

One Good Turn

UK : 1954 : dir. John Paddy Carstairs : GFD / Two Cities : 90 min
 prod: Maurice Cowan : scr: Maurice Cowan, John Paddy Carstairs & Ted Willis
 : dir.ph.: Jack Cox

Norman Wisdom (shudder); Joan Rice; Shirley Abicair; Thora Hird; William Russell;
 Richard Caldicott

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	≠	M	☺	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5916	2	3	0	1,012	-	7	7	7	7	No	Oct 2002

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Minor musical vehicle for man-on-the-street comedian Wisdom, putting forth such homey tunes as *"Take a Step in the Right Direction"*.
 ** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"An orphan stays on to become an odd job man, and tries to raise money to buy an old car¹. The star's second comedy is an almost unmitigated disaster, disjointed and depending too much on pathos."

[no listing in "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"]

TV Times review:

"This was Norman Wisdom's second starring role and the eagerly-awaited follow-up to **"TROUBLE IN STORE"**. It is less

successful at harnessing his very visual style of comedy, but there are two side-splitting sequences to savour – one when Norman inadvertently conducts an orchestra with the candy-floss stick he is desperately trying to detach from his fingers and another when he is confronted by a wasp in a railway carriage.
 *** "

¹ No, he tries to raise money to buy a brand new – toy – car as promised to one of the orphans.

Not to be confused with a 1931 Laurel & Hardy short of the same name. It's strange but true – there are *still* people roaming free on our streets who find Norman Wisdom funny. More chilling yet is the thought that in the fifties a large contingent of the British public found him funny. Personally, I never thought comic imbeciles remotely amusing. Stan Laurel's simpleton was only tolerable because it was twinned and contrasted with the bluster and self-importance of Hardy – and Laurel never made the cardinal error of grinning and hooting at his own slapstick antics, which Wisdom was always prone to do. It's a matter of taste, but one does wonder whether anyone suggested to Wisdom he'd fare better with a regular straight man than as a solo comedian. America had Jerry Lewis (shudder), and many European countries had their own working class buffoon types, but usually they were part of a double act. Wisdom, unlike say George Formby, or later Benny Hill, tried too hard to wring pathos from his character – “Don't Laugh at Me 'Cos I'm a Fool” – though audiences were not nearly so sentimental in the fifties and sixties as they had been in Chaplin's day. He had a tolerable enough singing voice, and perhaps a lighter touch in the comedy would have suited him better.

Some will find his films of nostalgic interest nonetheless, for the artefacts and street scenes of 1954 Britain, or for the gallery of British television familiars who pop up in supporting roles. Here he's a handyman at an orphanage where the trustees (heartless middle class speculators) decide to shut it down and sell the land for industrial development. The film closes with the orphans (none of whom are named in the credits) manning the battlements and bombarding the trustees with flour bombs, china plates and so forth until they see the error of their ways and agree to let the orphanage remain.

But the main thread of the plot concerns Norman's promise to buy a motorised car from a high street toyshop for one of the smaller boys, Tommy, whose aunt failed to arrive and take him on a day trip. Unable to get an advance on his wages he tries various schemes, including a night job walking the West End as a sandwich man, and having himself hypnotised so he can stay three rounds in a fairground boxing ring. Joining the orphans on an excursion to Brighton, he loses his trousers on the train (having caused general annoyance to the other adult passengers) and escapes arrest by merging with the London to Brighton marathon walk, which of course he wins. There's a subplot concerning his unrequited love for Joan Rice, and several “hilarious” chase episodes, including one where he's pursued by police car in the motorised toy car he's finally bought for Tommy – cue plenty of obvious back projection and cronic mugging from Wisdom.

The “side-splitting” setpiece where he's mistaken for a foreign conductor and ushered in to conduct a philharmonic with his candyfloss stick is a piece of warmed-up Marx Bros schtick, and the business with the wasp in the railway carriage is just flatly embarrassing. It's very easy to imagine comics of the twenties or thirties – W.C. Fields, Harry Langdon, Harpo Marx – performing the same routines, but Wisdom's comedy all seems to have an undercurrent of class snobbery. He constantly makes a fool of himself in the presence of stiff-necked middle class types who clearly regard him as an oik, and the audience are expected to take delight in the discomfiture of his “social betters”. That class element was present in much American farce too (the Marx brothers particularly) but is more noticeable in British comedy, where the class division was more pronounced.

None of the other children (22 in all) have any significant business on screen – “Sing us a song, Norman!” – so the film is only of minor interest to us, though it has to be said the kids-v-grown ups battle at the end is better done than the comparable school revolt scene in “**BOTTOMS UP!**”. Wisdom, as you know, gave his name to the teeth most of us had to have surgically removed. His comedy is about as funny as a bad dose of toothache.

See subject index under **COMEDY**, [ORPHANS / ADOPTION / CHILDREN'S HOMES](#), **SEASIDE TRIPS & HOLIDAYS** and **TOYS / DOLLS / MODELS**.