

Hell's House

(aka: "Juvenile Court")

US : 1932 : dir. Howard Higgin : Capital

: 72 min

prod: Benjamin F Zeidman : scr: Paul Gangelin & B. Harrison Orkow

: dir.ph.: Allen S Siegel

Junior Durkin; Frank "Junior" Coghlan

Pat O'Brien; Bette Davis; Emma Dunn; Charley Grapewin; Morgan Wallace; Hooper Atchley; James Marcus; Wallis Clark

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	≠	M	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
6032	2.5	6	0	1,567	-	-	-	-	-	No	unseen

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Low-budget quickie about a naïve kid who takes the rap for a bootlegger and goes to a poorly-run boys' reformatory. Interesting mainly for early appearances of O'Brien and Davis. ** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A boy is wrongly sentenced to a corrupt reform school. Primitive cheapie notable only for the early appearance of Bette Davis."

The Films of Bette Davis review:

"Based on a story by Howard Higgins. Jimmy Mason (Junior Durkin), an unemployed teenager, is befriended by Matt Kelly (Pat O'Brien), a small-time racketeer who gives him a job answering his telephone at his bootlegging headquarters. Jimmy, blinded by admiration for Kelly, doesn't realise the bootlegger is really interested in his girlfriend, Peggy Gardner (Bette Davis).

When the police raid Kelly's hideout, Jimmy, the only one present, is arrested. In court he refuses to identify Kelly as his employer and after being reprimanded by a stern judge (Wallis Clark), he is sentenced to three years in a state reformatory.

In this cruelly operated institution, the boys suffer mistreatment from a sadistic guard (Hooper Atchley) and an unscrupulous superintendent (James Marcus). Jimmy becomes friendly with Shorty (Junior Coghlan), an inmate with a serious heart ailment. After Shorty's death from mistreatment, a crusading newspaper publisher (Morgan Wallace) campaigns to have conditions improved, but his efforts are thwarted when the staff is alerted to the fact that the school is to be inspected.

After Jimmy's aunt (Emma Dunn) visits him and tells him that Peggy is seeing a good deal of Kelly, Jimmy escapes in a garbage container and goes to Kelly's apartment where he finds Peggy. She tells him her reason for being friendly with Kelly was to try to persuade him to help get Jimmy out of the reform school.

The police trace Jimmy to the apartment, but before they can arrest him, Kelly confesses his guilt and exonerates Jimmy."

"...The attempt to pillory reform schools in "HELL'S HOUSE" is hardly adult in its attack, but it has a few moderately interesting interludes. There is, however, insufficient detail on the institutions that appeals to the spectators as being presented without prejudice... The direction of the film is old-fashioned. Pat O'Brien, who acts the role of Kelly, gives a forced performance. Young Durkin's playing is sincere and likewise that of Bette Davis."

– Mordaunt Hall, **The New York Times**

"...This could have been made into a real first-run, class A feature. As it is, it merits only

attention of the lesser second-runs... The theme, which lent itself excellently to being a "**BIG HOUSE**" of a boys' state reformatory, projects as having been put together in a slipshod manner." – Waly, **Weekly Variety**

Illustrated History of the Movies: Bette Davis comment:

"...When her short-term contract expired, Universal decided not to renew it. No other studio seemed interested. Her only job offer came from independent producer Benjamin F Zeidman, who cast her opposite Pat O'Brien in a "poverty row" quickie called "**HELL'S HOUSE**" (1932). Originally released as "**JUVENILE COURT**", the film provoked legal action from an irate Los Angeles exhibitor, who unknowingly booked *both* titles on one double-feature programme.

Davis says "**HELL'S HOUSE**" took about five minutes to make but seemed like an eternity, although she enjoyed acting opposite O'Brien and thought that the photography and editing were superior to Universal's. As the teen-aged hero's girl friend who turns to bootlegger O'Brien, she had little footage, since the film was more concerned with the hero's tangles with the law and reformatory life than with his romantic involvement...¹ "

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Gangster and prison films in the 1930s had their junior counterparts. In this barely so-so example, an innocent boy does time in a harsh reformatory because he won't rat on an adult crook friend. Junior Durkin is the poor kid, Pat O'Brien is the crook – a bootlegger – and Bette Davis is his girl. ** "

CVMC video retail/rental website review:

