

Our Mother's House

UK : 1967 : dir. Jack Clayton : Heron / Filmways / M-G-M : 105 min
 prod: Martin Ransohoff & Jack Clayton : scr: Jeremy Brooks & Haya Harareet : dir.ph.:
Louis Sheldon-Williams; Margaret Brooks; Pamela Franklin; John Gugolka; Mark Lester;
Sarah Nicholls; Gustav Henry; Parnum Wallace
 Dirk Bogarde; Yootha Joyce; Claire Davidson; Anthony Nicholls; Annette Carell; Gerald Sim;
 Edina Ronay; Diana Ashley; Garfield Morgan; Faith Kent; John Arnatt; Jack Silk

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∅ M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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The compassionate Hubert (Louis Sheldon-Williams) grows concerned over Gertie (Sarah Nicholls), her head shorn as a punishment on the posthumous "instructions" of mother.
 Source: indeterminate

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Children's scheme to carry on normally when their mother dies works well until their worthless father shows up. Director Clayton gets fine performances from all in an offbeat film. ***"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"When mother dies, seven children, who don't want to go to an orphanage, bury her in the garden. Then their ne'er-do-well father turns up. Unpleasant and rather



Four more little Hooks and a big one: Jiminee's teacher (left) shows up at the house demanding to speak to their mother over the absence from school of Gertie. Estranged father Dirk Bogarde arrives at the door just in time to prevent the secret spilling out.

The children left to right – Dunstan (John Gogolka), Jiminee's runaway friend Louis (Parnum Wallace), Jiminee (Mark Lester), Elsa (Margaret Brooks) and Diana (Pamela Franklin).

Source: indeterminate

boring melodrama, too silly to have much dramatic impact.¹

"The children begin to display an alarming variety of accents...² and when Dirk Bogarde enters, doing a rich Bill Sykes act as the long lost wicked father to a predominantly genteel family, the whole structure collapses." - Tom Milne

The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985 listing:

"Frightened of being sent to an orphanage, seven children bury their dead mother. Cert. "X" "

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"When mother dies – in a decaying Victorian house in Croydon – the kids (including Pamela Franklin and Mark Lester) bury the body in the garden, sack the daily (Yootha Joyce) and thus control their destinies till a man turns up claiming to be their father. He is Dirk Bogarde, reprising his role in "THE SERVANT", but then the whole situation is similar to that in "LA CAIDA". * "

¹ Halliwell never did like children much

² Perhaps because they had an alarming variety of fathers, dolt!

The M-G-M Story – the Complete History of Fifty Roaring Years – review:

" "OUR MOTHER'S HOUSE" was a movie unlike any other. Dirk Bogarde (pictured with Mark Lester, Margaret Brooks, Gustav Henry and Sarah Nicholls) scored a triumph of subtle menace as the drop-out father who returned to his seedy London home to find the children living alone, pretending their mother hadn't died. These kids – Pamela Franklin, Louis Sheldon Williams, John Gogolka and Parnum Wallace were the others – carried most of the footage, including violently emotional scenes, like Old Vic veterans. Jack Clayton, who makes them seldom but well, produced and directed but the depressing tone of the drama, scripted by Jeremy Brooks and Haya Harareet from John Glog's novel, restricted returns to MGM and Martin Ransohoff's Filmways to less than the film's due."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89

review:

"Entertaining British entry concerns a group of children, the eldest being 13³, who decide to conceal their invalid mother's death and carry on as a family unit. Enter wandering no-good

³ The ages of none of the children are mentioned anywhere in the film.

dad (Bogarde) and the plot takes on shadings of the unexpected. *** ”



Above: Hubert's hopes for his new dad begin to sour as he comes to know him better.

Right: Dunstan and Jiminee dress up and put on a show for their new guest – Jiminee's runaway classmate Louis (centre)

Below: The first morning, and Charlie takes charge of the breakfast arrangements – much to the annoyance of Elsa, who feels her place usurped.





