

In the Heat of the Night

By Michael Schlessinger

The problem with making topical films is obvious: the risk of becoming dated. Clothes, hair styles and cars are already going to change, and little ages a movie more than slang, be it “hep cat with a bum gam” or “fo’shizzle in the hizzle.” But ultimately, it’s all in how the subject is handled.

Consider two Sidney Poitier vehicles released in 1967. Stanley Kramer’s blockbuster “Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner?” was a groundbreaking dramedy which gently told white America that, yeah, it’s okay for your daughter to marry a Negro...as long as he’s a Nobel Prize-winning doctor and they’re on a plane for Africa at midnight. But it had the desired effect—so much so that nearly half-a-century later, when even gay marriage is now legal, it seems curiously quaint, and survives mainly as a glorious valedictory for America’s most beloved screen couple, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.

Yet the other, “In The Heat of the Night,” still seems as fresh and crisp as a just-picked apple. The difference? Director Norman Jewison, writer Sterling Silliphant and producer Walter Mirisch wisely concentrate on the murder mystery, which is the meat of the film; the racial animus is the gravy and stuffing. Because bigotry is not the film’s primary focus, we can enjoy it as a thriller while receiving the message in more subtle ways. It’s not exactly a spoonful of sugar, but the effect is the same.

Based on the first of seven novels by John Ball, it’s set in the sleepy burg of Sparta, Mississippi, where a Chicago entrepreneur who’s building a much-needed factory is found robbed and murdered. In a town where drunk and disorderly is as bad as it usually gets, this is a catastrophe. Chief of Police Gillespie (a furiously gum-chewing Rod Steiger) thinks he has the suspect: Virgil Tibbs, a “boy” waiting at the train station. But it turns out he’s a cop; in fact, he’s Philadelphia’s top homicide expert. Moreover, he’s ordered by his captain to stay and help them solve the killing. Gillespie doesn’t want him, but he *needs* him. And the fun commences.

Now it would be easy to make Tibbs the white knight (ha!) who gallops in and saves the day, but it ain’t that easy. Yes, Gillespie is way out of his depth, recklessly arresting people left and right—even his own deputy!—only to release them after Virgil ex-



Mr. Tibbs (Sidney Poitier) examines evidence as Chief of Police Gillespie (Rod Steiger) observes from a distance. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

plains how it couldn’t be them. But Tibbs screws up, too: he’s so determined to pin it on the local plantation owner (the worst racist in town) that it blinds him to any other suspect, even at the risk of making himself look foolish to all those rednecks he so desperately wants to show up; his ultimate cracking of the case depends almost as much on luck as sleuthing. By picture’s end, he too has learned a lesson about dealing with people not like him, making the resolution that much more satisfying.

Jewison often refrains from dialogue to tell us what a situation Tibbs has gotten into, being content to simply show it: the hostile glares; the ominous cars following him everywhere; the look of horror on the medical examiner’s face when Virgil asks where he can wash his hands, and of course the famous final shot of Gillespie carrying Tibbs’ suitcase to the train—a complete reversal of the norm—proving that the chief has at last accepted him as an equal. (The visuals are in the gifted hands—and eye—of the legendary Haskell Wexler.) And when the widow (Lee Grant) is informed of the murder, she doesn’t do the traditional screaming and sobbing; she merely stands there and internalizes it. It’s method acting at its most methody, but it works—and avoids the cliché.

Silliphant is equally attentive to details—when Gillespie picks up the phone and tells the switchboard operator, “Will you *try and* get me long distance?” (italics mine), those two extra words tell us much about a character

we haven't really met yet. The dialogue crackles with real Southern heat ("—and boy, I mean like NOW!"), and I defy anyone to find a monologue more erotic than young Quentin Dean's purring account of how she seduced a man in a cemetery ("...feel all that cool marble on yo' back...") without using one dirty word. But of course it's Poitier who merits the film's signature quote: When Gillespie condescendingly asks what they call him in Philadelphia, he snarls, "They call me *MISTER TIBBS!*", a line that elicits cheers to this day.

Indeed, one thing many people don't realize is how funny the film is. (Another example of why it's important to see movies in theatres, where audiences pick up on things single viewers don't.) Humor is always important in easing tension, and here it grows naturally out of the characters; Warren Oates' deputy is positively goofy. (One of the few critics who picked up on this, though not in a positive way, was Andrew Sarris, who dismissed the comic byplay as "vaudeville routines"). Though for the then-unprecedented scene where Poitier gets slapped—and then slaps the man right back—the filmmakers were initially nervous about how audiences would react. Invariably, it would be a shocked gasp, followed by a burst of relieved laughter (and often whoops and applause).

The supporting cast is an appealing mix of familiar faces (Oates, Grant, Larry Gates, William Schallert, Peter Whitney, Beah Richards) and newcomers (Dean, Anthony James, Matt Clark and Scott Wilson—whose next film was "In Cold Blood"), and Hal Ashby was the editor. But the picture's secret weapon is Quincy Jones, who composed the sensational jazz score, drenched in the blues and flavored with country. He assembled some of the best in the business—including Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Ray Brown, Bobby Scott, Billy Preston and Glen Campbell—plus Don Elliott, who functions as a vocal percussionist, bringing a unique and extra spice to the gumbo.

Then to top it off, Jones and Alan & Marilyn Bergman wrote what is, in this reporter's opinion, perhaps the finest title song ever, sung by Ray Charles. Scratch that. Make it *wailed* by Ray Charles. From the opening notes, you can feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand up as his voice slices through the dark, bearing the weight of the centuries of pain felt by his people. But it also swings like mad, and like all great

songs, stays with you always. Horrifyingly, it didn't merit an Oscar nomination; nor did the score, for that matter. (The Best Song winner? "Talk to the Animals" from "Doctor Dolittle." Oy.)

Seldom has a movie had such perfect timing. The Civil Rights movement was at its peak, with massive legislation passing on one hand and riots occurring on the other. Mirisch and Jewison knew they had something very special, particularly when none other than Robert Kennedy urged them to keep going after death threats forced them to shoot most of it in the safer climes of Illinois. And then in a coincidence no screenwriter would dare propose, Martin Luther King was assassinated the very day the Oscars were scheduled. The ceremony was postponed for two days, whereupon "Heat" triumphed with five trophies, including Picture and Actor (Steiger, in his acceptance speech, exclaimed, "We *shall* overcome!"). It ranks among the Academy's most electrifying evenings.

Poitier did two sort-of sequels, "They Call Me Mister Tibbs!" and "The Organization," though not the long-running TV series in which Tibbs improbably moves permanently to Sparta. But none of them achieved the special alchemy that "Heat" has: one of those rare instances when all the elements almost magically come together to create something that's tremendously enjoyable while still holding a mirror to our national psyche. Perhaps the day will finally come when we can cherish it simply as entertainment, and its sociological angle will seem as old-news as "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?" does today. But for now, it remains a vital part of our landscape, as important as any film to emerge from that turbulent decade.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Michael Schlesinger is widely acknowledged as the dean of classic film distributors, having spent more than 25 years at MGM, Paramount and Sony, keeping hundreds of vintage movies in theatrical release (and later DVD). He oversaw the completion of Orson Welles' "It's All True," wrote and produced the American version of "Godzilla 2000," co-produced such Larry Blamire parodies as "The Lost Skeleton Returns Again" and "Dark and Stormy Night," and has written, produced and directed several shorts featuring the faux-1930's comedy team of Biffle & Shooster.