

The Browning Version

UK : 1951 : dir. Anthony Asquith : Two Cities / Javelin : 90 min
 prod. Earl St John / Teddy Baird : scr. Terence Rattigan : dir.ph.: Desmond Dickinson
[Brian Smith](#)
 Michael Redgrave; Jean Kent; Nigel Patrick; Wilfrid Hyde-White; Ronald Howard; Bill Travers;
 Paul Medland; Ivan Samson; Joan Haythorne; Judith Furse; Vivienne Gibson; Peter Jones;
 Josephine Middleton; Sarah Lawrence; Johnnie Schofield; Russell Waters; Scott Harold

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∅ M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Greek tragedy in the classroom – Crocker Harris grills Taplow

Source: Radio Times

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

“Redgrave is superb as middle-aged boarding school teacher who realises he’s a failure, with an unfaithful wife and a new teaching post he doesn’t want. Cast does full justice to the play by Terence Rattigan: he also scripted. Remade in 1994. ***1/2 ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review

“Retiring through ill health, a classics master finds that he is hated by his unfaithful wife, his headmaster and his pupils. An unexpected act of kindness gives him the courage to face the future. A rather thin extension of a one-act play, capped by a thank-you speech which is wildly out of character. Dialogue and settings are smooth, but the actors are not really happy with their roles. * ”

“If the sustained anguish of the role does not allow Redgrave a great deal of room to move



Crocker-Harris contemplates his own inadequacies

Source: Great British Films

around in, it does give him a chance to show marvellous interior performance and, true to what he can do in tight quarters, and that, it turns out, is considerable”

- **Pauline Kael, 70s**

The Critics’ Film Guide review:

“Schoolmaster (Michael Redgrave) finds his life falling apart. Restrained but profoundly moving film of the Rattigan play, in which Michael Redgrave gives one of his greatest screen performances. Unfortunately, there’s a tacked-on, schmaltzy ending which belatedly diminishes the central character; the production looks cheap, and Jean Kent is out of her depth as his wife. **6/10** ”

“Redgrave puts an infinity of variation into gestures which are involuntary in the driven human being, and when at a touch of kindness control suddenly gives way the contrast with the hardness and tightness of the earlier scenes is heartbreaking.”

- **Dilys Powell**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“A schoolmaster (Michael Redgrave), on the brink of marital and professional collapse, is given a translation of the “Agamemnon” by one of his pupils. Terence Rattigan adapted

and extended his one-act play, which remains touching and skilfully written; its weakest point is Jean King, both too young and too broad as the unfaithful wife. Nigel Patrick is her lover. ** ”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“An extraordinarily brilliant and moving performance by Michael Redgrave in the title role makes this Terence Rattigan story a memorable film about a stuffy professor of English at a boys’ school who learns of his wife’s affair with another teacher as he prepares to leave the school for another teaching post. **** ”

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Michael Redgrave makes the most of schoolteacher-in-crisis part in Anthony Asquith’s rather literal translation of Terence Rattigan play. 3 ”



Source: NFT Bulletin

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A careful adaptation of Terence Rattigan's play - in effect a re-run of **"GOODBYE MR CHIPS"** seen through dark-tinted glasses - which draws what little venom the original had by adding an absurdly sentimental coda. Worth watching for Redgrave's powerfully detailed performance as the schoolmaster who has masked his feelings of inadequacy by turning into a petty tyrant over the years, and whose façade is disastrously breached by a small act of kindness from one of the boys. But the rest of the characters are strictly cardboard. Video: Channel 5 VHS CFV 06412"

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"One of the "prestige" British productions of the time, this is a fine film version of Terence Rattigan's stage play of marital discord against a background of school life. Michael Redgrave gave one of the best performances of his career as the hapless schoolmaster whose loveless existence and professional humiliation have given him a defensive armour of coldness and even, at times, brutality. How this armour is pierced makes for dramatic entertainment. There are good performances, too, from Jean Kent as the cold-blooded wife, Nigel Patrick as her science-master lover, and Wilfrid Hyde-White somewhat untypically cast as the headmaster. Remade in 1994. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Terrence Rattigan's play, which had a big success in the West End in 1948, has been

faithfully translated to the screen. The celluloid version is crammed with emotional incidents and has two noteworthy tear-jerker scenes.

