

Spring and Port Wine

UK : 1970 : dir. Peter Hammond : EMI / Memorial : 101 min
 prod: Michael Medwin : scr: Bill Naughton : dir.ph.: Norman Warwick
[Len Jones](#).....
 James Mason; Susan George; Diana Coupland; Hannah Gordon, Marjorie Rhodes;
 Rodney Bewes; Adrienne Posta; Keith Buckley; Frank Windsor; Avril Elgar; Arthur Lowe

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Ω □ ♀ Z ♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Unpretentious little gem about the generation gap in a lower-middle-class[†] English family. Mason has one of his better later roles as the strict patriarch. ***"
 [[†] no – they're plainly working class]

Speelfilm Encyclopedie translation of the above:

"Unpretentious little gem about the generation gap in an English bourgeois family. Mason has a good role as the principled patriarch. *** "

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A Lancashire family runs into trouble when stern father insists that teenage daughter should eat a meal she refuses. A popular old-fashioned stage comedy which simply doesn't work on film, partly from being set in a too-real town (Bolton) and partly because of a miscast lead. "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Despite a sterling cast – James Mason, Diana Coupland, Rodney Bewes, Hanna Gordon, Adrienne Posta, Frank Windsor, Arthur Lowe, Susan George – director Peter Hammond has made the worst of Bill Naughton's family play. You can't believe in the characters or their situations. Reminiscent of "THE FAMILY WAY", also set in Bolton, but without that adaptation's sparkle. 77 "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Phlegmatic, rather patronising story of a Bolton family dominated by the patriarchal James Mason (himself a northerner, but from the White Rose county). The fulcrum of the tale is the reluctance of his younger daughter (a pert, teenaged Susan George) to eat a herring for supper and the subsequent plot centres around the tortuous ritual imposed by her father of serving up the hapless fish at every meal until she devours it. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Set in the mill area of Lancashire and its moors (though lacking most of the cliché Lancashire gags and mannerisms), this is the story (from the play by Bill Naughton) of a generation clash in a small family and the points of view of both parents and children are fairly, compassionately and interestingly brought out.

James Mason plays the patriarch of the family, a kindly but stubborn man who brings up his family with a startling strictness. Remembering his own youth he is determined the house he reigns over shall not be such a mess.

Chief rebel is the high-spirited Susan George whose refusal to eat a herring for tea sparks off a handful of situations that remind Mason that "you can spend a lifetime creating a family and break it up in a weekend."

Sixties British Cinema comment:

"The television spin-offs divide into two groups. The least contentious are the solidly realist social comedies like British Lion's **"TILL DEATH US DO PART"** (1968), which might be classed alongside the two Bill Naughton adaptations, **"THE FAMILY WAY"** (1966) and **"SPRING AND PORT WINE"** (1970). They are unadventurously orthodox in terms of style but have some merit in their genuine exploration of social themes and their warm, unpatronising affection for the lives of their very ordinary protagonists.

The other group, **"30 IS A DANGEROUS AGE, CYNTHIA"** (1967), **"BEDAZZLED"** (1967), **"THE RISE AND RISE OF MICHAEL RIMMER"** (1970), **"EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE"** (1970), belated children of the satire boom, employ a battery of cinematic tricks – fast motion, rapid montage, animated insertions – to disguise what unfortunately tend to be over-extended ragbags of old television sketches."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The

Time Out Film Guide", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Comedy starring James Mason and Susan George. Strict patriarch Rafe Crompton is forced to examine his outlook on life when his stubbornness leads to family confrontation. ***"

"Any film adaptation of a play in which the critical action takes place around a dining table is likely to be slightly stagebound. That Bill Naughton's screen version of his own generation-gap comedy works as a movie is partly down to its commonplace, but utterly compelling, content and director Peter Hammond's deft opening out of events. However, the key element is unquestionably the playing of James Mason, Susan George and a host of cosy sitcom celebrities, with Mason alternatively infuriating and endearing as the dour Lancastrian feuding with daughter George over an unwanted meal. ***"

Right, let's see if we can get through this without use of the words "patriarch", "pert" or "herring".

