

Home Alone



Review by Garry Victor Hill

Home Alone

Directed by Chris Columbus: Produced and written by John Hughes: Associate Producer Mark Radcliffe: Editor Raja Gosnell: Cinematographer Julio Macat: Costumer Jay Hurley: Music John Williams: Studio: Premier A Twentieth Century Fox film. Released November 10th 1990; Running Time 103 minutes (99 minutes in some versions): Rating PG: Available on DVD. Returned to cinemas during COVID-19 Reviewer's rating 85%

Cast

- [Macaulay Culkin](#) as Kevin McCallister
- [Joe Pesci](#) as Harry Lyme
- [Daniel Stern](#) as Marvin
- [Catherine O'Hara](#) as Kate McCallister
- [John Heard](#) as Peter McCallister
- [Roberts Blossom](#) as Marley
- [Angela Goethals](#) as Linnie, Kevin's older sister
- [Devin Ratray](#) as Buzz, Kevin's oldest brother who often gets him into trouble
- [Gerry Bamman](#) as Uncle Frank, Peter's older brother
- [Michael C. Maronna](#) as Jeff, Kevin's older brother
- [Hillary Wolf](#) as Megan, Kevin's oldest sister
- [John Candy](#) as Gus Polinski, a polka musician who helps Kate
- [Kristin Minter](#) as Heather, Kevin's oldest cousin
- [Daiana Campeanu](#) as Sondra, Kevin's older cousin
- [Jedidiah Cohen](#) as Rod, Kevin's older cousin
- [Kieran Culkin](#) as Fuller, Kevin's youngest cousin
- [Senta Moses](#) as Tracy, Kevin's older cousin
- [Anna Slotky](#) as Brook, Kevin's younger cousin
- [Terrie Snell](#) as Aunt Leslie, Uncle Frank's wife
- [Jeffrey Wiseman](#) as Mitch Murphy
- [Virginia Smith](#) as Aunt Georgette
- [Ray Toler](#) as Uncle Rob
- [Matt Doherty](#) as Steffan, Kevin's older cousin
- [Billie Bird](#) as the travelling woman at the Paris airport
- [Larry Hankin](#) as Officer Balzak
- [Ralph Foody](#) as Johnny in the film *Angels with Filthy Souls*
- [Michael Guido](#) as Snakes in the film *Angels with Filthy Souls*



Happy Families: The McCallister's. Left to right: siblings Megan, Jeff, Buzz, Father Peter, Mother Kate, Kevin and Lennie. Below: Their family home.



Review

Home Alone has become one of the world's most popular films ever. On its prolonged theatrical release of nine months in 1990-1991 *Wikipedia* estimates that sixty-seven million Americans saw it. That estimate might be a bit higher than the reality: foreign tourists and repeat viewing devotees must boost the total, yet surely not by all that much. When it went into video release in late 1991, it sold eleven million copies. *Home Alone* remains one of the biggest grossing films of the twentieth century, behind *E.T.* (1983) and *Star Wars*, (1977) but ahead of *Titanic* (1997), *Gone With The Wind* (1939) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). It is one of the very few films which ever got a major cinematic rerelease decades after being made, gaining a rerelease on the thirtieth anniversary of its first release. When this reviewer saw it on a 2020 Sunday afternoon (the most dismal time for audience numbers) the cinema was far from empty, despite covid restrictions. After the showing I went grocery shopping and saw a DVD version prominently displayed selling for much less than the theatre ticket. This, the way audience members tended to be older, and only some with children, (plus the audience participant in a medieval styled jester's costume) suggest that rarity, a cult classic with mass appeal.

Why does *Home Alone* have such a high level of success? There are no big name stars in leading roles, no extravagant special effects, high production values or memorable songs. The budget was less than shoestring level by 1990 Hollywood standards for an international cinematic release, being eighteen million dollars. There were no gushing critics. nor great publicity Most critics, while essentially favorable, had criticisms. *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic* only gave it scores of 63% and 65%.

Technically some aspects of the film show it to be not all that well made. Even before reading *Wiki Fandom's* entry for *Home Alone* this reviewer spotted several continuity mistakes and illogicalities. *Wiki Fandom's* writer lists eight such in a general trivia section and 112 more in their section "Goofs." Some, such as dry shoes and trousers after just wading through water, need an eagle eye to spot. Others such as a stuntman in a mismatched style of wig doubling as an eight-year old boy are blatantly obvious. The

dénouement becomes obvious within early scenes. Implausible motivations and holes in the plot abound.

So the question remains: why was and is *Home Alone* such a success? The abilities of producer writer John Hughes and director Chris Columbus to continually make entertaining films comes into it. The fast, but not too fast pacing and clever jokes and fine acting all come into the answer, but are not the main reason. Like Frank Capra's comedies and much of the output of the Earling Studio, like *The Paleface*, *How to Steal A Million*, *Raising Arizona*, *Crocodile Dundee* and *A Fish Called Wanda*, this comedy has that intangible thing, cinematic magic. Without the ability to beguile audiences into forgetting everything else but the story before them and take them into another delightful, even impossible situation, comedy can only be a failure. With it, wrong wigs and dry shoes when they should be sodden and 119 other misconstrued details and implausibilities are nothing.

So what beguiles?

