



Above is a Charles Dodgson photo of the real Alice Liddell as a child.

*DREAMCHILD* is a potential future LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library as part of its Classic Cinema Collection. Here's Kino Ken's review of that telefilm.

14 of a possible 20 points = \*\*\*1/2 = excellent film

United Kingdom 1985 color 94 minutes live action feature teledrama  
PfH Limited / Thorn EMI Producers: Rick McCallum and Kenith Todd

Key: \*indicates an outstanding performance or technical achievement  
(j) designates a juvenile performer

**Points:**

- 2 Direction: Gavin Millar\*
- 1 Editing: Angus Newton
- 1 Cinematography: Billy Williams

- Still Photography: Albert Clarke\***
- 2 Lighting: George Cole (gaffer) and Jimmy Worley (electrician)**  
**Special Effects: Lyle Conway, Chris Eveleigh, Duncan Kenworthy,**  
**Lesja Liber, Constance Peterson**  
**Mould Maker: Allan Croucher**
- 1 Screenplay: Dennis Potter**  
**Script Supervision: Jean Bourne**
- 1 Music: Stanley Myers and Max Harris**  
**Orchestrations: Simon Bainbridge**  
**Choreography: Gates McFadden**
- 2 Production Design: Roger Hall\***  
**Art Direction: Marianne Ford\* and Len Huntingford\***  
**Set Design: Steve Cooper**  
**Puppet Maker: David Alan Barclay**  
**Costume Design: Jane Robinson**  
**Makeup: Jenny Shircore\* (Supervisor), Eddie Knight\***  
**Props: Gerry Bourke**
- 0 Sound: Godfrey Kirby**  
**Sound Editing: Brian Blamey**  
**Sound Effects: Christopher Ackland (footsteps)**  
**Puppeteers: Mike Quinn and Lyle Conway**
- 2 Acting**  
**2 Creativity**  
**14 total points**

**Cast: Ian Holm (Charles Dodgson), Coral Browne\* (Alice Hargreaves),**  
**Peter Gallagher (Jack Dolan), Caris Corfman (Sally Mackeson), Nicola Cowper\***  
**(Lucy), Jane Asher (Mrs. Liddell), Amelia Shankley (j)\* (Little Alice),**  
**Imogen Boorman\* (Lorina), Emma King (j) (Edith), Rupert Wainwright**  
**(Hargreaves), Roger Ashton-Griffiths (Mr. Duckworth), James Wilby (baker),**  
**Shane Rimmer (Mr. Mari), Peter Whitman (radio producer), Ken Campbell**  
**(radio sound effects man / March Hare), William Hootkins (first radio actor),**  
**Jeffrey Chiswick (second radio actor), Pat Starr (radio actress), Johnny M**  
**(first crooner), Alan Shearman (first reporter), Danny Brainin**  
**(third reporter / photographer), Sam Douglas (fourth reporter), Peter Banks**

(first editor), Scott Hoxby (second editor), Ron Berglas (third editor), Ron Travis (fourth editor), Thomasine Heiner (announcer / chairman), Olivier Pierre (president of university), Tony Mansell (Waldorf Astoria crooner), Ron Mueck (Gryphon), Steve Whitmore (Mock Turtle / Caterpillar), Karen Prell (Dormouse), Mick Walter (Mad Hatter), Fulton MacKay (Gryphon's voice), Alan Bennett (Mock Turtle's voice), Julie Walters (Dormouse's voice), Tony Haygarth (Mad Hatter's voice), Frank Middlemass (Caterpillar's voice), Melissa Whitmire (additional Muppet performer)

*Dreamchild* is a 1985 British live action drama focused on the life of Alice Liddell. It contrasts her crotchety seventy-nine-year-old self with the ten-year-old complacent child who requested Charles Dodgson to put his fantastic tales about Alice and various imaginary creatures into writing. This he eventually did, using children of George MacDonald as a preview test group. When they responded positively to *Alice's Adventures Underground*, the author then went seeking a publisher. The rest of the story is quite famous already. It should require no further elucidation.

