrex once again looks perfectly at home — leaning from a window above a bakery with Jane, watching a parade as though he belongs to this new life already. It is a perfect image of his psychology: he is always most dangerous when he appears settled. Neilson spots him first. McCall moves. There is a brutal confrontation inside the building, with Greatrex fighting like a cornered animal, smashing a vase over Thomson and bolting for the stairs. The chase spills into the street, where all Greatrex's performances finally collapse into one fact: he is not a gentleman, a photographer, a preacher or a visionary. He is a fugitive.

The final movement of the film resolves not only the legal case but the moral one. Greatrex's capture lays bare the emptiness behind his charm. The people around him were not fellow adventurers in a life of reinvention; they were casualties. Jessie loses the illusion of her marriage. Jane loses the fantasy of escape. The Grimshaws lose their futures. Even Greatrex's talents — his wit, discipline and eye for opportunity — become part of the tragedy, because they could have made him almost anything except a decent man. McCall, by contrast, emerges as the embodiment of an opposite creed: that intelligence matters not when used to deceive, but when used to hold deception to account.

Themes

At its core, *Greatrex* is about **reinvention as addiction**. Greatrex does not merely commit fraud; he lives fraudulently, always convinced that the next identity, city, scheme or woman will complete the self he is forever manufacturing. The film asks whether a man can survive by becoming everyone except himself.

It is also about **modernity and criminal opportunity**. Photography, banknote circulation, rail, telegraphy and international travel all promise progress, but Greatrex sees in each one a way to counterfeit trust. The same age that celebrates innovation also creates the possibility for crimes of new sophistication. McCall's pursuit turns the story into a contest between two modern intelligences: one exploiting the future, the other trying to defend society from it.

Finally, the story is about **the human cost of charisma**. Greatrex's greatest victims are not just banks or creditors, but the people who loved him, believed him, or followed him. The emotional centre of the film lies in the gap between how he sees himself — exceptional, destined, smarter than everyone else — and the quieter truth visible to Jessie, Jane and McCall: he is a man who mistakes appetite for greatness.

Closing Statement

Greatrex is a richly cinematic historical crime drama about performance, fraud and pursuit. By charting one man's passage from convict to actor to entrepreneur to counterfeiter to fugitive, the film explores the seductive power of self-invention in the modern age — and the inevitable reckoning that comes when performance can no longer outrun truth.

It is a story of ambition without conscience, told through a character as magnetic as he is morally hollow, and anchored by the relentless intelligence of the detective who finally sees through every mask.