

A Time to Live

US TV : 1986 : dir. Rick Wallace : : 100 min
 prod: : scr: John McGreevey : dir.ph.:
[Corey Haim](#); [Scott Schwartz](#)
 Liza Minnelli; Jeffrey DeMunn; Swoosie Kurtz; Jeannine Manatis; Karen Shallow

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5660a	2.5	3	1	1,445	3	7	7	7	7	Yes	May 2002



The indignities and creeping despair of the muscular dystrophy sufferer (Corey Haim) are soft-pedalled in favour of exploring the guilt and angst of his mother (Minnelli). Since it is the mother who wrote the book this is scarcely surprising, but inevitably it makes the boy a supporting character in the story of his own fatal disability. It becomes his mother's tragedy, not his own.
 Source: Radio Times

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Liza made her TV movie debut with a riveting performance as a mother who must cope with her young son's struggles with muscular dystrophy. John McGreevey's sensitive script was adapted from the touching book "Intensive Care" by Mary-Lou Weisman (whom Minnelli plays). *Above Average*"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

"Inspirational true-life drama. Minnelli plays a mother coping with her bright young son's struggle with muscular dystrophy. Based on the autobiographical "Intensive Care", the film pulls

the audience's heartstrings without insulting its intelligence. *** "

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Corey Haim:

"Corey Haim was a strong, serious, sensitive boy with a face the camera loved. His career began in Canada, in a TV series called **"The Edison Twins"**. He then moved down to the USA, and had particularly rewarding leads in **"SILVER BULLET"** and **"LUCAS"**. Corey's later films included **"THE LOST BOYS"** (87), **"LICENSE TO DRIVE"** (88) and **"PRAYER OF THE ROLLERBOYS"** (90). He was also in the TV series **"Roomies"**."

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Making her TV movie debut, Liza Minnelli reveals surprising depths in this affecting drama. Rising well above the average "disease of the week" TV script, director Rick Wallace leavens the action with moments of genuine courage and humour. Jeffrey DeMunn and Corey Haim provide strong support. *** "

"Real-life drama starring Liza Minnelli. The resilient mother of a child with muscular dystrophy struggles to make his short life as fulfilling as possible. *** "

Disease-of-the-week TV movies became such a byword for maudlin exhibitionism that audiences were doubtless wary even of big screen treatments of similar themes – such as **"LORENZO'S OIL"**, or **"THE CURE"** – but no genre can be wholly bad, and this is one title that does buck the trend, largely due to a powerhouse central performance by Minnelli. She is one of the few screen stars with such sheer force of presence that she burns all her co-stars off the retina, not by stagemanship but mere personality. Few vehicles will carry that personality as well as her screen debut, **"CABARET"**, which is perhaps why she appears so seldom before the camera. This TV film and its central character were just the ticket, and she lifts it above the mundane, even though it has the flaws of its medium – too much verbalising, a rather over-sanitised portrayal of a ghastly debilitating (and lethal) disability.

Pete's parents are confronted in his infancy with a devastatingly frank prognosis of the boy's condition. Muscular dystrophy essentially degrades the body's muscles to useless fatty tissue incrementally over the years, until finally the vital functions are hopelessly compromised, and patients die of complications such as pneumonia. There is no cure. Parallels with the progress of AIDS victims will be all too apparent now, but AIDS was still invisible in 1986.

What is even worse (if worse is possible) – Pete's mother learns that the disease only strikes male children, and is only transmitted to them through the mother's genes.

The film charts Pete's physical deterioration – from leg-braces to wheelchair to bed – as his parents clutch at any thin strand of hope: a New York telepathist, a Parisian “spirit surgeon”, while their marriage comes under increasing strain. Mary Lou is so attentive, twenty-four hours a day, to her son's every need that her husband (a lawyer) feels excluded, while she feels she is carrying the whole burden alone, not just of his care, but of the close emotional attachment, with all the stress that implies.

Hospitalisation with pneumonia brings the boy at 13 to within a whisker of his death, but he is weaned off the respirator and recovers. At one stage he had asked his mother, by written note, “am I going to die?” and she had reassured him forcefully that would not happen. Later, talking to her sister (Swoosie Kurtz, in a pleasing support role) she is filled with self-recrimination for having lied to him about the most important question of all. As the weeks go by she tries to broach the subject again with Pete, but he shies away from it. Then, as she wheels him through the streets one day he tells her a story from a history lesson – that the 18th century sailors who voyaged the West Indies trade routes purposefully never learned to swim. If their ship went down rescue was impossible, and there was simply no point in postponing the inevitable.

A little while after this, the family (Pete has an older brother, Adam, played by Scott Schwartz) are gathered again in hospital, and this time Pete himself asks to be taken off his respirator. The film fades out as they await his death together.

That ending is one of the film's more disappointing compromises. The camera creeps away from Pete **before** his death to spare the audience, but that is no less of a cop-out than all those wildlife hunt-and-chase documentaries, where we see the lion pounce on its prey, then

the camera politely averts its gaze during all that messy disembowelling business. The death of the boy was the natural point to close the film, and Wallace (and Minnelli) should have resisted any effort to shy back from it.

But the more significant flaw, as with all sick children films I can bring to mind, is that the boy's suffering, creeping disablement and ultimate death are projected as his **mother's** trials, and not his. The camera spends hardly any time with Pete (Corey Haim) by himself, so that we never really come to know him as the central figure in his own tragedy. The script gives us no indication how much Pete knows about what he's suffering from, but the inference must be that his mother and father kept the truth from him (so that, for example, when he's reduced to using a wheelchair, they still encourage the hope in him that it's only a temporary setback).

Towards the end, obviously, Pete cannot even relieve himself, and must rely on others for all his bodily functions (he asks his aunt to “pee him” in one scene, which embarrasses her only for the briefest instant) but the degradation for the boy of this dependency is not even obliquely touched upon. From start to last, his collapsing body is his mother's grief and anguish, and he the disinterested spectator.

The original book was written, of course, by the mother, and one would need to be a moral eunuch (or perhaps a journalist) not to be touched by her story. It's clear she invested three lifetimes of energy in dedication to her son, and could not be expected to project herself into his emotional framework when painfully recalling their time together. Nevertheless the film cannot claim that excuse. It's comparable to a film exploring the rape of a teenage daughter entirely as a trauma her father must go through, with the girl herself almost incidental to the agonies. As I indicated already, it's a common flaw in sick children films, but disappointing to find it here, in what is an unusually articulate and perceptive one. That caveat aside, it's a moving and harrowing story, and a dreadful eye-opener about muscular dystrophy. One of very few US TV movies that will stand up to repeated viewing. **Recommended.**

Corey Haim, 13, was a fine boy actor; modest, personable and good-natured. He has little opportunity to shine here though, particularly when most of his scenes are shared with the arc-light talent of Minnelli, but he handles himself with dignity, and makes no attempt to lay on the pathos. He played a paraplegic boy the same year in "**SILVER BULLET**", an essentially worthless Stephen King werewolf film, but will mostly be remembered for his title role in "**LUCAS**" (86) as a lovestruck schoolboy plagued by cretinous jocks. A slightly earlier model of Scott Schwartz played the spoilt rich kid tormenting Richard Pryor in "**THE TOY**", and a proto-yuppie entrepreneur in "**KIDCO**".

See subject index under [AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TITLES](#), **DEATH / DYING CHILDREN**, **DISABLED / HANDICAPPED** and **RECOMMENDED TITLES**.