Far less transparent is the identity of the model for Alice. Was the book Alice truly based on Alice Liddell's actual personality?

Dodgson dedicated his fantasy to the middle daughter of Dean Liddell, presenting the girl with a copy for a special pre-publication gift. Yet he proposed a different child be used for Tenniel's original illustrations and even denied claims Alice Pleasance Liddell was prime inspiration for fictional Alice. Nor did A. P. L. herself advance such an assertion.

All this notwithstanding, Gavin Millar's film proceeds on the assumption that Dodgson's classic was a sort of valentine to a pre-adolescent neighbor. It discounts the theory the Oxford don might have been actually courting the Liddell children's governess instead. Speculation he was actually enamored of Alice's older adolescent sister Lorina – or vice versa – is also given some play in Dennis Potter's screenplay. Beware! None of these musings has adequate documentary evidence backing it.

As for *Dreamchild* itself, the plot revolves around a 1932 transatlantic trip made by Alice Liddell Hargreaves and a young woman companion named Lucy. Alice is to be feted at Columbia University and awarded an honorary degree there.

In reality, the widowed woman's companion on the journey was her son Caryl. But Lucy's presence opens the door for Hollywood-style romance, as Caryl's apparently would not.

About forty reporters greet the septuagenarian is greeted upon docking. This detail of Millar's film is accurate. What follows is largely inventions of the screenwriter. Until his British protagonist arrives at Columbia University.

According to the script, Widow Hargreaves is haunted by recollections of encounters with Wonderland eccentrics from Dodgson's book. Jim Henson's life-size animatronic puppets, operating in some phantasmagoric Terrorland, bring material reality to these ghastly visitors. While such a premise allows for intrusion of enormous dollops of imaginative technology, it badly skews the story into bizarre surrealism more appropriate to a clinical study of gradual descent into madness.

There's no evidence to support such a notion. Alice Liddell Hargreaves may have been crusty and conventional. She certainly was not delusional. Nor did she regret childhood friendship with Charles Dodgson. After all, she was the one who asked him to pen what became *Alice's Adventures Underground*. Without her prodding, tales that finally appeared in 1865 under the title *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* might never have seen the light of day. It's known she treasured the manuscript version received in November, 1864 as a present and only reluctantly offered it for auction decades later in order to defray considerable household maintenance expenses after her husband's death.

Throughout the movie, Alice is depicted as mercenary, snobbish, unimaginative, even callous. That hardly squares with what is known about the adult Mrs. Hargreaves, who faithfully attended church each Sunday with her family. She also painted, drew, and sculpted, having received art training from John Ruskin himself.

If not recognized as one of England's leading philanthropists, Alice was no female Ebenezer Scrooge. Was she patently susceptible to flattery, as Potter makes her out to be? Well, she did accept Columbia University's proposal to come to the United States and be honored there for some amount of remuneration. So who knows?

There are no indications in her life of any passionate enthusiasm for visitations from Reverend Dodgson once she reached adolescence.

Making a romantic tie even more unlikely was a celibacy stipulation which had to be honored if the Anglican deacon hoped to preserve his post at Christ Church.

Another irksome fabrication of the plot positions Alice's mother in attendance on river outings with youngsters and storytelling amateur photographer. Actual adult chaperones for these day trips were either Dodgson's colleague Duckworth, governess Prickett, or the two of them together.

Okay, so the screenplay is more excursion into alternate reality than insightful biopic. It's costume fiction with above-average dialogue delivered by characters melodramatically familiar to any veteran viewer of English interwar teleplays. Class struggle underlies every movement and spoken word. Potter adds Freudian undertones for garnish.

Poor Alice emerges a prudish, egoistic tyrant. Dodgson fares little better. He looks like a social pariah and sounds utterly awkward, stuttering and stammering in conversation. Neither characterization matches well with what's known about this pair. Yes, Dodgson did stutter occasionally, but no, it didn't diminish his social respectability in Oxford.

