

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs

US : 1960 : dir. Delbert Mann : Warner Bros : 124 min
 prod: Michael Garrison : scr: Harriet Frank Jr & Irving Ravetch : dir.ph.: Harry Stradling Sr
Robert Eyer; Lee Kinsolving
 Robert Preston; Dorothy McGuire; Angela Lansbury; Eve Arden; Shirley Knight;
 Frank Overton

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
6140	4.5	12	5	1,432	- - - - -	No	Unseen

**“Every time a woman turns her face away
 because she’s tired or unwilling,
 there’s someone waiting like me... ”**



If the source play touched – discreetly – on the topic of frigidity as a motor of divorce, then the message of the poster (sex as the motor of marriage) is quite intentionally misleading. Source: Moviegoods.com

Leonard Maltin’s *Movie and Video Guide*
 2001 review:

“Simple, eloquent drama, set in 1920s
 Oklahoma, with Preston in top form as a

traveling salesman caught in a passionless
 marriage. His relationships with wife McGuire,
 daughter Knight and "friend" Lansbury are
 played out in a series of beautifully acted scenes.
 Poignant script by Irving Ravetch and Harriet

Frank Jr, from William Inge's Pulitzer Prize-winning play. ***1/2 "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Artificial treatment of William Inge's play set in twenties Oklahoma, focusing on Preston's family and neighbours, their problems and frustrations. Still good. Arden and Lansbury come the best out of it. *** "

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Twenties small town drama about a young boy's awakening to the sexual tensions around him. Archetypal family drama set in that highly familiar American street. The perfect essence of this playwright's work, with high and low spots, several irrelevancies, but a real feeling for the people and the place. The curious title turns out to be a synonym for life, which one should never be afraid of. Academy Award nomination: Shirley Knight. ** "

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"A domestic crisis ensues when father (Robert Preston), a traveling salesman, is scolded by mother (Dorothy McGuire) for being drunk: so he goes to stay, platonically, with the local beautician (Angela Lansbury) - but do mother and her sister (Eve Arden) know that? The piece is like "LIFE WITH FATHER" revamped by someone with a bad case of the Tennessee Williamses - and the someone is William Inge, on whose Broadway play it is based. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"William Inge's theatrical reputation has shimmied up and down the critical barometer, and this slightly scrubbed version of his mid-western vision is a faithful academic version of one of his better works. Delbert Mann's direction is overly careful and deliberate - Inge plays better with a dash of hysteria. The cast is impeccable. *** "

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"The William Inge play on which this memoir of life in twenties Oklahoma is based won the

Pulitzer Prize. Unfortunately, whatever merit the original might have had as a theatrical experience has been dissipated here by Delbert Mann's reverential approach to its themes of sexual awakening, family discord, class snobbery and anti-semitism. The main problem for modern audiences¹ is the fact that many of its attitudes are so out-dated that they are likely to breach even the most flexible code of political correctness². ** "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"William Inge's play about family life in a small Oklahoma town in the 1920s is expertly produced for the screen with much of the emotions unfettered. Preston stars as the father, and McGuire plays the wife with proper stateliness. Eve Arden, Angela Lansbury and Shirley Knight stand out in supporting roles. Academy Award nomination - Knight, Best Supporting Actress. *** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"If William Inge play was more profound in the theatre, this version of family-and-neighbours small-town drama, with Eve Arden, Angela Lansbury, Dorothy McGuire, Robert Preston, escapes banality. 33"

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A Pulitzer Prize winner in its Broadway version, William Inge's play based on memoirs of his Oklahoman youth in the '20s suffers here from undue reverence from both Mann and screenwriters Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank - usually much sharper with oddball Westerns or liberal dramas for Martin Ritt - and undue hamming from a wildly disparate cast. Small-town domestic intrigues push one way, sub-plots about adolescent fears and anti-Semitism pull another."

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

¹ i.e.: for this particular reviewer, speaking for the rest of humanity

² Well heaven forbid that people in the past should think differently than **we** do, in our ineffable wisdom !

“The William Inge play on which the picture is based is a poignant study of an Oklahoma family torn apart by internal conflicts. Its relationships are barred with perception and penetration, and the problems of the parents,

described in frank terms but handled in good taste, centre on the bed and the activities which do, or more accurately do not, take place in it.



The film is well cast and persuasively acted. Its chief cast value lies in Robert Preston, whose newly-won fame via "THE MUSIC MAN" can be used to spur box office for the WB picture. Easily detectable is the similarity in manner and speech between his Harold Hill of "THE MUSIC MAN" and Robin Flood of "DARK...". Each is a high-powered salesman - one flamboyant, the other serious. But there's a strength and an independence that's the same.

Dorothy McGuire is tops as the mother caught between devotion to her children and the knowledge she must sever the cord. Eve Arden is convincing and highly effective as the sister, performing with spirit and proving she could have done even more with her big scene if given the chance. Angela Lansbury plays one of her better and more sympathetic roles as the woman who wants Robin, and she fills it well. Shirley Knight is fine as the daughter."

The Warner Bros Story review:

"William Inge's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS", was less successful in its screen adaptation (by Harriet Frank Jr and Irving Ravetch) than it had been on Broadway, possibly as a result of the larger-than-life performance of Robert Preston as the head of the Flood household. More in scale with Inge's domestic drama were the performances of Dorothy McGuire as the wife Preston temporarily deserts, Angela Lansbury as the woman he deserts her for, Eve Arden and Frank Overton as her sister and ineffectual brother-in-law, Robert Eyer as her adolescent son afraid of the dark at the top of the stairs, and Lee Kinsolving as a young Jewish lad driven to suicide by anti-semitism. Directed by Delbert Mann with all the sensitivity the subject demanded, it was a well-intentioned effort, but finally lacked conviction. Michael Garrison produced (Technicolor)."

Post-script to The Moving Picture Boy entry on Richard Eyer:

"Richard's more solemn-looking younger brother Robert Eyer - born 6 May 1948 - was featured in "THE DARK AT THE TOP OF

THE STAIRS" (60) and "BACK STREET" (61)."

Cast:

Robin FloodRobert Preston
Cora FloodDorothy McGuire
LottieEve Arden
Mavis PruittAngela Lansbury
Reenie FloodShirley Knight
Sammy GoldenLee Kinsolving

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. If we only had one or two of the above sources to go by, this film would seem to have no relevance to the archive whatsoever. It's scarcely encouraging that not one of them even mentions Robert Eyer's character (the author of the story) by name. To most critics boys are invisible, you see. Mere background noise.

Tales of small-town infidelity are (thankfully) outside our remit. The suicide of a boy owing to venomous small-town anti-semitism is another matter, but without further details one cannot comment at length. Perhaps it would make a valuable corrective to all those disingenuous pleas for tolerance which show All-American kids befriending traumatised Jewish exiles and refugees. The truth is that Jew-baiting was every bit as endemic in US culture as it was in Europe, not least owing to a huge influx of Jewish émigrés during the 1920s and 30s.

One of the most notable titles to treat creatively with a boy's deep anxieties about the dark (and encroaching blindness) was "**AFRAID OF THE DARK**" (91), but this title sounds to have more in common with "**I REMEMBER MAMA**" or "**CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN**".

Nothing else is known of Lee Kinsolving (16/17). He's not listed in "*The Moving Picture Boy*", but I'm told by a retired film editor that Kinsolving died in his early thirties of "a respiratory disease", while playwright William Inge ultimately committed suicide.

See subject index under [AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TITLES](#), [CHILDHOOD PHOBIAS](#), [DEATH / DYING CHILDREN](#) and [DISCRIMINATION / PREJUDICE](#).