

The Marriage Playground

US : 1929 : dir. Lothar Mendes : Paramount : 70 min
 prod: : scr: J Walter Rubin & Doris Anderson : dir.ph.: Victor Milner
Philippe deLacy; Little Mitzi [d] ; *Anita Louise; Billy Seay; Ruby Parsley*
 Donald Smith; Jocelyn Lee; Fredric March; Mary Brian; Kay Francis; Lilyan Tashman;
 Huntley Gordon; William Austin; Seena Owen; Joan Standing; Maude Turner Gordon; David
 Newell; Armand Kaliz; Gordon Demain

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L to R: Fredric March, Mary Brian, Philippe deLacy; Anita Louise; Little Mitzi; Billy Seay and Ruby Parsley
 Source: indeterminate website

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Children of divorced rich parents wander round Europe in a group. Slightly unusual drama of its day; sound technique very thin. Scr: J Walter Rubin & Doris Anderson, from the novel "The Children" by Edith Wharton; ph: Victor Milner"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"An American traveller in Italy befriends a group of children whose parents have remarried and have little time for their brood. The eldest daughter (Mary) now has the mother role and falls in love with the American, who already has a fiancée somewhere. Sympathetic film with fine performances from Brian and March. Also a good combination of comedy and drama. **½"



They seem about to break into a chorus of "Raindrops on Roses and Whiskers on Kittens..."

Source: indeterminate website

The Films of Fredric March review:

"Opened at the Paramount Theatre, New York, December 13, 1929. March then found himself cast in a better-than-average picture, and in a role which highlighted all his most warm and winning qualities. As a young American traveling in Italy in **"THE MARRIAGE PLAYGROUND"**, he befriends a group of children whose previously-divorced parents have married each other, and who flit about Europe leaving the children more or less on their own in charge of the eldest of the consolidated brood, Mary Brian. At eighteen, Miss Brian is doing her level best to serve as substitute mother to her brood, half of whom are not even related to her, and it taxes her ingenuity and patience, to say nothing of the fact that she is pretty and at an age when a girl seeks romance. Getting scant help from her elders, she does the best she can.

When March comes along, she responds, as do the children, to his kindness and concern, and shortly finds herself in love with him. But the man of her dreams (don't they always?) has a fiancée in Switzerland or someplace, and Miss

Brian seems to be in for a bad case of unrequited love until March finally comes around, drops his fiancée (who wasn't much in the first place), and claims the "little mother" for his own, thus sending 1929 audiences home sighing happily¹.

The film was adapted from an Edith Wharton novel "The Children", and was several cuts above the usual film fare in its handling of character and atmosphere, in line with the truism that even the sloppiest movie made from a good writer's book will display its literary origin despite the movie hacks' best efforts.

The critics were, for the most part, kind, and March came in for a goodly share of praise, as did Mary Brian, Lilyan Tashman (who played the bubble-headed mother as only Miss Tashman could) and such child stars of the more precocious type [*sic*], for instance Philippe de Lacy, whose winsome face popped up in a number of films of the period². Kay

¹ Or yawning wretchedly, as the case may be.

² ie: he'd made more films than Fredric March had.



"...such child stars of the more precocious type, for instance Philippe de Lacy, whose winsome face popped up in a number of films of the period..."

Source: indeterminate website



Terry (Philippe deLacy) plays the "little mother" to his step-sister Zinnie (Little Mitzi)...

Wait a moment, that can't be right, surely? No, he must be playing the "big brother", **that** must be it. Phew...

Source: indeterminate website

Francis was also along for the ride, though this was before her top-liner days, and her role, while displaying her attractively, was essentially peripheral. There were authentic human values in the picture, an appealing March-Brian romance, and workmanlike direction by Lothar Mendes. All in all, March could term his appearance here an advance. This was the last of his 1929 films, and in seven pictures in one year he had become widely and favourably known to the moviegoers."

Variety contemporary review:

"... A peach of a picture, well above the satisfaction-giving average of a program release and the kind that leaves a sense of full-hearted human pleasure behind it. Can be booked in safely and exploited with confidence. It's packed with children, amusingly impudent, touchingly warm youngsters who will carry a tremendous appeal to the great home-keeping, family-loving American public. In the midst of the children, and for this reason, as for others, suggestive of Thomas Meighan, although in no respect similar as to looks, is Fredric March, sharing billing with Mary Brian and getting a great break. A couple of pictures like this one and March will romp upward pronto. Miss Brian is splendid... it is a production characterised by quiet, unostentatious elegance."

The New York Times contemporary review:

"... Although it has spasmodic lapses and the youngsters are a trifle too precocious [*sic*] even for this generation, it is quite an intelligent production with well-woven strands of humour and sympathy, pathos and an appealing romance. The brunt of the acting falls on Fredric March and Mary Brian, who are thoroughly believable in their roles."

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "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", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]



The stills photographer was doing his winsome best, that much is certain. Source: indeterminate website

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Philippe deLacy:

"Romantic Philippe of the curly brown hair and hazel eyes had a painfully romantic start to his life. His French mother and five brothers and sisters having been killed by a German shell when he was two days old, he was kept alive by his grandmother in a cellar in the devastated village. There, with the old woman on the point of death, they were found by an American nurse called Edith DeLacy, who adopted Philippe and took him back with her to the U.S.A.

Things now cheered up. Miss DeLacy had show-biz connections, and one day when they were in a Hollywood studio watching Geraldine Farrar filming in "**THE RIDDLE: WOMAN**", Farrar and her director noticed the beautiful child and co-opted him into the film. He never looked back – or not for many years.

Philippe in his patrician mood had something of the haughtiness of Freddie Bartholomew, and they both played Garbo's son in screen versions of "**ANNA KARENINA**" (the 1927 one was entitled "**LOVE**"). But compared with the rather inhibited Bartholomew, DeLacy is positively flirting with his screen mother, and there is a much warmer relationship between them.

Philippe DeLacy made no more film appearances [*after 1930, that is*], but stayed in the entertainment business. In 1955 he directed "**CINERAMA HOLIDAY**", and by

the 1980s was a director of a Hollywood TV station."

Bizarrely enough, this was remade as recently as 1990, calling itself "THE CHILDREN", with Ben Kingsley in the Fredric March role, though in the vindictive spirit of the latter part of the century the story of course became a study of middle-aged male infatuation. Philippe de Lacy, described in The Films of Fredric March review as "a child star of the more precocious type" - there's that word again - "whose winsome face popped up in a number of films of the period", was 12. He would feature with March again the following year in a somewhat similar storyline for "SARAH AND SON", but had done most of his work in the silent period. Among his better-known titles were "PETER PAN" ('25), "BEAU GESTE" ('26), "MOTHER MACHREE" ('27) and "SQUARE SHOULDERS" ('29).

"Little Mitzi", as she's billed here, or Mitzi Green, was 9, in her first film appearance. From a vaudeville family background, she was signed to a contract by Paramount, and over the next five years or so established herself as a premiere film brat - the female counterpart to Jackie Searl - in titles such as "SKIPPY" ('31) or "FINN AND HATTIE" ('30), though she also played more winsomely in "TOM SAWYER" ('30), "HUCKLEBERRY FINN" ('31), "LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE" ('32) and others. She became one of those child players whom some adult stars, fearful of upstaging, refused to work with. Nothing further is known of Billy Seay or the others named.

See "THE CHILDREN" ('90), and subject index under SIBLING HOUSEHOLDS for other parentless "broods".