

## Fango Flashback: "THE BABY"

Written by Jack Bennett

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Having failed to make any kind of impression upon its initial release, the 1973 thriller *THE BABY* would be just another forgotten movie if it wasn't so very, very odd. The director, Ted Post, was best-known for helming mediocre second installments of two famous franchises, namely *BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES* and *MAGNUM FORCE*, the first sequel to *DIRTY HARRY*.

Post's cinematic style must have seemed dated even at the time, with static compositions and the kind of impersonal staginess that made even his most expensive films look like TV movies. Yet that quality is exactly why *THE BABY* seems so bizarre; if this were played as high camp or noxious sleaze, it would make sense. Instead, we're given a movie that looks and sounds as plain and square as an Afterschool Special, one that just happens to feature the perverse, sordid story of a family of women caring for a mentally deficient adult man as if he were still a defenseless baby. It's the kind of flick that begs viewers to ask, "Did anyone making this movie realize how weird it is?"



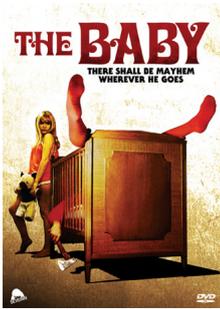
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Recently issued on its second DVD edition by Severin Films, *THE BABY* draws its inspiration from a true story. Apparently, once upon a time, an adult woman was claimed as a baby in order for a family to collect welfare. This was extrapolated by screenwriter Abe Polsky into sadistic matriarch Mrs. Wadsworth (Ruth Roman) destroying the lives of anyone who gets between her and her son Baby (David Mooney, credited as David Manzy), a full-grown man who spends his days in a crib, fussing and crying but never speaking, acting like a normal, healthy infant but looking like a sensitive actor fresh from a touring company of *GODSPELL*. When social worker Ann Gentry (Anjanette Comer) suggests to Mrs. Wadsworth that Baby could possibly be given some special education and develop mentally, Mrs. Wadsworth narrows her eyes and fumes that "I've raised three children and believe me, I ought to know what's best for my own child." Sounds like an average day at the movies, right?



Scene after scene of *THE BABY* plays out with inexplicable unpredictability. The social worker attempts to tell her superiors several times that someone needs to intervene on the Wadsworth family's situation, and she is rebuked several times on the basis that she is spending too much time on the case. What? Why is a social worker having such a difficult time gaining the necessary assistance to prevent systematic abuse? Before you can dwell too long on that question, the film forces you to consider a pretty young babysitter (Erin O'Reilly), who is left alone with Baby and allows him to suckle her breasts in such a sweet, unassuming way that you can't tell if we're supposed to be sympathetic to her or not.

It would help if Baby's condition was ever fully explained to the audience. Is he mentally challenged? Is his condition purely psychological? Are we supposed to support the babysitter's choice to treat Baby as an adult, or is she nursing him in an attempt to go along with the premise that this man has the needs of an infant? When caught in the act by Mrs. Wadsworth and her two daughters, the three women beat the babysitter sadistically and "punish" Baby with an electric cattle prod. By the end of the sequence, the audience is completely confused. Even filmgoers in love with moral ambiguity will watch *THE BABY* and scream at the screen, "What the hell am I supposed to be feeling here?"

While expert character actress Roman brings honesty and conviction to the fuming Mrs. Wadsworth, Baby's sisters nearly push the film to *MOMMIE DEAREST* levels of hilarious

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melodrama. The pigtailed Alba is played by Suzanne Zenor, who was almost famous once as the girl Suzanne Somers replaced on *THREE’S COMPANY* (legend says you can still see her in the distant beach shot of that show’s opening credits) and she’s a hoot in *THE BABY*, resembling a sexed-up caricature of a farmer’s daughter and delivering every line in a tone of barely suppressed rage.

Her sibling Germaine is played by Marianna Hill (remember her from *THE GODFATHER, PART 2*? She’s Fredo’s embarrassing new wife who gets thrown out of the Corleones’ party for making a scene), who for the length of the film basically just glides around looking seriously mentally ill. No, really, something about the woman’s piercing eyes, toothy smile and crazy mane of hair makes you think, “She could not look any crazier if she tried.” Then she shows up in a party scene covered in makeup, her hair in a shock of curls, and she looks *even crazier!* At that same party, we get some of the movie’s only comic relief in the form of a sleazy swinger who hits on the social worker by humorously hinting at his desire to drug and rape her.



Speaking of the social worker, she seems like a squeaky-clean, vanilla heroine with the best of intentions for the length of the movie—at least before a climax that sees her burying people alive and an ending that reveals her intentions to be a little more selfish than previously supposed. Oh, that ending! It’s practically an M. Night Shyamalan twist, changing our protagonist’s motivations entirely and re-explaining what already made sense, instead of explaining any of the parts that made no damn sense.

That’s *THE BABY* in a nutshell: a collection of moments that seem clear and straightforward even while they add up to “What the hell were they thinking?!” Post brought a similarly unremarkable lens to an incendiary subject with *THE HARRAD EXPERIMENT*, the movie that asked the question, “Would high school be better if everyone was naked in class?” As for *THE BABY*, you probably know by now whether or not it’s the kind of movie you’d enjoy. It can’t be denied; there’s still an audience for oddities such as these.

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