



BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL

The Nanny

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

It would not be too fanciful to see *The Nanny* as Hammer's horror version of *Mary Poppins* (1964). Its eponymous heroine is actually referred to as 'Mary Poppins' at one stage and the family seems to see her in an idealised light as the devoted domestic who lightens the family load; it is only Joey who insists she is trying to kill him. This is not the first time Seth Holt has been involved on a film about a lethal lady in a nanny-ridden England, for he was also the associate producer on *The Ladykillers* (1955).

Cinematically, *The Nanny* is a knowing film. With its dark deeds around a shower-curtain and bathtub, and deranged monologues to the dead, it teasingly invokes *Psycho* (1960). The casting of Bette Davis, fresh from her tour-de-force in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1963), brings frissons of fear, and there is a smart allusion to one of her most famous moments of screen villainy when, as in *The Little Foxes* (1941), she refuses to fetch the medicine that might save someone's life.

Yet there is also a compelling restraint and conviction about the film, quite different in style from Hammer's characteristic Gothic rhapsodies but typical of Holt, where suspense is generated from suggestion more than melodrama. Events and characters have an intriguing intricacy of perspective. The film's core tragedy is both poignant and appalling in its consequences. Joey might initially seem a monster (as a nurse describes him) but his behaviour can also be explained by his anger at not being believed and his exasperation with ineffectual parents, who allow Nanny a disproportionate influence on the household. Nanny is eventually revealed as the real monster, but her behaviour too has a plausible psychological base, being a desperate bid for self-protection after a single act of carelessness, at a moment of personal trauma, has threatened to undermine the life of service to which she has devoted herself. In other hands, Nanny's final rescue of Joey from drowning might seem contrived; here it is movingly rendered as a guilty woman's grasp at redemption. Bette Davis is particularly awesome here, and indeed all the performances are splendid. Seth Holt's subtle and unerring command of pacing, composition and structure compels one to ponder anew Christopher Lee's claim for him as 'one of the best British directors ever'.

Neil Sinyard, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

I have been trying to meet Bette Davis for years, but something always seems to get in the way: if it is not, as usually, the Atlantic Ocean, it is awkward shooting schedules, or she has come to make her personal appearances in just the week that I am away on holiday. But seeing that she was trapped here for a few weeks shooting *The Nanny* for Hammer, I determined that this time she should not elude me, and finally, in her last week of shooting, I managed to sneak in. All the big, nasty scenes were finished – not, I gather, that the film will be as nasty as the book might lead one to expect; this nanny may well turn out to be more sinned against than sinning, and I don't think she actually murders more than one person in the course of the whole film.

What was actually before the camera afforded pleasure enough: it was mainly Bette Davis giving one of her Looks, surveyed in the course of the afternoon from three different angles and through a number of takes without varying one iota from its established prototype. It was the look she gives when accused

by her charge of attempting to murder him, and don't ask me exactly what it is intended to convey: a Davis look could always convey all or nothing at all, just as its giver chose, and this look is no exception.

Her role in *The Nanny* she seems to approve of: 'It's very ... (mimes severity and restraint) all through, so I can't rant and rage in it at all. Which is very good for me. It's good for an actor every so often to play a part she has really to work at.' A note of the nanny creeping in, perhaps: eat up your nice rice pudding – it's good for you? Possibly, but next minute Bette Davis is heartily condemning modern filmmaking as 'the ice-cream business' because it is dominated by the idea that everybody has to be sweet to everybody else instead of getting on, hated if necessary, with making the best movies possible.

The prospect of her settling down as a lovable, easy-going old nanny of a star seems remote indeed. 'O.K., so many of the best people in films have been monsters. If it's necessary for them to be monsters in order to make good movies, then let them be monsters.' If not exactly a monster, she is at least an authentic *monstre sacré*, one of the best and, it sometimes seems, one of the last. Long may she continue to exact our worship.