The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Brilliant, intriguing, macabre, but ultimately unsatisfying (because too many questions are left unanswered) cross between **"LORD OF THE FLIES"** and **"THE SERVANT"**. Seven children hide their mother's death, bury her in the garden, commune with her by séance, allow themselves to be invaded by Dirk Bogarde⁴ and Yootha Joyce, and there's plenty more (too much) plot to come. Producer-director Jack Clayton shied away from the whole hog, however, and this 1967 creepie only crawls. 33 "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Sombre, sinister drama of seven children living together after their mother dies, but suddenly threatened by their long-missing father – a performance of great menace by Dirk Bogarde. The entire movie was shot on location at a real, rambling old house in Croydon, Surrey, the gloom of which is well captured by director Jack Clayton and adds much weight to the doomy atmosphere. Pretty Sarah Nicholls, who plays one of the children, later made an adult career as actress Phoebe Nicholls. ** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"**"OUR MOTHER'S HOUSE"**, a film about children but not to be considered in any way a kiddie pic, is a well-made look at family life and parenthood by seven destitute moppets [sic]. Dirk Bogarde stars in an excellent performance as their long-lost legal father, who is not the total heel he seems; nor, for that matter, are the kids all angels. Julian Gloag's novel has been adapted into a good screenplay which develops neatly the accelerated maturing of children after the death of their long-ailing mother (Annette Carell). Latter, object of adulation, is buried in the back yard, eldest child Margaret Brooks imposing her belief on the others that this will eliminate orphanage fears. To all except the eldest son, Louis Sheldon Williams, she conceals the existence of a father, Bogarde."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times reviews:

"Dirk Bogarde enjoys himself in a rich character part as a cockney rogue who returns to his family after a three-year absence to discover his seven children living on their own following the death of their mother. The children, including Mark Lester ("**OLIVER!**") and Pamela Franklin, have a field day in this dark and entertaining film, which director Jack Clayton, alas, struggles to make convincing. *** "

⁴ Come again..?

“Drama starring Dirk Bogarde. When their mother dies, seven children bury her body in the back yard to avoid being sent to an orphanage. They then carry on as if nothing has happened, but their independence is threatened by an unexpected caller. *** ”

“A weird and often chilling horror story about some children who bury their mother’s dead body in the garden and carry on as if she were still alive. Then shifty cockney Dirk Bogarde shows up, claiming to be their errant father. Set in a derelict house in Croydon, it’s like a rehash of Henry James’s *“The Turn of the Screw”*, which director Jack Clayton had previously filmed in 1961 as **“THE INNOCENTS”**. Bogarde and Clayton believed they had failed honourably, but Italian director Luchino Visconti thought it was a “beautiful” film and hired Bogarde for **“THE DAMNED”** and **“DEATH IN VENICE”** on the strength of it. *** ”

Cast:

Charlie HookDirk Bogarde
Elsa Hook**Margaret Brooks**
Hubert Hook**Louis Sheldon-Williams**
Diana Hook**Pamela Franklin**
Dunstan Hook**John Gualka**
Jiminee Hook**Mark Lester**
Gerty Hook**Sarah Nicholls**
Willy Hook**Gustav Henry**
Mrs QuayleYootha Joyce
Miss BaileyClaire Davidson
Mr HalbertAnthony Nicholls
Louis**Parnum Wallace**
DoreenEdina Ronay

Given an X certificate
The

The revelation of the film is little Mark Lester as Jiminee, giving the one authentic acting performance of his career. In "OLIVER!" he was as decorous and lifeless as flock wallpaper, in "EYEWITNESS", "NIGHT HAIR CHILD", "WHATEVER HAPPENED TO AUNTIE ROO?" and others, his acting could be described as mediocre at best, and in "CROSSED SWORDS" (ie: "The Prince and the Pauper") he was flatly awful, not to say hideously miscast. But here he stammers and stutters, dresses in drag (aping Louis' mother), does the twist in his pyjamas and is a boisterous, cheerful, irrepressible child. Whatever happened to that spirit and personality through all his post-"OLIVER!" starring vehicles? The answer would seem to be that he grew progressively more self-conscious before the cameras, withdrew entirely into himself, mouthed his lines mechanically, and shook his pretty tresses. His parents didn't even send him to a voice coach to rectify that leaden London accent he carried with him. Mark Lester was stunning to look at in his bloom of puberty, but his personality barely registered on the scale at all. What this film shows is that there was an actor inside of him, but it required a more attentive director – and better-written parts – to tease it out.

