

After the Promise

US TV : 1987 : dir. David Greene : New World : 100 min
 prod: Tamara Asseyev : scr: Robert Lenski : dir.ph.:
Chance Michael Corbin; Ryan Francis; Donnie Jeffcoat; Ryan Heavenor; Mark Hildreth;
Trey Ames; Richard Billingsley; Meghan Ramsey
 Mark Harmon; Diana Scarwid; Rosemary Dunsmore; Dunnelly Rhodes; Adrien Dorval;
 Janet Wright; Pat Bermel; Bill Buck; Michele Goodger

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ♀ Z ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5137	2½	3	0	1,786	7 7 7 7 7	No	Oct 2000

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

“Surprisingly effective drama about an itinerant Depression-era carpenter’s long struggle to regain custody of his four sons, who were institutionalised after their mother’s death. Robert Lenski scripted from Sebastian Milito’s story, based on actual events. **Above Average**”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“An uneducated labourer (Mark Harmon) loses custody of his sons following the death of his ailing wife. His efforts to get them back lead him down a road of red tape, through courtrooms, orphanages and hospitals. Shamelessly maudlin and predictable TV movie. ** ”

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film

Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

“A refreshingly gritty made-for-TV drama, set against the backdrop of the Depression. Mark Harmon ditches his pretty-boy image to play an unschooled worker battling bureaucracy in an attempt to be reunited with his children, who have been taken into care [sic] following the death of his wife. Harmon is admirably restrained in the lead role and there is effective support from the likes of Diana Scarwid and Mark Hildreth. Edited [sic] for language and contains some violence. *** ”

“Depression-era drama, based on a true story, starring Mark Harmon. Following the death of his wife, an itinerant carpenter is judged to be an unfit father and his four sons are taken into custody. Over the years that follow he must struggle to reunite his family. *** ”

The expression “taken into care” has a deeply repellent ring after viewing a story like this. It purports (don’t they all?) to be “based” on true events, but if the family history recorded here even approximates to truth it makes for a horrific indictment of the social services and their institutional prejudice against working class parents, but working class fathers especially.

“**AFTER THE PROMISE**” is a kidnap drama, where the kidnappers are the state. And don’t be deterred by that emetic US TV movie title - as Maltin says, this is a grittier, more uncompromising wodge of TV angst than most, suitably drab and down-at-heel for its Depression-era setting. Whoever New World Productions may be, one senses an agenda at

work in this furious tirade against the social work establishment (and not, one might think, before time!). Scriptwriter Robert Lenski may be discreetly locating his tract in the 1930s, but the social attitudes and sensibilities on display are unmistakably those of the 1980s.

Carpenter Elmer Jackson's wife, whose christian fundamentalist views compel her to "accept god's will" and refuse medical treatment despite the pleadings of her husband, dies accordingly of peritonitis. Faced with the funeral costs and the task of raising their four small sons alone, Jackson approaches the Welfare Office for financial assistance. The woman who deals with his claim rejects it out of hand, is hostile from the get-go to a man raising his own sons alone - particularly since he "denied" his wife medical assistance - and suggests the boys be put up for "fostering" (ie: given to another woman). He asks if some young girl could be provided to mind the boys while he's at work. She retorts that "a young girl" would certainly be out of the question. Here we are in the 1930s, with our social worker presumption of the male "predator"...

A woman *is* provided to sit for him while he's at work, but she is a slut who locks the boys out of their own house while she fornicates with passers-by. Outraged, Jackson slings her out of his home, but she goes immediately to the Welfare Office to report him. "We had no intention of subjecting you to *abuse*" apologises the case worker. Here we are again, back in the 1930s, talking in terms no-one ever dreamed of then. Of course, the (female) social worker believes the (female) "victim" without any corroboration, and on this pretext obtains a court order to steal the boys - or "take them into protective custody" - while their father's at work. Already you see what I mean about a tacit agenda at work in the story. The boys are taken, not to some state children's home, but a hospital lock-up, where Jackson tries unsuccessfully to break them out. The four boys - Richard, Wayne, Ellis and Raymond - are made wards of court and fostered out, their father denied visiting rights until they have "settled in".

