

Tom's Midnight Garden

UK : 1998 : dir. Willard Carroll : Hyperion / Easton : 107 min
 prod: : scr: Willard Carroll : dir.ph.: Gavin Finney
Anthony Way; Florence Hoath; Nick Robinson; Rory Jennings
 Greta Scacchi; James Wilby; Joan Plowright; David Bradley; Liz Smith; Penelope Wilton;
 Nigel Le Vaillant

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Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"Just who writer/director Willard Carroll hoped would enjoy this is a mystery. Clocking in at a hundred-plus minutes, it is unlikely to sustain the interests of children, while adults are unlikely to see it as anything other than a twee fable. Singer Anthony Way stars as a teenager who, during a summer stay with his childless aunt and uncle, discovers that at midnight, the ugly area around the building turns into a magical garden inhabited by a lonely orphan from the previous century. Sadly the scenes between the children are unengaging, while the adults, including James Wilby and Greta Scacchi, add no lustre to a pretty, but overlong effort from a director who's no stranger to children's films. From the novel by Philippa Pearce. **"

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001"]

Radio Times listing:

"Fantasy adventure starring Great Scacchi and Anthony Way [*but not necessarily in that order*]. A 14-year old boy is sent to stay with his aunt and uncle, but is disappointed when there appears to be nowhere to play."

Cast:

Tom Long**Anthony Way**
 Hattie age 12**Florence Hoath**
 Aunt Gwen KitsonGreta Scacchi
 Uncle Alan KitsonJames Wilby
 Mrs BatholomewJoan Plowright
 Peter Long**Nick Robinson**
 AbelDavid Bradley
 Tom Long as an adultNigel Le Vaillant
 Aunt MelbournePenelope Wilson
 Mrs WillowsLiz Smith
 Young Henry**Rory Jennings**

The *Radio Times* review is unusually dense on this occasion. The film was quite obviously aimed at older children (predominantly girls, given its plotline), but with production values too high for it to be counted as a true "children's film", which makes it just a traditionally-minded British family film, yes? Like the previous year's "**FAIRYTALE: A TRUE STORY**" in fact.

As to its length, "**HOME ALONE 2**" (92) "clocked in" at 120 minutes, "**JUMANJI**" (95) at 104 minutes, and "**JUNGLE 2 JUNGLE**" (97) at 105 minutes, so the BBC wisdom that children (of the age all these films were aimed at) will not sit still for two hours is clearly disproven. The film is indeed a tad too long, but for its material, not the mental span of its audience.

At some unspecified period – the 1930s or 1950s, it's hard to tell – Tom Long is packed off to stay with Aunt Gwen and Uncle Alan when his younger brother Peter goes down with the measles. They live in a small converted flat in an old house where no children are living, and

even the temporary stay of an older one (Tom is 14 going on 16) is surplus to requirement. He's told at once the house has no garden, and running about in general is to be avoided. (If you must use the convenience," Uncle Alan points out cheerfully, "remember it isn't shameful for a young man to sit instead of stand." "It's quieter that way" Aunt Gwen agrees.

In the empty hallway stands an old grandfather clock transfixed to the wall. The first night Tom is intrigued to note that it strikes 13 at midnight. Investigating, he finds the hallway oddly furnished now, and a maidservant busying about. The back door now leads, not to a few communal dustbins, but a capacious garden, complete with an ornate maze. On subsequent nights Tom explores further, still in his pyjamas, finding that it's daylight outside, and children in old-style dress are playing there, but none of them see him, and with a little effort he can pass through gates without opening them.

He reports back on all these fascinating discoveries to his brother Peter by a relay of postcards, but makes no mention of it to his aunt and uncle, feigning sickness when the time comes for him to be returned home. Above all, he has struck up an acquaintance with one of the children in the garden, Hattie, who is obviously an unwanted ward of the house. She can see him quite plainly, and talks to him without any fear or apprehension. She takes him to be a ghost by his odd style of dress, he takes her to be the same from hers. A fast friendship develops, and Tom's waking thoughts are all consumed by his nocturnal somnambulations.

