

The Battle of the Villa Fiorita

(US = "Affair of the Villa Fiorita")

UK : 1964 : dir. Delmar Daves : Warner Bros

: 111 min

prod: Delmer Daves : scr: Delmer Daves : dir.ph.: Oswald Morris

Martin Stephens; Elizabeth Dear; Olivia Hussey [d]

Maureen O'Hara; Rossano Brazzi; Richard Todd; Phyllis Calvert; Maxine Audley;

Ursula Jeans; Finlay Currie; Richard Wattis; Ettore Manni; Clelia Matania; Rosi di Pietro

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	□	≠	Z	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Rossano Brazzi consoles Elizabeth Dear, his intended stepdaughter, while her mother Maureen O'Hara and brother Martin Stephens look on with, as they say, mixed feelings. Source: Warner Bros Story

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"Unconvincing soaper with O'Hara running off to Italy to carry on with widower Brazzi; predictable interference from each's children. Shot in Panavision. **½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Two children aim to break up their mother's romance with an Italian concert pianist. Quite lively, old-fashioned, romantic comedy-drama largely set in a splendid Mediterranean villa; happy ending never in doubt. Scr: Delmer Daves, from a novel by Rumer Godden."

Movies on TV (1987) review:

"When their mother runs off with her lover her children try to get her back with pater. ** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on
Television review:

"One of those sickly dramas about children of divorcing couple screwing up the proceedings. Delmer Daves directed Maureen O'Hara, Rossano Brazzi, Richard Todd, Phyllis Calvert in 1965¹ 77 "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Lushly silly soap opera about a diplomat's wife who runs off to romantic Italy with a widowed concert pianist. Even Daves and his swooping crane can do nothing to stem the tiresomeness when the children of both parties turn up to do battle for respectability."

¹ Which of those played the children?

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“ **"THE BATTLE OF THE VILLA FIORITA"** is a beautifully photographed and well-mounted Delmer Daves production which falls short artistically by switching gears. Daves' script (from Rumer Godden's novel) propels Maureen O'Hara into an affair with Italian composer Rossano Brazzi when the latter attends an English tunefest during one of hubby Richard Todd's frequent absences from home. The lovers hie to an Italian villa and set up housekeeping before her divorce action jells.

At this point the concept shifts to attempts by her kids (Martin Stephens and Elizabeth Dear) to break it up, joined later by Brazzi's moppet [sic], Olivia Hussey. The idea is played for laffs, from juves' trek from England through hunger strikes, faked illness and other gambits. O'Hara looks appropriately shook up but the script does not permit much acting. Brazzi projects very well as lover, father and foil. Phyllis Calvert is on for seconds as a gossipy English lady."

The Warner Bros Story review:

“ **"THE BATTLE OF THE VILLA FIORITA"**, written by Delmer Daves from the novel by Rumer Godden, had Maureen O'Hara abandoning husband Richard Todd for suave widower Rossano Brazzi, much to the chagrin of the respective parties' children who do their best to wreck the romance. With its lush Italian Riviera settings, an appropriately splashy music score by Mischa Spoliansky, and the soap opera nature of the story, it aimed for the tear-ducts of the ladies in the audience², unleashing floods of emotion wherever it was shown. English actors and actresses dominated the cast - Phyllis Calvert appeared as an old gossip, Ursula Jeans played an interfering neighbour, and other roles went to Maxine Audley, Richard Wattis, Finlay Currie and, as the children, Martin Stephens, Elizabeth Dear and Olivia Hussey. It was produced and directed by Delmer Daves and photographed in Technicolor and Panavision."

² or "women", as we say in English

[no listing in "'The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Shamelessly emulating the glossy soap-opera style of Douglas Sirk, writer/director Delmer Daves makes the most of the gorgeous Italian scenery, as runaway wife Maureen O'Hara and her composer lover Rossano Brazzi are dogged by the disapproval of her children. **"

"Romance starring Maureen O'Hara. When their mother runs off to Italy with another man, Michael and Debby decide it is up to them to get her back. **"

What's On TV note:

"Romantic drama starring Maureen O'Hara. **"

Sunday Times note:

"A woman flees to Italy to be with her lover³."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Stephens:

"Martin Angel Keller - with a middle name like that, it's ironic that he became famous for playing evil children - initially appeared before the camera as a commercial model, before acting (as Martin Keller) in the refugee drama **"THE DIVIDED HEART"**. He was the younger version of Michel Ray's "Toni". After this, and a lapse of some years, he became Stephens. Martin had an alert, intelligent little face which was capable of being funny or mischievous. He was demure and touching in films like **"THE WITNESS"**, where he was threatened by crooks and exploited by police, and amused everyone as crafty Sigismond, the child of Deborah Kerr and aristocrat Rossano Brazzi in **"COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS"**.

³ flees from what?

It was only as the leader of the mysteriously-spawned alien children of "**THE VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED**" - sporting a loathsome



Olivia Hussey starts her screen career as she means to go on – in pert swimwear, or parked across the knees of Rossano Brazzi to have her bottom smacked in frilly white knickers. Martin Stephens and Elizabeth Dear sit tight and devoutly hope to avoid a similar indignity. Such was the classic payoff to childhood insurrections since the time of *"Our Gang"*. Perhaps it finally began to dawn on film-makers that such scenes of "wholesome family discipline", captured on film, became a covertly erotic spectator sport. Source: indeterminate website



After Donna meets her Waterloo, Debby (Elizabeth Dear) narrowly escapes a dose of the same medicine by throwing up over Brazzi. Rushing upstairs, she commiserates with Donna. "I bet your bottom must be *really* red!" she gurgles in anticipation, "Can I have a look..?" Donna nods, and allows her survey the scars of battle. "Woww!" Debby coos appreciatively. The scene clearly predates ideas that such childhood experiences must result in lifelong trauma.

