

The Window

US : 1949 : dir. Ted Tetzlaff : RKO : 73 min
prod: Frederick Ullman : scr: Mel Dinelli : dir.ph.: William Steiner
[Bobby Driscoll](#)
Arthur Kennedy; Barbara Hale; Paul Stewart; Ruth Roman; Anthony Ross; Richard Benedict;
Jim Nolan; Ken Terrell; Lee Phelps

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*Would **you** buy a murder report from a face like this? Well of course you would – the child must always be believed – but children did not occupy the same lofty pedestal in 1949, and Tommy Woodry has his work cut out gaining credence from adults.*

Source: The Moving Picture Boy



*"Listen Jack, **you're** the one wearing glasses ! **My** eyesight is fine, and I know what I saw. Got it straight now?" Tommy gives the sceptical detective a piece of his mind. "Beat it, kid" replies the cop. Source: indeterminate*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Sleeper film less impressive now than in 1949; still good, with young Driscoll earning a special Academy Award for his performance as a little boy who witnesses a murder and is unable to convince his parents he's not lying. Parents' dialogue weakens credibility, but suspense still mounts; extremely well photographed (by William Steiner) and staged. Based on a story by Cornell Woolrich. Remade as **"THE BOY CRIED MURDER"** and **"CLOAK AND DAGGER"** (1984). ***"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A New York slum boy is always telling tall tales, so no-one believes him when he actually witnesses a murder... except the murderer. Classic little second feature, entertaining and suspenseful; unfortunately it had few successful imitators. *** "

"Logical, well-shaped, cohesive, admirably acted, beautifully photographed and cut to a nicety." – Richard Winnington

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"A boy (Bobby Driscoll) witnesses a murder but can't make anyone believe him. If the story has echoes of **"REAR WINDOW"**, that's hardly surprising because Cornell Woolrich wrote them both. Ted Tetzlaff is not as imaginative as Hitchcock, but he had obviously learned a lot from being Hitchcock's cinematographer on **"NOTORIOUS"** three years before. He turns in a very suspenseful, atmospheric thriller, with Driscoll outstanding in the lead. Frederick Knudtson's editing was Oscar-nominated. 6/10 "

Mixed:

"Although Tetzlaff's direction is not always as restrained as might be desired, there is no denying that his contribution looms large, for he has not permitted any of several increasingly harrowing incidents to spoil the full crushing force of the picture's climax."

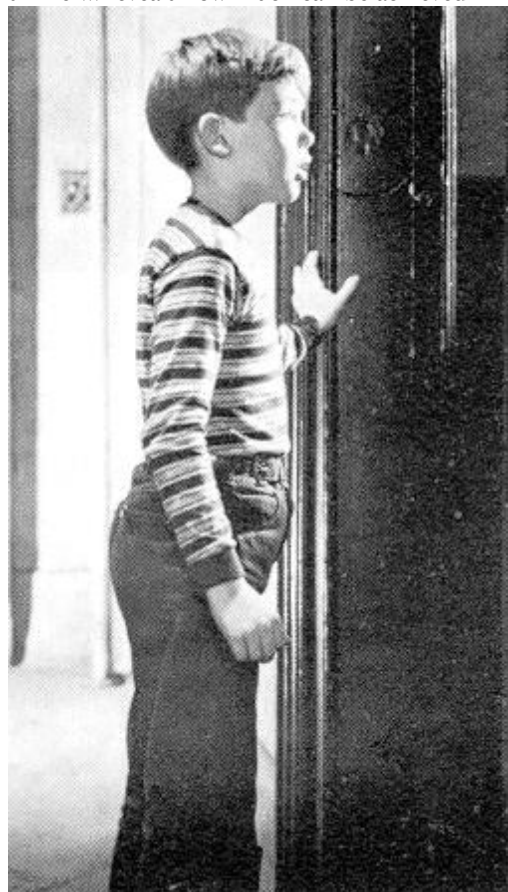
– New York Times

Pro:

"Starts rather slowly, but has a terrific impact once it gets started and never lets up until the fadeout... Very good."

- Charles J Lazarus, **Motion Picture Herald**

"Without the footage and star value of a great many other productions of its kind, this thriller... reveals how much can be achieved



"I spy with my little eye... something beginning with... R - if this were a Stephen King story..."