Arkadin, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1965

The standard ending of a Bette Davis film these days is her departure for the madhouse. That, at least, is what one presumes is her fate at the conclusion of *The Nanny*; but the film ends on something of a dying fall, fading quietly away just as we expect to see Miss Davis in full maniac stride. Perhaps everyone felt that enough was enough; and this Hammer Horror is in fact so muted that one feels there may have been a certain tentativeness about tackling a subject which plays with only two possibilities – monster child or trusted nanny as psychopathic case-histories.

The novel, which was altogether more alarming, put a doctor's X-Ray machine to sinister use. The film provides a very obvious and planted introduction to the machine, but it's never seen again. In any case, the keynote of the film is the Davis performance – the quietest and most restrained since *Baby Jane* started this cycle. Whether feeding ducks in the park, preparing goodies for the outrageous Joey to reject, or explaining patiently to the dying Aunt Pen that of course she can't possibly give her the medicine, Bette Davis maintains the sweetly-smiling confidence of someone who knows that she is the most rational member of the household. So, indeed, she appears to be, in view of the distinctly odd behaviour of Joey's family; and the performance is as solidly understated (and, without any loss of the Davis vocal effects, as plausibly British) as the Nanny's hat which she wears pulled firmly down at the regulation angle.

Seth Holt's direction works best when tensions are being established – the edgy opening, for instance, with husband and wife fighting behind half-closed doors, Joey discovered in appalling misdeeds at the school, and Nanny beamingly serving a dinner nobody eats. When it comes to working the tensions out, there's some hesitation over just how monstrous everyone is supposed to be. The result is a mixture of non-horrific horror film and half-cock psychological exercise – watchable on both levels, not quite working on either, and with the confusions seeming to spring from the way the novel has been toned down in the script. Apart from Miss Davis, there's a performance of remarkable surly aplomb by 10-year-old William Dix, who seems almost alarmingly in control of his situation.

Monthly Film Bulletin, November 1965

THE NANNY

Director: Seth Holt
©/Production Company: Hammer Film Productions
Production Company: Associated British Productions
Executive Producer: Anthony Hinds *
Producer: Jimmy Sangster
Production Manager: George Fowler
Assistant Director: Christopher Dryhurst
Assistant Director: Ariel Levy *
Continuity: Renee Glynne
Screenplay: Jimmy Sangster
Based on the novel by: Evelyn Piper
Director of Photography: Harry Waxman
Camera Operator: Kelvin Pike
Supervising Editor: James Needs
Editor: Tom Simpson
Production Designer: Edward Carrick
Wardrobe Consultant: Rosemary Burrows
Wardrobe Mistress: Mary Gibson
Make-up: Tom Smith
Hair Stylist: A.G. Scott
Music: Richard Rodney Bennett
Musical Supervisor: Philip Martell
Recording Supervisor: A.W. Lumkin
Sound Recordist: Norman Coggs
Sound Editor: Charles Crafford
Made at: Elstree Studios

Cast

Bette Davis (*the nanny*)
Jill Bennett (*Pen*)
Wendy Craig (*Virginia Fane*)
James Villiers (*Bill Fane*)
William Dix (*Joey Fane*)
Angharad Aubrey (*Susy Fane*)
Pamela Franklin (*Bobby Medman*)
Jack Watling (*Dr Medman*)
Maurice Denham (*Dr Beamaster*)
Sandra Power (*Sarah*)
Alfred Burke (*Dr Wills*)
Nora Gordon (*Mrs Griggs*)
Harry Fowler (*milkman*)
UK 1965©
91 mins

* Uncredited

35mm print from the BFI National Archive

BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL

The Nanny

Tue 24 Aug 20:45; Mon 30 Aug 12:40

The Star

Wed 25 Aug 20:45

The Whales of August

Thu 26 Aug 20:30; Tue 31 Aug 18:10

Jezebel

Fri 27 Aug 18:00

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?

Sat 28 Aug 17:20

Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte

Sat 28 Aug 20:30

Mr. Skeffington

Sun 29 Aug 11:30

All About Eve

Sun 29 Aug 15:00

Dead Ringer

Mon 30 Aug 15:20

With thanks to Martin Shingler



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