Technically, most elements of *Dreamchild* work quite well. This is particularly true in the acting department, with exceptional renderings coming from all leading actresses. Young Amelia Shankley mixes well introversion of a voracious reader with extroverted outbursts of recollected poetry. Intelligent, bristly object of Dodgson's photographic and aesthetic attention, she can't understand why this scrupulously methodical adult studies her moods so intensely. That confusion about his motive in doing so is strikingly mirrored by her in scene after scene.

Nicola Cowper's vulnerable, trusting innocence is thoroughly realized in her alter ego Lucy. This makes the scene where she turns on her patroness and castigates the older woman for selfishness memorably explosive.

In the role of Alice's elder sister Lorena, a likely rival for Dodgson's focus, Imogen Boorman projects mature solicitude for the self-respect of her literary companion. Without being arrogant, she frequently mediates between him and Alice, even risking being labelled the tale-spinner's pet. By underplaying each of her scenes, Miss Boorman allows a more vociferous Shankley to shine,

simultaneously insuring the rather maternal nature of her relationship to Mr. Dodgson gets successfully communicated.

Coral Browne's adult Alice is rendered flawlessly through clipped, tony speech and meticulously slow, measured movements signposting age and rigidity. Though her portrayal is little akin to documentary realism, it authentically embodies traits assigned Mrs. Hargreaves by Dennis Potter's story treatment.

More enigmatic is coolly aristocratic Mrs. Liddell, mother of three children who seem all to have fallen under the spell of Mr. Dodgson. Here, as played by Jane Asher, she seems more governess than parent, concerned overwhelmingly with proper conduct and extirpation of any slang inroads corrupting her daughters' conversations.

Emma King makes a charming Edith, youngest of the three Liddell girls and the most accepting of adult fantasy. Though least disposed to passive listening. She's quick to detect hypocrisy of anyone, calling out Alice's contradictions in a direct manner not at all well received by the older girl.

Caris Corfman's Sally Mackeson, who seems to be a call receptionist at a newspaper or magazine in New York City, is plucked straight out of *The Front Page*. She's worldly wise, acerbic, a cynic par excellence.

Over on the gentlemen's side of the ledger, Ian Holm suggests a brooding, emotionally – and perhaps ethically – conflicted Charles Dodgson. He's clearly uncomfortable invading territory of such extroverts and social climbers as the Liddell family. Because opposites can attract, he proceeds gamely on, beating bootlessly against a rising tide of ambition prevailing in the Dean's household. Dodgson's melancholy attitude and feckless attempts at ingratiating himself into that environment receive potent realization in Holms' performance.

Peter Gallagher deserves commendation for strenuously trying to make something credible out of ex-reporter Jack Dolan's character. One which does a 180-degree turnabout in midstream. The script insists on transforming the tough-as-nails streetwise veteran inside out through the scathing tongue of a subdued, retiring English lass, someone who possesses enough native insight into counterfeit chivalry to completely unmask and unman him.

The supporting cast proves quite adequate.

Billy Williams' cinematography serves the drama well, being vivid and filled with spot-on compositional framings which keep the focus constantly on

whomever is most important speaker or listener. It's never guilty of dallying over a background distraction.

Equally competent is Angus Newton's editing, making optimal use of dissolves and overlapping imagery in transitioning from present to flashback and back again.

Gavin Millar extracts magnificent achievements from his cast. He's been unfairly neglected in terms of recognition for that. It's not his fault the script of *Dreamchild* favors whimsy over substance.

Due to some sensuality, profanity, and hints of improper conduct, this film is not suitable for preteens. But for teen and adult audiences, it offers a rewarding, if somewhat disturbing, experience. Older screeners can better grasp social implications of various scenes. *Dreamchild's* MPAA rating is PG.

P.S.: Jim Henson's puppets are both fantastic and harrowing, making this an excellent choice for watching at home on Halloween.