Source: A Pictorial History of the Talkies

with a genuinely original story and an enterprising and intelligent director... Bobby Driscoll gives an appealing and remarkably realistic performance." - **Today's Cinema**

"Much of the credit for this well-presented and wholly absorbing film is undoubtedly due to the splendid acting of young Bobby Driscoll."

- **MFB**

"This taut, tense story... is a must on any film-lover's list... Tetzlaff takes the pattern of the fire escape, scores of them, all lancing the screen with diagonals, for both his opening and closing shots... [The climax] is something new in thrills, a fitting nightmare culmination to a

nightmare story... Sorrow, not shock, is [its] trump card."

- R H Alder, **Amateur Cine World**

"Why **"THE WINDOW"** has not been rated as a first feature for West End showing is one of those mysteries which now and again surprise those engaged in film-sampling. There is more virtue - more life, excitement, interest and general feeling - in this obviously economically-made picture than in an average half-dozen star-laden offerings. All praise to the Academy for coming to the rescue and providing the opportunity for reviewing it. There are no star names attached to it, it is true, though it creates a new young star in 12-year old Bobby Driscoll."

- A E Wilson

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89

review:

"Child witnesses a murder, but no-one will believe him. Terrifically tense, suspenseful melodrama. Special Oscar, Driscoll. ***1/2 "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"This compelling thriller about a slum kid who witnesses a murder, but can't convince his parents about what he saw, is deftly executed and excruciatingly tense as the boy and murderer parry. Driscoll is excellent in the role of a boy who is often caught telling tales. And there are fine supporting performances by Arthur Kennedy, Ruth Roman, Barbara Hale and Paul Stewart. The photography of William Steiner sets the mood and tempo of the story. *** "

Those Endearing Young Charms still caption:

"A boy who loves to fib witnesses a murder, but can get no-one to believe him. In this scene from the picture Ruth Roman peers in on the boy who is the sole witness of the murder that she and her husband committed."

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A superior RKO B-thriller variant on the boy who cried wolf fable, adapted from a short story by Cornell Woolrich. Driscoll is the kid who, from the fire escape one hot night, witnesses the couple in the apartment above killing a

drunken seaman, only to have no-one believe his story since they're all so used to his lying ways¹. Thrills begin when the culprits (Stewart and Roman) realise he knows the truth and decide to ensure his silence. Pleasingly performed and shot, the film benefits from its evocative creation of the grimy New York tenements as a claustrophobic haven of crime and paranoia. Taut and gripping."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"This chilling drama about a young boy who witnesses a murder and finds himself unable to convince any authority figures of what he has seen is one of the classic nightmare films of the post-war period. Bobby Driscoll (who earned a special Academy Award for this film) is kidnapped by the murders and the film becomes one taut encounter after another. ***1/2 "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"Set in the tenement section of New York's Lower East Side, this incredibly tense nail-biter stars Driscoll as a young boy who has a habit of crying wolf. One night, while trying to beat the heat by making his bed on the fire escape, he climbs up to the next floor and sees Stewart and Roman murder a drunken seaman, Benedict. Of course, no-one, not even the boy's parents (Kennedy and Hale), believes Driscoll when he tells what he has seen, since they all assume that this is just another of the boy's tales. Danger lurks.

Based on a story by Cornell Woolrich (whose writing was also the basis for Hitchcock's similar "REAR WINDOW"), "THE WINDOW" presents a frightening vision of helplessness, vividly conveying childish frustration at being dismissed or ignored by one's parents. Director and one-time cameraman Tetzlaff adroitly injects a maximum of suspense into the film, enabling the audience to identify with Driscoll's predicament and, interestingly, to view his parents as evil, almost as evil as the murderers themselves.²

¹ Or his fantasising – for those who don't hate children

² Utter nonsense. Neither the script nor Driscoll's character takes that view of his parents. Even the killers upstairs are conveyed, not as "evil", but as cunning and dangerous.

