

The Whipping Boy

US TV : 1994 : dir. Syd Macartney : Gemini / Disney : 99 min
 prod: Ellen Freyer : scr: Max Brindle : dir.ph.: Clive Tickner
Truan Munro; Nic Knight; Karen Salt
 George C Scott; Andrew Bucknell; Kevin Conway; Vincent Schiavelli; Christoph M Ohrt;
 Mathilda May; Jean Anderson; Michael Kausch; Nigel Betts; Nicholas Amer; Georg Tryphon

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Jeez, there must be an easier way to earn the price of a mountain bike! – thinks Truan Munro

Leonard Maltin's TV Movies and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"A spoiled young prince convinces his disinterested dad, the king, to use a street urchin as his whipping boy, to literally take the prince's punishment for him whenever he is disciplined. How the two kids become pals makes for fine family viewing in this Dickensian Disney movie. Scott is deliciously hammy as a Fagin-like pub-keeping reprobate. Made for cable. **Above average**"

Sunday Times note:

"Family adventure about a prince and his peasant friend."

"A young prince and his whipping boy decide to run away."

Radio Times note:

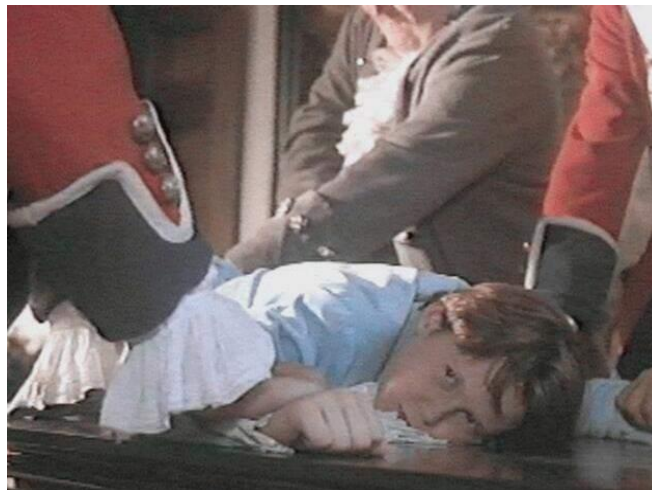
"Period family drama."

"Period comedy adventure. ** "

Daily Mirror note:

“Spoiled brat prince Nic Knight runs away in children’s mediaeval yarn. ** ”

[no listing in "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]



Send for the whipping boy! Fifteen strokes of the cane would be enough to reduce many a grown man to tears, but not rat-catcher Jimmy, whose buttocks are obviously desensitised by a life of grinding poverty. He doesn’t raise so much as a whimper – much to the chagrin of spoilt prince Horace. They make ‘em tough, these urchins!

All stills courtesy of The Movie & TV Spanking Page – a website which may not suit all tastes, as they say, but is an invaluable source for material on the portrayal of corporal punishment in films.





The sainted Uncle Walt himself looked fondly on a spot of spanking now and then in his films. But in that regard he was certainly in tune with mainstream American parental opinion, and with other conservative film-makers like John Ford. Whether people spanked their own kids or not (Ronald Reagan didn't – but his wife Nancy did) they would defend staunchly the need of children for the scorched bottom remedy. That was then. But now that corporal punishment has been eradicated entirely from the schoolroom, and all but eradicated from the home, what are we to make of a jolly family adventure film on the subject of a whipping boy!

Cinema in general has chosen to draw a veil over this particular royal prerogative, although in **"THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER"**, (62, also from Disney) Tom Canty (Sean Scully), standing in for the absconded prince, is relieved to receive a few pointers on palace protocol from his own whipping boy in return for a stay of execution, while in Bertolucci's **"THE LAST EMPEROR"**, the young Pu Yi explains to his astonished younger brother that it is the servants around him who are punished whenever he's naughty. My own understanding of the background is that a whipping boy was never a mere palace servant or hired peasant, but an aristocrat of the prince's age who attended lessons with him as a general companion. It was esteemed a privilege and opportunity for royal preferment (by the boy's family at any rate). How common the practise was the history books do not tell us, but it seems to rest rather desperately on the notion of *noblesse oblige*.