The background of the story is an English public school with the action spanning barely 48 hours. It is the last day of term, and Andrew Crocker-Harris, an austere disciplinarian, is retiring because of ill-health without a pension. The events leading up to the final, powerful, valedictory address make up a plot which is rich in incident and human understanding.

The role of the retiring master is not an easy one, but a prize in the right hands. Michael Redgrave fills it with distinction. Almost matching this performance is the role of his wife, played with a mixture of callousness and coyness by Jean Kent.

Nigel Patrick, in a less bombastic part than usual, chalks up another personal success as the science master who becomes ashamed of the intrigue he has had with Kent. Wilfrid Hyde-White is as smooth as ever as the headmaster."

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"Good show! Rattigan adapted his own play for the screen, and it's lovingly directed by Asquith and acted within an inch of the viewer's life by Redgrave and a magnificent small ensemble. Story explores the tragic restriction of a headmaster's retirement and his wretched, unfaithful wife. Redgrave won the Best Actor award and Terrence Rattigan the writing prize at the 1951 Cannes Film Festival for this film. Absolutely not to be missed. ****1/2 "

NFT Bulletin – July 1981 – review:

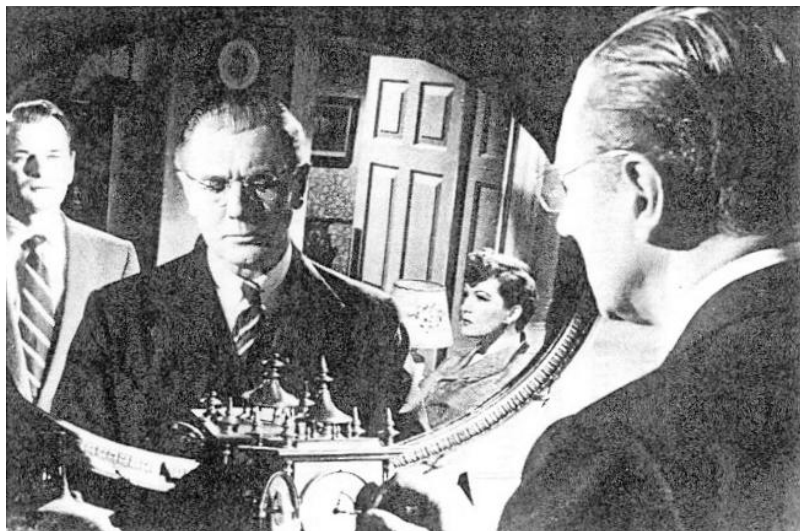
" "The Browning Version" is a translation of "Agamemnon" given to his classics master by a grateful pupil. A single act of kindness which unmans the teacher, a dried-up, unhappy pedant who is on the verge of an unregretted retirement. The simple gift changes his life and such is the power of Michael Redgrave's performance that he makes the miracle seem possible. Once again the combination of Rattigan and Asquith inspired a great actor."

The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985
listing:

“Drama. Retiring schoolmaster realises he is a complete failure.”



A classics master needs no instruction on the public standing of a cuckold. His embittered wife's artless infidelities with a junior member of the faculty are no great secret about school, but Crocker-Harris is deemed too remote in his ivory tower to notice. Rattigan gives only the subtlest of hints in the dialogue that the jaded schoolmaster has known all along.



The younger man is shamed by his quiet acquiescent decency in the matter, but the venomous wife cannot forbear a last stab of cruelty, to take from her husband the one fragile consolation of his mediocre career – Taplow's inscribed parting gift, which she convinces him is merely meant as a bribe. Her lover is so appalled at this act of gratuitous spite that he rejects her at once. Some may be prompted to wonder what he saw in her in the first place...

Source: Great British Films



No crocodile tears for the "Croc"

Source: *Great British Films*

NFT Bulletin review:

"Here Rattigan expands the one-act play that is his masterpiece, and Asquith fashions his most completely satisfying film. It is a minutely-observed study of an ailing public schoolmaster, in which Rattigan characteristically assembles a series of petty humiliations and minor crises which lead to a final emotional climax of great force, whose philosophical implications go well beyond the story's naturalistic setting. Rattigan's script provides Michael Redgrave with perhaps the best part of his cinema career."

