

Houseboat

US : 1958 : dir. Melville Shavelson : Paramount / Scribe : 110 min
 prod: Jack Rose : scr: Melville Shavelson & Jack Rose : dir.ph.: Ray June
Paul Petersen, Mimi Gibson, Charles Herbert
 Cary Grant; Sophia Loren; Martha Hyer; Eduardo Ciannelli; Harry Guardino; Murray Hamilton

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Domestic bliss breaks out – but not for long

Source: 50 Years of the Movies

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“Loren becomes Grant’s housekeeper and takes his three motherless kids in hand. Predictable romance ensues, in this delightful comedy. Guardino hilarious as houseboat handyman. Shot in VistaVision. ***½ ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwel's Film Guide review

“A widower with three children engages a maid who is really a socialite, and they all set up house on a boat. Artificial sentimental comedy with A-1 credits, but little style or bite. Academy Award nominations: Best

Script, Best Song ("Almost In Your Arms" – music /lyrics: Jay Livingston & Ray Evans)”

“The kind of picture to which you can take your stuffy maiden aunt, your wicked sophisticated uncle and your ten-year old child, and they will all have a wonderful time.”

- Ruth Waterbury, **Los Angeles Examiner**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“Cary Grant has Sophia Loren as his partner in this film but the material he has to work with is far below that handed him in his great days as a light comedian. It dithers between family comedy (he is a widower with three children) and sex comedy (he engages her as nurse) but being neither one nor the other ends up by being very little.

Murray Hamilton and Harry Guardino are others impressed by Loren’s physique; Eduardo Ciannelli is her father. * ”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“You can’t really analyse charm; you can only abandon yourself to it. So enjoy yourselves as Loren and Grant light up the screen with their movie star chemistry. It’s a droll romantic comedy (beautifully scored by George Dunning) about a widowed daddy who acquires a housekeeper with no previous experience. Sophia scores as a surrogate mama and then captures Grant’s heart; it’s her best Hollywood film. ***½ ”

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“Grant and Loren make the sparks fly in this predictable but charming comedy. He’s a widower residing in a houseboat with three children. She comes on board as a maid¹ and provides some motherly love for the kids. Unbeknowns to Grant, however, she’s really a woman with social standing. A good role for Loren, whose talents as a comedienne have gone largely unnoticed. Martha Hyer, Eduardo Ciannelli, and Harry Guardino perform well in supporting roles. Academy Award nomination – Jack Rose and Shavelson, Best Story and Screenplay written directly for the screen. *** ”

¹ inaccurate

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Sophia Loren has said she learnt more from this, playing with Cary Grant as an *au pair* hired by widower for his three kids, than from any other actor (guess what happens and you’re right!). Mel Shavelson directed. 3 ”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“Sophia Loren’s first Hollywood comedy was this winsome fable about a widower who falls for the Italian girl who looks after his three children. With Cary Grant as the widower, it’s guaranteed to skate skilfully over the stickier patches. *** ”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“The voyage of "**HOUSEBOAT**" is to a nearly extinct era in motion pictures when screens and hearts bubbled over with the warmth of original family humour. It’s a perfect role for Cary Grant, who plays a government lawyer separated from his wife and who, upon her accidental death, is brought into contact with his three children, none of whom are very friendly toward him.

Enter Sophia Loren, a full-blown lass with lovely knees who’s been kept in tow by her father, a noted Italian symphony conductor and who takes the first chance to get away from it all. Grant, though he takes for a tramp, hires her as a maid at seeing her ability to handle his children upon first meeting. Off goes everyone to the country, and through living together begin to understand and love each other. This, of course, also goes for the two adults (by now, he’s noticed her knees²).

Grant mixes concern with disconcert and says more with a head tilt than most residents of situation comedy are able to say with an entire script. Loren acts better in irate Italian than in emotional English, but she is believable and sometimes downright warm as the lover of Grant and his children. Harry Guardino is outstanding as a fiery wolf who will take anything but a wife, and Martha Hyer, as the rich "other" woman, is beautiful and skilfully competent. As one might expect, the moppets [*sic*] steal the show.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

² What’s all this about Loren’s **knees**? Is this some sort of euphemism for buttocks or breasts?

“A minor entry in Cary Grant’s *oeuvre* of romantic fluff, largely unremarkable because of its ho-hum script. With this sort of insubstantial material coming his way, it’s little wonder Grant chose to retire eight years later. He lives on a houseboat *sans* wife; Sophia Loren is the housekeeper/maid with whom he falls in love. Unrated, suitable for family viewing³. *** ”

50 Years of the Movies note on Loren:

“A growing star in Italy by the mid Fifties, it was inevitable that Loren would make an assault on Hollywood, but her first American movies were hardly demanding. She was rather lost in a big picture, **“THE PRIDE AND THE PASSION”** (57), where she had very strong competition from Cary Grant and Sinatra... She got a stab at something meatier as the object of lust for father and son in **“DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS”** (58) but wasn’t truly ready for heavy-duty acting and proved rather better against Grant in a simple comedy, **“HOUSEBOAT”** (58). By then she was an international star but her output for the rest of the decade was no better than average.”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "The Time Out Film Guide" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Sunday Times note:

“A young governess takes a job looking after an attractive widower’s unruly brood of children. * ”

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Herbert:

“Charles Herbert Saperstein was a square-faced little boy with some droll expressions and tones of voice, good value in films of the late Fifties. He made his bow in 1953 on TV’s **“Half-Pint Panel”**, and was later active on the stage, where he earned an Emmy nomination for his performance as a blind child in a play called **“The Miracle Hour”**. After 1960 Charles Herbert made one or two more appearances in TV series like **“The Twilight**

Zone” and **“The Outer Limits”**, but not much more.”

