

Dennis the Menace

(UK title: "Dennis")

US : 1993 : dir. Nick Castle : Warner Bros

: 96 min

prod: John Hughes : scr: John Hughes : dir.ph.: Thomas Ackerman

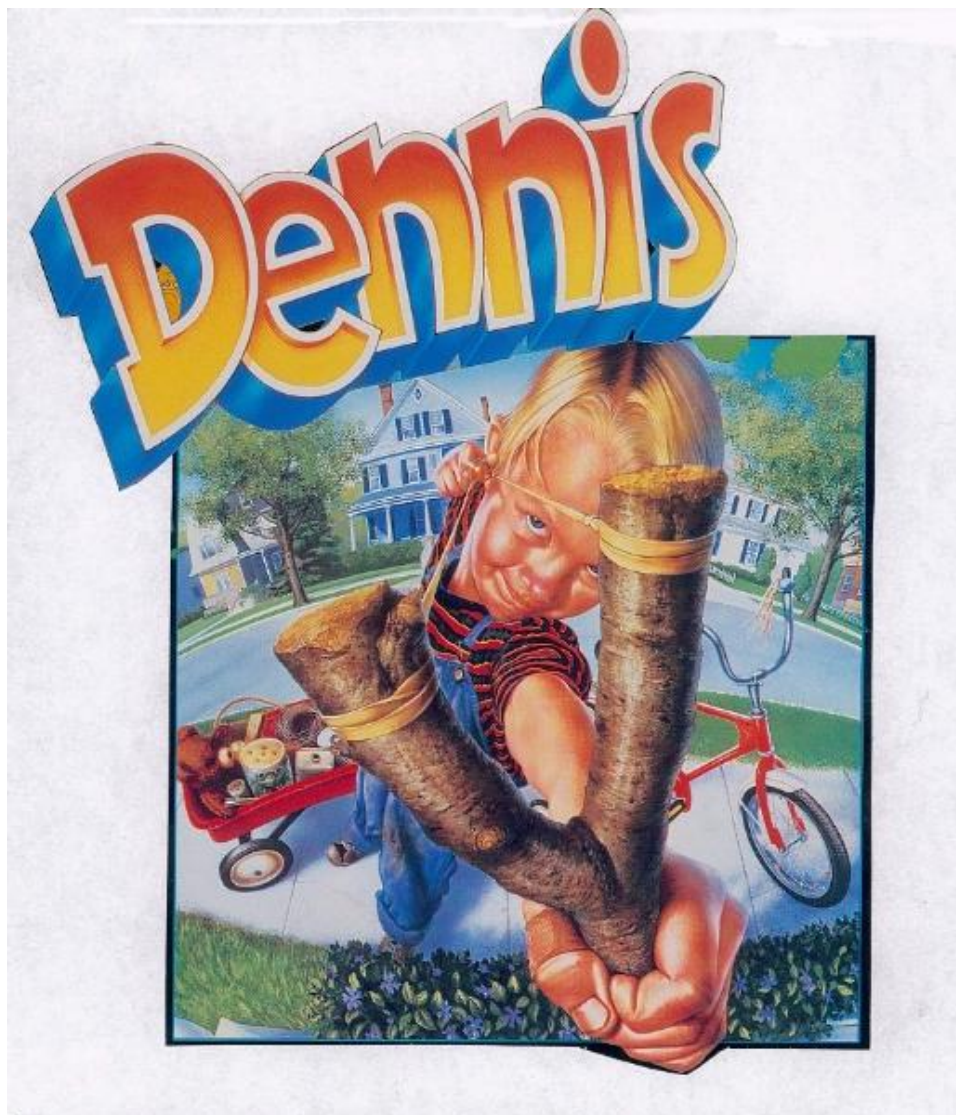
Mason Gamble; Amy Sakasitz; Kellen Hathaway; Devin Ratray; Casey Gamble

Walter Matthau; Christopher Lloyd; Joan Plowright; Lea Thompson; Robert Stanton;

Paul Winfield; Natasha Lyonne; Hank Johnston; Melinda Mullins; Billie Bird; Bill Erwin;

Arnold Stang; Ben Stein; Ethel Gerstein; Rebecca C Hogan; Leona Toffel; Peggy Goldberg

