

The Nanny

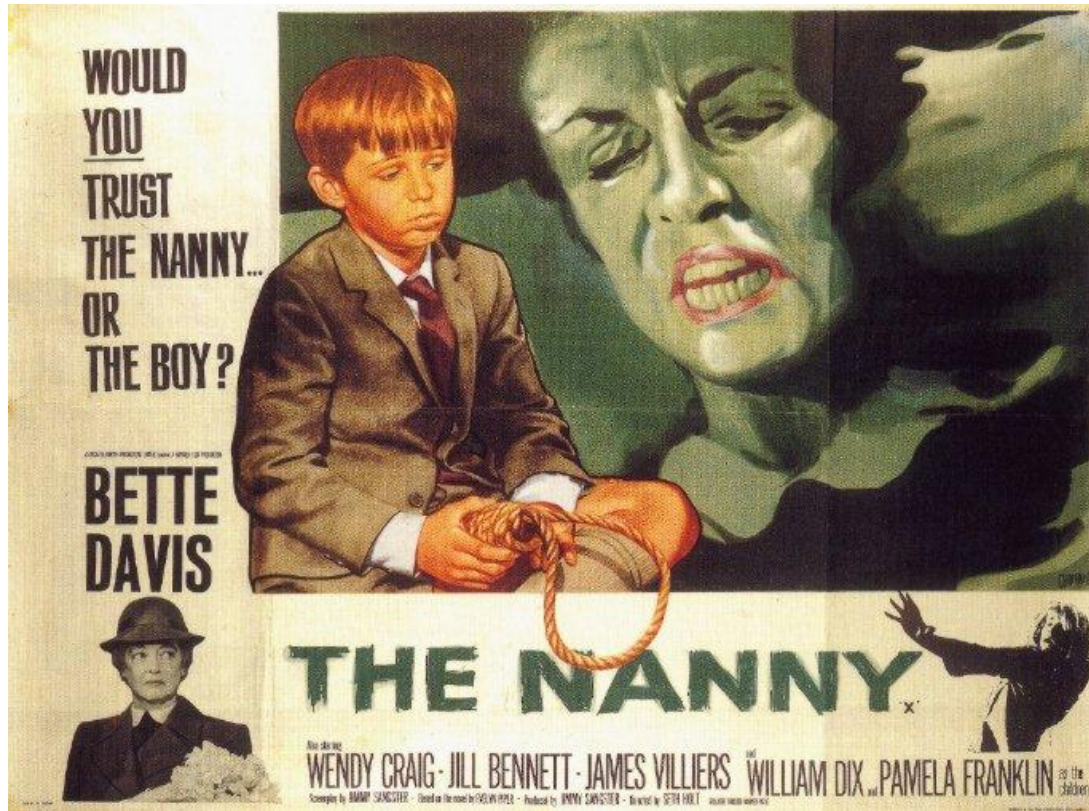
UK : 1965 : dir. Seth Holt : Hammer / Seven Arts / ABP : 93 min
prod: Jimmy Sangster : scr: Jimmy Sangster : dir.ph.: Harry Waxman
[William Dix](#); [Pamela Franklin](#)
Bette Davis; Wendy Craig; Jill Bennett; James Villiers; Maurice Denham; Jack Watling;
Alfred Burke; Nora Gordon; Sandra Power; Harry Fowler; Angharad Aubrey

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∞ M ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Hard-core Just William – a scamp with a vendetta

Source: Original front-of-house still



The poster seems to answer its own question – since the artwork makes Davis look like a badly mummified witch. Nobody trusts small boys anyhow, do they?
Source: souvenir postcard from original Hammer poster

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Twisting, scary plot plus fine direction reap results. Suspects of child murder are narrowed to governess Davis and disturbed youngster Dix. Unusual Hammer production, written by Jimmy Sangster. From the novel by Evelyn Piper. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwel's Film Guide review:

"A ten-year old boy hates his nanny, and with good reason, for she is a neurotic murderess. Muted Hammer experiment in psychopathology, with too much equivocation before the dénouement; the star's role allows few fireworks, and the plot is rather unpleasant. * "

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"Bette Davis gives a controlled but showy performance in the title role, a lady who may be a monster – or is one of her charges (William Dix) a liar? His ally is Pamela Franklin, who lives upstairs; the father, James Villiers, is a petty disciplinarian; the mother (Wendy Craig) is a fluttery neurotic; his aunt (Jill Bennett) comes to stay but is disinclined to believe that the nanny tried to drown him in the bath. An unlikeable film because we know we are being manipulated (some of the flashbacks show things which never happened) and because children are involved. * "

A Heritage of Horror comment:

"The brief for Hammer's prolonged but recently dormant psychological cycle was undoubtedly the enormous success of "PSYCHO" (and to a lesser extent "THE FIENDS") in the late 1950s. This being so, it must be admitted that none of the films, which to date include "TASTE OF FEAR", "MANIAC", "PARANOIAC"

"NIGHTMARE", "HYSTERIA", "FANATIC", "THE NANNY" and "CRESCENDO", can ultimately compare with Hitchcock's uncompromising masterpiece, but some of them are first-rate thrillers which stand up well to the test of time.