Having photographed Hitchcock's "NOTORIOUS" just three years before, Tetzlaff had, without a shadow of a doubt, learned something of his suspense-building craft from the master of that art (as did just about every working director). By casting the 12-year old Driscoll, star of such heart-warming Disney pictures as "SONG OF THE SOUTH" and "SO DEAR TO MY HEART", Tetzlaff was able to twist the idyllic Disney image of childhood into a nightmare world of death and violence, in which parents and neighbours are the child's worst fears come true.

Adding to the film's effect is the on-location photography and the dark ambience of the tenements, where evil and death seem to lurk in every shadow³, where the seaman's corpse is found, and where the pursued boy is nearly killed. (In a perverse twist of fate, it was in an abandoned, crumbling, New York City tenement that actor Driscoll was found dead some 20 years later, the victim of an apparent drug overdose.) "THE WINDOW", which cost only \$210,000 to produce and made many times that at the box office, was voted the Best Mystery Film of the Year by the Mystery Writers of America. Editor Knudtson was nominated for an Academy Award, while Driscoll was named Outstanding Juvenile Actor and given a miniature statuette. An exceptional film. ***** "

[no listing in "The Good Film and Video Guide", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Variety Movie Guide 1993"]

Radio Times review:

"This superior B-movie, based on Cornell Woolrich's short novel "The Boy Cried Murder", is about a youngster (the excellent Bobby Driscoll) who witnesses a killing but can't get anyone to take him seriously because he has a reputation for telling tales. Despite its age-old plot⁴, the film made a huge impression on audiences of the day, and has been relentlessly imitated ever since. **** "

³ Perhaps you should go and have a lie down?

⁴ Yes? Can you name **one** film prior to 1939 which used that plot?

"Thriller. Tommy, a small boy with an overactive imagination [sic], cries "wolf" once too often, so when he witnesses a murder no-one believes him. And soon the ten-year old is at the mercy of the killers. **** "

"Not a lot of people know that... Bobby Driscoll, the child star of the 1949 thriller **"THE WINDOW"**, was awarded an honorary miniature Oscar as the outstanding juvenile

actor of that year. He was also the model for – and voice of – Disney's **"PETER PAN"**."

What's On TV notes:

"Thriller. A 10-year old boy witnesses a murder but no-one believes his story. With Bobby Driscoll. **** "



*The climax of the film has Paul Stewart stalking Bobby in the shell of an adjacent tenement building. It was imitated in many later films, not least **"THE YELLOW BALLOON"**, with an equally strong performance from Andrew Ray. But children in such predicaments very rarely come to harm in the cinema, and that awareness defuses much of the tension, however well constructed. Driscoll, cast as 9, was actually 11 or 12 when the film was shot, but a very diminutive 11 or 12 certainly.*

Source: A Pictorial History of the Talkies

"Thriller about a young murder witness in peril. Stars Bobby Driscoll. **** "

Cast:

Tommy Woodry**Bobby Driscoll**
Mrs Woodry**Barbara Hale**
Mr Woodry**Arthur Kennedy**
Mr Kellerton**Paul Stewart**
Mrs Kellerton**Ruth Roman**
Ross**Anthony Ross**
Drunken seaman**Richard Benedict**
Stranger on street**Jim Nolan**
Man**Ken Terrell**

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Driscoll:

"Bobby Driscoll, finally one of the most tragic of screen children, seemed to have everything going for him. He was pleasant-looking, alert, plucky, intelligent, with a sense of humour and great acting talent. He had all the chances a kid

actor could have wished, and took them beautifully. And his was a face the camera loved, alive with fleeting shadows and nuances.

His mother, born Isabella Kretz, was a school-teacher. His father, Cletus Driscoll, was a roofing contractor whose sinus trouble caused him to move from Iowa to California in search of warmth and sunshine. A friend in Pasadena, where they came to live in 1942, arranged for Bobby to attend a studio audition, and he was given a tiny part in **"LOST ANGEL"**. Even this was enough for people to notice something fresh and special about him, and he was signed up by 20th-Century Fox.

His early films included **"IDENTITY UNKNOWN"**, a title that was to prove ominous. He went on to win Critics' Awards for his performances in **"SONG OF THE SOUTH"** (a semi-animated Disney, based on the "Uncle Remus" stories), **"SO DEAR TO MY HEART"** (boy and black lamb) and **"THE WINDOW"** (cry-wolf tale of a child who witnesses a murder

but is not believed) - all these made before he was twelve. He was equally endearing in grubby denims or in velvet and lace.

