

The Day of the Locust

US : 1975 : dir. John Schlesinger : Paramount : 144 min
 prod: : scr: Waldo Salt : dir.ph.: Conrad Hall

Jackie Earle Haley

Donald Sutherland; Karen Black; Burgess Meredith; William Atherton; Geraldine Page;
 Richard A Dysart; Bo Hopkins; Pepe Serna; Lelia Goldoni; Billy Barty; Madge Kennedy;
 Florence Lake; Natalie Schafer; Nina Talbot; Paul Stewart; John Hillerman; Robert Pine;
 Dennis Dugan; David Ladd; Dick Powell Jr

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ≠ Z ☠	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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**"IT HAPPENED IN HOLLYWOOD -
 BUT IT COULD HAVE HAPPENED IN HELL!"**



Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Excellent adaptation of Nathanael West's sweeping novel about Hollywood's netherworld in the 1930s, seen mostly through the eyes of a young artist (Atherton) who finds little glamour and a lot of broken-down people in Tinseltown. Disturbing, depressing... and absolutely fascinating. Script by Waldo Salt. ***1/2 "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"In Hollywood in the 1930s, a novice is bewildered by the eccentricities of life and an innocent man is martyred by the crowd. A curious and interesting work from a savagely satirical novel; full of stimulating scenes and characters, it barely succeeds as a whole and was a disaster at the box office. Scr: Waldo Salt, from the novel by Nathanael West. Music: John Barry. Academy Award nominations: Conrad Hall (Best Cinema-tography); Burgess Meredith (Best Supporting Actor). * "

"The sense of horror which the film excites is all the sharper because the monstrosities of action are man-produced. In this brilliantly-devised film it is the human heart, not some freak of an indifferent nature, which kills."

- Dilys Powell

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"Nathanael West's novella about some of the lost and strayed in the Hollywood of the '30s has resisted adaptation - at least, that is the kindest way of regarding this chaotic piece, a long-cherished dream of its director. William Atherton plays the central character, a designer en route for the madhouse, and those fluttering around him include Karen Black (an extra),

Donald Sutherland (hotel clerk), Burgess Meredith (an old vaudevillian) and Bo Hopkins (a "cowboy"). * "

Movies on TV (1987) review:

"Memorable, harrowing, long-awaited adaptation of Nathanael West's 1939 novel, a crystallisation of his long Hollywood experience as a screenwriter. William Atherton is impressive in his debut in a major role playing an impressionable "civilised" young Yale screenwriter trying to cope and succeed in Hollywood circa '38. Schlesinger builds to an unforgettable climax of a movie premiere which becomes a riotous nightmare. ***½ "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"A naive young art director (Atherton) takes a job at a Hollywood studio in the 1930s and sinks into a bleak nightmare of crushed hopes and failed dreams. Nathanael West's brilliant Depression-era novel reaches the screen with none of its impact diminished. Sutherland's performance as a simple midwesterner who falls in love with a venal bit-player (Black) is astonishingly good; you've never seen decency so terribly wronged. Meredith scores as a sick-at-heart ex-vaudevillian who struggles to make a living as a door-to-door salesman. A disturbing but fascinating film, brilliantly photographed by Conrad Hall and keenly directed by John Schlesinger. ***½ "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Despite some splendid set-pieces, notably the riot at the end outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre, John Schlesinger's 1974 version¹ of Nathaniel West's novel misses in evoking either the forked vision of the original or Hollywood as it was in 1938. Caricatures abound: Donald Sutherland is the passive set designer; Karen Black the whore he worships; Burgess Meredith her ex-vaudevillian father; Geraldine Page the faith healer who doesn't. ** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

¹ [made in 1975]

"Schlesinger's misguided version of Nathanael West's cynical classic about a tormented Tinseltown, peopled by no-hopers trying in vain to work their way into the glamorous, starry life of the Hollywood studios.

