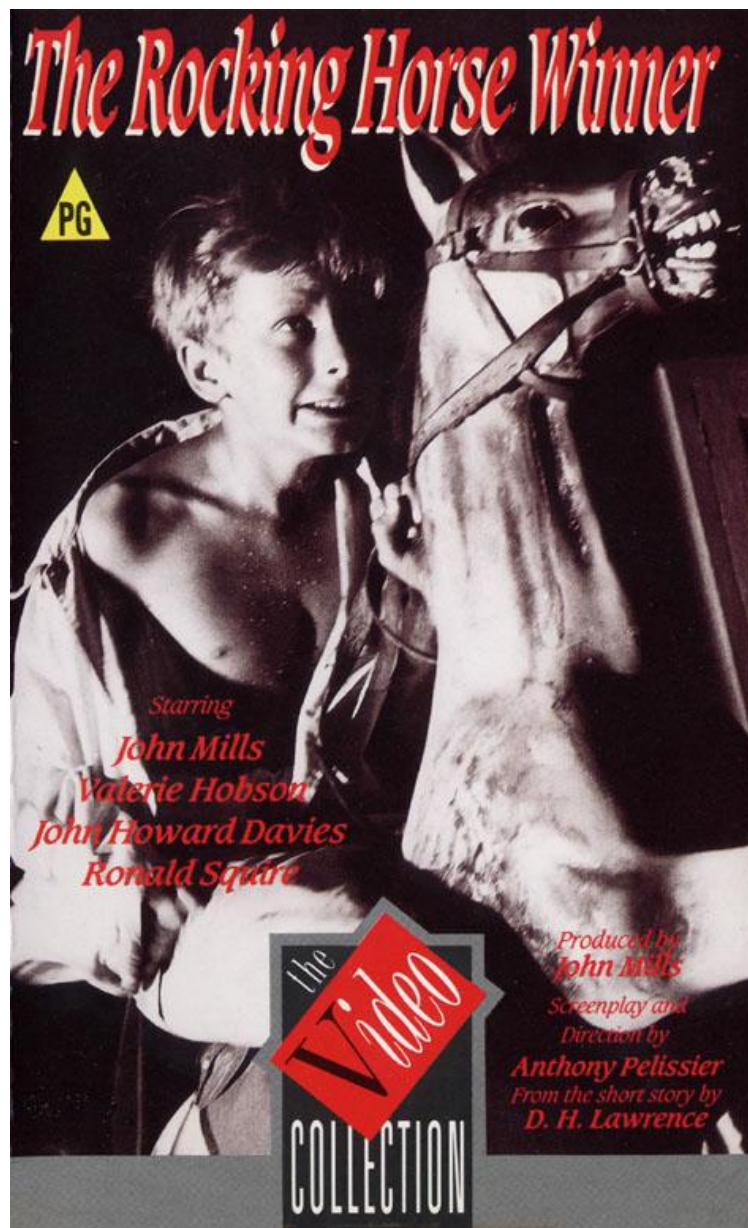


The Rocking Horse Winner

UK : 1949 : dir. Anthony Pelissier : Rank / Two Cities : 91 min
prod: John Mills : scr: Anthony Pelissier : dir.ph.: Desmond Dickinson
[John Howard Davies](#)
John Mills; Valerie Hobson; Ronald Squire; Hugh Sinclair; Charles Goldner; Susan Richards;
Cyril Smith; Anthony Holles; Melanie McKenzie; Caroline Steer

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3234b	5.5	11	6	2,390	-	7	7	3	7	Yes	Mar 2003



*The highlighted nipple, the frenzied expressions on horse and boy — at one level perhaps, both cameraman and video jacket designer recognised the implicit sexual undercurrents laid bare in the **Time Out** review below. I must confess I did not...*



John Howard Davies, having read his Iliad at school, watches his wooden horse like a hawk, lest a horde of Greek warriors come tumbling out to pillage his bedroom.
Source: indeterminate

