

The Big Fella

UK : 1937 : dir. J. Elder Wills : British Lion / Fortune : 73 min
 prod: H. Fraser Passmore : scr: Fenn Sherie & Ingram d'Abbes : dir.ph.: Cyril Bristow
[Eldon Grant \(= Eldon Gorst\)](#)
 Paul Robeson; Elizabeth Welch; Roy Emerton; Marcelle Røgez; James Hayter

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	≠	M	⊗	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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*This boy was **fifteen?** They sure don't make them like **that** anymore!*

Source: The Moving Picture Boy

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"In Marseilles, a black man returns a lost child to his English parents. Pleasant light vehicle with the star in typical easy form. From the novel "Banjo" by Claude McKay. * "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Sentimental tosh leavened only by the easy-going acting and powerful singing of its star. Robeson plays a Marseilles layabout hired by a wealthy English couple to find their missing son; when he finally discovers the boy's where-

abouts the latter prefers to stay with Robeson rather than return to Mater and Pater. A comedy drama that fails to tug the heartstrings or tickle the funnybone.¹ "

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Gorst:

"His father – a remarkable personality with a passionate sense of justice – had begun adult life as an actor, but marriage convinced him of the need for a more reliable income and he

¹ *Time Out* identifies the boy as "Eldon Grant", and Halliwell doesn't even trouble to name him at all.

entered the consular service: thus it was that Eldon was born in Holland.



Biff! Robeson proves no match for the feisty Gorst
Source: NFT Bulletin

After some stage experience in England - "A Midsummer Night's Dream", "Where the Rainbow Ends" - he was chosen to play Tom Tulliver (James Mason) as a boy in **"THE MILL ON THE FLOSS"**, and then got a leading part in **"THE BIG FELLA"**, as a genteel runaway who is given shelter by a friendly black seaman (Paul Robeson).

Eldon - billed as "Eldon Grant" in the latter film - was small for his age. He had enormous self-possession and an impish charm which he used ruthlessly on the great singer.

His only other screen appearance in Britain was as a teenager in **"GOODBYE, MR CHIPS"** (39). After his beloved father's untimely death, his mother married a Hungarian and the family was overtaken by the war. The two boys succeeded in leaving Hungary, and Eldon went to the USA, where he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.

After the war, he did his best to make a living, while keeping his mother and sisters in Budapest supplied with food parcels. He was in "Leave Her to Heaven" on the Broadway stage (40, with Ruth Chatterton) and the film **"THE EXILE"** (48, with Douglas Fairbanks Jr). With plans of marriage, he developed a skill in

cabinetmaking to supplement his modest income as an actor.

Then, just as this new venture had begun to prosper, he was the innocent party in a car crash, and sustained a head injury which seriously affected his ability to concentrate and memorise. Nothing seemed left, and eventually, in despair at the ruin of his hopes, the unlucky Eldon Gorst shot himself."

CVMC video retail/rental website review:

"When a spoiled English boy (Eldon Grant) of about eleven years disappears in the French slums, the cops suspect kidnapping and ask "Big Fella" to help them solve the case. When the man finally stumbles onto the lad, he learns the youngster wasn't at all kidnapped, that instead he ran away to distance himself from his retentive parents [sic]. "Big Fella" takes pity on the boy and lets him hang around, but a greedy neighbourhood hood has plans to get the reward money by returning the kid to his parents. A classic musical which includes the songs "You Didn't Ought to Do Such Things" and "All God's Chillun Got a Robe."

Rated NR: brief nudity; mild violence
Language: English (also some French)
Categories: Boy Films, Little to Preteen, Comedy, Drama
(Very little dialogue is in French. Although this print has been nicely restored, there is some minor speckling to be found.) "

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. **"BALLAD IN BLUE"** (66, absurdly retitled "Blues For Lovers" in the States) similarly brought over a prominent black musician, Ray Charles, and wound him into a tissue-thin story involving a small British blind boy. 1937 predates Paul Robeson's clash with the loathsome House Committee on Unamerican Activities (Robeson

had performed in the U.S.S.R, and expressed strong views on labour rights in the US) during which period his passport was revoked, but he received voluble support from the acting



Musicians shouldn't do movies, yet still they try, and still, more often than not, they fail. Robeson was also an actor, but even though the range of roles available to black actors (decades before Sidney Poitier) was so demeaning, cinema represented his best means of reaching a broader audience with that unique basso profundo of his.

(Note, incidentally, how the original still below has been altered – left – to switch the focus of his attention from a white man to a black woman.)

Source (left): CVMC website
(below): NFT bulletin Nov 94



fraternity in Britain (among them a close friend of mine). Robeson, in common with Louis Armstrong and other black performers in the US, was not well served by the films he appeared in. A cultured man, he very rightly felt distaste at his roles in “**SANDERS OF THE RIVER**”, “**KING SOLOMON’S MINES**” and others of this period.

Eldon Gorst is perhaps only a more extreme illustration of just how much younger mid-teenagers of the 1920s and 30s were, physically if not psychologically, than kids of that age today. He would easily pass for a modern 10-year old. The sum effect of a generation getting taller and larger (also fatter, in the US and Europe) than their predecessors of a generation before, the falling age of physical puberty (girls are menstruating at 8 or 9, not 12 or 13), and the pressure of pop culture to sexualise them earlier, has created a bizarre cultural contradiction which has drawn very little comment. Adolescent behaviour and self-identity (i.e. that point of maximum social turbulence) is now being assimilated by kids well in advance of their teens, and the period of genuine emotional childhood is dwindling to a briefer and briefer span of years. It is not simply that we regard 14 and 15-year olds differently today than a generation ago. They are themselves measurably different creatures. It would be interesting to see some research on the physical and social factors which have brought this about in what is an astonishingly brief span of time. None of this, of course, has any bearing on “**BIG FELLA**”, but there’s not very much one can say about one more Little Boy Lost story.

See subject index under **LOST & FOUND, MUSIC, RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**. I doubt that it qualifies as a musical in the understood sense.

