

The Toy

US : 1982 : dir. Richard Donner : Columbia / Rastar : 102 min
 prod: Phil Feldman : scr: Carol Sobieski : dir.ph.: Laszlo Kovacs

Video: Parkfield Entertainment VHS CVT20159

Scott Schwartz
 Richard Pryor; Jackie Gleason; Teresa Ganzel; Ned Beatty; Wilfrid Hyde-White; Tony King;
 Annazette Chase; Don Hood; Karen Leslie-Lyttle; Virginia Capers; B.J. Hopper; Ray Spruell

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	KBytes	Ω	□	€	Z	⊕	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5110a	4½	7	22		3	7	3	3	7	No	Pre 1990



Who is more uncomfortable here? Gleason? Pryor? Or the audience?

Source: *The Film Yearbook* vol.3

Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide* 1996 review:

“Stultifying remake of the Pierre Richard comedy **LE JOUET**” with Pryor as penniless writer hired by zillionaire Gleason as plaything for spoiled son Schwartz. A few good gags are lost in a sea of you-can’t-buy-friends-you-gotta-earn-them lectures, not to mention dubious taste for an 80’s film with a black in such a demeaning part. *½”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – cumbersome translation of the above

Halliwell's *Film Guide* review

“A black janitor is hired as a toy for a millionaire’s nine-year old son. Feeble attempt to translate a 1976 French film by Francis Veber. The few laughs are laughs of embar-rassment.”

“Tasteless in implication, flavourless in execution.” - **Sight and Sound**



*They've just been told of plans for a sequel...
Source: Film Yearbook vol.3*

The Film Yearbook vol. 3 review:

“Now, as the saying goes, we’ve seen it all: here is Richard Pryor, festooned in pink ribbon, being decanted from a packing case as the latest plaything in a millionaire nursery. After that, things only get worse, and although this soggy, groggy “comedy” may aspire to be a farcical fairy-tale of goodwill, with bigotry vanquished in a custard-pie finale, it comes out as not just ideologically dubious but a pretty basic test of anyone’s patience.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

“Asinine remake of the charming French film. Even Pryor playing a man besieged by debts can’t save this slapstick mess about a tycoon (Gleason) who buys Pryor to amuse his spoiled child. * ”

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“The talents of Pryor and Gleason are shamelessly thrown away here. Pryor plays an unemployed journalist who is so desperate that he takes a job as playmate to the bratty nine-year old son of a heartless tycoon (Gleason). Countless poor-little-rich-kid clichés are mixed in with stale slapstick routines.

Predictably, Pryor becomes the surrogate father¹ to the affection-starved youngster. * ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“In this far from fair world, the larger a man’s native talent, the higher the standard we set him, and so one’s disappointment with successive Richard Pryor comedies has dragged the emotions from dismay to anger, forgiveness to apathy. While it’s hard to be angered by this particular vehicle “**THE TOY**” (based on a 1976 French film, “**LE JOUET**”) is undeniably another wasted opportunity.

The plot is fairly implausible: unemployed man (Pryor) is hired as a bauble for billionaire store-owner Gleason’s nine-year old son (welcome again to the New Depression). After virtually every imaginable stock comic situation, Pryor humanises both spoiled son and money/power fixated pop in a moral, weepy ending. Played straight, this could make some quite serious points about the predicament of the unemployed (Pryor as prostitute), but the film finds it easier to opt for cheap laughs.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“You would think any comedy that combines the talents of Richard Pryor and Jackie Gleason would have to be exceptionally good, to say nothing of funny, but that’s simply not

Master Bates at his military academy

¹ “Surrogate father” - that’s code for a child’s male adult friend, by the way.



Source: unknown website

true of this movie, about a spoiled rich kid (Scott Schwartz) whose father (Gleason) allows him to buy the ultimate toy (Pryor). Rated "PG" for profanity [*sic*] and adult themes [*sic*]. ** "

The Film Yearbook vol. 3 "Turkeys of the Year" analysis:

"On the face of it, **THE TOY**" is so resolutely negligible as to be even unworthy of the usual withering stream of sniper fire. Apparently adapted from Francis Veber's script for Pierre Richard's **LE JOUET** " (1976) the story seems simple enough to be contained within the bland confines of a boulevard comedy with a mild moral: a spoiled nine-year-old boy, scion to the Bates Oil empire is home on his once-yearly trip to see his father, U.S. Bates (Jackie Gleason), and is allowed to have anything he wants just so long as he will leave his father in peace - not an unreasonable idea given the brat's loathsome demeanour.

Unfortunately while touring the toy store, he sees Richard Pryor wrestling with a slowly deflating "Wonder Wheel" and decides that he wants the funny black man. Since Pryor is an out of work journalist and badly behind on his mortgage payments, the only question to be settled about this arrangement is one of price.

Once installed as the boy's plaything, Pryor undergoes a ritual round of humiliation which involves such original ideas as a bucket of whitewash suspended above a door through which he is about to enter, and sitting on a

whoopee cushion. In case you should think that this is the most clichéd set-up that the scriptwriter can descend to, there is also some business involving Pryor spilling soup in Gleason's lap, a moment when the fat black cook says "Walk this way" to Pryor, who duly responds with a not very good imitation of her waddle, and a running gag about Pryor upsetting Gleason's carefully set-up pattern of dominoes which occurs three times, each fully signalled by a good minute's slow burn. These are only the choicer examples. I've been to funnier funerals.