When Buster Keaton, one of cinema's greatest comedians, said that timing was everything in comedy, he was exaggerating, but not by much. Comic potential can be easily killed by slowness, which dulls interest or by the opposite. Relentless speed can become tedious quickly, bewilders, and tires. Whatever faults this film has, its pacing and editing are near perfect. *Home Alone* starts at a frenetic pace as fifteen members of the McCallister family are in one Chicago residence, preparing to go to Paris the next morning. Amidst all the children and adults running around in confusion, a police officer Harry Lime (Joe Pesci) stays still, politely asking rushing passers by for the person who owns the house. This successfully contrasts stillness and movement calm and courtesy with cranky comments and worry. Throughout the film such a contrast occurs: when points are to be made action and filming slow so that the audience can get the point. With the action or the visual jokes comes the editing, music and cutting between close-ups, medium and long shots make the pacing faster. Neither the faster nor slower scenes are too long or too short; with the best editing and pacing the audience remains barely aware of their structure, if that. Mixed in with timing in comedy must be vitality - and this film certainly has that from the cast, the screenplay, the editing and the music. It also has contrast with that vitality in virtually perfect placing.



The siblings clearly dislike Kevin... Below: he burglars





Macaulay Caulkin as Kevin

In these first scenes despite his amiability and courtesy Pesci's stillness amidst movement creates a sense of something wrong, even before the facial close up showing his deceitful smugness. Something intangible gives it away that something must be wrong. Indeed while appearing to be a policeman waiting there to issue warnings about burglars being common in the Christmas season, Lime really cases the joint.

We soon see that the McCallisters are not playing happy families. Kevin, aged eight, emerges as the outsider. His crass, cranky, bullying older brother Buzz (Devin Ratray) gives him obscene abuse. His supercilious, precocious sister Lennie (Angela Goethals) indulges in a favorite mind game of that type, giving him an insult in French, which has the further preplanned humiliation of making him look stupid and her superior, as she knows French and explains from on high what the insult means. If all this humiliates, Buzz adds fear to Kevin's worries by observing their sinister looking neighbor Marley (Roberts Blossom) Buzz tells Kevin that Marley, a serial killer, escaped convictions in 1958, but he still kills. The salt that he spreads on his pathway to prevent slips is really the mummified remains of his victims. Buzz's mixture of excitement, relish and fear while recounting this might be a subtle comment by the filmmakers on the American fascination with serial killers. According to one television commentary around the time this film was made less than twenty -five real American serial killers were convicted, but over a hundred and twenty fictional depictions appeared in American culture.

This opens up a serious moment in this comedy, something that Columbus and Hughes frequently do in their films. Realities are often revealed as being the opposite of appearances. Marley turns out to be a polite church going gentleman who when Lyme is about to kill Kevin, saves Kevin from the once seemingly amiable and protective Lyme.

The serious side continues after sighting Marley, albeit briefly. The cousins also ridicule him, then when the dinnertime pizza arrives. Buzz and his cousin Fuller annoy Kevin over who eats what pizza. A fight between them ensues, all pizzas are ruined and milk goes over the travel documents. Although Buzz and Fuller were provocative, Uncle (Gerry Bamman) snarls at Kevin that he is a jerk. A camera shot from Kevin's point of view of the families silently and sullenly staring down at him shows that they agree with Uncle Frank's abuse. Kevin gets the blame and Kate, his mother (Catherine O'Hara) removes him, making him sleep in the attic. He tells his quietly

angry mother he wishes to have the house to himself and in the morning when they rush to the airport for the Paris flight he gets his wish. He sleeps in unnoticed and during the head count, a visiting childhood friend becomes mistakenly counted as Kevin.

At first Kevin feels overjoyed to be alone, but then Lime and his dopey mischievous sidekick Marvin (Daniel Stern) arrive to carry out the burglary...

Meanwhile Kate McCallister realizes that something has been forgotten and then after going through the likely answers she gives one of the most memorable scenes when she realizes, shrieking "Kevin!!"

From this point the film divides between three styles. Straight drama unfolds in short scenes as Kate frantically leaves Paris, trying to get home in the Christmas rush season, Here we see a frequent motif in the films of both Columbus and Hughes: the loud, pushy behavior of many Americans in Europe inflicting their cultural imperialism. Oddly, the McCallisters spend what we see of their Paris stay watching television. Ironically, *It's a Beautiful Life*, the 1946 classic Christmas film about a dysfunctional mid western American family, engrosses them - even if dubbed into French.

Kevin's dealing with living alone in the mansion and going about town becomes situation comedy. Slapstick starts when the burglars try the home invasion. Not since *The Three Stooges* (active 1922-1970) has the screen seen a more egregious slapstick team than Pesci and Stern. In one scene they actually use a crow bar as a stick to slap each other. Pesci with his craggy features, sedulous ways, short but stocky build, loud, aggressive and temperamental manner and way of attacking everyone and everything over anything embodies Mister Punch. All that the filmmakers have left out of Punch's ways are the attached strings, the large colorful coat buttons and the pixie hat: Pesci even ends up with a ridiculous chicken-feathered hat. Pesci has been perfectly cast, even if it was by serendipity, being a sudden replacement. Daniel Stern as a combination of dopey Judy substitute and fall guy looks just right.

The slapstick situations emerge as the burglars try to do their stuff in the McCallister house, falling for every trap, deceit and punishment that clever Kevin has gleefully prepared. Even if you never liked slapstick or thought



The boys watch Marley Below; Marley does look sinister, but Uncle Frank does reflect his personality.





Kevin's assorted attempts to baffle the burglars: airgun shots, fake people props and slippery stairs





Lyme, prostrated, gets a tarantula, courtesy of Kevin.



John Candy plays a good Samaritan helping Kate get home. His shoot took twenty-three hours for a role lasting a few minutes

you had outgrown it, you will be battling to keep a straight face in these segments.

Mercifully the ending does not go quite as predictably as expected: after the happy family reconciliation the last line comes from Buzz, snarling about what Kevin has done to his room. There are clearly conflicts ahead in the numerous sequels.

If you dislike American sitcoms, this might just change your mind. In that genre they don't come any better.



John Hughes
1950-2009

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