Admittedly the book, an elusive, mesmeric work of associated images and ideas, surreal and analytical, would present problems for the most talented of filmmakers. But Schlesinger really blows it. West's thin plot is stretched out to excessive length, with little sense of pace or the significance of events; the characters are cut down, stranded without pasts and motivations; images are emphasised with no sense of context; the narrative is often confused and confusing. Only the hysterical holocaust at the end of the film gives any idea of West's conception, and even then the power of the scene is betrayed by a pathetic, superfluous coda."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"A daddy longlegs of a film, sprawling all over its story of life at the wrong end of Hollywood in the late Thirties, and finally finding its raison d'être in a long and bloody riot scene at the end. William Atherton, then a fresh-faced newcomer, has the role on which all the action turns, as the young sketch artist who moves in with an old vaudevillian turned drunken salesman (Burgess Meredith) and his silly, virginal daughter (Karen Black). Director John Schlesinger lovingly recreates the period (as he was to do with "YANKS"), much of it in soft focus, intending to add a glow of nostalgia to this adaptation of the bestseller by Nathanael West, but neglecting the most important element of all: discipline. ** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Magnificent production, combined with excellent casting and direction, make "THE DAY OF THE LOCUST" as fine a film (in a professional sense) as the basic material lets it be. Nathanael West's novel about losers on the Hollywood fringe has lost little of its verisimilitude in adaptation. "THE DAY OF THE LOCUST" puts its focus on the loser, the never-was and the never-will-be.

The story of destined failure features Karen Black in a fine performance as an aspiring, selfish would-be starlet, the daughter of broken down vaudevillian Burgess Meredith (a brilliant

characterisation). Donald Sutherland, labouring under the most striking burden of fuzzy writing, still evokes a good measure of



"Hatefully effeminate brat" Angel Loomis. Note, not "hateful and effeminate", but "hatefully effeminate"
 Source: *The Moving Picture Boy*

pity as the hick whose immature love for Black is abused by her. The principals are surrounded by a truly superb supporting cast: and the physical and technical support is beyond belief."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"This drama is both extremely depressing and spellbinding. It shows the unglamorous side of Hollywood in the 1930s. The people who don't succeed in the entertainment capital are the focus of the film. Rated "R". ****½ "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"**"DAY OF THE LOCUST"**, like the power-ful and incisive Nathanael West novel on which it

is based, focuses on the seamy side of the city of dreams in its 1930s heyday - the subculture of losers, misfits and neurotic fringe characters. Black is a sexy untalented aspiring actress who lives with her feather, Meredith, a former vaudevillian, now a down on his luck door-to-door salesman. Recognising her limited prospects, Black becomes a regular on the casting couch of producers in the hope that she'll rise above her usual walk-ons. She still has dreams of fame and legitimacy.

Despite her dubious character, Atherton, an altruistic art director, falls for her but she gives him the cold shoulder - at first. She soon begins amusing herself by toying with him. This is the beginning of a pattern. When she finds herself destitute she moves in with a sensitive but oafish accountant, Sutherland, who loves her from afar. She and all about him use and ridicule him as he lumbers through life; he is particularly vexed by an evil neighbourhood child, Haley. Everything comes to a head in the apocalyptic finale of the film, a memorably traumatic spectacle.

This grim conclusion, along with the stark and unsavoury story and characters that preceded it, brought shudders to audiences and undoubtedly helped this excellent film fail at the box office. Nevertheless, it accurately captures the intent of West's dark masterpiece. Black is the perfect slattern with movie ambition - cheap, shallow, conniving, and utterly reprehensible. Sutherland gives one of his best performances as the doltish but sensitive outsider whose concern for films is marginal at best.

The movie boasts excellent supporting players, such as Atherton as the ethereal art director. He is savvy to Hollywood and gives it back the banal glibness that is the hallmark of its society. Many of the characters are inspired by historical Hollywood figures. **"DAY OF THE LOCUST"** exudes authenticity, from the costuming to the cars, from the exotic clothes to the marcelled hair styles. **** "

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Jackie Earle Haley:

"Jackie Earle Haley - as he was known from **"THE BAD NEWS BEARS"** onwards - is the son of the actor Bud Haley. He was appearing on TV from the age of six, his earliest important job being to supply the voice of the

protagonist in the animated TV version of "**Dennis the Menace**".

