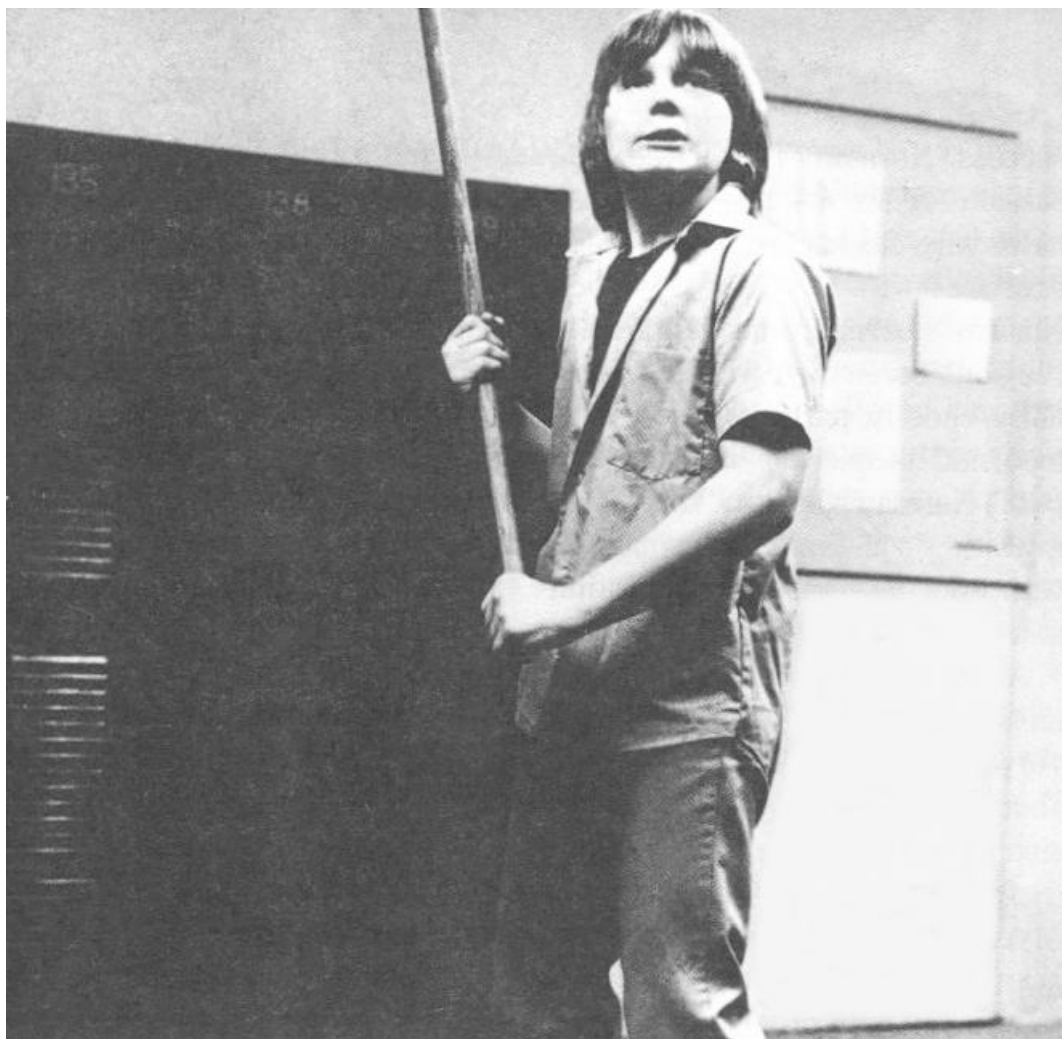


Fighting Back

Australia : 1982 : dir. Michael Caulfield : Samson / Adams-Packer : 100 min
 prod: Sue Milliken & Tom Jeffrey : scr: Tom Jeffrey & Michael Cove : dir.ph.:
[Paul Smith](#) [d]
 Lewis Fitz-Gerald; Kris McQuade; Robyn Nevin; Caroline Gillmer; Catherine Wilkin;
 Ben Gabriel; Wyn Roberts

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ∅ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5429	3½	6	2	1,375	3 - 3 3 -	No	Pre 1990



Paul goes berserk in the locker room

Source: Australian Cinema 1970-1985

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

“Ambitious if not entirely successful drama of teacher Fitz-Gerald trying to tame unruly, illiterate 13-year old (Smith, excellent in acting debut.) **½”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above



A lazy teacher gives Paul a warm hand

Source: indeterminate website

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"A teenager runs riot at home and at school. Tolerable problem picture with no surprises."

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"After much frustrated head-banging, a troublesome boy (Smith) finds a friend (brother, mentor, father figure, etc) in a well-meaning teacher (FitzGerald) whose revolutionary methods stretch to playing AC/DC in class. Caught between developing the individual relationship of pupil to teacher and exposing the injustices of the educational system, the film opts for an unhelpful sentimentality. The teacher's lack of sexual definition, and the film's refusal to raise the question of sex in general – strange, as its real subject is puberty – makes the subject of the relationship decidedly odd. Analysts will have a field day. Others needn't bother."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"A distant Australian relative of **"THE MIRACLE WORKER"**, as a dedicated teacher tries to win friendship of a violent and deeply disturbed 13-year old boy, at the risk of the hatred of his fellow teachers and finally even his job. A bit unrelenting in its punishing portrait of a difficult relationship, and ruthlessly cute in its depiction of happier times (teacher and boy on a camping / canoeing holiday). But still there are times when the film cuts right to the heart. The acting is generally competent and, in the case of Kris McQuade as the boy's mother, rather more. **"