Great British Films review:

"A handful of distinguished stage actors, all born within the twentieth century's initial decade and all renowned for their interpretations of Shakespeare and the other classic playwrights, quite dominated the roster of great British theatre acting during this century's third, fourth and fifth decades. Of this lot, John Gielgud is better known for his leading roles on stage than on the screen. Laurence Olivier, a brilliant stage actor, has won equal acclaim in his many fine movie roles. Their contemporaries, Ralph Richard-

son and Michael Redgrave, have given many excellent performances in both media, but have not quite been accorded the great-actor status justly due them.

Our spotlight here is on Redgrave, like Olivier an expert blend of character actor and matinee idol, whose characterisation (at forty-two) of, "**THE BROWNING VERSION**"'s uptight, defeated, middle-aged classics instructor facing the premature twilight of a failed career and spiteful marriage, represents the most powerful, affecting performance of his intermittently distinguished movie career.

Andrew Crocker-Harris, the tragic central figure in Terence Rattigan's long one-act, single-setting stage play, offers a great acting challenge. But it is not, by any means, actor-proof; the pitfalls are many and tricky, and the actor who can avoid and surmount them deserves high praise indeed. Eric Portman created the role in 1948 on the London stage, and Maurice Evans played it on Broadway, while a 1959 revival marked the auspicious U.S. television debut of John Gielgud. It proved a successful vehicle for all three. But Michael Redgrave did them one better; an intelligent, cerebral actor, he makes brilliant use of cinematic means to bring out the

subtlety of Crocker-Harris's emotions. It is a marvellous interior performance and, true to form, the revealing camera-eye misses nothing. Nor is Redgrave's performance limited to an appropriate glint in the eye or a twitch of the jaw. His precise, confined mannerisms are just right for this self-restricted, frustrated martinet, and the high-pitched, nasal voice Redgrave uses here, with its nervous falter and sarcastic tone, is cunningly deployed.

"THE BROWNING VERSION" is a **"GOODBYE MR CHIPS"** gone sour, with overtones of **"WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?"** At the story's outset, Crocker-Harris's ill health is forcing him prematurely to give up his long-time position as instructor of classic languages at an English public school. Once, he had been a brilliant and respected teacher, but too many years of marriage to the wrong woman have completely undermined his spirit as a man, husband and instructor. Millie (Jean Kent) is a selfish, callous woman who long since gave up hope of getting the material things she wanted from this marriage and, in retaliation, has turned her cruel energies to the destruction of her husband.

For some time, she has carried on a none-too-secret affair with Frank Hunter (Nigel Patrick), the school's popular science teacher. When a student, Taplow (Brian Smith), makes Crocker-Harris a gift of Robert Browning's translation of the "Agamemnon" of Aeschylus, the man is moved to uncharacteristic tears. But Millie takes even that small pleasure away from him by calling it a bribe for a good year-end grade, and she humiliates him in front of Hunter, who finally realises her true nature and ends their affair, attempting to convince Crocker-Harris that Taplow's sincerity was genuine. Millie packs up and departs, leaving her husband alone to deliver his farewell speech at the school graduation ceremonies.

Without Millie's discouraging presence, Crocker-Harris experiences a renewed strength of character and abandons his prepared text to speak from the heart. The school's least popular master startles everyone by delivering a straightforward apology for his failure as a teacher. And the room falls into a complete hush as he formulates his final words: "I shall not find it so easy to forgive *myself*. Goodbye."

There is a stunned silence, followed by belated applause which builds into a tumultuous ovation, drowning out the headmaster's efforts

to proceed with his planned programme. As staged and acted, this scene is powerful enough to incite filmgoers to join in the onscreen applause.

Some critics felt that the movie's closing scene betrayed the story and vitiated its impact: Taplow approaches his teacher outside to return Crocker-Harris's own version of the "Agamemnon", which the lad had "borrowed" from his desk without permission. Taplow expresses the opinion that it's a very good translation, leaving the startled man to thoughtfully cross the campus, in anticipation of the less demanding low-paying position he has taken at another school – for backward boys.

Regardless of what a minority may think of this finale, the film's total impact is quite shattering, from Redgrave's artful, heart-breaking Crocker-Harris to Jean Kent's incisively contemptuous wife (admittedly, Rattigan gives the character no redeeming characteristics), Nigel Patrick's contrite science teacher, Wilfrid Hyde-White's manipulative Headmaster, and Brian Smith's naturally appealing Taplow.