He created his first big impression, though, as the maliciously epicene child actor in "**THE DAY OF THE LOCUST**". He was fine as the abrasive Kelly Leak, odd star out of "**THE BAD NEWS BEARS**", and soldiered on through this glorious film's two increasingly awful sequels: "**THE BAD NEWS BEARS IN BREAKING TRAINING**" (77) and "**THE BAD NEWS BEARS GO TO JAPAN**" (78). He was a post-holocaust orphan in "**DAMNATION ALLEY**" (77), but had better luck in "**BREAKING AWAY**" (79) and "**LOSIN' IT**" (83). Wary little Haley may not have been the most charming of child actors, but he has never lacked for personality."

In his entry on an authentic Hollywood small-part boy actor of the Twenties - Bubbles Noisom - Holmstrom says the following:

"...If you saw the name alone, you would conjure up something like the epicene demon played by Jackie Haley in John Schlesinger's film of "**THE DAY OF THE LOCUST**": bubble-curled, spitting with malevolence,

mincing around in velvet bolero and skin-tight shorts. (Though in the many thousands of stills I've looked through of child actors of the Twenties and Thirties, I've seldom seen one remotely like Schlesinger's Adore Loomis either in appearance or garb).

The description of Adore in Nathanael West's novel is rather different. "He was about eight years old, with a pale, peaked face on a large, troubled forehead. He had great staring eyes. His eyebrows had been plucked and shaped carefully. Except for his Buster Brown collar, he was dressed like a man, in long trousers, vest and jacket." Bubbles Noisom, to judge from his printed portrait, was near to the West model, but nicer. He appears neither bubbly nor noisome. His straight fair hair is slicked severely back from a broad, intellectual forehead. His expression is manly and thoughtful..."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide" or "A Pictorial History of the Talkies"]

Only one of the above reviews makes any mention of the Adore Loomis character, from which we might suppose the film to have only slight interest to the archive, but "epicene", "mincing", "effeminate" boys are not exactly a commonplace of mainstream cinema. He represents, on the one hand then, a rare but not unique instance of the "boy as consummate catamite", and on the other a startling new variant of the homophobic caricature in Hollywood – the child actor as hateful fag.

As Holmstrom draws to our notice, Schlesinger's Angel Loomis bears no resemblance whatever to the author's description of him, and it shouldn't be forgotten that "**MIDNIGHT COWBOY**" did not treat the New York gay subculture very sympathetically either. The insinuation (conscious or not) that it wasn't only talentless young starlets who "became a regular on the casting couch of producers" isn't so very far from the truth, I daresay. Roman Polanski, when forced into self-exile in France to evade prosecution for sex with a (consenting) 14-year old girl, evinced genuine surprise that anything so commonplace in Hollywood circles should raise such a ruckus.

Although Holmstrom says he's never seen a still of a child actor resembling this narcissistic Little Lord Fauntleroy, other films on Hollywood have alluded to the tantrum-throwing, mother-pampered infants trussed like Christmas turkeys for sale to the major studios, and lest one supposes this custom to have died out with the Depression, the documentary series "**Hollywood Kids**" reminded us that the parental gravy train continues unabated, as though the well-publicised antics of Macaulay Culkin's parents were not evidence enough of that.

Jackie Earle Haley was 13 (ie: five years older than the character as written), having appeared two years previously in the French/Italian co-production "**HOMME ET MORT**". Karen Black is the mother of Hunter Carson, who starred with her in the 1986 remake of "**INVADERS FROM MARS**".

See subject index under **BRATS / SPOILT KIDS, CHILD PERFORMERS / CHILD STARS**
and **DEPRESSION ERA / 1930s SETTINGS**.