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Truly unique, fascinating drama based on a D. H. Lawrence story; small boy has a knack for picking racetrack winners, but complications set in before long. Beautifully done. Screenplay by the director. ***1/2 "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A boy discovers he can predict winners while riding an old rocking horse; his mother's greed has fatal results. A very short story is fatally over-extended and becomes bathetic; but the production is solid and the film deserves a mark for trying. Story by D. H. Lawrence. * "

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"An uneven adaptation of the story by D. H. Lawrence about a sensitive child (John Howard Davies) whose rocking horse provides mother (Valerie Hobson) with the names of

tomorrow's winning steeds. The writer-director has tried to be casual but succeeds only in forcing his situations, partly because the subject does not lend itself to length. With John Mills (who produced) as the groom, Ronald Squire, Hugh Sinclair and Charles Goldner. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"D. H. Lawrence's superb short story becomes a heartbreaking movie. A boy discovers he can keep his parents together by the money he wins predicting winners at the track. Davies rides his rocking horse (his means of infallible predictions) for all it's worth; his desperate drive suggests the depth of his fears. ***1/2 "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Adaptation of D. H. Lawrence story about a boy with second sight. Anthony Pelissier got fine performances in 1949 from Valerie

Hobson as the tragic mother, John Mills as the father¹. John Howard Davies was the boy. 33”

¹ *Wrong !*



Another observation which escaped the reviewers was that John Howard Davies, here 10, is clearly too old to be given a rocking horse in the first place. Without knowing the age of the child in the original story, I'd assume him to be 6 or 7, not 10. To most adults, a kid is a kid is a kid, and such age distinctions are meaningless.



The Time Out Film Guide review:

“In introducing D. H. Lawrence to the screen, the Mills / Pelissier team made a strange choice with this brief, terse evocation of Oedipal love (a sensitive child, threatened by a rift between extravagant mother and jobless

father, discovers an ability to predict racing winners while pretending to be a jockey, frenziedly astride his rocking horse). Though no-one noticed at the time, the Lawrentian sexual undertones are clearly transposed to the film. The boy's masturbatory riding is given a frightening potency, and his attempt to win the

love of his glitteringly powerful mother has little to do with filial affection. Pelissier's direction is occasionally overblown, but Mills (as the groom who feeds the boy's fantasies), obviously relishing the opportunity to use his native Suffolk accent, is admirably restrained, and a British film which explores the complex links between sex, money and power is rare indeed."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"John Howard Davies, later the producer of TV's **"Fawlty Towers"**, plays the sinister child who, once aboard his rocking horse, can predict the winner in any given race. As might be expected from the star of **"OLIVER TWIST"**, Master Davies brings this version of a D. H. Lawrence novella to chilling, disturbing, but fascinating life. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"There has rarely been a more faithful adaptation of an original, with the exception of the ending, which was added at the request of the censor. In following the original D. H. Lawrence short story, Anthony Pelissier, who scripted as well as directed, has developed the story of an extravagant mother as seen through the eyes of a sensitive child. How to raise the cash to bring the family out of debt and anxiety is the problem playing on the youngster's mind.

Then, gradually, the boy realises he has a facility for picking winners in horse races and in secret association with the family handyman, later joined by a sporting uncle, has an astonishing run of good luck. John Howard Davies plays the sensitive lad with a skill and sincerity which would do credit to a seasoned trouper. Valerie Hobson is fine as the mother."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Impressive screen adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's disturbing story about a sensitive

little boy's uncanny ability to predict racehorse winners by riding his rocking horse. ***1/2 "

Videocassette – The Video Collection VHS VC3152 – sleeve notes:

"D. H. Lawrence's classic short story is brought to the screen by some of the leading names in British cinema. John Mills stars as a groom who fires the imagination of an impressionable and lonely young boy with stories of horse racing. The boy is given a rocking horse for Christmas which soon becomes his favourite toy. The link between the boy's games and reality becomes blurred when he names racehorse winners with uncanny accuracy... but every gift has its price. **"THE ROCKING HORSE WINNER"** is one of John Mills' greatest productions – a film that is both poignant and eternally haunting."