Source: indeterminate website

bleached coiffure and luminescent eyes - that he joined the ranks of hell, consolidating his status with his chilling Miles in Henry James's "Turn of the Screw", filmed as "**THE INNOCENTS**". By this time the icy look was second nature. He was saved from further creepies by taking over from Keith Hamshire in the title rôle of Lionel Bart's "Oliver!" on the London stage in 1961.

He re-appeared in his mid-teens in two more films: "**THE BATTLE OF THE VILLA FIORITA**" and "**LE STREGHE**" (Italy/France '66). But finally he quit show business and became a lawyer."

An insufferable Peg's Paper romance with neither humour, torrid passion nor effective use of glamorous locations to alleviate the tedium. Brazzi is the only one among the key players to sustain credibility for a moment, while the dialogue, particularly in the early "romantic" interludes, verges on the hilarious. British cinema was simply never able to convey sensual indulgence or reckless passion, and any film which tried for more than the polite courtship of "**BRIEF ENCOUNTER**" rapidly came unstuck. The same flaw runs as a wide seam through archive titles such as "**OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS**" or even "**THE SPANISH GARDENER**" and "**SAMMY GOING SOUTH**", where Brits in hot climates are suddenly exposed to the turbulence of their emotions, but British directors prove quite unequal to the task of conveying those emotions.

Michael (Martin Stephens) and Debby (Elizabeth Dear), aghast at the prospect of moving to a London flat with their distant, decent father (Richard Todd, in a small and thankless rôle) resolve to pursue mama to her Italian love-nest and put a stop to her nonsense. In order to raise the fare, Debby is obliged to sell Topaze, a pony she's won in a girls' magazine competition. On arrival Michael is laid low by the horrors of Italian cooking, preventing the children being packed off back home to dad by the first plane. Brazzi's 12-year old daughter Donna (Olivia Hussey, in her debut appearance) soon joins them there, and the two girls decide on a hunger-strike as the best means of bringing their parents to their senses. This defiance eventually culminates in Brazzi taking Hussey over his knee for some parental guidance, Italian style, which deeply shocks O'Hara. The next day Debby (who is not a Catholic) unburdens her soul of the whole dilemma to a local Catholic priest, who denounces the negligence of the sinful parents. A showdown ensues, to the suitable accompaniment of a Mediterranean thunderstorm, with Brazzi and O'Hara announcing they are leaving the children. Michael and Donna (who have by now exchanged a chaste kiss or two) pre-empt them by fleeing into the night on a small sailing boat. They are rescued from the storm, but the trauma proves too much for romance, and O'Hara promises Michael she'll be returning with him and Debby to her patient and doubtless understanding husband. Decorum is duly restored. A mother's place is in the home after all.

Martin Stephens, here 16, makes a fairly obnoxious little prig as Michael, and is lumbered with some particularly indigestible lines: (to his sister) "My god, child, what are you thinking about?", and (viz her pony) "For people it is much better not to try to think what animals must be thinking". Although he is most indignant of all at his mother's unseemly carryings on, Michael inexplicably shrugs off the crisis and spends his time sailing, leaving the two girls to

make their spirited stand alone. In the same slapdash fashion, the script has Brazzi march Debby to the airport to send her home in advance of her brother, and she is so disapproving of him that she won't utter a word. But - what do you know! - she has inadvertently forgotten her passport, and when he accepts the situation without a hint of suspicion she suddenly runs to hug him, and spends the next scene or two escorting him happily hand in hand. When Donna arrives on the scene she is haughty and disdainful of the younger English girl, but come next morning the two of them are dashing out giggling for a dip in the Med like lifelong friends. These flat contradictions in the motivations of the children are no expression of dramatic subtlety, but reveal a complete inability to identify with their psychology.

Stephens' performance here, as in "**THE HELLFIRE CLUB**", or "**THE INNOCENTS**", is frightfully stiff and pucker, and the best one could say of him is that he was undeniably British. Coincidentally, he had played Brazzi's own son five years earlier in "**COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS**". Holmstrom suggests he was more entertaining in that title, and some of his earlier roles, but to date I have only found him acceptable as the emotionless David in "**VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED**", a part which did not put too much of a strain on his acting abilities. Argentinian-born Olivia Hussey, 13, steals most of the scenes involving the children, and has more spark than in her celebrated appearance in Zeffirelli's "**ROMEO AND JULIET**" (68). She was also seen in "**CUP FEVER**" (65), "**ALL THE RIGHT NOISES**" (69) and "**SUMMERTIME KILLER**" (72). Nothing else is known of Elizabeth Dear.

The one sensible line to occur in "**THE BATTLE OF THE VILLA FIORITA**" comes when Brazzi is remonstrating with O'Hara about her over-solicitude to the feelings of her kids: "We don't own our kids," he says, "and even more important, they don't own us." Unfortunately, the story's resolution rather gives the lie to that credo, with both errant parents smartly brought to heel. But by parental solicitude, and not through the machinations of the kids themselves. No doubt if Michael and Debby had lined up for a spanking across Brazzi's knees with Donna (Debby evades it by throwing up over him), the whole situation could have been resolved more to the parents' liking. "Do your children perpetually have to vomit?" Brazzi declares in extremis. See this film and you'll have to agree – the kids may not be any great shakes as actors, but what critics!

See subject index under **MATCHMAKER KIDS / MATCHBREAKER KIDS** for other titles in the same vein, and under **RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS**.