Several problems present themselves with the film before Tom has a chance to set foot in his garden. Choirboy Anthony Way (late of the 1995 TV serial **"The Choir"**) is evidently too old for the part as written, which seems to call for a boy of 9-11, while his voice is clearly breaking. Even granted that the story is supposedly set in period, before the phenomenon of "teenager" was ever coined, it does not ring true to see a boy his age almost clap his hands for joy at finding a garden to run in, or playing hide and seek with Hattie. Secondly, although a few old cars and radios are on hand, and Tom dresses in period shorts during daylight, the personal dynamics between him and Aunt Gwen or Uncle Alan are very 1990s – a habitual flaw in contemporary period reconstructions – so that the romantic distancing device does not work. Adults simply did not speak to children in the 1930s or 50s as they do today, and though kids watching this will not be aware of the anachronisms, adults will.

The story itself is an amalgam of ideas from **"The Chronicles of Narnia"**, **"THE AMAZING MR BLUNDEN"** and **"THE SECRET GARDEN"**, and as such more in step with the nostalgic impulses of parents, perhaps, than the sensibilities of modern kids, but it has its own charm, and throws in a couple of unexpected twists. The gardener in the Victorian household (a nice cameo from Dai Bradley, erstwhile hero of **"KES"**) can also see Tom, for example, though he pretends not to do so; Tom's brother Peter – throwing all logic to the winds – pops up himself during one nightly excursion outside the bounds of the garden, also in his pyjamas; Hattie ages steadily in the space between Tom's visits, and by the end is a young woman with fiancé in attendance – much to Tom's disgust and jealousy.

Top-billed Greta Scacchi has a thankless role as an ingratiating, child-hungry young aunt whose dialogue with Tom, given his actual physical age, comes across as cloying. (She talks to him as a 6-year old, the script requires a 10-year old, and the actor himself is 14/15.) Veteran character player Liz Smith grumbles below stairs as the neighbour who views Tom as a stampede-in-waiting, and Joan Plowright is her kindly matronly self as Mrs Bartholomew, who owns the house, and has a final surprise in store for Tom. Filmed on the Isle of Man, the garden itself is sumptuous and olde-worlde, but the fine photography is undermined slightly by an over-insistent romantic score, bellowing "enchantment" throughout, just as some nice spot effects, which show the past house melting into the present one each time Tom passes through the garden door, are spoilt by leaden sound "enhancements".

One final niggle on the period accuracy question – Hattie's three boy cousins in the garden – James, Hubert and Edgar – who exclude her from their games, are dressed in what I would

take to be Edwardian knickerbockers and cloth caps, yet these scenes take place in the 1870s or 1880s, simply adding to the confusing chronology. But these quibbles do not interfere too much with the storytelling and, although I suspect it worked better in the TV serial version which preceded it, this is a pleasant enough nostalgic children's romance, without too much interference from adults, or the feared cop-out that "it was all just a dream". I'm sure some children will be intrigued – time travel and hauntings are perennial themes in children's fiction – but it is their grandmothers who will be most vulnerable to being enchanted.

Anthony Way, still reasonably gorgeous several years after his choirboy prime, gives an adequate performance, but this is not the right film for him. Florence Hoath seems more comfortable as the 12-year old Hattie. She played Marushka, 7, in "**A PIN FOR THE BUTTERFLY**" (94), Flora in "**THE HAUNTING OF HELEN WALKER**" (95), and Elsie Wright in "**FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY**" (97). She shows definite quality. Rory Jennings had a small role in "**FATHERLAND**" as the son (+/-8) infected by Nazi eugenic philosophy. Nothing else is known of Nick Robinson, and the actors who played the other cousins are unknown.

See the BBC TV serial version, and subject index under **BEDTIME, BOY MEETS GIRL, GHOSTS & HAUNTINGS, HISTORY, ORPHANS / ADOPTION**, and under **SCIENCE FICTION** for the majority of time travel adventures.