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ≠ Z ☺	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"Unconscionable, jerry-built rip-off of the two **"HOME ALONE"**s from their producer-writer John Hughes, based on Hank Ketcham's long-running comic strip, with the blond rascal's skirmishes with cantankerous neighbour Mr Wilson (Matthau) a mere warm-up to his more Culkin-ian climactic punch-out of a robber/derelict (Lloyd). Fun for under-8's and well-served by its cast, but still a desperate collection of crotch and flatulence jokes. Warning to Hughes: stay away from **"Leave It To Beaver"**! ** "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"This is a laugh and a half. Well, about half a laugh actually. I think it came when villain Christopher Lloyd coughed after being set on fire and smoke poured out of his mouth. Yes, that must have been it. There's nothing wrong with the premise here: an angelic-looking but awful five-year old kid torments his elderly neighbour and can't resist touching things that lead to escalating disaster. The two themes join forces when the elderly couple-next-door (Walter Matthau and Joan Plowright) agree to look after the little monster (Mason Gamble) while his parents are away. Under the treatment of director Nick Castle, however, this becomes a clodhopping affair that's never in touch with reality and is mostly unbearable to watch. The director seems to have little idea how to create comedy that will actually get you laughing. Oh well, it is at least wonderfully well shot in glowing Technicolor, and half a laugh is better than none. * "



Togetherness on a rainy day – Matthau and Gamble

Film Review 1994-95 review:

" **"HOME ALONE"** meets **"PROBLEM CHILD"** in this artless, contrived cinematic



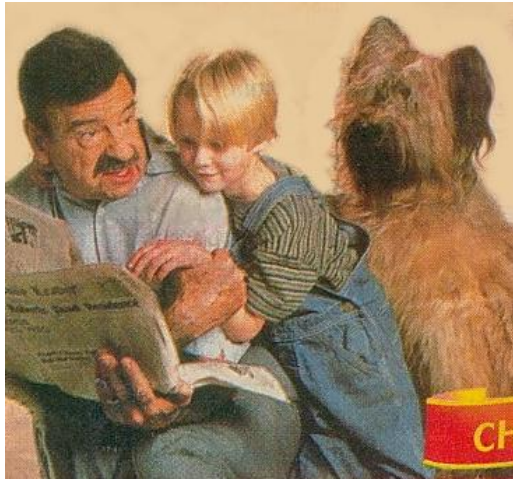
reincarnation of Hank Ketcham's classic cartoon featuring the mischievous 5-year old.
Good ol' Mr Wilson presents prosecution exhibit no.1

Here, Dennis is portrayed as a moronic kid plagued by his own wayward curiosity and misguided attempts to please. Add a saccharine subplot about the grumpy neighbour's deep-seated love for the boy, and you have a film that insults the young and gags the even older. At least Kevin McCallister in the **"HOME ALONE"** films was bursting with charm and ingenuity. "

Film Review – August 1993 – partial review:

"Five-year old Dennis Mitchell menaces American suburbia. Wayward children are big box-office at the moment (cf **"HOME ALONE"**, **"PROBLEM CHILD"**) and so are movie reincarnations of TV series (**"BATMAN"**, **"THE ADDAMS FAMILY"**) - particularly with a comic strip mentality. And so the premise of bringing TV's irrepressible **"Dennis the Menace"** to the big-screen seemed like a marriage of concepts made in heaven. Bring in John Hughes (**"HOME ALONE"**, **"UNCLE BUCK"**) to produce his own screenplay, and you have a sure-fire winner. Not.

Why **"HOME ALONE"** was so successful with pint-sized adults was it showed a young (and charming and photogenic) boy able to compete in a grown-up world. Not only that, it depicted a ten-year old who had the smarts to outsmart the big bad guys. Throw in a dose of morality expressing the importance of family values and you have a blockbuster endorsed by the whole family. **"DENNIS"** falls flat on its face at the starting gate. Not only is it artless, contrived and unfunny, but it insults the intelligence of children everywhere. Dennis himself is portrayed as more investigative than mischievous, his relentless curiosity getting him in..... "



Blockbusters video rental promotional
handout:

"It's summertime, and the living is definitely not easy for grumpy old George Wilson (Walter Matthau). School's out and his six-year old neighbour Dennis Mitchell is home for the holidays. He may look cute and adorable, but Dennis is a catapult-toting child who wreaks menace and mayhem on the long-suffering Mr Wilson. John Hughes, creator of **"HOME ALONE"**, brings his favourite cartoon character to life in this hilarious, hugely entertaining film.

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Directed by Nick Castle, this adaptation of Hank Ketcham's cult comic strip was released as **"DENNIS THE MENACE"** in the USA, but shortened simply to **"DENNIS"** in this country to avoid confusion with "The Beano's" tousle-haired terror. Often funny, but just as often painfully poor, the film was co-written and produced by John Hughes, who seems to have cobbled it together from ideas left over from **"HOME ALONE"**. Mason Gamble just gets by as the mischievous imp; Walter Matthau, however, is brilliant as his long-suffering victim, Mr Wilson. Edited [sic] for violent content. ***

"Comedy starring Walter Matthau as elderly Mr Wilson, the neighbour burdened with looking

after irrepressible six-year old Dennis Mitchell while his parents are out of town on business. But Mr Wilson only has a limited amount of patience, and Dennis has already used it up. ***

TV Times review:

"An elderly couple (Walter Matthau and Joan Plowright) agree to look after an angelic-looking but awful little monster of a boy (Mason Gamble) while his parents are away. As directed by Nick Castle, this becomes a clodhopping affair that's never in touch with reality. * "

"A mite too much. Grumpy old Walter Matthau copes with family pests in "DENNIS" on ITV."