He went on to play Jim Hawkins to the legendary, eye-rolling Long John Silver of Robert Newton, though this was one of his less interesting efforts, perhaps cowed by the magnificent ham of his companion. And, at 15, he was the voice of Disney's **"PETER PAN"**.

In his mid teens, Driscoll was still a handsome fellow, but the ground was crumbling under his feet. Suddenly Walt Disney had no further plans for him, nor did anyone else. For the next five years the only job he got was in a Colonial-period piece called **"THE SCAR-LET COAT"** (55). In 1956 he got married - and was arrested on a narcotics charge, which was to be the first of many. In 1958 came his last movie, a teenage gang melodrama called **"THE PARTY CRASHERS"**. His lead in this mediocre affair wasn't among his happiest. The year after, Bobby was jailed as a heroin addict. Then came a curious incident with a handgun, a robbery charge, and a six-month jail

sentence for drugs and forgery. In his statement to the court he said he had been experimenting with drugs since he was 17, and at the time had the money to pay for it. Now he was hooked and broke.

The last five years of Bobby Driscoll's life are a sad blur of addiction, mostly spent in hippie circles of New York's Lower East Side. His family and friends lost sight of him for ever. In March 1968 a young man's body was found by some children playing in an empty tenement. There was no identification, but there were needle marks and there were "certain substances" in what was left of the bloodstream. The body went into a pauper's grave.

When, a year or so later, Bobby's mother renewed her appeals to the FBI to find her missing son, the unidentified man's fingerprints were among those compared with Bobby's. They were a perfect match, and so the mystery was solved - just after his father's death."

I don't recollect how things turned out for the boy in Aesop's original fable, but in every film I can recall which has touched the same nerve the boy has emerged, relatively unscathed, from his critical shortfall in social credibility. There is one exception, and that only because the boy is an incidental character in the film. **"INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS"** (55) begins with a young boy (Bobby Clark) pleading for belief that his parents are not his parents. A short while later, we find that he has abandoned all that nonsense and settled down like a good boy. He at least did not survive his crisis of disbelief, but the plot trajectory of even a good Hollywood thriller, such as this one, would never permit a central child character to come to grief. This background awareness - that the hero, being a young child, cannot possibly come to real harm - undermines somewhat the tension director Tetzlaff constructs so cleverly.

His development of the situation, by tiny plausible increments, is better than in any subsequent boy-who-cried-wolf film (**"EYEWITNESS"** with Mark Lester for example, or **"CLOAK AND DAGGER"** with Henry Thomas), and the predominance of night shooting adds greatly to the sense of the boy's isolation from his community. There is one small touch, for example, certainly worthy of Hitchcock at his best. Tommy has been locked in his bedroom while his father is working at night and his mother away visiting a sick sister. The neighbours creep down to his flat in the wee hours. Tommy, desperate to escape, uses a coathanger to push the key from his bedroom door and tries to hook it through under the door, not realising that Mr Kellerton is standing on the other side of that door, watching it all with a wry smile. Finally the man lifts up the key and places it neatly in the coathanger to help him. Some while later, the Kellertons bundle Tommy into a taxi after he has momentarily evaded them. Frantic, he hails a policeman when the cab halts at a red light, but the policeman naturally assumes the couple are his parents, and when they explain that the boy is on his way to a good sound spanking, he reassures Tommy that a hiding never did any kid any harm. Back safely in their own flat, Mr Kellerton, having knocked Tommy (as he thinks) unconscious, perches him carefully on the rail of the fifth floor fire escape and stands back to let him fall.

Tommy weaves and teeters for a few moments, but is not unconscious after all, and makes good his escape when Mrs Kellerton tries to rescue him (not quite so “evil” then).

