

Spare the Rod

UK : 1961 : dir. Leslie Norman¹ : British Lion / Bryanston / Weyland : 93 min
 prod: Victor Lyndon : scr: John Cresswell : dir.ph.: Paul Beeson
[Richard O'Sullivan; Jeremy Bulloch](#).....
 Max Bygraves; Geoffrey Keen; Donald Pleasence; Betty McDowall; Eleanor Summerfield;
 Claire Marshall; Mary Merrall; Peter Reynolds; Jean Anderson; Aubrey Woods;
 Rory McDermott

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	KBytes	Ω □ ∅ Z ♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3336a	2½	7	0	80	7 7 3 7 7	Yes	1998

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Bygraves is an idealistic teacher in a tough London school trying to communicate with pupils and cope with the system. OK drama. **1½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"At an East End school, a novice master wins the confidence of tough pupils. A British "BLACKBOARD JUNGLE", paving the way for "TO SIR WITH LOVE"; not exci-ting on its own account."

Films & Filming - July 1961 - review:

"The screen adaptation of Michael Croft's novel has had a chequered career. Several years ago a treatment was submitted to the British Board of Film Censors, whose warning light was sufficient to indicate too much trouble ahead for the producers. Since then there have been changes at the Board, and the public mind has become more liberal. But this film as it now stands, with a script by John Cresswell, is substantially different from the earlier version, which contained what the censors regarded as an excessive emphasis on the physical

gratification obtained by some teachers in administering corporal punishment to boys.

"SPARE THE ROD" concerns itself with a reflection of conditions as they exist today in an East End of London school. It is one of those dreadfully old-fashioned buildings, looking like a left-over from the worst Church of England schools. The kids are tough, and the small group of teachers, terrified of their charges, can only maintain discipline and a few hopes of imparting a modicum of knowledge, by being one-up on the kids.

Into this atmosphere comes a new, ill-equipped young teacher, with the naive idea that tough kids can be tamed by sympathy and understanding. He clashes with the sadistic carpentry master, slowly and painfully breaks through to his charges, but is eventually forced to resign because a weak and disinterested headmaster eventually sides with his old staff against him.

It could be a depressingly cynical story. Our education system is bad enough without having salt rubbed into the wounds. But the script, aided by Leslie Norman's down-to-earth direction of a score of cheeky Cockney faces, injects a kind of natural humour which for all the staginess of some of the classroom sequences gives the drama what so many current British films lack - credibility of character. Too many of the "new wave" films finish up by putting improbable characters in more than probable settings. The people in "SPARE THE ROD" ring true, even though

¹ father of film critic Barry Norman

Worrell Street School does not represent the best - or worst! - of British schools today.

Donald Pleasance gives yet another wonderfully perceptive performance, this time as the weak-willed head. Geoffrey Keen, whose work can so often be overlooked by the very nature of its subtlety, catches just the right blend of "good-humoured brutality". I was not altogether happy with Betty McDowall as the all too pretty mistress who makes a discreet pass at the new master. She really did seem in the wrong school, or otherwise too dedicated to be true.

And sad to report that what might have been a really outstanding British film has been marred beyond redemption by its casting for the lead. Max Bygraves is quite ineffective as the ex-Navy master with a heart of solid oak, and however much Norman shoots around him, time and again the camera picks him up standing as though the rest of him was solid oak as well.

Inevitably this will be compared with Hollywood's "BLACKBOARD JUNGLE". I believe the comparison is favourable. On almost every point the British picture gives a more honest, more human reflection of the depressingly inadequate way Western communities are looking after their unruly young. Of course, everyone connected with the teaching profession will say about the film, "It's not true". I believe it is."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"New young teacher faces obstacles in trying to break through to a group of tough kids. **½"

Sixties British Cinema comments:

"James Clavell's "TO SIR WITH LOVE" (1966) takes us through a traditional cheery East End to a rundown school where Sidney Poitier faces the same problems with apathetic or sadistic colleagues, insolent youths and sexy young girls as Max Bygraves in "SPARE THE ROD" and Laurence Olivier in "TERM OF TRIAL"..."

" "TERM OF TRIAL", like "SERIOUS CHARGE" (1959) and "SPARE THE ROD" (1961) earlier, and "TO SIR, WITH LOVE" (1966) and "THREE INTO TWO WON'T

GO" (1969) later, explores the pitfalls confronting middle-aged men when dealing with sexually precocious *[sic]* teenagers."

Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television
review:

"This sincere 1961 effort to show the awfulness of the average English state school suffers from two central flaws. One is the rewriting of the script under threat of censorship so that the master who was to get a kick out of beating kids (Geoffrey Keen) is no longer seen to do so. The other is Max Bygraves as a timid new teacher who believes you can get through to children with kindness; he can't act and lets down the whole film. Otherwise, director Leslie Norman and ambivalent headmaster Donald Pleasance manage to save what could have been a disaster, given the central casting, and even turn it into a sympathetic and realistic piece of social comment whenever Norman can manage to shoot around his "star"."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995
review:

"Max Bygraves, who plays an idealistic schoolmaster in this story of life in a tough London school, staked nearly £50,000 of his own money to bring Michael Croft's controversial novel to the screen. One film company dropped the project when the censor threatened an "X" certificate, but Max stuck to his guns, determined to bring this angry swipe at corporal punishment before a viewing public.

No punches are pulled², even though the school's problems may look minor compared with some of those today. There are savage thrashings, administered mainly by hardliner Geoffrey Keen, and a riot in which pupils wreck furniture and windows and scream slogans of hate. "The final irony," said Michael Croft, when the film escaped with an "A" certificate, "is that the canings were more brutal, the attitude to teachers less sym-pathetic, than anything in the original script!"

The results ring true right to the final scene, helped by good performances from all the youngsters, headed by Claire Marshall and Richard O'Sullivan. *** "

² a spectacularly injudicious turn of phrase

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

From a novel by Michael Croft. Britain was unimpressed by this early plea against corporal punishment in schools - it was not until the 1980s that the cane was reluctantly discarded from state schools (and even now it's still kept in reserve by some private schools) although the European court failed to uphold one pupil's case that his civil rights had been infringed by being beaten. A more recent, certainly more effective, indictment of systematic arbitrary corporal punishment in comprehensives came in the excellent "**BIRTH OF A NATION**".

Richard O'Sullivan (here 18) had the rare distinction of owning the most-tanned backside in British cinema: he was caned in "**IT'S GREAT TO BE YOUNG**" ('56), caned again (or very nearly) in "**CARRY ON TEACHER**" ('58), and caned yet again in "**THE WEBSTER BOY**" ('61). Jeremy Bulloch was 16 (it's one of that kind of school film, evidently). Mainly seen on TV in series such as "**Billy Bunter**" and "**The Newcomers**", his films as a boy included "**THE CAT GANG**", "**CROW'S NEST**" and "**A FRENCH MISTRESS**", though as an adult he landed small parts in more prestigious projects including two Bonds and two of the "**STAR WARS**" trilogy (back when it was just a trilogy). He also made "**HOSTAGES**" for the Children's Film Foundation, while his son Christian has the lead in "**THE BOY WHO NEVER WAS**". Max Bygraves cropped up surprisingly in a small role in "**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLDAYS**" ('51) and starred in the hideously-titled "**BOBBIKINS**" ('59) as father of a talking baby who gives him tips for the stock market.

See subject index under **CORPORAL PUNISHMENT** and **SCHOOL**.