Holt's two films, for example, "TASTE OF FEAR" (1960) and "THE NANNY" (1965) are both highly accomplished versions of above average Jimmy Sangster scripts, with "TASTE OF FEAR" benefitting greatly from Douglas Slocombe's beautiful monochrome photography. It is to be hoped that Holt's qualities as a director will need no introduction here, for it would be impossible to do his work justice outside a full scale study. He seemed to manifest a psychological insight that was extremely rare in British films, though unfortunately it has only become apparent sporadically, because of his regrettably small output... "

Illustrated History of the Movies – Bette Davis excerpt:

"Davis had long admired Britain and the British, and was pleased to return there in 1965 for the title role in "THE NANNY", directed for Hammer Films by Seth Holt. This time she played a dowdy character far more sane, sensible – and indeed repressed – than in her previous bouts with the thriller genre. Much of Jimmy Sangster's script (from a novel by Evelyn Piper) proceeds so smoothly and calmly that the audience is certain that Davis, as a British nanny suspected by her young charge of having murdered his infant sister, must eventually turn to murder and mayhem. The cat-and-mouse game between the nanny and the boy is played with mounting tension and a few moments of genuine horror, as when the nanny calmly and serenely refuses to help the woman dying of a heart attack in front of her. For Davis, the role of the nanny was a comparatively restrained exercise after years of outlandish excess."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Miss Davis is cast as an English nanny whose sense of reality is clouded due to some deep dark secret in her past. Her charge, a very disturbed young lad fresh out of a junior

asylum is wise to her, but he has trouble making anyone else believe him. Despite the built-in melodrama, Miss Davis's performance is quite restrained and has touches of credibility and pathos. *** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Is the trusted old nanny a murderess or is it all the malicious imagination of the little boy? As you wait to find out, you have plenty of time to admire Bette Davis, senior citizen among superstars, losing none of her power in 1965. Unfortunately, Seth Holt couldn't do much with Jimmy Sangster's Hammer script which has Jill Bennett screaming on the floor, children dying in the bath and sundry other horrors. 3 "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"The suspense is so well built up in this chilly drama that it's a pity the end is something of an anti-climax. No fault of the direction or actors: Jimmy Sangster's otherwise impeccable screenplay must shoulder the blame. Sitting perfectly poised on the suspense fence, the film asks the question: is nanny (Bette Davis at her tightest-lipped) really the deranged and dangerous old woman that 10-year old Joey (William Dix) alleges? Once or twice, the film descends on the ridiculous [*sic*], but mostly the audience is kept well strung up awaiting the next development, to the accompaniment of some dramatic background music. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"It's not necessary to be an astute student to guess that Bette Davis as a middle-aged Mary Poppins in a fairly fraught household will eventually be up to no good. Which immediately sets the odds against screenwriter Jimmy Sangster and director Seth Holt. But, in fairness, the balance of power between Davis, posing as a devoted nanny, and William Dix as a knowing youngster who hates Davis' innards, is so skilfully portrayed to make "THE NANNY" a superior psycho-thriller.

It's an added plus to the pic that neither writer nor director teeters over the edge into hysterics, and the cast has cottoned

on and helped to build up the suspense gently but with a steely prickling of the nerve ends.

Yarn, briefly, concerns the relationship between nanny Davis and Master Joey (Dix) which is less than cordial. He comes out of a school for the unstable to which he has been sent when his baby sister is found drowned in the bath. He insists it was nanny's fault, but, of course, the adults don't believe him.

Davis handles her assignment with marked professionalism, and copes with plenty of knowhow competition. Wendy Craig is fine as a weak, fond young mama whose nerves are shot to pieces by the household happenings."

The Films of Bette Davis synopsis:

"Ten-year old Joey Fane (William Dix) is due home from a school for disturbed children, where he has been undergoing treatment for two years. His father, Bill Fane (James Villiers), goes to pick him up, and is dismayed when the headmaster tells him that the youngster has been a great problem to the staff.

Back home, Joey is greeted by his mother, Virgie (Wendy Craig), and his nanny (Bette Davis). He refuses to acknowledge Nanny, won't use the room she has made ready for him, and later, won't eat any food she has prepared.

He meets Bobbie (Pamela Franklin), the teenage girl who lives upstairs, and tells her that his little sister Susy was drowned in the bath two years ago, that Nanny did it, but that he was blamed for it and sent away.

The following day, Virgie is taken ill with food poisoning after eating Nanny's steak and kidney pie (which Joey had been seen meddling with while Nanny was out of the kitchen). She is rushed to the hospital. Joey refuses to stay in the apartment alone with Nanny, so the doctor sends for Virgie's sister, Aunt Pen (Jill Bennett). Pen has a weak heart and must always have her medication at hand - a fact which fascinates Joey.