If little reference made here of Terence Rattigan's sensitive, skilfully opened-up script and Anthony Asquith's equally understanding direction, it is because neither is in the least obtrusive. As Rattigan later said of Asquith: "He had a superb instinct, impeccable taste and always gave distinction to the films he made. That is what told us it was Asquith's work."

At 1951's Cannes Film Festival, Michael Redgrave won the Best Actor award, and Terence Rattigan the writing prize for his screenplay."

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"Infinitely superior to Mike Figgis's 1994 remake, this is another expert collaboration between writer Terence Rattigan and director Anthony Asquith. What makes this version of Rattigan's hit play so memorable is the mesmerising performance of Michael Redgrave as the classics teacher whose life is as redundant as his subject. The supporting cast is also first-rate, with Jean Kent chillingly heartless as Redgrave's adulterous wife and Nigel Patrick suitably cocky as the man who cuckolds him. The shabby gentility of the school is neatly captured, and the merciless revelation of each new woe is, thanks to

Redgrave's dignified self-pity, agonising to watch. Only the optimistic conclusion fails to ring true. **** "

[no listing in "Rating the Movies (1990)" or "Video Movie Guide 1993"]

Radio Times reviews:

"Anthony Asquith's velvety direction showcases a career-best turn from Michael Redgrave as the middle-aged schoolteacher in crisis. Adapted from Terence Rattigan's one-act stage-play, it's a vintage piece of British drama; solid, precise and hugely affecting. As the heartfelt but fumbled recent remake starring Albert Finney so amply demonstrates, they don't make 'em like this any more. ****"

"Drama based on Terence Rattigan's acclaimed play, starring Michael Redgrave. A staid classics master, derided by his pupils and hated by his unfaithful wife, is forced to reflect upon his failures in life."

1994 retrospective on Redgrave by Barry Norman, to coincide with a screening on BBC1:

"Michael Redgrave appeared, often with great distinction, in more than 30 films but I bet he is still best remembered for the one he made first - Alfred Hitchcock's **"THE LADY VANISHES"** in 1938.

Towards the end of his career - he made his last film in 1971 - there were polished cameos in the likes of **"OH! WHAT A LOVELY WAR"** and **"THE GO-BETWEEN"** but it comes as a mild surprise to recollect that, for ten years or so after the Second World War, he was one of our leading screen actors.

Not a glamour boy like Dirk Bogarde or a light romantic lead like Kenneth More - Redgrave was never suited to that kind of stuff. He was instead the man the British movie industry - and on two occasions the Americans - called upon for grown-up roles.

In 1947 he won an Oscar nomination for **"MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA"** and three years later he was named best actor at the Cannes Festival for **"THE BROWNING VERSION"**. Since Terence Rattigan's adaptation of his own one-act play also won an

award the film was one of Britain's first big successes at Cannes. It's a simple story, set at the end of term in a British public school, and the leading role of Crocker-Harris, the classics teacher, provides ample opportunity - gratefully accepted by Redgrave - for a virtuoso performance.

Briefly, Crocker-Harris is retiring, without a pension, because of ill-health and in his last 48 hours at school he is forced to come to terms with a life of under-achievement.



The defining gesture of the film - diffident Taplow makes Crocker-Harris a small present of "The Browning Version" of Agamemnon, in token of thanks for his private tuition. His Greek inscription reads: "The gods smile from afar on a gentle master". The teacher, who has come to recognise his own mediocrity, is moved beyond words by this simple mark of kindness. He has touched one mind at least.

Source: indeterminate

His wife (Jean Kent) despises him and is having an affair with another teacher (Nigel Patrick). His headmaster doesn't like him and the boys both fear and mock him.

What lift and enliven an essentially sad story are the unexpected gift from a pupil of a book by Robert Browning and Crocker-Harris's rousing valedictory speech. It's a small, well-crafted play which stands or falls by the central performance and here Redgrave is superb, bringing out both the pathos and dignity of a repressed, cramped individual who is actually

far more considerable than most people have realised.