"Following the death of his mother, soon-to-turn fifteen Jimmy (Junior Durkin) heads to the city to shack up with his aunt and uncle. There, a boarder gets the naive boy (Were kids really this dumb back then?) involved in a bootlegging scheme which lands the lad in a reform school that utilises child labour and strict forms of punishment as a means of "rehabilitation." When his fellow inmate and pal Shorty (Frank "Junior" Coghlan) falls sick,

¹ *The author can't even trouble to put a name to the film's lead actor*

Jimmy escapes to seek assistance. In the process, might a few wrongs be righted? Durkin died in a car accident three years after the making of this film; Jackie Coogan happened to be with him but managed to survive, yet not Jackie's dad who was also in the vehicle. Should be of interest to anyone who likes the early child/teen stars!

Rated NR: violence; mild adult themes [sic]
Categories: Boy Films, Adolescent, Child Abuse [sic], Drama

The sound is often faint and includes a noticeable static. Although watchable, this print is in rather bad condition, includes lots of speckling, thin vertical lines and blotching."

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Junior Coghlan:

"This cheerful, brown-eyed Irish-American was just about the most likeable boy actor of the late silent screen. His father, Frank Coghlan Sr, was a doctor, and his mother, Katherine, an actress. In early childhood he earned good money as a model, then followed his mother's profession to considerable effect. He hit the screen at the age of three, at \$3 a day.

Though Frank Junior could look sad and waifish if business required, he was irrepressibly optimistic by nature, and when the leading roles began to come they were of an active, self-reliant nature. In "**LET 'ER GO, GALL-AGHER**" he was an orphaned newsboy with his own furnished flat (an abandoned taxicab), who became the sidekick of an investigative journalist. Other rewarding parts came in "**RUBBER TIRES**", "**THE YANKEE CLIPPER**" (as a stowaway) and "**MARKED MONEY**". Sometimes, foreshadowing Mickey Rooney's persona of the mid-Thirties, he would be the rough street kid cast opposite the posh one, as he was with Philippe DeLacy in the military-school setting of "**SQUARE SHOULDERS**". The chemistry was perfect.

The 1931 Penrod was Leon Janney, and Frank Coghlan (as Junior was now beginning to be called) was his Sam. The homely potato-faced boy was growing into a personable youth, and his child career was over. He was in the 1932 serial "**LAST OF THE MOHICANS**", and played the four-year old Shirley Temple's elder brother in a series called "**FROLICS OF YOUTH**". He often cropped up in supporting parts in films of the Thirties, sometimes as a

jockey (for he was a skilled rider), sometimes as gang leader in opposition to **The Dead End Kids...**

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. Not to be confused with the 1938 "**JUVENILE COURT**" (with George Billings). We must be grateful after a fashion for the presence of Davis in the cast, because otherwise these sources would have ignored it altogether. The film is of interest to the archive, however, solely for the presence of Junior Coghlan, and we can brush the perfidious gangster's moll from our minds.

Junior Durkin was in fact 18, Two years previously he'd played Huckleberry Finn to Jackie Coogan's "**TOM SAWYER**", as well as in "**DERELICT**", "**RECAPTURED LOVE**", "**SANTA FE TRAIL**" and "**SHADOW OF THE LAW**". If he made any prior film appearances, they are not recorded. As has been mentioned above, he was killed in the same car crash that slew Coogan's father, in May 1935.

Coghlan was 16, and appeared in the serial "**LAST OF THE MOHICANS**" the same year. He'd been making films from the age of five. Holmstrom has listed the most notable ones, but others included "**A HARP IN HOCK**": and "**SLIDE, KELLY, SLIDE**" (both in 27).

With juvenile leads of 18 and 16, the film's interest even to us is only slight, but there may be a few actual boys on hand, uncredited, at the boys' reformatory. The thirties and forties saw a small slew of films exposing the inhumane conditions in reform schools, juvenile prisons and similar establishments, to which "**BOYS' TOWN**" was supposedly the answer. As we well know, the 1990s saw another slew of films, exposing the inhumane conditions in reform schools, children's homes and similar establishments, but it would take a more astute cultural observer than I to draw a credible connection between these two outbursts of social conscience, and the deeper anxieties underlying them.

See the similar "**BOY SLAVES**", and subject index under **PRISON / BORSTAL / REFORM SCHOOL**.