



The 1993 Warner Brothers production of THE SECRET GARDEN is a June, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pa.

United Kingdom 1993 color 102 minutes live action feature drama
Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc. Producers: Fred Fuchs, Fred Roos,
Caroline Thompson, and Tom Luddy

11 of a possible 20 points

*** of a possible *****

Key: *indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

(j) designates a juvenile performance

Points

- 1 Direction: Agnieszka Holland
- 0 Editing: Isabelle Lorente
- 2 Cinematography: Roger Deakins
- 1 Lighting: John Higgins
- 1 Screenplay: Caroline Thompson, based on the novel by
Frances Hodgson Burnett
- 2 Production Designer: Stuart Craig*
Supervising Art Directors: John King*, Peter Russell*
Set Decorator: Stephenie McMillan*
Costume Designer: Marit Allen
Make-Up: Jenny Shircore, Robert McCann

- 2 Sound: Jennifer Ware (Supervising Sound Editor), Philip Rogers (Sound Recordist), Drew Kunin (Sound Mixer)
- 1 Acting
- 0 Creativity
- 11 total points

The 1993 film release version of THE SECRET GARDEN is a moderately entertaining family drama lacking a raison d'etre. In 1949, MGM produced a charged, reasonably faithful adaptation of the Francis Hodgson Burnett novel. It featured Margaret O'Brien in top acting form as Mary Lennox. Despite the youngster's inability to quite nail a Yorkshire accent, the star fully immersed herself in the character. All subsequent moppets can only hope to match her embodiment. Besting it is not likely to happen. Dean Stockwell's Colin Craven in that same 1940s production has likewise not been surpassed. Nor is it likely to be overshadowed, unless a brilliantly scathing Mary Lennox willing to pull out all stops surfaces simultaneously. While the 1993 film does offer the most convincingly natural Dickon to date, it does not include enough additional positive novelties to justify its creation.

The story, mostly left intact by screenwriter Caroline Thompson, concerns an Anglo-Indian ice princess, orphaned suddenly by, in this film, an earthquake. She's transported back to England where her only surviving relative appears to be moody, reclusive Uncle Archibald Craven. The latter is still enveloped by grief dating back to the death of his wife in an accident precipitated by a falling tree limb. Though Archibald has a son, he cannot bear to spend time with the boy, as there is too overwhelming a resemblance between Colin and his mother. Furthermore, Colin has been reduced to invalid status by severe over-protection. The feeble lad has lost his ability to walk and developed a pessimistic certainty he will never live to adulthood. An obsessive fear of inheriting a hunched back from his father also haunts him.

Into this melodramatic morass is dumped a forthright, feisty, inquisitive relation from the subcontinent. Mary is accustomed to being shunted aside and finding her own entertainments. So she accepts conditions at Misselthwaite Manor as largely normal. Her uncle provides food, clothing,

and a room of his choosing. She, in turn, can select her own amusements, including a choice of cultivated gardens to play in. Certain rooms are off-limits for unexplained reasons. There is at least one uncultivated garden similarly proscribed. Being as instinctively curious as Oedipus and equally obstinate, Mary determines to explore the mystery of forbidden territory, both indoors and outside. This leads to intermittent clashes with Archibald's stern housekeeper, Mrs. Medlock. Every attempt by Mary to investigate strange wailings and private rooms is thwarted by Medlock, generating an intense antipathy from the houseguest.

Outside wanderings have proved more fruitful, despite gardener Ben Weatherstaff's refusal to openly share secrets with an interrogating pariah. Gaining access to a key fitting the lock Mary most wants opened, the disobedient brat pushes her way through a resisting gate into tempting garden wilderness she has specifically been denied authorization to enter. Like Eve, she's intent on making her own rules and decisions about gardens.

Once inside, a new dilemma confronts her. Is the garden salvageable? Can it be restored? The girl seeks local assistance to answer those questions. Dickon, who seems to spend almost all waking hours roaming neighboring moors, is dragooned into serving as free horticultural advisor and landscaper. Take that, Ben Weatherstaff! Who needs you around here, anyway?

Once the garden is no longer cloaked in secrecy, Mary turns her attention to tracking down the source of loud grievings too often disturbing nightly slumbers. She is sure the originator is human, not animal. Where and who is this disturber of her peace hidden? Obviously, somewhere she is not supposed to go. Well, phooey on rules and cautions. They might apply to other children. But independent Mary is a special case, liberated from parental supervision and actively antagonistic to adult oversight. This lover of freedom is answerable only to instinct.

Eventually, she fumbles her way to Colin's bedroom and discovers her cousin shares a family penchant for imperious selfishness. Since there can only be one commander in child ranks, Mary outshouts and outrages Colin into stupefied sobbing surrender. Auburn-tressed Kate Maberly gives this crucial scene her best shot. However, she applies brakes where O'Brien

careened unrestrictedly to a more decisive climax, using vocal authority second to none to override and smother Stockwell's tantrums like a freewheeling juggernaut. Once having established dominance as the alpha preadolescent at Misselthwaite, it becomes a relatively simple task to direct Colin outwards to nature and away from enforced idleness. This increases his desire for greater participation in childhood activities, prodded partially by envy of Dickon's superior mobility and more interactive relationship with Mary. Colin is goaded by the other two to free himself from wheelchair bondage. With their encouragement, he comes to do so. Then all that remains is to show the results to an absent father.