By chance a new film version, starring Albert Finney, is in the cinemas now. It suffers a little by being set, uneasily, in modern times but Finney, like Redgrave, is excellent. It's an interesting exercise to compare the two performances. After **"THE BROWNING VERSION"** Redgrave starred in several other fine British films, including **"THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST"**, **"THE DAM BUSTERS"** and - one of my favourites, since my father directed it - **"THE NIGHT MY NUMBER CAME UP"**. He also worked effectively with Orson Welles (**"CONFIDENTIAL REPORT"**) and Joseph Losey (**"TIME WITHOUT PITY"**). But by the end of the 1950s his career as a film star was effectively over.

This is not, of course, to suggest that he spent the rest of his life until his death in 1985 twiddling his thumbs and regretting what might have been. He had after all another, even more distinguished, career as a stage actor, in which capacity he was the contemporary and equal of such great actors as Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson. In 1959 he was, like them, knighted for his services to the theatre.

But though from 1960 onwards Redgrave averaged a film a year he was no longer a leading man. Age (he was born in 1908) may well have had something to do with that but perhaps, too, he lost interest. He belonged to a generation which, in Britain anyway, found it difficult to take the cinema seriously. To them the theatre was where real acting was done.

Whatever the reason he seemed content with guest star appearances, which helps explain why, to many cinemagoers he will always be, above all, the man who starred in **"THE LADY VANISHES"**. Plus perhaps, after this week, **"THE BROWNING VERSION"**.

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Brian Smith:

“Although a mid-teenager when he was in **"THE BROWNING VERSION"** and **"NO PLACE FOR JENNIFER"**, Brian Smith was amazingly small and young-looking for his age, and these were unmistakably "boy roles".

A year or two earlier, he had read stories on BBC Radio, and played in "A Month in the Country" for Hugh Hunt at the Bristol Old Vic. At the end of 1948 he played Jim in a London production of "Treasure Island", and in 1949 was "Moth" in Hunt's magical production of "Love's Labours Lost", starring Michael Redgrave.

He was then in the Redgrave "Hamlet", and the Redgrave-Smith partnership at last came before the cameras in the crucial scene of **"THE BROWNING VERSION"**, played with memorable delicacy and feeling.

Brian Smith, who has grown into a mature and subtle actor (still uncannily youthful), had the delicious satisfaction in 1982 of appearing in "The Browning Version" at York Repertory Theatre - not as Taplow, but as Crocker-Harris."

Cast:

- Andrew Crocker-Harris
.....Michael Redgrave
Millie Crocker-HarrisJean Kent
Frank HunterNigel Patrick
GilbertRonald Howard
FrobisherWilfred Hyde White
TaplowBrian Smith
FletcherBill Travers
WilsonPaul Medland
Lord BaxterIvan Samson
Mrs FrobisherJosephine Middleton
CarstairsPeter Jones
Betty CarstairsSarah Lawson
Albert WilliamsonScott Harold
Mrs WilliamsonJudith Furse
PorterRussell Waters

A detailed commentary of my own would be inappropriate as it's too long since I last viewed the film, beyond to say that it will inevitably look stuffy and set-bound today, and audiences weaned on cinema grandstanding of the Jack Nicholson/Al Pacino variety may not appreciate so readily the finesse and understatement of its central performance. It remains, however, a touching portrayal of endurance and disenchantment. The tragedy of Crocker-Harris is not in

his shallow wife's infidelities, but in the distance he discovers between the high ideals he served by entering teaching as a young man and an honest reckoning of his accomplishments in that career. What the above reviews fail to mention is that the act of kindness which so moves him is not Taplow's gift itself – of an antiquated translation of the "*Agamemnon*" found in a second-hand book dealer's – but of the Greek inscription his pupil makes in it to him, a quotation from Aeschylus himself which translates as:

"The gods smile from afar ~ on a gentle master".

The play has been subsequently adapted three times to my knowledge: in 1959 for American TV's "**Du Pont Show of the Month**" with John Gielgud, a British TV film starring Ian Holm, and a 1994 remake with Albert Finney, foolishly updated but moving nonetheless. Anthony Asquith and Terence Rattigan had already collaborated on the 1948 film of "**THE WINSLOW BOY**", with Robert Donat. Brian Smith was 18 in 1951, so certainly too old for the part, even though he may not look it. Were we short on schoolboys in 1951? What a scandal!

See the three remakes, and subject index under [BOARDING SCHOOL / PUBLIC SCHOOL](#) and [OSCAR-WINNERS / AWARD-WINNERS](#).