As she dozes in a chair, Aunt Pen is awakened by Joey, a towel around his waist, screaming that Nanny has tried to drown him in the bath,

Pen sends him to his room and goes to question Nanny, whom she discovers hovering near Joey's door with a pillow in her arms.

A struggle for the pillow ensues, and Pen suddenly falls gasping to the floor. She begs Nanny for her medication, but Nanny doesn't seem to hear. She carries Pen to a bedroom and places her on the bed.

As in a trance, Nanny begins to talk to the dying Pen, describing to her the events of the day on which little Susy drowned. Nanny had been alone with the children when she received an urgent call from a doctor concerning her own grown daughter, Janet, whom she had given away when she was six months old. ("I had to, you see, because I had so many other children to look after".) Leaving Joey and Susy alone, she had gone to a squalid room in the slums, where she found Janet dead after an abortion. Dazed, she had walked miles through the streets of London, finally arriving home at bath time. But, as a result of her neglect, little Susy had already fallen into the tub, and was dead.

"I couldn't have Joey tell on his old Nanny, could I? Who would look after Madam? ...And all those other children looked after by other nannies - I mean, if it got out, well, parents just wouldn't trust us any more, would they? "

By now, Pen is dead. Nanny goes to Joey's room, and after a scuffle, knocks him out. She carries his body to the bathtub, which she has filled, and pushes him in and under. Suddenly, she sees not Joey but Susy in the tub, and the horror of the day two years ago comes back to her. Overwhelmed by the enormity of what she is doing, she pulls Joey from the tub and revives him. He seizes his opportunity to escape.

Now Nanny sinks slowly to her knees, all the regrets and disappointments of a lifetime sweeping over her. Weeping, she goes to her room and begins to fill her suitcase with her clothes and the framed photographs of all her "children".

"In this, her fourth venture into the Hitchcock-cum-horror milieu, Miss Davis is out for character rather than hoax and comes up with a beautifully-controlled performance as a jealous and voracious nursemaid pitted against a wilful and obviously disturbed 10-year old. Miss Davis sets the standard, and indeed it is

her performance and four complementary ones that give this film its distinction."

- New York Herald Tribune

The Moving Picture Boy entry on William Dix:

"Grey-flanneled English prep-school angel turned devil, the machiavellian Master Dix was a fair match in **"THE NANNY"** for his deranged keeper, Bette Davis - whether confronting her with jowly truculence or a fake suicide.

Transformed into jolly, helpful Tommy Stubbins in the messy whimsy of the **"DOCTOR DOLITTLE"** musical, he was inevitably less riveting, and after this, like Tom Brown before him, young William went off to Rugby."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Bette Davis came to Britain to work for Hammer and stars as a nanny who seems to be hiding a dark secret. A restrained, convincing performance from Davis, heading a classy cast (Jill Bennett, Wendy Craig) in this creepy tale, chillingly directed by Seth Holt. *** "

It must have been something of a major coup for Hammer studios to sign up a star of Davis' stature. Her presence does create problems with the film's dramatic structure. The plot requires a degree of ambiguity as to whether Joey's insistence she means to poison him is anything more than a paranoid delusion on his part. Had someone like Deborah Kerr been cast as the nanny, the end might have proved more of a surprise. As it is, one merely waits patiently for Davis to show her true colours. It is, nonetheless, for Hammer a remarkably restrained production. William Dix, here 10, essentially a prominent bottom lip with a small boy attachment, sulks and scowls through his part, but scarcely does or says anything to suggest he may be seriously psychologically disturbed - as Mark Lester was meant to be in **"NIGHT HAIR CHILD"** for example - and nothing that a good drubbing on his buttocks with her hairbrush wouldn't put right. Pamela Franklin plays a 14-year old girl in the flat upstairs whom Joey feels able to confide in, though she taunts and disbelieves him, and finds his aloof and absent father "dishy". Wendy Craig as the neurotic mother is a bit much of a good thing, and one firm reason for suspecting suicide by Joey's baby sister, found drowned fully dressed in the bath. She was not, as it turns out, murdered by Davis, but when the film veers towards melodrama in its closing minutes this scarcely seems to matter. Davis had played a nanny/governess 25 years previously in the Charles Boyer romance **"ALL THIS AND HEAVEN TOO"**. The only other film William Dix made was the musical **"Dr DOLITTLE"** (67), where he played Tommy Stubbins. He was packed off then to Rugby School, where doubtless his lower lip proved a great success. Pamela Franklin - **"THE INNOCENTS"**, **"THE LION"**, **"OUR MOTHER'S HOUSE"** - was 16.

See subject index under **BRATS / SPOILT KIDS** and [**NANNIES / GOVERNESSES / DOMESTIC SERVANTS**](#).