Nine months later, and the state grants Jackson permission to visit his boys. They plead with him to take them home again, and without a second thought he bundles them into his car and drives off. But he hasn't gone five miles before a police car overtakes him, he's beaten up and arrested for kidnapping. If this seems a tad over the top, you ain't heard nothing yet. Another court forbids Jackson to attempt any contact with his sons, and that same Welfare Office woman now drives the boys in person to a full-blown Dickensian workhouse - the "Sykes Home for Mentally Retarded Boys", presided over by a female dominatrix and her Neanderthal son with much brandishing of butterbats.

Two years pass. The brothers run away but are quickly rounded up by police and returned to Madame Sykes. Richard, the eldest, has his leg broken to discourage further attempts, and is placed in a state mental hospital. Wayne is marched off - in leg-irons, mind you - to work on some prison quarry at the age of ten or so. Meantime dad has seriously hit the skids, but a chance meeting with a woman in a diner (Rosemary Dunsmore) forces him to take stock of his life, he tentatively asks her out, and within days the couple are married. He smartens himself up and applies to the Welfare Office for return of his sons. He finds himself confronted by the selfsame woman, who says he doesn't have the income or accommodation to support four boys, has a history of violence, has neglected them for years, etc etc. She also happens to be on the board of the state mental hospital where Richard is incarcerated, and is keenly involved in arrangements for his "sterilisation" at the appointed age.

As one would expect of a TV movie, remarriage signals light at the end of the tunnel for Jackson. He builds himself a new house, engages a lawyer to file for custody of the boys and, yes, succeeds in re-uniting his family in time for the end credits. But it is by no means the sort of happy ending which obliterates what has gone before. By the time they're returned to him, Wayne has developed a pronounced stutter, Ellis is deeply embittered and turned to pilfering, while Richard has been duly castrated by the state. Jackson has his family back, but each of them irreparably scarred - the Welfare Services have "taken care" of them.

Seldom before have I seen such a searing indictment of institutional cruelty and callous manipulation of the law against the interests of the individual. But more than that, this film touches on the explicit anti-male prejudices of a female-dominated social work establishment. As Jackson is made to protest to his new fiancée – “They look at a child with no mother as if they’re deformed. Fathers? We don’t count. We’re not supposed to know anything about raising children”. And the one sympathetic face Richard encounters at the lunatic asylum, the one who works for his eventual release, is a male: Dr Northfield (Donnelly Rhodes).

There are problems with the film of course. Mark Harmon is too much the matinee idol for the illiterate, quick-tempered 1930s man he portrays. He is clothed in the radiant glow of a Victim of Injustice. When, towards the end, he’s provoked to give Ellis a slap on the face (Ellis has just told him flatly “You’re not my real father”) he’s immediately overcome with shame and remorse for it. Not, mind you, because of the years of cruelty the boy has already sustained from the authorities, but because good parents simply do not slap their children. Here again, we have the sensibilities of the 1980s intruding on a scene fifty years before. Jackson has remarried of course, and in that sense, by providing a woman in his home to mother the boys, he has acceded to the social presumption that men cannot be entrusted with the job alone.

But more than all of these, the chief criticism of the film is that it interprets the story wholly from the position of the “wronged parent”. We see nothing at all of the years of cruelty and maltreatment meted out to the four sons, and their suffering is almost an adjunct to the suffering of their father. The film is at base about a father’s right to the custody of his sons, when the real horror lies in the experiences of the boys themselves under the mighty auspices of the “child protection” mafia.

Nevertheless, for an American TV movie it is uncommonly forthright and bleak, avoiding the obvious pitfalls of full-blown melodrama. And what a refreshing change it makes to see women identified as the “perpetrators” of systematic “child abuse”. One recognises that they have always played their part in cruelty to children, but that involvement has always been understated in cinema, firstly from deference to male presumptions about “the fairer sex”, and now in deference to female presumptions that women are by nature “the nurturers”. One falsehood has merely been supplanted by the other, and it is the same falsehood. Only the gender in ascendancy has changed. Merely as a rare glimpse of the other side of the coin, then, ***Recommended***.

Chance Michael Corbin (or Corbitt?) appeared the same year as the vampire waif in Joel Schumacher’s hit-and-miss teen horror comedy “**THE LOST BOYS**”. Nothing else is known of the other boy players. Meghan Ramsey plays their new half-sister, Melissa.

See subject index under **CRUELTY / NEGLECT / MALTREATMENT, DEPRESSION ERA (1930s settings), DIVORCE / CUSTODY BATTLES, KIDNAPPING, POLICE / SOCIAL WORKERS, PRISON / BORSTALS, RECOMMENDED TITLES** and **RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS**.