Australian Cinema 1970-1985 analysis:

"From 1982, there was a steady stream of city-and-youth films, including **"FIGHTING BACK"**, **"MOVING OUT"**, Haydn Keenan's **"GOING DOWN"** (1982), Michael Pattinson's (1984) and Ken Cameron's **"FAST TALKING"** (1983)... **"FIGHTING BACK"**'s chief concern is with the efforts of a young teacher, John Embling (Lewis Fitz-Gerald) to reclaim a mentally and emotionally disturbed

student¹, Tom (Paul Smith). The source of Tom's disturbance is his brutal father's desertion of him and his mother (a touching, detailed performance from Kris McQuade), and the site of its display is, variously, home, school, and the city streets. There is a shot of Tom walking in a suburban street with a grim city-scape behind him that suggests an intelligent understanding of the power of *mise-en-scène*. Ultimately, however, and in spite of the film's opening statement, "What follows is a true story", "**FIGHTING BACK**" is an old-fashioned and simplistic piece. Its intentions are exemplary but its treatment lacks the motivating complexity that would make it seem **dramatically** true."

"..."**FIGHTING BACK**" and "**STREET HERO**"... should be noted as representations of teenage maladjustment directly related to an absent father. Tom (Paul Smith) is in fact seriously disturbed, giving to outbursts of raging violence at school and at home. The school's remedial teacher (Robyn Nevin) fears that one day he might snap completely, and a well-judged crane shot catches the frenzy of his destructive mania as he smashes windows in a locker room while the new teacher, John Embling (Lewis Fitz-Gerald), waits for him to subside. Embling, in his efforts to help Tom, seeks the reasons for his behaviour in his home where he is first seen fighting his sister over a television programme and then kicking and swearing at his mother (Kris McQuade) who ineffectually threatens "Don't you ever speak to me like that". There is a touchingly detailed performance from McQuade as a working-class mum, deserted six years earlier by a brutal husband. She fears that Tom has "got his father in him, that's his problem".

The dead father of Vinnie in "**STREET HERO**" is also a major part of his problem... For him, trying to live up to a dead father is as inhibiting as Tom's inability to come to terms with his father's desertion. Both are forced to learn that a sense of personal identity lies in directions other than those laid down in their father's behaviour. "**FIGHTING BACK**" suffers from a certain naivety in its narrative procedures but, like "**ANNIE'S COMING OUT**", is transparently well-intentioned."

The Australian Film Book 1930-Today
review:

¹ i.e. school pupil

"Tom is a teenage boy who is dismissed as uncontrollable until a teacher named John takes a special interest in him. Gradually John overcomes the deep psychological problems the child faces."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Films of the Eighties", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. Adapted from John Embling's book "Tom". Not to be confused with a 1982 American vigilante film of the same name with Tom Skerritt, nor a 1980 US football TV film of the same name with Robert Urich and Art Carney, nor a 1948 film of the same name with Gary Gray and Tommy Ivo.

It's too many years since I last watched this to comment on it fully, but It's partly an indictment – like Britain's "**BIRTH OF A NATION**", or "**KES**" – of the kind of sink school where endemic corporal punishment was an index of lazy, defeatist authoritarianism (one teacher here boasts how he slipped an entire gym class, regarding it as a feat of personal prowess). Corporal punishment in Australian state schools was presumably still a live issue in 1982. But the film also highlights the poverty of adult communication with boys passing through puberty, taking Paul as an extreme illustration. On the face of it, to pine for an absent violent father seems a masochistic obsession for a 13-year old, but even brutality is attention of a kind.

As in "**KES**", "**SPARE THE ROD**" and others, we are presented with a teacher of near superhuman forbearance, perception and understanding who succeeds in penetrating the hard unlovely exterior of the boy to that soft, vulnerable, receptive interior child which is so reassuring to the disconcerted adult sense of knowing "what's best" for these creatures. And if Embling becomes a martyr to his commitment to the troubled boy, the message is still one – to the adult psyche – of success: not of hope for the boy himself (that is merely the surface meaning) but that the conundrum of Paul was ultimately cracked, even at the cost of Embling's job. Indecipherable children are far more worrisome.

The *Time Out* critic's veiled remarks allude (without daring to breathe the word) to a pederastic subtext in the Embling/Paul relationship. Such an element (even unconsummated) in any teacher/pupil scenario would be anathema to current prejudices – this is the central theme of "**MAN WITHOUT A FACE**" – but perhaps in its modest way it is a plea for the *pedagogical eros*, a strand in educational thought which held that one learns best from a "mentor" within an intimate, even sensual, relationship that enhances self-worth and close regard to the high esteem of the teacher. In our sex-obsessed culture, all such notions are reduced to the defloration or terrorised young bodies by predatory adult males, and any subtler conception of the phenomenon is a heresy akin to infanticide. Whether Embling has sexual feelings for Paul (or vice versa of course) is left unspoken, as it was in "**MAN WITHOUT A FACE**", but we are invited to accept the relationship as valid by dint of its results, whatever the motors that drove it.

Paul Smith, 14, is credited in *The Moving Picture Boy* with just one other title, a TV series "**Waterloo Station**", made the same year. Nothing else is known of him.

See subject index under **AUSTRALASIA, BOATS / FISHING, CAMPING TRIPS, CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, SCHOOL** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.