

# ROALD DAHL ON FILM

## THE NIGHT DIGGER

USA/1971/110mins/R

Dir: Alastair Reid With: Patricia Neal, Pamela Brown, Nicholas Clay

1971 was a big movie year for Roald Dahl. And not a particularly agreeable one, as Hollywood was in the process of bringing his novel 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' to the big screen, retitling it **WILLY WONKA AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY**, magnifying the role of Wonka against the author's wishes, and steadfastly ignoring Dahl's insistent plea that Spike Milligan should be cast as the crazy confectioner. Invited to pen the screenplay himself, Dahl set to work, but ultimately couldn't meet the production deadlines and ignominiously saw his script pass into the hands of David Seltzer for rewrites. Dahl disowned the final movie, and was especially critical of Seltzer's unwelcome additions to the plot structure.



Oscar-winning actress Patricia Neal (HUD, BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S) had been married to Dahl since 1953. The couple suffered tragedy after tragedy during the first half of the 1960s - four-month-old son Theo was brain damaged when a New York cab collided with his pram, seven-year-old daughter Olivia died from encephalitis, and then in 1965, a pregnant Patricia was hit by a series of strokes and fell into a coma for three weeks. Eventually resuscitated, she gave birth to daughter Lucy that August, and then commenced her own rehabilitation. Through the remainder of the decade Neal attempted to claw back her acting career, remarkably and swiftly achieving another Academy nomination for **THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES** (1968). Her supportive husband was keen to find projects suitable to assist her recovery, and as the **WILLY WONKA** debacle (as he viewed it) was unfolding, Roald Dahl busied himself by penning a script based on Joy Cowley's novel 'Nest In A Falling Tree'.

Cowley's 1967 book was set in a small New Zealand town and centered upon the relationship between a spinster, forced to tend to her frail and blind mother in a decrepit

CHAPTER



[www.filmhubwales.org/roalddahlonfilm](http://www.filmhubwales.org/roalddahlonfilm)

Facebook: [roalddahlonfilm](https://www.facebook.com/roalddahlonfilm)  
Twitter: [@filmhubwales](https://twitter.com/filmhubwales)

Join the conversation #RoaldDahlOnFilm



old property, and a young moody handyman/gardener who joins the household and brings along problems of his own. The character of Maura Prince was a perfect fit for Patricia, and her husband eagerly set to work on adapting the story for film. Dahl being Dahl, though, he upped the ante on the 'troubled teenager' figure - the fashion at the time in British thriller cinema was for handsome young men to be revealed as messed-up inside, full of deadly intention (Hywel Bennett in *TWISTED NERVE*, Shane Briant in *STRAIGHT ON TILL MORNING*, and other pretty-boy psychos), and so Nicholas Clay here plays the gardener as an outwardly confident, inwardly tormented figure, seemingly impotent (as revealed in flashbacks - real, heightened, or imaginary? - one of which has an unsatisfied blonde prostitute slapping him and calling him a "eunuch" over and over again) and loaded with hatred towards attractive dark-haired females.

Patricia Neal is exceptional in the finished movie (released as *THE ROAD BUILDER* or *THE NIGHT DIGGER* in different parts of the world), herself exemplifying a tradition of British screen acting, the on-the-shelf middle-aged wallflower desperately launching a somewhat pathetic passion towards an inappropriate target. This sort of role offers gold for women performers during that shadowy period where the movie business doesn't know quite what to do with them (ingénues and dowagers, fine - anything in between, unemployable), and Neal captures the anguish and sense of lost opportunity to perfection, via both monologue and quiet, wordless reflection.

*THE NIGHT DIGGER* roots itself in that 'England' which probably never really existed, the realm of chintz and bone china, steak and chips, hypocritical chattering churchgoers, idyllic coastal hideaways - though Dahl cleverly incorporates the changing face of the nation as Clay takes full advantage of new motorway construction to dispose of the damning evidence of his perverted crimes. The actor can only ever really ape his 'juvenile Jack the Ripper' predecessors here, but director Alastair Reid (an underappreciated specialist in the suspense/horror genres) does add one striking feature, having his young terror travelling the countryside at speed on a high-powered motorcycle - a motif that has proved influential on everything from *PSYCHOMANIA* (Don Sharp 1972) to *UNDER THE SKIN* (Jonathan Glazer 2013).

Dahl has huge fun playing with the mores and morals of the British way of life - scurrilous gossip abounds, notably from a winning Graham Crowden, who accidentally puts about a false rumour concerning the local vicar and his wife (a superb and beautifully-sustained running gag) and is eager to discuss and theorise upon newspaper details of the spate of murders which seem to be making their way south from Liverpool. The dilapidation of the property occupied by Neal and her mother conforms to an ever-effective visual metaphor in frequent use throughout British cinema, the crumbling family pile; and the one-upmanship (tenuous claims about 'relatives in Cheshire'), mistrust, and anxiety about change are all observed with relish by the author. The final scene of *THE NIGHT DIGGER* may prove a talking point - largely wordless and pieced together from close-ups, sideways glances, and symbolic shots, it often leaves viewers bemused, but is in fact gloriously dramatic and fully comprehensible, concluding this sad, sorrowful story in a manner that only cinema can.