The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985 listing:

"Fantasy. Boy who predicts winners while riding horse is driven to death by his greedy mother. Story: D.H. Lawrence."

Cast:

BassettJohn Mills
Hester GrahameValerie Hobson
Paul Grahame**John Howard Davies**
Oscar CresswellRonald Squire
Richard GrahameHugh Sinclair
Mr TsaldourisCharles Goldner
NannieSusan Richards
BailiffCyril Smith
Bowler HatAnthony Holles

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

Betting on the gee-gees can cause fatal diseases – this strange and overwrought film warns us – and is particularly unhealthy for growing boys. I viewed it again recently, conscious of *"Time Out"*'s reading, and there are some grounds for their argument in the frenzied shots of Paul Grahame (John Howard Davies) lashing his bucking mount in the nursery, but if it's a purposeful subtext at all, it's a secondary one. Far easier to read the film as another Dire

Warning on the Evils of divorce, a prevalent theme in the late forties. Paul's parents do not in fact split up, but they spend Christmas Day bickering about financial worries, and the boy is obviously deeply affected, although he overhears none of their conversation. An image, plucked presumably verbatim from the D.H. Lawrence story, of the house being filled with creeping whispers – “We *must* have more money!” – is translated literally onto the screen, so that Paul becomes fatally obsessed with exorcising these whispering spirits. That's his conscious motivation, and since the word divorce is not mentioned at any point in the film, it remains on the level of a subtext.

Sadly, it's all so clumsily done in any case that it fails to engage the audience emotionally in the boy's turmoil and distress. The dialogue is stilted beyond belief, even for its own decade, and director Pelissier paces it so clumsily one might almost be watching amateur dramatics. Another crucial flaw is the miscasting of John Howard Davies as the boy. He was only 10 in 1949, but looks and sounds 12, and incongruously large to be given a rocking horse as his major Christmas present. Paul's dialogues with his mummy about luck and money seem obviously written for a smaller boy, 7 or 8 at best, and it seems pretty clear Davies was cast on the strength of his hit the previous year with David Lean's “**OLIVER TWIST**”. His performance here is almost as wooden as his horse, and that too cripples the emotional thrust of the story. For once I line up firmly with Halliwell rather than Maltin – the film gallops headlong into bathos.

The story opens with Paul making a friend of the family's new handiman cum gardener (Mills), who was his uncle's batman in the forces. Uncle Oscar is wealthy, and takes conspicuous pleasure in lecturing Paul's parents, Hester and Richard, on their financial shortcomings. Hester is a spendthrift, living resolutely above her means, Richard loses his job and is saddled with gambling debts. Despite Oscar bailing them out, pretty soon they find bailiffs knocking at their door. Hester's rationale of money is itself that of a child. It all comes down to luck, she assures Paul. If you're born wealthy you can always lose your money, but if you're born lucky you'll always find more. Uncle Oscar must be a very lucky man, Paul concludes, reasonably.

Learning that handiman Bassett likes to bet on the horses, Paul tries to pick a winner for him, unsuccessfully. He cajoles Bassett into placing a bet for him (Paul) at the same time, which Bassett does only with some reluctance. Paul is not a bit dismayed by initial failure, and next time picks his winner more carefully. Some weeks later, on a trip to the coast with Uncle Oscar, Paul lets slip that he and Bassett have accrued winnings of several thousand pounds, a sum the boy only vaguely comprehends. Incredulous, Oscar quizzes Barrett on the story and finds it to be true. Being a man who enjoys a flutter himself, he promptly buys into their secret syndicate. Neither man understands how the boy picks his winners, but soon find that when he's certain he's infallible, and when he's not their winnings quickly translate into losses.

