



Clubhouse Detectives

US : 1996 : dir. Eric Hendershot : Silver State : ? min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
Michael Galeota; Jimmy Galeota; Christopher Ball; Thomas Hobson; Alex Miranda
 Michael Ballam; Suzanne Barnes; Lillian Gabal; James Claffin; Thom Dillon; Alisa Harris;
 Carolyn Hurlburt; Nancy Riddle

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Radio Times review:

"Adventure thriller. When young Billy Rackman witnesses his next-door neighbour strangling his lover, no-one believes him - except, that is, for his pals in the Blue Heaven Clubhouse. Together they set out to bring the culprit to justice. ** "

"A sort of American version of the Famous Five, which doesn't really break any new ground but will keep the kids quiet during the holidays. Michael Galeota is the junior crime fighter who turns to his friends when the grown-ups fail to believe his story that he has witnessed a murder. The members of the young, largely unknown cast give enthusiastic performances and it rattles along amiably enough. ** "

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996"]

The Radio Times' John Ferguson tends apparently to the oafish view that any drivel will suffice if it meets the test of "*keeping the kids quiet during the holidays*". Precisely the adult laziness which has left a generation of kids to be taught by their television sets how to think, speak, dress and behave. The plot of "**CLUBHOUSE DETECTIVES**" is indeed very derivative of Enid Blyton, not to mention a long line of child-eyewitness-to-murder thrillers, the least of which racked up more tension than this Disneyesque "comedy" thriller. But Blyton's polite middle-class English children must move over now for the hip nineties American child. What kind of social behaviour cues does Ferguson think our kids will pick up from this film?

Witness the opening scene. Boy's widowed mom is expecting the latest in a line of dates for the evening. Boy and his mates (aged about 10) spy through the window blinds as the date drives up to the house:

- Kids - *Yeah, this is the place, STUPID!*
- *My Mom's a babe. No way she's gonna go for THIS dud!*
- [gasp] *I don't believe it guys, I think this butt-head's wearing a rug!*

Boy shows date into the house, then proceeds to scare him off by claiming the motley group of bad-mannered friends are all his half-brothers. One of their fathers is in the slammer, one has run off to San Francisco with his (male) secretary, one is a drug-runner, etc. Naturally, the date makes his excuses and leaves. What a hoot, eh kids?

So the film has not been running three minutes and we've had a litany of "cool" disrespect for adults, racial stereotyping, homophobia and, of course, a boy too stupid to know which end of his baseball cap is the front. This is all meant to be *funny* – just the way kids talk these days – but as an index of American manners it is only ghastly. By all means let's have our kids watch this to "keep them quiet"...

Billy Rackman (Michael Galeota) is the leader of the pack. His brother Kade (Galeota's own brother Jimmy) is the object of universal scorn, being three years younger. The rest of the gang have been mixed to a recipe from the political correctness cookbook, so we have *one black boy* - Jimmy (Thomas Hobson), *one hispanic boy* – J.J. (Alex Miranda) and *one fat kid* – Eddie (Christopher Ball). No kid with glasses this time, and no fully-empowered girls, but hey, you can't have everything.

Billy is taking a pee in the bathroom late one night when he overhears a neighbour rowing (he thinks) with his wife. The argument becomes violent, and Billy sees the man club his wife to the ground. He also manages in his alarm to strike the window of the neighbour's home with a jet of urine from his bathroom window, thus alerting the culprit to the fact he may have been observed. The neighbour is an opera singer, so eminently worthy of suspicion.

Billy rushes to mom's bedroom and tearfully (yes, tearfully) tries to persuade her that murder most foul has been done next door. She will not believe him, so next day he enlists the aid of his gang to break into the neighbour's home and search for the body. You'd never have guessed it, but the neighbour comes home from work unexpectedly early and Billy finds himself trapped in the house...

Billy escapes by the skin of his teeth, and the kids rush straight round to mom's office screaming blue murder, but she only marches her son back to the neighbour's home to apologise. He seems very magnanimous about the whole business (breaking and entering, slander, that kind of stuff) and all is forgiven. Then brother Kade – who was receiving piano lessons from the neighbour – spots a missing person poster for a young woman, and recognises her as the woman who had asked him for directions to the neighbour's home that same night. Other clues fall into place, the kids know now where to search for the body, and see to it that justice doth prevail.

Young American boys are very anally-obsessive, in case you weren't aware of it, and their dialogue is peppered with lines like "all our butts are gonna be famous", "don't bust your butt", "nail his butt to the wall" and "I'm going in there and doing some major butt-kicking". I don't know where the writer's head was when he rattled off this awful script, but I'm willing to hazard a guess.

On the most generous level, of course, this is innocuous pap for the summer camp season, but since families all over Europe are being actively encouraged (by patronising types like Ferguson) to feed their young on the same cultural diet, I'd say we have every reason to protest about the subliminal behaviour cues junk like this is teaching its audience, or at any rate the kind of manners it so blithely reinforces: all brag and no courtesy, all self-assertiveness and no self-restraint.

The mother of Billy and Kade (Suzanne Barnes) is also scarcely a model of competent parenting. She has to offer her sons a bare-faced bribe to get them to feign good manners when meeting someone she wants to impress. Having caught Billy out once - "maligning" the neighbour and trespassing inside his home - she imposes no punishment whatever (despite promising he's "in deep trouble"), but shrugs the matter off. On the second occasion, the most she can muster is to threaten her sons with cleaning out the garage. She does not **make** them do it, nota bene, she merely threatens to make them do it (and any mess in the garage is presumably their own anyway!) With slack parenting like that, it's hardly any wonder kids treat adults with such contempt.

"**The Simpsons**" is amusing - witty, inventive, full of tart observations on American media, culture and family life (and incidentally, in "Bart of Darkness" they also reworked the same plot - when Bart suspects Flanders of murdering his wife.) But Bart Simpson himself, as a yardstick of the "average kid", would not be amusing in the least. If we shrug and accept our 10-year olds behaving like that, we can hardly complain about the way they'll be acting at 15. Negative values are taught by television, if anything, even faster than positive ones, because there is less implicit resistance to them. Bad attitudes start by small degrees, and my complaint, in a nutshell, is that lazy films of this kind are extremely bad teachers. More damage can be done to a child's social outlook by a diet of such films than anything they're liable to encounter from unmediated access to the internet.

My first experience of Michael Galeota, then, was less than endearing. The boy cannot act for toffee, and I doubt somehow that his "butt" will ever become famous, though it certainly requires attention. His younger brother Jimmy seems to show more talent (in this story he's clearly the smarter of the two) and is certainly more appealing. They remind very much of the Lawrence brothers, who played together in "**PULSE**" (88). Ball, Hobson and Miranda, for their part, are cast in such stereotype roles they're not really given any opportunity to shine. In conclusion then, if you thought "**THE GOONIES**" (85) was pretty dire, best to give this one a miss, as I intend to do in future.

See subject index under **EYEWITNESSES TO MURDER / BOY WHO CRIED WOLF, FOLLOW THE LEADER (Children's Gangs), KID DETECTIVES, KIDS OUTWIT THE CROOKS** and **MATCHMAKER KIDS / MATCHBREAKER KIDS**.

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