"Adaptation of the cartoon character Dennis, with Mason Gamble in the title role. ** "

"Walter Matthau as long-suffering neighbour Mr Wilson in naughty-little-boy froth. ** "

Hollywood Report (Central TV's cinema news slot) item on the film's UK release:

"Macaulay Culkin watch out! 6-year old Mason Gamble looks set to take over from Hollywood's highest-paid child actor. John Hughes, who made Macaulay a star with "HOME ALONE",



Uncertain TV guide note:

"Comedy based on the US comic-strip character. A mischievous boy torments his cantankerous old neighbour with his pranks. * "

The Guardian note:

"Walter Matthau and Joan Plowright as frantic neighbours of a small boy bent on leaving a trail of destruction behind and in front of him."

Sunday Times note:

"Comedy about a mischievous brat and his exasperated neighbour."

Daily Mirror note:

chose Mason to play opposite Walter Matthau in "DENNIS", the new movie based on one of America's most popular cartoon strips.

Hughes : I took the theme and, primarily the tone is what I took away from the strip. It is about this family and the conflict between the boy and his neighbour. So I had to kind of create a story into which I could put a lot of incident.

Following his success with "UNCLE BUCK" and "HOME ALONE", producer John Hughes seems to have found out how to work with children and make hit movies.

Hughes : I think a kid is naturally, ah, predisposed to doing this in a way. You know, I mean the things that we look for in an actor: which is discipline, you gotta know your lines, you gotta show up. I mean, it's what kids do.

You gotta get up at this time, you gotta go to school, you gotta read this, if you want to talk you've got to raise your hand.. Those are all things that serve an actor very well. And I like kids, so...

Mason Gamble was chosen from more than 20,000 young hopefuls, so how did he feel when he learned he had the part?

Mason : I thought I was special.

And does he think he'll be as big as multi-million dollar role model Macaulay?

Mason : Hopefully!

Mason (squirming impassively in his chair, energetically describing a scene in the film:) I spill a bunch of mothballs in the attic and make him fall like THIS: he goes PHWOOSH! And then this boat comes down on him, and it lands right HERE! (indicating between his legs) And then these G.D. garden lanterns, that were in the boat, come tumbling down on him. I pick this lantern up and his face is RIGHT THERE! Endlessly tormented by Mason on screen, Walter Matthau could be forgiven for exacting revenge off-screen:

Matthau : I told him once "Stop kidding around". I said "Mason, stop kidding around. Let's do this scene. If you don't I'm gonna punch you in the mouth and I'm gonna knock

all your teeth down your throat! " And he said "No you're not". I said "What makes you think I'm not?" He said "Then you'll have to wait for them to grow back in!"

Mason : I like SCARING people! I like dropping lemons down their shirt. (giggles) I like dropping things down my shirt, like ice cubes.

Hughes : He's not a brat. There would be no point in doing, y'know, a movie about a misbehaving child, y'know, it's not funny at all. It's not amusing, it's annoying. I looked for those situations that he could go into innocently, that would cause a fair amount of hilarity, but without any evil intent. There's no malice. Y'know, he's just doing what a five-year old boy is gonna do.

Charming little fella, wasn't he? "



"There would be no point in doing a movie about a misbehaving child, it's not funny at all" – Producer John Hughes

Contrary as ever, I have to disagree with the consensus of critical pannings the film received. Calculating and manipulative it certainly is, but no more so than "**HOME ALONE**", which was favourably received and a massive hit at the box office. I suspect critics and audiences, particularly after such "sassy little kid" atrocities as "**PROBLEM CHILD**" ('90) and "**COP AND A HALF**" ('93), had seen quite enough movies about self-assertive tykes for the present, thanks very much. Also, "**HOME ALONE 2: LOST IN NEW YORK**" had been released only a year before, and reviews were far less charitable. Perhaps some people felt (not without cause) that Hughes was over-milking that particular box office cow. For what it's worth, "**DENNIS THE MENACE**" certainly raised the odd smile from me - particularly the slapstick routines at Mr Wilson's house (Matthau and Gamble play off one another very well) - and if it is to be damned for being vacuous and formulaic, the same could be said of scores of Hollywood comedies released since.