Briefly, it is an essay on family power trips, and on the fallout from shattered illusions. When mother goes to her reward in the opening moments of the film, Elsa as the eldest of seven quickly assumes the mantle of authority. As the initial emotional shock subsides, the dread of being placed in an orphanage "where they whip you with real whips" resolves the children to brush the problem under the carpet. Or bury it in the back garden at any rate. Mother's things are reverently transferred to the garden shed, or "tabernacle" where by means of nightly "mother times" Elsa is able to consolidate her power over the others. Young Gerty (Sarah Nicholls) is the first to bear the full brunt of this when she begs a ride on a passerby's motor scooter, giving him a peck on the cheek as he delivers her home. Condemned as a harlot, "mother" orders her hair to be shorn off in punishment. Hubert, the eldest boy, is horrified at this cruelty, and when Gerty goes into shock, but Elsa will not allow a doctor to be brought to the house for her, Hubert secretly writes to their mother's estranged husband Charlie (Bogarde), whose address he finds on a will. In other words, Charlie does not arrive out of the blue, he is summoned into the situation (and welcomed with relief) by Hugh.

Charlie, again instantaneously, usurps Elsa's position as head of the household, which she keenly resents. The other children warm to him more readily, even Dunstan (John Gugolka), who has thus far been fulminating like a pulpit-bashing evangelist. The second daughter Diana (Pamela Franklin), conceives a flirtatious fondness for him which verges on deep waters indeed. Young Jiminee (Mark Lester, affecting a nervous stutter quite well) who has been forging mother's signature on her family allowance cheques, is now suborned by Charlie into doing some other useful forging - giving Charlie power of attorney, for example. No explanation is given why Charlie is so assertively working class, yet his brood are impeccably well-spoken and living in a large detached house. Equally common cleaning woman Mrs Quayle (Yootha Joyce), who had been dismissed by Elsa for being overly inquisitive about mother's whereabouts, now reinsinuates herself into the house via Charlie, and begins to blackmail him with what she suspects. Before long (as in "THE SERVANT") his dissolute side comes to the fore, and he begins to treat the kids dismissively, curtly (although comparing him to Bill Sykes is going it a bit).

When the children believe Charlie is about to sell the house from under them they force a confrontation with him. Drunk, he chooses the moment to disabuse them of their reverence for mother. None of them are his legal children, he announces, each of them bastards fathered by the various men mother would bring back to the house. Her later zealous conversion to religion is what finally drove him to desert her. He burns a photograph of mother to drive home his point, and Diana (not Elsa) clubs him to death with a poker. The film ends as the children troop out of the house finally to notify the authorities.

Director Clayton failed to make the film convincing chiefly because he took a patronising view of children and their private behaviour (the kind of patronising view which dubs them all

"moppets"). He hadn't the empathy of (say) a Truffaut in order to draw compelling natural performances from his young cast, who in any case perhaps were recruited from the wrong social caste to start with. Louis Sheldon Williams? Parnum Wallace? Gustav Henry? Where were these names plucked from? The weakest performance among the children comes from John Gugolka, too overwrought as Dunstan. Pamela Franklin and Sarah Nicholls are fine, Louis Sheldon Williams a quietly complaisant character, and the most generous of them, and young Mark Lester, only 9 here, gives one of the better performances of his indifferent career (much better than "OLIVER!" for a start). Pamela Franklin had already worked with Clayton on "THE INNOCENTS". Her other films include "THE LION", "THE NANNY" and "THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE". Weak though it is in many ways, this remains an important child-centred film, and as such is recommended.

[The scene with Bogarde taking the kids on an outing was shot at Crystal Palace park lake, when more of the stone dinosaurs were still in situ than remain today.]

The storyline is not such an unusual one. See subject index under **SIBLING HOUSEHOLDS** for at least half a dozen comparable titles, such as "**THE CEMENT GARDEN**" and "**LA FRACTURE DU MYOCARDE**", and under **DEATH, LARGE BROODS, ORPHANS / ADOPTION / CHILDREN'S HOMES** and **STEPMOTHERS / STEPFATHERS**.