

Problem Child

US : 1990 : dir. Dennis Dugan : UIP / Universal / Imagine Entertainment : 81 min
prod: Robert Simonds : scr: Scott Alexander & Larry Karaszewski :
dir.ph.: Peter Lyons Collister

Michael Oliver
John Ritter; Jack Warden; Amy Yasbeck; Gilbert Gottfried; Michael Richards; Peter Jurasik;
Charlotte Akin

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ≠ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5560	5½	13	5	1,879	- - - - -	No	<i>unseen</i>



Give us this day our daily spanking, and forgive not our trespasses...

Source: original front-of-house still



Fair play is for wimps – a thesis we were sold (often under guise of comedy) many times during the 1980s and 90s
Source: original front-of-house still

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Botched comic twist on **"THE BAD SEED"** has Ritter as an unlucky father who adopts devil-child Oliver. A promising opening leads nowhere as bad performances and crude jokes prevail. Followed by a sequel, a TV movie, and an animated TV series. *½ "

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"A badly-behaved boy is adopted by a small-town couple. Broadly played, predictable comedy or mayhem and misunderstandings."

Rating the Movies review:

"A ridiculous comedy about the misadventures of a bratty seven-year old boy who is adopted by a family right out of a television sitcom. Michael Oliver plays the red-haired devil, who photographs nuns in the shower, sets fire to his bedroom, drives the family car into a store window, and corresponds with a serial killer. The broad physical humour, which has the subtlety of a sledgehammer, fails to generate many laughs mostly because neither the screenwriters nor director Dennis Dugan could

decide whether to make a dark satire or a warm-hearted tale with a lesson in love. ** "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review¹:

"Or: how to make a comic variation on **"THE BAD SEED"**. This repulsive comedy will turn your stomach over rather than tickle your ribs. Michael Oliver is obscenely awful as the monstrous kid Ritter and Yasbeck are unwise enough to adopt. It begins quite well, but subsequent scenes are so crude as to make the **CARRY ON** films seem a tower of good taste. But then, if you like seeing cats tortured, this could be for you. Amazingly, practically the entire cast signed on for a sequel. * "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Universal took a step in the right direction by whittling **"PROBLEM CHILD"** down to just 81 minutes but didn't go far enough. The studio should have excised another 75 minutes and released this unbelievable mess as a short. (Several characters listed in the credits never show upon screen.)

¹ *Bearing a suspicious resemblance to Leonard Maltin's review*



A Christian fundamentalist storms the set and offers to do away with the infernal spawn. No no, cries the director, we've signed him up for two sequels and a TV series.
Source: original front-of-house still

John Ritter and Amy Yasbeck play a yuppie couple determined to have a child, primarily so they can be invited to the neighbours' birthday parties for their own kids. Unable to conceive themselves, they get suckered into adopting round-faced Junior (Michael Oliver), a child repulsive enough to make nuns cheer when he's taken from their care.

The major subplot has Junior becoming pen-pals with a serial killer (Michael Richards) who busts out of prison to see him, leading to a kidnapping and chase that makes **"SMOKEY AND THE BANDIT"** look like **"CITIZEN KANE"**.

The film marks an atrocious big-screen debut for actor and episodic TV director Dennis Dugan. The most offensive character is Yasbeck's shrill, status-conscious wife."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"A bickering yuppie couple (John Ritter, Amy Yasbeck) decide to adopt a child so they can get invited to all the upscale kiddie birthday parties. They end up with a foul-mouthed, destructive youngster (Michael Oliver). Moronic combination of **"POLICE**

ACADEMY" and **"THE EXORCIST"**. Rated PG for vulgar language and violence. **"

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times reviews:

"Ghastly farce with the amiable John Ritter and Jack Warden doing their best with a terminally unfunny script. Infantile and unlovable, though this became enough of a hit at the box office to spawn a sequel. The worst film of this or any other Christmas². * "

"A childless couple (John Ritter and Amy Yasbeck) make a big mistake when they adopt seven-year old Junior (Michael Oliver). The little terror's already caused chaos in the orphanage, but that's nothing compared to the havoc he wreaks now, ruining a birthday party, playing his own smash-and-wallop brand of baseball and trashing his new Pop's car. An undemanding helping of kiddie slapstick, this would have been a lot better if the tyke had

² Nonetheless the BBC helped to promote it with a ticket giveaway on their own Radio Times children's page, and they were the channel which bought it up for terrestrial screening – but then had the gall to "edit" it for "content"!

been given a personality. As it is, he's just a smiling little hook to hang the gags on."

"...What, however, is emphatically not worth a look is a truly nasty little movie, purporting to be a comedy, called **"PROBLEM CHILD"**, which invites us to laugh at the allegedly side-splitting antics of a small boy who is clearly in need of urgent psychiatric help.³"

"The **TURKEYS?** Well, **"LOOK WHO'S TALKING NOW"** is one. But avoid at all costs **"PROBLEM CHILD"**, which somehow keeps cropping up in the schedules, even though it's quite a nasty little film."

"A dreadful mishmash of a comedy, starring John Ritter as a man who adopts a dysfunctional child [sic]. Not only is this movie crude and deeply unfunny, but it fails to work even on the simplest level as an object lesson in giving love and eventually receiving it⁴. Edited [sic] for language and content. * "

"Comedy starring John Ritter. A badly-behave 7-year old is adopted by an unsuspecting suburban couple."