All of this might just matter less if the thing were aimed at a birthday-party gathering of six-year-olds; but there is another level of joking which puts it well below even that exalted station. This involves such things as a voracious German governess who keeps grabbing Pryor in the corridors and suggesting that she bathe him, the breasts of Gleason's mistress - which are enormous, on display, and much commented upon - and another running gag about the brat being called "Master Bates" by the household servants. These are not the worse instances of puerile smut, but there comes a point where pain curtails the drawing up of lists.

Of course Pryor comes to realise that the boy is so awful because he has been deprived of paternal affection. This is the point when the glutinous soundtrack comes winging in on all engines to pave the way for mawk; such sentiments as "You need a friend and you can't buy friendship, you have to earn it." are proffered as the moral message of the film.

Naturally the boy comes around to being human in an instant, even managing to embrace Jackie Gleason (not, one would have thought, one of the greatest of rewards for having progressed to a maturity of outlook).

Then there is the problem of Richard Pryor. It is very hard to imagine just what he thinks he is doing, wading through material like this. One of his many strengths as a comedian is his extraordinary physical grace, which combined with his expert sense of timing, makes him one of the few good verbal comics who can successfully cross over into slapstick. The few outbursts of physical humour here are flabby, ill-timed and generally mishandled. Even worse is his habit of breaking into a whingeing imitation of an overwrought child whenever danger threatens. This brings to mind uncomfortable memories of Danny Kaye, who used to embarrass nine-year-olds [by] similar

displays; after working just once for Howard Hawks, he earned the surest moratorium on his talent in Hawks' verdict: "He was about as funny as a crutch."

But there is something just below the surface, lurking in the film's shallows, which is offensive; and trying to pin it down in a film so insubstantial is like trying to lasso a cloud. It is, of course, to do with the colour of the toy. If reports from the US are to be believed, under Reagan there is a steady national increase in racism of all kinds. Certainly there is a dearth of movies made by blacks or for black audiences. Inserting throwaway demurs from Pryor like "Hey, the civil war is over, we don't have slaves anymore" just won't measure up as a counterweight to a problem which is never really examined in the film: the base-line of buying a black man for amusement.

The easiest reference for gaining a hold on this



film's attitude to this nagging worry comes in



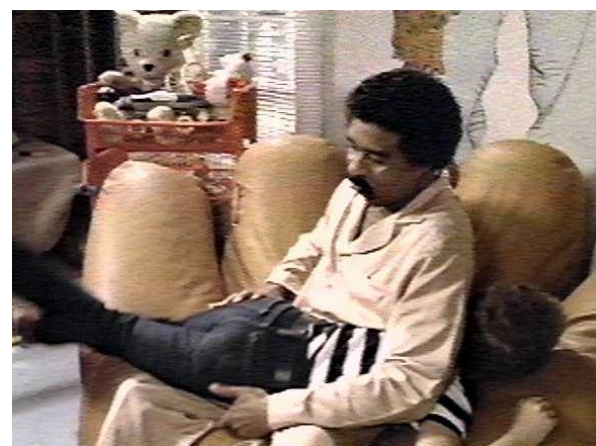
a slapstick finale, during a garden party which Gleason is throwing for various local luminaries among whom is the grand wizard of the local Ku Klux Klan. Pryor disrupts the spectacle aided by the brat, by driving around in a go-kart, while lifting up tent pegs, throwing cream cakes in faces, and nudging people into the pool. One could pursue the film's stance on racism at some length, but perhaps its easiest to bury it on that realisation; someone, perhaps many people, involved in the film's making, think that the best response to the Klan is a custard pie in the face."

- Chris Peachment

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "International Film Guide 1982", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

The toy strikes back! Tormented beyond enduring by his "owner's" childish pranks, plaything Richard Pryor exacts the traditional retribution, only to discover – Well gee! – that the boy just wanted to be pals with him all along. Guess you should have spanked him a lot sooner then, eh Dick?

Source: The Movie and TV Spanking Page



One would have thought Pryor might have learned his lesson from the abysmal **"BUSTIN' LOOSE"** which he made the previous year. Unquestionably at his best as a stand-up comic (in a succession of recorded one-man shows), Pryor's gift for mimicry and sharp racial caricature needs a looser reign than commercial cinema will allow him. Still he would turn up time and again, gooning with Gene Wilder, playing it straight (as in **"BLUE COLLAR"**) or else almost visibly squirming through these anodyne and mawkish would-be comedies. Pryor's flip mouth would actually strike sparks off kids very well if he were given his head and a decent script, but in **"BUSTIN' LOOSE"** and **"THE TOY"** he is constrained into a kind of afro Cary Grant performance. He cannot help being funny by fits and starts, but the sheer weight of mediocrity in these productions stifles his natural zest. Was it just for the money (or the all-money in his case)? It's difficult to reach any other conclusion.

"THE TOY" is the least worst of the two, but not by far, and Pryor's being black introduces wholly unnecessary racial connotations to the story, not present in the French original. The humour should reside in his being a reluctant Mary Poppins, not a comic black servant, of whom American cinema has given us more than enough in the past, thank you.

Scott Schwartz, who made **"A CHRISTMAS STORY"** in 83, and **"KIDCO"** in 84, was not really ideal casting for a bratty rich boy. He has the requisite gleam of devilment in his eye, but it comes out of him as mere boyish mischief, he lacks the air of jaded condescension that the part required. Had **"THE TOY"** been made a decade later, one can easily see Macaulay Culkin in the role – there is an air of smug contempt for adults in many of his films. Scott Schwartz' career prospects were not well served by appearing in such a consummate turkey, however, and he did little subsequently.

See also **"LE JOUET"**, and subject index under **BRATS / SPOILT KIDS, COMEDY, NANNIES / GOVERNESSES / DOMESTIC SERVANTS, SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS** and **TOYS / DOLLS / MODELS.**