Harried by the bailiffs meanwhile, Hester is driven to the consummate social disgrace of selling part of her wardrobe to a back-street pawnbroker to raise cash. Again Oscar comes to her rescue, and secretly agrees with Paul to syphon some of their winnings to his mother through a solicitor, pretending she has come into an inheritance. The dye is cast, however, and Paul feels pressured to produce ever more winners for the adults who have come to rely on his forecasting, and nervous prostration takes its toll in a climax that is pure melodrama.

Masturbation, and a boy's primal incestuous longings to displace his father, seem a very long way from that plotline. Not having read the original short story, I cannot comment how overt those threads may be in Lawrence's writing. It seems implausible in the extreme that a 1949 British film, under John Mills' own stewardship, would have purposefully translated them onto the screen. Indeed, the very notion of John Howard Davies strangling his snake in the shadowy nursery almost defies belief, given the infantile dialogue they have written for him. Nonetheless, watching the film with that awareness, one is certainly struck by the intensity of the scenes where he's pitching back and forth on his rocking horse, lurching at the camera in

feverish black and white, pyjama shirt slashed open to the waist, his family receding in his eyes by telescopic lens shots, until he reaches some metaphorical climax and sits back, exhausted, in the saddle. "Well, I got there!" he tells his mother. "*Where* did you get to?" she asks, bewildered. "Where I wanted to go" he answers flatly. "He's such a *funny* boy, Oscar!" mother later confides in her brother.

Reviews above implying that the boy is ridden to his doom by a grasping mother are flatly inaccurate. Early in the film Paul actually offers his mother a loan from his piggy bank and she tells him that, however desperate she might be, she'd never take a penny away from him. Later, as she's harried by the bailiff, he comes to her again and offers her money but she brushes him away sharply. She has no inkling of his secret gambling with Bassett and Uncle Oscar, and is more distraught than anyone by the boy's death. In the final scene Bassett tries to give her the fortune Paul has won with his terminal forecast, but she rejects the money in horror as tainted, pressing him to burn it in the flames with the rocking horse. Rather unkind, then, to blame her for the train of events. Profligate she may be, but hardly grasping.

Indeed, a feminist deconstruction of the same film would place the blame squarely at the feet of Bassett and Uncle Oscar, who exploit the boy more overtly, and point to his mother's attempts to send him away from them for his own good. Instead of an oedipal subtext to the frantic horse-riding scenes, they might see an elliptical hint at the boy's sexual exploitation by the same men. It is Bassett who teaches the boy to ride, uncle Oscar who suggests he be moved out of the nursery (Paul has two small sisters) and into the box room on the top floor. Oscar and Bassett were officer and batman in the forces, perhaps they were in league also to play their own horsey-and-jockey games with young Paul? One can read pretty much what one chooses into a film as illogical as this one.

The only interesting performance comes from Charles Goldner as Tsaldouris the pawnbroker. Ronald Squire, as Uncle Oscar, is weak, and John Mills dull as dust in his plain and simple working class fellow mode as the punter who inadvertently sets the tragedy in train. Mills obviously saw potential in the story, taking a modest supporting role himself, but the screenplay was written by someone with no feeling for how children think or speak, so the central figure of Paul remains a toy himself, broken between squabbling grown-ups.

[John Howard Davies'](#) film career was as slender as he was. After "**OLIVER TWIST**" and this one, he only made "[TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLDAYS](#)" (as the lead) and "**THE MAGIC BOX**" (in a small supporting role), both in 1951.

See Peter Medak's 1987 remake for the Learning Corporation of America, and subject index under [DEATH / DYING CHILDREN](#), [HORSES & PONIES](#), [NANNIES / GOVERNESSES / DOMESTIC SERVANTS](#), [PRODIGES / GIFTED CHILDREN](#), [SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS](#) and [TOYS / DOLLS / MODELS](#).