"**DENNIS THE MENACE**" resorts to the same sentimental rewrite as the 50s TV sitcom with Jay North, in that the Dennis character is absolved of conscious mischief altogether. He's not brattish or a naughty child in any sense, as the original character was, but an accident-prone "innocent" (hence all the more lovable, folks). But note how the film's poster trades notwithstanding on the "naughty boy" character type – advertising the sort of film we're *expecting*, not the one they've actually made. Producer Hughes, as the above interview makes clear, balked at filming a mischievous and rebellious five-year old spirit - all film and TV incarnations of Britain's "Just William" have bowed to the same cop out - presumably because it smacks too much of independence from parental control, whereas childish curiosity and clumsiness allows adults to feel benign, superior and forgiving. Rather an interesting giveaway on parental psychology, that.

The rewrite had some other "unfortunate" stereotypes to redress while it was about it. Where Jay North's mum was the spruce young housewife of a thousand TV ads, Mason Gamble's mum is also a career woman battling a family-unfriendly office culture. Where the original Dennis (like William) detested girls with a passion, this one is packed off *immediately* (albeit under protest) to the home of classmate Margaret, who spouts a five-year old feminist credo while bullying Dennis and pal Joey into converting their treehouse from fort to ideal home. "Forts didn't *have* powder rooms" they protest limply, but one shake of Margaret's fist is sufficient to still dissent in the ranks. Hughes has made Dennis *girl-friendly*, to head off any criticism from that quarter. Dennis is permitted to torment his baby-sitter's boyfriend - a nice cameo from Devin Ratray, who played Culkin's elder brother Bug in the "**HOME ALONE**"s – but only so far as ringing the doorbell when they settle down to a smooch.

So instead he becomes a kind and thoughtful little fellow: administering an aspirin to the "sleeping" Mr Wilson without wishing to wake him, he fires it down his throat by catapult. When he accidentally breaks Mr Wilson's dentures ("Uh-oh!"), he replaces the missing teeth with the closest match to hand - chewing gum. The effort to redefine him as a "good" boy verges on the sickmaking. When malevolent drifter Lloyd abducts Dennis, the boy thinks he's on a camping trip, but says he must be back by morning 'cos he goes to church on Sundays. When Lloyd says he's to be his "hostage", and they'll jump a midnight train together, Dennis agrees eagerly, but adds that they should stop off at his home first, collect his toothbrush, and tell his mom so she won't worry. Jeez Hughes! You were never five years old?

The Christopher Lloyd character (didn't we get enough of him in "**THE ADDAMS FAMILY**"?) represents a genuinely obnoxious undercurrent in the script. He slopes, leering and sinister, into town with his long straggly hair and filthy clothes, and his first (motiveless) act is to steal a child's doll. Local cop Paul Winfield catches him loitering about the kiddies' playground (feel the subtext, you mums in the audience) and warns him to move on. He is being set up, of course, like the Joe Pesci/Daniel Stern burglars of "**HOME ALONE**", to be the butt of a string of slapstick violence gags (all "accidents", naturally) at the hands of his co-operative little hostage. But whereas the Pesci/Stern burglars were no more than "**Tom & Jerry**" villains, Lloyd's character is altogether darker, more malignant. He is a greasy city-trash intruder in this demure well-ordered small town, a social parasite invading middle America's incubator, a bug in the WASPs' nest. And needless to add - this is the 1990s - an implicit sexual menace to the children. This repellent bourgeois insularity underpinning the film's Chaplinesque sight-gags almost left me concurring with the critics who drubbed it. Scriptwriter Hughes is pushing at buttons we should be insulted he thinks we possess.

Mason Gamble makes a fair fist of his part, at any rate contriving to be less winsome than Jay North on TV, and mugging to camera a deal less than Macaulay Culkin, while Matthau is an obvious choice for the sour "good ol' Mr Wilson". Joan Plowright lends maternal warmth to the unrewarding role of Mrs Wilson – none of the boy's accidents work to *her* disadvantage, so she's allowed to preserve her wistful illusions about the joys of childraising - and Dennis' parents are the blank middle class cyphers they always were. The camerawork is, as the TV Times guide points out, impressive, and rather better than a film like this deserves. If you

catch only the first hour of "**DENNIS THE MENACE**" you'll have seen the best part of it, and been spared the ludicrous spectacle of little children joining a midnight search of the neighbourhood for the missing boy, not to mention the obligatory hugs-and-kisses finale.

See the 1987 TV movie "**DENNIS**", the sitcom "**Dennis the Menace**" and subject index under **KIDNAPPING**, **KIDS OUTWIT THE CROOKS** and **RASCALS & SCALAWAGS**, as distinct from **BRATS / SPOILT KIDS**.