³ *The film reviewer doubling as child psychologist... But if he thinks it so mediocre, why award such a high mark?*

"The moppets steal the show" says Variety. Odd then that none of the above sources name them, or list any one of them among the cast. The children, finally, are David (13, Paul Petersen), Elizabeth (+/-9, Mimi Gibson) and Robert (7, Charles Herbert) with harmonica.

As an adolescent I confess I had a soft spot for **"HOUSEBOAT"**. It is that beguiling sort of Americana which portrayed the States as a land of the fair, where nothing seriously bad or boring ever happens (mom's death and funeral are tidily over before the film begins, and nobody, ultimately, is hurt or defeated). It is precisely the blend of light, tuneful family comedy which Disney has struggled to patent through innumerable films, hardly any of which found the right tone. True, the glamour in **"HOUSEBOAT"** is imported (Grant was English, Loren Italian), but the muddying of social and class boundaries which runs as a thread through the plot is wholly American.

The impossibly suave and handsome Cary Grant made frequent forays into comedy, but was prone to mug shamelessly (as his drunken car ride in **"NORTH BY NORTHWEST"**) or overplay surprise and consternation to a painful degree (as in **"ARSENIC AND OLD LACE"** or **"BRINGING UP BABY"**). Here, mercifully, he's at his most restrained, and the chemistry between him and Loren – in prime sex goddess form – is quite unforced. There are elements that recall Grant's earlier film **"MR BLANDINGS BUILDS HIS DREAM HOUSE"** or even **"THE EGG AND I"**, being as much as anything a "city folks adrift in rural surroundings" comedy.

Cinzia (Loren) is a bored debutante fresh out of finishing school ("Get a job?" scoffs her conductor father, "I've given you the finest education in all of Europe. You do not know how to do anything!", "Then perhaps, father, I will run for Congress" she purrs). It is during one of his open-air Washington concerts that she breaks loose and becomes acquainted with young Robert Winters. Robert's father (Grant), a State Department lawyer, has just been stung into reclaiming custody of his three children, has moved them into his small bachelor apartment, and bored the pants off them with a whistle stop tour of the historic sights of the capital. Robert goes AWOL at the same open-air concert, and becomes smitten with the sensual Cinzia, especially when she "wins" him a prize harmonica at the fair.

Tom Winters' clumsy attempts to win over his alienated brood have met with a frosty reception, but nannies are at a premium in Washington, so when "Roberto" is returned by the Italian girl and sings her praises, he flippantly offers her the job. Next day, when the family is decamping to a roomier summer house in the country, Cinzia returns, now dressed like a socialite, to accept his offer. Tom hastily tries to recant, but is outvoted by his children. On the road they run into their country house, just in time to watch it demolished when the truck towing it stalls on a railway line. The truck driver, a local gigolo called Angelo, offers to make amends by renting them his dilapidated houseboat on the river. To complete his joys, Tom soon discovers that his haughty new maid cannot cook, do laundry or make a cup of coffee (but knows a Cezanne when she sees one) and likes to sleep in of a morning. Yes, he has arrived in sitcom heaven.

Elder son David is a simmering cauldron of thirteen-year old resentment, expressing his anger at his mother's death through petty pilfering, and made by his father to feel a "lamebrain" who can do nothing right. One night he attempts to run away and almost drowns before dad dives in to the rescue. Perceptive Cinzia helps dad to see through his son's defences, and all is well between them after a heart-to-heart talk about death. But David is also developing a keen interest in the opposite sex (it takes all sorts) and the sudden blooming of romance between his father and Cinzia only leave him feeling cast aside like a child again. Elizabeth is the first of the three children to melt to dad's charm onslaught, but when she realises that a new wife and mother will mean she can no longer share dad's bed (fear of thunder sent her scuttling there in the first place) she also goes cold on the new maid.

But the real film-stealer is Charles Herbert as "Roberto", with his primal angst mouth organ. He seduces Loren faster than any other male in the film, seems most at ease on the boat ("swimming" at the end of a fishing line dangled over the side by Cinzia) and is the most outspoken in declaring his rights.

Herbert was a very diminutive 9, having appeared the same year in **"THE FLY"** and **"THE COLOSSUS OF NEW YORK"**. While **"HOUSEBOAT"** was his tenth film, Petersen (13) seems to have made no others. He had been one of Disney's "Mouseketeers", and would become a familiar face on TV's **"The Donna Reed Show"**, which began in '58 and ran for eight years. As an adult he developed a deep sense of resentment over the catharsis of fame evaporating at the end of his boyhood, and he became a founder member of "A Minor Consideration", a pressure group of former child players who campaign for the rights of child actors and performers against exploitation by parents and producers. Nothing else is known of Mimi Gibson.

See Sophia Loren in the later TV movie **"AURORA"**, co-starring with her own son Edoardo Ponti, and see Cary Grant in the similar **"ROOM FOR ONE MORE"** (52). See subject index under **BOATS / FISHING, COMEDY** and **MOVING HOME** (in both senses).