How this is achieved through mystic mumbo-jumbo and junior detective work by nosy Mary remains as unconvincing in screen presentation as it was in the original novel. An anticlimactic epilogue drags slackly through the final ten minutes or so of the film. While tying up a few loose ends and supplying requisite happy resolution, it nonetheless lacks impact, with no additional character development resulting. Since this flaw originates in the original story, taut film editing could have minimized it. Instead, filmmakers attempt to interest viewers in two protracted predictable reunions, overlooking the fact the drama truly ends as soon as Colin learns to walk. Readers already know his father will accept this improvement. Nor is Archibald such a louse that he would exile its author from Misselthwaite Manor. If anyone would be sent packing, it would have to be Dr. Craven and his conniving ally, Mrs. Medlock. The latter apparently feels Colin's dependency is required to assure continued iron command over the household. An on-site master of the manor is intolerable to her. Perhaps a more sympathetic conclusion would be furtive departure of a black-garbed Medlock from Misselthwaite in a midnight coach shared with Dr. Craven.

Another major problem with the current film is its inclination to magnify landscapes and resort to continuous color. MGM's 1949 predecessor wisely begins with black-and-white, an ideal complement for Mary's dour mood at that point and the winter season in Yorkshire. Only when spring arrives in the garden is color introduced. The striking contrast in both atmosphere and outlook harmonizes perfectly with a story line which warms and unfolds

concurrently with nature. In this film, heat haze, hints of a tropical palace, the natural world ravaged by chaos, and a rushed edit to mist-choked Liverpool docks all violate the original novel's chamber atmosphere. Mary seems to be battling the elements more than her own crabby, insular personality. Not what the author intended.

Roger Deakins' sweeping camera shots introduce majestic vistas inimical to the story arc. Angles are well chosen, with considerable variety. Compositions are rendered optimally, in best painting fashion. Too often, though, key characters are dwarfed by landscapes. In the novel they serve solely as backgrounds rather than molders of personality.

Both plenitude of period furnishings and precisely reproduced costumes enhance credibility of observed actions. These offset the monochromatic character of Mrs. Medlock, who emerges as a stereotypical early Edwardian villainess, harbinger of family secrets, implacable defender of the status quo. Rarely have fabric textures been so sensuously foregrounded in a family film.

While the score of Zbigniew Preisner dovetails well with the story arc's early stages where disruption and becoming are key elements, it's less satisfactory as the film progresses, failing to develop in accordance with Mary and Colin's blossoming personalities. Extension and variation of melodic line would have been more appropriate. Adding a wider range of tonal colors and resorting to lush crescendos as the film approached its climax could have resulted in more emotionally involving musical accompaniment.

At times, lighting is blurry when acute focus would have been effective and delightful. Time lapse photography palls beside closeups of rain-soaked vegetation, as in Dovzhenko's ZEMLYA (EARTH), which seem far more natural than what is observed here. Night scenes in the garden, without intrusive humans, might have also better communicated unfolding of plants over time.

Sounds of nature are captured faithfully and integrate seamlessly with what is visible on screen. Dialogue is recorded adequately, yet the practiced enunciation of MGM's child stars is sorely missed. Fortunately, the dvd version of THE SECRET GARDEN includes subtitles, assuring words do not drown in thick Yorkshire accents or inadvertent slurs and elisions.

Among actors, most accomplished is Kate Maberly's Mary Lennox. She is thoroughly believable in speech and body gestures. Unfortunately, Kate displays minimal movement of her mouth, resulting in a generally standardized scowl. This infrequently reshapes into a taut smile. These traits undermine her overall performance. Heydon Prowse delivers an able portrayal of Colin Craven, though there appears something lacking. Perhaps it is too heavily patterned by the performer, rather than experienced. Or maybe he is simply too factual in his delivery and too barren of imaginative childhood whimsy. As idealized Dickon Sowerbury, Andrew Knott proves the most naturalistic player to date. Not always abetted by dialogue which depicts him as camp counselor / nature center interpreter rather than boyish companion, he nonetheless capitalizes on ingratiating grin, semi-mischievous smile, and well-chosen vocal modulations to establish an optimistic, affable, extroverted personality. Maggie Smith's Medlock possesses a bit too much hand-wringing neuroticism for what the role requires. Gladys Cooper's unrelenting severity in 1949 hews closer to the novel's characterization. Probably due to temerity on the part of filmmakers about challenging squeamish adults, memorable scenes of violent alcohol-inspired rage so potently staged by Herbert Marshall in 1949 are replaced here with lugubrious bouts of melancholy. John Lynch retains the depression and abruptness, but dispenses with violence and liquor, in the process restoring Archibald Craven's general personality as penned by the author. Less colorful than Elsa Lanchester's giggle-infested depiction, Laura Crossley's naïve Martha Sowerbury has more of a cautious reliability and disposition to playfulness, befitting an older teenager who has not yet completely abandoned amusements of childhood despite the gravity of service responsibilities. She risks the wrath of Mrs. Medlock, not only due to fear of reprimand from Colin, but also because she still remembers fondly joys and searchings of childhood. These she is unwilling for Mary and Colin to surrender prematurely.

The dvd includes featurettes on the story, the author, the animals, and production, each lasting only a few minutes. It also provides trailers for both the 1949 and 1993 versions of the film, in addition to one for the 1990s THE

LITTLE PRINCESS production, a movie Kino Ken does not recommend for anyone.

This recent version of THE SECRET GARDEN is the second-best adaptation available on screen. Do not deprive yourself and your children of a chance to view the 1949 film, however. It's still the best, with superior acting, generally more appropriate scene timings, and equally fine cinematography. The 1993 version is suitable family viewing, officially rated G, and particularly geared to middle-aged audiences 9-12. It may be more enticing to female audiences than the 1949 release. Both are well worth a screening.