

Islands in the Stream

US : 1977 : dir. Franklin J Schaffner : Paramount : 105 min
 prod: Peter Bart & Max Palevsky : scr: Denne Bart Petitclerk : dir.ph.: Fred J Koenekamp
Michael-James Wixted; Brad Savage
 George C Scott; David Hemmings; Gilbert Roland; Susan Tyrrell; Richard Evans;
 Claire Bloom; Hart Bochner; Julius W. Harris

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∅ M ∅	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Davey's (Michael-James Wixted) love-hate relationship with Dad is the pivot of the first half of the film, but a swordfish soon spears them together.
Source for all screen grabs: indeterminate website

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Film version of Hemingway novel about an island-dwelling sculptor and his three sons begins well but falls apart completely in the final third. Still one of the better adaptations of this author, with one of Scott's best performances. Shot in Panavision. **1/2 "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above, but adding:

"...The background projection in the fishing scenes is very transparent!"

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"On a Bahamian island in 1940, an expatriate American artist welcomes his

three sons and reflects on the futility of life. Shapeless semi-autobiographical fragments culminating unpersuasively in an action climax of heroic self-sacrifice. A film on which no expense has been spared and which doesn't work at all."

"It is all too awful for words"

– Benny Green, **Punch**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"The screen never did better by the Hemingway ethos than in this version of his posthumous novel – "too painful" to be published in his lifetime – but unless you're in sympathy you're likely to have trouble with it, for it has little else to offer. Even George C Scott can't get away with this hollow man, ignoring the war on the Bahamas and being visited by young sons and ex-wife Claire Bloom before deciding to go off and become a hero. David Hemmings plays a hard-drinking chum. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"This film version of Hemingway's posthumously published novel is impressive in spots, despite the problem of making the Hemingway mystique palatable for current audiences. A selfish artist (Scott), secure in his self-imposed isolation, finds his peace of mind shattered by the arrival of his three sons. After one boy is killed in war, Scott rejoins the human race and tries to help a family of fleeing refugees. **1/2 "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"This introspective movie version of Ernest Hemingway's novel begins well, but fails to gain any momentum. Scott plays the artist-hero – a self-exiled sculptor whose marriages have failed – with gruff macho spirit. But the film doesn't do justice to the Hemingway prose, and the story drifts along with no point of view. ** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"The strongest thing about this ponderous movie is the redoubtable George C Scott. Basing the character upon Hemingway himself as much as upon the Hemingway hero of this

late novel, Scott contrives mostly to play Scott, and what makes his performance so interesting is the tension between conscientious craftsmanship and an intelligence too keen to take seriously the whole charade of acting. Set in the Caribbean in 1940, this film about father and sons uncomfortably mixes reflection and action: ageing artist comes to terms with life (during sons' school holidays) and death (heroic self-sacrifice). Scott performs the Hemingway clichés with vigorous conviction, whether trying to catch the big fish, idealising the memory of his first wife, or displaying gruff affection for the obligatory rummy friend. Mostly it's heavy-going though, especially Schaffner's direction, which languishes in the tropical sun as it did with "PAPILLON".

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"While too introspective a story to be really compelling screen drama, Franklin J Schaffner's film of "ISLANDS IN THE STREAM" is at least a proper valedictory to the era epitomised by author Ernest Hemingway. Hawaiian locations provide a superb physical backdrop (simulating the Bahamas, circa 1940) for the production. George C Scott's semi-Hemingway pivotal character lives on a remote island, to which travel his three sons by broken marriages, as the world moves into the globe-shrinking holocaust of World War II. One can admire and follow the film without ever really getting enthusiastic about it, because of the way in which it has been written, acted and directed. There's a pervading sensitivity and restrained respect for the moral antiquity which is herein represented."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

" "ISLANDS IN THE STREAM" is really two movies in one. The first part is an affecting and effective look at a broken family. The second is a cheap action-adventure. Thomas Hudson (George C Scott), a famous painter and sculptor, lives the life of a recluse in the Bahamas. His only companions are his seagoing crew of Joseph and Eddy. One summer his three sons Tom, Andy and Davy arrive to see him for the first time in four years. Rated "PG" for violence and profanity [sic] *** "



Top: A hammer-head shark gets too friendly while the three brothers are swimming. The younger ones scramble into the boat but Tom (18) is too far out and has to be rescued by David Hemmings with a gun that fires like a Howitzer. Bye bye shark.

Bottom: Brad Savage (left) and Michael-James Wixted look on as their father finds the corpse of a young seaman washed up on the shore after a U-boat has sunk his vessel. Note the resemblance between the faces.



Various shots of Davey (Wixted), the more troubled of the three sons but Dad's notional favourite. The website these grabs were derived from mistakenly identified him as Brad Savage. Savage was 10, Wixted 15/16.