British cinema of the sixties – notably through the work of socialist polemicists like Ken Loach (**"Kes"**, **"Poor Cow"**) - was the heyday of the common man, the working class protagonist straining at his roots and challenging the cultural values which kept his parents in their place. The level of socio-political commitment in such TV films as **"Cathy Come Home"** and **"Edna the Inebriate Woman"** were a wide world away from the complacent social engineering which characterises the modern TV soap. From **"Billy Liar"** and **"The Family Way"** to **"O Lucky Man!"**, they attempted to portray the concerns of ordinary people (predominantly of the midlands and north) without the taint of middle class patronage. That these "kitchen sink dramas", as they were tagged, often look very dated now is a measure of how far the political pendulum has swung the other way over the intervening decades. The cultural war has long since been won decisively by the working class, but its political aspirations have come to nothing.

The generation war was a hot issue in that decade. Parental authority had never been so comprehensively undermined, or been required to make such seismic adjustments, as by the winds of change in the late sixties. It's against that backdrop of upheaval in domestic tradition that **"SPRING AND PORT WINE"** is set.

Rafe Crompton (Mason) is the head of a family of two sons and two daughters, the youngest, Wilfred (Len Jones) being 14 or 15, still in the Scouts but already at work. Hilda (Susan George) is presumably 16 or 17, and still smarting from a broken courtship. The elder two, Harold (Rodney Bewes) and Florence (Hannah Gordon) may be in their twenties, but are still living at home. Mason rules the roost with a quiet but adamant authority, regimenting his family by strict observance of rituals – at the dinner table, gathered around the piano for a singalong, or handing over their weekly tariff towards the housekeeping (not unlike the father in **“HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY”**). Everything has its right and wrong fashion of doing, and grim memories of the Depression and the Jarrow march have left him with a penurious “waste not, want not” philosophy.

Rafe’s family submit to his autocratic rule despite token gestures of resistance – Harold smoking defiantly in the parlour, only to stub it out in panic as dad turns in at the front gate – and wife Daisy (Diana Coupland) is stung to be accused by a neighbour of having no pride in herself, letting her husband so dictate the running of her household. When the family sit at table for the evening meal, and daughter Hilda announces she won’t eat the fish put before her, it comes as a startling challenge to Rafe’s authority, and slowly escalates for old and young alike into a point of moral principle.

The film makes no suggestion that Rafe is a violent man, or that he beats his children into submission, although that would have been a commonplace in other Lancashire families, as elsewhere. His cruelty is expressed as inflexibility, and the persistent recital of moral strictures from his family bible. The film’s most tense confrontation comes when 14-year old Wilf attempts to resolve the impasse over the uneaten fish by furtively feeding it to the cat. His father traps him in a lie, and interrogates him with mounting intensity over the vanished fish, ultimately brandishing the bible for Wilf to swear an oath upon. The boy deftly escapes this crisis by swooning in a faint.

A secondary plot strand concerning elder daughter Florence’s last best chance at marriage is meant to reinforce the sense of the family home as a stifling prison of convention, except that it is hard quite to see the elegant Hannah Gordon either as a stoical working class schoolteacher or as the plain Jane implied by the dialogue. For that matter, Susan George is tough to swallow as an impulsive fun-loving factory girl only dimly aware of the facts of life. Although she is the catalyst of the family crisis, her character and emotions are poorly fleshed out in the dialogue. Her father’s philosophy and rationale are explored more subtly. Mason gives a fine, against-type central performance, but he too seems cast in a role that would better suit someone like Brian Glover or Pete Postlethwaite. That we can accept him at all as a proud, didactic, but essentially modest machinist who enjoys a game of bowls and will join the neighbourhood kids in a friendly kickabout is something of a testament to his range.

Losing itself between social comedy and domestic drama, **“SPRING AND PORT WINE”** is chiefly interesting as a counterpoint to **“THE SHOOTING PARTY”** (in which Mason as a local magistrate entertains his upper class social circle to a weekend’s game shooting on his rolling country estate). Its relevance to the archive, aside from the superficial theme, is not so much for Susan George, who was 20 in 1970, though slight enough of figure to pass for 16 or 17, but for Len Jones as the cheeky-faced younger brother, playing mam off against dad for all he’s worth, signing up eagerly to the family mutiny without any sense at all of what is at stake for his sisters and parents. If he made any other film appearances, or did TV work in the sixties, I have no information on it. Halliwell describes Susan George as a *“former child actress, usually typed as sexpot”* though he cites her first film as **“BILLION DOLLAR BRAIN”**, aged 17. The following year she played Mark Lester’s sister in the dismal **“EYEWITNESS”**.

The only vaguely relevant subject index heading would be **WORKING BOYS (AND GIRLS)** though we’re not told what school-leaver Wilf does for a living.