Well-constructed as it is, however, there are a few problems with the plotting. Firstly, since the audience themselves witness the murder in progress (all done and dusted in the first ten minutes), no ambiguity remains that Tommy may indeed be fantasising, or remembering a nightmare, or simply misconstruing what he saw. This device flatters the audience, it rescues them from the embarrassment of siding with his parents’ natural disbelief. They’re not left to judge the credibility of the boy’s story on its own merit. The audience are made “honorary children”, and yet the film does not *quite* tell the story through Tommy’s eyes, or shoot the scenes from a child’s eye level. Dramatic irony perhaps, but I would have postponed the realisation that his story was true as long as possible.

Secondly, and all the subsequent films have made the same error, Tommy is not sufficiently established as a notorious teller of “stretchers”. This was for reasons of brevity, obviously (73 minutes is brief even by modern TV movie standards). At the start we see him telling some other boys that his father owns a ranch in Texas “Somewhere near Dodge City, wherever that is”, and the family will be moving out there just as soon as all the indians have been killed off. This news quickly gets back to the concierge of their tenement block, who arrives at the family apartment that evening to show prospective new tenants around. The murder in the flat upstairs occurs the very same night. But we have not sufficiently accepted Tommy as an inveterate fantasist to understand his parents brushing off his urgent pleas for belief. We’re just asked to take it as read that he has a long history of yarn-spinning, and that’s a tenuous foundation, since so much of the plot rests upon it.

Thirdly, flowing directly from the above, the boy’s parents display almost supernatural patience with their stubborn, insistent 9-year old. For all the warnings of punishment and hairbrushes, the most they actually do is promise to take him to a psychiatrist (rather implausibly for a tenement-dwelling family). The scriptwriter, one assumes, felt uneasy at letting the parents punish the boy when the audience know him to be telling the truth. Tommy’s parents are shown to be in the wrong for mistrusting him, but not so much in the wrong as to spank him for sticking so doggedly to the truth. If the Virgin critic’s comments had been well-founded, and the film were siding wholly with the child’s sense of injustice, this would not have been so assiduously side-stepped. If he had selfish, inattentive parents then his stories would simply have been ignored, but in fact Tommy’s parents do anything but ignore him. They’re shown to be deeply concerned at his waywardness, perhaps unfeasibly attentive and solicitous. The overwhelming majority of the film’s audience would be parents themselves, so it’s not too surprising that Tommy’s folks escape serious censure from the script and director.

[Bobby Driscoll](#), released for this film “by special arrangement with Disney”, gives it his all and is certainly cute as a button. Indeed, he’s a little too wide-eyed and well-mannered for the shabby New York ghetto where the story is set, but that’s a question of casting, and takes nothing away from his energetic performance. One wonders whether he relished the opportunity, at 11, to play a role less steeped in molasses and sunshine than “**SONG OF THE SOUTH**” or “**SO DEAR TO MY HEART**”. More likely it was all one to Bobby, and the kudos he attracted for this performance would have come as a puzzle to him. Other children have portrayed fear and anguish more convincingly, but he’s so delightful no-one would begrudge him his mini-Oscar.

All reservations aside, “**THE WINDOW**” is still a taut, economical teaser of a film, and a seminal telling of the boy-who-cried-wolf theme. Driscoll is centre stage throughout, which one could not say of most of his films for Disney, and the film is disarmingly honest about the prevailing adult attitude to children, or small boys at any rate. It stands in very stark contrast to today’s sham respectfulness toward kids, the total abnegation of authority and guidance which has created a profound moral vacuum. And despite which, today’s children enjoy far less freedom and independence than Tommy in this film, scampering over the rooftops and

sleeping in the heatwave on the communal fire escape. Modern parents will hit the panic button at the first report from their children of rum goings-on in the neighbourhood, but this does not mean their children are any better respected, any better raised, or any more secure emotionally. It is an index of social paranoia, and nothing else. **"THE WINDOW"** may look dated from where we are now, but so all too often does common sense. For its quiet skilfulness, adroit plot development, and for Driscoll's bright-eyed charm, ***recommended.***

See also **"CLOAK AND DAGGER"**, **"[EYEWITNESS](#)"**, **"THE YELLOW BALLOON"** and subject index under **EYEWITNESSES TO MURDER / BOY-WHO-CRIED-WOLF, [KIDNAPPING](#), [OSCAR WINNERS / AWARD WINNERS](#)** and **RECOMMENDED TITLES.**