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Savage:

"Brad Savage, a beefy child, was a bit like a dark, curly-haired Kurt Russell, with sharp blue eyes in a pudgy face. He started his stage career playing Auntie Mame's nephew in a touring production. On screen Brad usually played uncomplicated, cheerful kid brothers, but when for a change he played an elder brother (to Ronnie Scribner) in **"SALEM'S LOT"** he found himself being an involuntary blood donor to his junior, who by an unfortunate accident had become a boy vampire. Once bitten, Brad of course became one too. After **"MAYDAY! MAYDAY!"** (81), he was one of the high school guerrillas in John Milius' egregious **"RED DAWN"** (84)."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies of the Seventies". "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times reviews:

"George C Scott is excellent here, playing a fisherman and sculptor who sits out the Second World War in the Bahamas. The story of his relationship with his wife and sons¹ is rather self-important, but the film looks good and Jerry Goldsmith's score is one of his best. Contains some swearing.² *** "

"The second of the double bill of Hemingway-based films is a drama starring George C Scott. A US sculptor retires to the Bahamas and an idyllic lifestyle. But he is then drawn into the Second World War. *** "

¹ Though not necessarily in that order

² It contains three violent deaths, drunkenness, a prostitute, and graphic scenes of hunting a swordfish. Ahm, but let's watch out for that swearing, eh?

“Ernest Hemingway's story of an artist living in the Bahamas just before the Second World War.”

What's on TV note:

“Based on Hemingway's unfinished novel. A famous sculptor, played by George C Scott, is visited by his sons and is forced to reconsider the way he has lived his life.”

“A man enjoying solitary life on an island is visited by his sons.”

TV Quick note:

“Drama. A middle-aged sculptor takes stock of his life when his three sons visit.”

Fred Koenekamp's cinematography received an Academy Award nomination, although the nomination might as well have gone to the gorgeous Hawaiian coastline that did service for the Bahamas. That “Bounty commercial” backdrop interferes grievously with all the navel-gazing and marital post-mortems which consume so much of the dialogue. Bergman on the beach would not be a winner either.

To coin an idiotic football cliché, it's a film of two halves – the first concerning Thomas Hudson's rapprochement with his estranged sons from two marriages on a summer holiday visit, the second with a brief surprise visit from his first ex-wife (Claire Bloom), to inform him that his eldest son, Tom, has been killed over France. The hair-shirt he chooses to don for his son's death involves smuggling Jewish refugees to Cuba. These two halves rub awkwardly together, and the heroics of the latter are as unconvincing as the existential emptiness of his life in the former. It has distinct echoes of “**THE AFRICAN QUEEN**”, though its characters are less engaging, and as a tribute to Hemingway it works less well than “**THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA**” [qv] which was also a flawed film.

Naturally it's the first hour of the film that concerns us here. Tom (18), Davey (14) and Andrew (10) arrive on a Bahamas where the only woman in sight is a blousy prostitute and the only black, Joseph (Julius Harris), is a hand on dad's boat. Dad also has a brawling alcoholic sidekick in the shape of David Hemmings (badly miscast). Within this egregiously masculine environment – John Ford springs to mind, and particularly “**DONOVAN'S REEF**” (63) – the three boys work out their various relationships with dad. Tom and Andy are the fondest (“Is ten too **old** to kiss your father goodnight..?”) while Davey bears him a grudge for the way he mishandled their mother (“He hasn't changed, he's still a mean bastard”). A harmless pillow fight early on (one of Ford's bar-room brawls writ small) ends with Davey furiously pummelling at Hudson, who of course only admires him the more for it. He takes the boys swordfishing, and Davey is the one to make a catch, struggling with the huge fish for three hours, till hands and feet are bleeding, rather than concede defeat in his father's sight. The fish does finally evade capture, but father and son, in the mysterious fashion of menfolk, have bonded again in the process.

Because the film's point of view is that of Scott's character, the sons (and wife) are superficially drawn, corporeal phantoms from the life he abandoned, but the script does not sufficiently define the personality at the centre of the emotional void. We do not see him seriously engaged with his art, nor with the sea he professes to revere in place of a god, nor even greatly with himself, although he reports back to us occasionally that he's been brooding a long while on this or that. Scott's performance is both understated and unengaged, so the film drifts downstream without an anchor until it founders on the rocks of dramatic contrivance (Scott's self-destruction as he tries to evade capture by the Cuban coastguard). His dying reflection – "I know now there is no one thing that is true. It is all true" – is essentially meaningless, and nothing that has preceded it convinces us of the validity of one man's existence on his own terms, free from the constraints of personal ties. If this is the best apology we can contrive for the Hemingway ethos, it does not hold water at all.

Michael-James Wixted (Davey) was 16 in 1977, but presumably 15 when the principal shooting was made. *The Moving Picture Boy* cites only four other titles for him: "**LOST FLIGHT**" (70), "**THE WACKY ZOO OF MORGAN CITY**" (70), "**THE MIRACLE**" (c70) and the TV mini-series "**QB VII**" (74), but he also appeared in the lamentable 1975 TV series "**The Swiss Family Robinson**", which did not stick around very long. [Brad Savage](#) was 10, and when he was not being feasted on by his dead kid brother in Stephen King's satisfying vampire opus "**SALEM'S LOT**" (79), he was being "obnoxious" in Disney's "**NO DEPOSIT, NO RETURN**" (76), or cute in Disney's "**THE APPLE DUMPLING GANG**" (74). He was later in the obscure TV series "**Aloha Paradise**". The Jewish refugee family at the end have a young daughter, but she is not identified by name, does not speak a line, and is not listed in the credits.

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