Adapted from the book of the same name by Sid Fleischman, this fantasy is set putatively in the eighteenth century (judging from the costumes) in the small European kingdom of Brattenburg. It was shot on location in North Rhine-Westphalia and Burgundy. Relations are strained between the king (Andrew Bucknell) and his cousin in a neighbouring principality, and ambassadors have been despatched to avert war. Meanwhile, back in the gutters, orphaned Jimmy (Truan Munro) is providing for his sister Annie Rose, 8 (Karen Salt), by keeping the local gambling den – run by George C Scott in an eyepatch – supplied with fresh live rats for the terriers to rip asunder. Jimmy is diligent in his work, and saves enough to find rented lodgings for the two of them in a garret. But one day his path crosses a royal coach transporting twelve-year old prince Horace of Brattenburg (Nic Knight). Horace spots the rats Jimmy has in his basket, and demands he hand them over. Jimmy declines and is chased through the alleyways by a footman, losing him in the sewers.

Next morning however, Jimmy is lifted from the streets and bundled off to the castle, scrubbed clean (the sewers of Brattenburg left him remarkably spick and span anyway) and clad in fine clothes. Prince Horace appears to announce that Jimmy is to be the new whipping boy. This concept requires some explaining (not least to the baffled young viewers). "It wouldn't be proper to whip a prince, would it?" Horace points out, "Me? The future king? I've never been spanked in my life! And when you're whipped you're to bellow. Good and loud!" We can tell Horace has never been spanked, viewers, because his behaviour is so appalling. He's mean to the peasants in the street, curt with the servants, lazy at his schoolwork, and unable even to write his own name. "What's the use of being a king if you can't get someone to write your name for you?" he reasons with the palace tutor.

Horace is not to blame for being conceited, lazy and obnoxious. Goodness me no, those days are gone. It is his father's fault, for neglecting him. Horace tries repeatedly to garner some attention from the king – some "quality time", as the Americans call it – but is rebuffed again and again while his father negotiates a settlement with his cousin's ambassador. Horace's response is to substitute live rats for the dishes set before a grand state banquet, to the mortification of his royal father. "Send for the whipping boy!" is the cry, and Jimmy is marched from his room, bent over a table and given six on the bottom by a palace servant. The king tosses a coin at him – "For your pains, whipping boy" – and he's led away, to the delight of Horace.



Horace gets his come-uppance later at the hands of two famously smelly highwaymen. When they discover the "prince" cannot write but his "whipping boy" can, they conclude not unreasonably that the boys have switched roles on them. Instead of beating Jimmy (the prince) they flog his whipping boy (Horace), and a jolly good thing too. Horace bears up well under the fustigation, and has his bottom massaged by a gypsy girl who specialises in such therapies. Honestly, some people have all the luck – thinks Jimmy.

Another day, and another promised ride with the king is cancelled, so Horace sabotages a freshly painted portrait of the queen mother on horseback, substituting her head for the horse's. "Send for the whipping boy!" rings the cry. This time it's fifteen strokes of the cane for Jimmy, but still he refuses to gratify Horace by crying out. Tingle tingle, little bum.

But we've forgotten little Annie Rose. Jimmy has been befriended by the palace tutor, who is astonished to find the peasant lad can write his letters. He agrees to send a message from Jimmy to his sister at their lodgings, together with the coin the king gave him. But Annie Rose can't read. She takes the letter to Blind George (Scott), who is not blind, but can't read either, and finally asks a passing gentleman in the street (Frank Middlemass, in almost a walk-on role). The gentleman promptly accuses her of stealing his handkerchief, and has the girl marched off to the magistrates, who sentence her to three years in Waldbach Prison. Jimmy, from his castle window, sees his sister being bundled away with other prisoners in a cart, and resolves to escape and rescue her.

Horace pulls one final stunt on his father, by greasing the saddle of the ambassador's horse, but this time the ambassador calls off his mission and returns home. This time, the King assures Horace, there won't be any whipping boy. You must be punished yourself. Aghast, Horace decides to flee the castle, but dare not venture out on his own. Jimmy, for his part, cannot get past the guards unaided. Together they slip through the gates and are free.