"Comedy ensues when a mischievous young boy brings chaos to the lives of his adoptive parents."

"Comedy. A mischievous young boy turns the lives of his adoptive parents upside down."

– *Having read the Radio Times' low opinion of this "truly nasty little movie", now read this, from their kids' section:*

"**LITTLE DEVIL:** It's wicked and it's out next week. Your chance to see **"PROBLEM CHILD"** and win a fabulous Florida holiday.

Seven-year old orphan Junior is just too awful to find a family to keep him. In his short life he's been returned to Brutus orphanage 30 times, but now he's found a new mum and dad. **"PROBLEM CHILD"**, released in UK cinemas this week, follows the adventures of this terrible child and the dreadful adults around him. A US family comedy, things turn out OK in the end, although, as the "PG" certificate suggests, some scenes may be unsuitable for younger children.

³ Or a sound good hiding, as the case may be

⁴ Whoever would want a film to "give them an object lesson" in that??

WIN! WIN! WIN! WIN! WIN!

Here's your chance to see **"PROBLEM CHILD"** for free this half term. *Radio Times* has 100 pairs of tickets to be won, allowing you to see the film while it is being shown at any Cannon cinema. And one lucky reader will be travelling further afield when they win the first prize of a super family holiday for four in Florida, USA. The trip includes four return flights on TWA from Heathrow via JFK airport in New York, a week's Hertz car hire, room-only accommodation at the Gateway Inn (conveniently located for Walt Disney World and other attractions) plus £300 spending money."

TV Quick note:

"Comedy. A young couple adopt a little boy who proves to be something of a handful."

TV Times review:

"Orphaned Junior (Michael Oliver) is an unholy terror, proving unworthy of adoption until he is taken into the home of Ben and Flo Healey (John Ritter and Amy Yasbeck). But all their love and attention fails to reform the brat, who goes on to ruin a birthday party and attack Little League baseball players. Things get worse when Junior's pen pal Martin Beck (Michael Richards) escapes from prison and pays his young friend a visit. Clearly, screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski are poking fun at so-called family values, but this tedious film fails to generate laughs or provoke concern for Junior's loveless state. * "

"Comedy. Desperate for a child, yuppie couple Ben and Flo Healey adopt a mischievous young boy, only to discover that he's a walking disaster. * "

"A crass attempt at comedy. TV version - edited [sic] for content. * "

What's On TV notes:

"Comedy about a horrible little boy who runs rings round the couple who adopt him."

"Comedy about a devilish little orphan."

"Comedy about a couple who adopt a very nasty piece of work."

“An orphan fights bureaucracy to be with his adopted dad, a travelling musician, at Christmas.⁵”

The Guardian note:

“Unfunny, lame-brained bad taste comedy about a hell-raising orphan and his annoyingly fey new parents.”

The Sunday Times note:

“Smash hit comedy about a couple who adopt a mischievous boy.”

News of the World (*heave*) review:

“Junior (Michael Oliver) is the naughtiest boy in town. To the joy of the nuns who’ve been minding him, he’s finally adopted by Ben (John Ritter) and Flo (Amy Yasbeck). A birthday party they throw for Junior becomes a nightmare and the new parents realise they’ve taken on a devil of a child! A load of laughs!
*** ”

⁵ *Ummm... nice try, but wrong film.*

No further information currently available. I haven't seen any box office figures to indicate whether this was, or was not, "a smash hit" with the public, but it seems fairly obvious the two films were shot back-to-back, without waiting for an audience verdict on this first one. How appropriate that, in the teeth of an avalanche of reviews trashing it for bad taste, the "News of the World" (so called) should deem it "a load of laughs". Lame-brained it must be, for sure!

Though none of them say so explicitly, the recurrence of the Hell – little devil motif in these reviews seems to suggest that Junior is introduced as a kind of low-rent Antichrist rather than a "Bad Seed", but it would hardly be worth sitting through its 81 minutes to find out. Placing it in a broader context, "**PROBLEM CHILD**" was released the same year as "**HOME ALONE**", which certainly did prove an unexpected box office hit, and in terms of simple receipts, the most successful film comedy ever. What was it that made the one such a winner and the other such a turkey? Was Culkin's character that much better written? Did John Hughes strike the balance between violent slapstick, emetic humour and mawkish sentiment with greater finesse?

It has been suggested "**PROBLEM CHILD**" was mocking the temple of "family values" – a sort of antidote to "**PARENTHOOD**" two years before – but it sounds more as though the writers simply disliked children per se. It could just as well be read as an extension of the "yuppie nightmare" genre of "**FATAL ATTRACTION**", "**BASIC INSTINCT**" etc – adoption as a Bad Life Choice – or as a coded attack on the inadequacies of modern parenting. It is not, after all, Junior who is "dysfunctional" or in need of a psychiatrist, but the inept and wrong-headed child-raising methods which produce such abominations (and we've all encountered them, haven't we?) Beat your children! You know it makes sense.

See the sequels, and subject index under **BRATS / SPOILT CHILDREN, CIRCUS / FAIRGROUNDS, COMEDY, KIDNAPPING, ORPHANS / ADOPTION** and **SPORT**.