

To Sir with Love

UK : 1967 : dir. James Clavell : Columbia : 105 min
 prod: James Clavell : scr: James Clavell : dir.ph.: Paul Beeson

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 Sidney Poitier; Christian Roberts; Judy Geeson; Suzy Kendall; Lulu; Faith Brook;
 Geoffrey Bayldon; Patricia Routledge; Adrienne Posta; Rita Webb; Michael Des Barres

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	KBytes	Ω	□	€	Z	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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"A Story as fresh as the girls in their minis!"

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Excellent film of novice teacher Poitier assigned to roughhouse London school, gradually earning respect from his students¹. Well acted, with nice work by British newcomers; Lulu also sings hit title song. Written and produced by Clavell, from E.R. Braithwaite's novel. ***½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie clumsy approxi-mation of the above:

"A splendid film by newcomer Poitier who becomes teacher at a state school in East London and gradually wins the respect of the difficult pupils. Good performances, also from the young English actors and actresses. The story is that of "THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE" and gave rise to the later TV series "Please Sir". ***½ "

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"A West Indian teacher comes to a tough East End school. Sentimental neo-realism² patterned after "THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE" but much softer; its influence led to a situation comedy, "Please Sir". From the novel by E.R. Braithwaite."

"The sententious script sounds as if it has been written by a zealous Sunday school teacher after a particularly exhilarating boycott of South African oranges." - M.F.B

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"E.R. Braithwaite's book is an honest, autobiographical account of a black West Indian teaching in London's East End but this adaptation by the director, usually a novelist, has the facile assumptions of bestsellerdom. Sidney Poitier is the teacher, of such wisdom, tolerance, humour, intelligence and strength that he is the eighth wonder of the world. The delinquent or precocious [sic] kids include Adrienne Posta, Judy Geeson, Christian Roberts and the pop singer Lulu. Ann Bell is a mum, while two splendid actresses, Faith Brook and Patricia Routledge, are over-wise fellow teachers. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

"A good-humoured, touching story of an idealistic ex-engineer (Poitier, of course) and his experience in teaching a group of rambunctious white high school students from the slums of London's East End. Poitier is particularly appealing in this film based on the novel of E.R. Braithwaite and skilfully produced, adapted and directed by James Clavell. Lulu had a hit record with the title song. *** "

¹ Or "pupils", as we call them in English...

² A contradiction in terms, surely

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Drama starring Sidney Poitier. An engineer from British Guiana tries unusual methods to gain respect when he becomes a teacher in London's East End. *** "

"Twelve years after snarling his way through a New York education as a student in **"THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE"**, Sidney Poitier graduated to the chalk-face as a teacher in London's East End, motivating less surly pupils to be responsible citizens in director James Clavell's adaptation of E.R. Braithwaite's novel. This soft-centred affair is probably best remembered for Lulu singing the title song, though Judy Geeson gives a credible performance as a lovelorn pupil. Naïve it may have been, but it became one of the year's top box-office hits. Edited³ for some of its language. *** "

³ *They mean "censored" of course. It was broadcast at 2.40 a.m., while the word "fuck" was being repeatedly heard in a film broadcast six hours earlier. So what was this "language" that needed to be "edited" out for the wee hours?*

Of all the reviews above, the "Good Film and Video Guide" is the one which hits the button. The film's tag-line should have read – a story as stale as last year's gymshoes. That it later gave rise to the witless sitcom "**Please Sir**" is surely all the warning one needs.

It comes as something of a surprise to learn that this film is based on an autobiographical account. To be fair to Mr Braithwaite, it's probably safest to assume his book was far more honest and shrewd about East End culture and schools, because "**TO SIR WITH LOVE**" shows no indication of the least familiarity with either. I think he should have sued Clavell.

"**TO SIR WITH LOVE**" is nonetheless an interesting relic, not for what it tells us about the state of youth culture or state education in the late sixties, but for what it reveals about adult perceptions of both. It essays a damp liberal perspective on youth, but from a standpoint of almost breathtaking ignorance.

For a revealing contrast (or lack of it) in social perceptions, see the 1990s TV drama series "**The Head**", in which erstwhile zany black comic Lenny Henry plays the result-getting head of a deprived London school. By the 1990s black teachers were no longer such a novelty, women teachers outnumbered male colleagues by a ratio of nine to one, and the racial balance of pupils at a typical inner London school had been reversed completely – with token white children dotted about the classrooms. To what extent these changes were reflected in that series (let alone reflected upon) you must judge for yourselves.

See also "**BADKONAK-E SEFID**" and "**BASHU**" - both recent Iranian films, and subject index under **ARAB WORLD / MIDDLE EAST**.