Ah but not for long. Two desperate (and of course, dim) highwaymen – Hold Yer Nose Billy and Cutwater (Kevin Conway and Vincent Schiavelli) – waylay the boys in a forest. Horace loudly declares who he is and they determine to ransom him, a tubby boy, for his substantial weight in gold. But they cannot write the ransom note, and when they discover Horace cannot either, but his so-called "whipping boy" can, they realise the boys have lied about who is whom. Jimmy, clearly, must be the prince and ignorant Horace his whipping boy. Needless to say, Horace gets his just deserts at the hands of the brigands, but not before he has reformed his character and made a genuine friend of Jimmy. There are escapes, recaptures, brown bears, gypsy girls, sewers, war councils and tearful reunions. And Annie Rose will not content with a mere royal pardon, but insists on being declared innocent, and duly is. As the film ends in this outburst of sweetness and light, we imagine Jimmy scribbling down his particulars as follows: "Whipping boy, unemployed, late of palace service. Excellent references available. No job too small (whipping rods not supplied)."

Well well. What are we to make of it all, eh? Or perhaps, more cogently, what do young children make of all this now? It must baffle them that any boy would allow himself to be struck by an adult, even on his **own** account, let alone submit to being soundly thrashed in public. It must be more alien to them than the frocks and tights they see boys wearing in mediaeval adventures, or the prurient discovery that ancient Greek athletes trained and competed naked. Perhaps corporal punishment equates in their minds to the baroque tortures of Tudor England, of public gibbets and beheaded wives, holding the same grisly fascination for them as those elements of crime and punishment do for adult audiences. I suspect the modern child will identify more readily with bratty prince Horace than stoical hero Jimmy. Horace is smug, conceited, secure, undisciplined, lazy at his lessons, and has respect for no-one but his father. He is the modern child, or at least, a recognisable caricature of one. Jimmy is a stock noble hero figure – working class, but pious, industrious and dutiful, caring more for his younger sister's safety than his own hide, responding eagerly to education. Perhaps, to paraphrase Nixon's rumination before the portrait of J.F.K. in Oliver Stone's "**NIXON**", readers of the book would look at Jimmy and see the type of kid they'd like to be, but when they look at Horace they see the type of kid they are. But then again maybe not, because the Horaces of the world are not to be caught reading books, are they?

"**THE WHIPPING BOY**" is a standard costume adventure for children, quite expensively mounted, in which every adult from the king down is flawed, but Jimmy and his sister morally impeccable, and with the buffoon adult villains who seem inescapable in any film made for children. In this instance, "Hold Yer Nose Billy" and "Cutwater" do not overplay the buffoonery and are entertaining rogues, while George C Scott's character is drawn less from Fagin than the leader of the outlaws in "**THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER**". There are nice incidental touches – a lamplighter trudging through the streets at dawn crying "Sun's getting' up, so should you!" – and a cleverly disguised message about the benefits of schooling. Heart of the story, naturally, is the reforming of bratty prince Horace through the example of Jimmy, and on that score its closest comparison would be Kipling's "**CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS**". These personality overhauls are never really convincing on screen. The pressures of dramatic flow prevent a more gradual transition from obnoxious to endearing, and the same is true here. The two boys go fishing together, splash about in a river, and emerge like baptists with a newfound respect for one another. Not remotely plausible, but we accept the transition for the story's sake.

Nothing else is known of Truan Munro, Nic Knight or Karen Salt. Passing over the mystery of Jimmy and Annie Rose sporting thick Cockney accents in a central German kingdom, the three kids fill their roles well enough and neither outshines the others. Now what I need to know about master Munro is, in the true spirit of method acting, how did he go about preparing himself for the role?

For another anachronistic children's film on the same ruby theme, see "**THE DOLLAR BOTTOM**", in which a boarding school boy insures his classmates against getting caned, and see subject index under **ARISTOCRACY / ROYALTY, BRATS / SPOILT CHILDREN, CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, DISNEY, HISTORY, KIDNAPPING, NANNIES / GOVERNESSES / DOMESTIC SERVANTS, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, PRISON / REFORM SCHOOL, RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS** and **WORKING BOYS & GIRLS**.