

# CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

Directed by Richard Brooks  
Produced by Lawrence Weingarten  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Released in 1958

Money will drive a family apart like nothing else. Throw in closeted homosexuality, incestuous desire, marriages that produce children but not love, and cancer and you've got a toxic cocktail that will leave the participants retching and the audience gasping. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a triumph. It's a play that translates well to the screen as it doesn't need to be opened up. The setting of a mansion in a thunderstorm, with all parties stuck talking whether they like it or not, makes for good drama on stage or screen. The cast is a knockout (especially Burl Ives), and there's a lot of truth in the sad tales of that long evening.

The only disappointments are the opening (when Brick jumps the hurdles, the sign designating the high school behind Brick's head—East Mississippi High—is clunky exposition since high schools are named after towns, counties, or people, not states) and the end (Gooper turns on his wife and renews his bond with Brick too fast). In between we get to see this grand family pressure-cooked to perfection.

The best scene occurs after the big conflagration has ended, down in the basement, where Big Daddy finally owns up to the fact that he loved his father, and despite everything he has accomplished and acquired his life was never better than when he tooted about the country with his happy bum of an old man. Thus, despite the little time he has left, he finally sees the value in living for something besides himself.

The most criticized aspect of this movie is the veiled treatment of Brick's homosexual bond with Skipper. If we look beyond the asinine motivation to preserve morals, the censoring of this development is actually better than the overt treatment on Broadway. Why? First, it's because friends can be that important for men. Many men cannot relate to women and seem incapable of sharing anything of substance. A man's vulnerabilities will be laid bare in an ongoing intimate relationship with a woman. But not his secrets.

Second, it's the love that dare not speak its name. Even if everyone in the family arguing with Brick knows what was really going on, it makes sense that they'd be unable to say it. And Brick cannot admit to it—it's too personal (or too shameful).

And why not empower the audience? Why not reward them for putting 2 and 2 together?

A good example of this is when Big Momma deduces that Maggie and Brick are not sleeping together since he's an alcoholic and she's childless. Big Momma then enjoins Maggie that marriages live or die by the marriage bed. But there's more to it. A couple that doesn't have sex will find their marriage withering. But the root cause of destruction is whatever it is that keeps the two from physical unity. Here the spiritual disunity is grounded in Brick's suspicions of Maggie's adultery and greed. If sex was all that mattered, marriages could thrive on mutual lusts. That, of course, is unsustainable. For a marriage to work, there must be communication, trust, and sacrifice.

So the audience knows from its own experience that Big Momma is speaking to much broader concerns. In short, Maggie does not keep Brick happy. He doesn't need the happiness that comes from conjugal bliss; he needs the happiness that makes him willing to share the marriage bed with his wife.

It's always better to empower the audience and presume they're intelligent (with the risk that they miss something non-essential) than to talk down to them and insult them. Always get the audience in the story. Keep them thinking, keep them guessing. By always explaining what's happening filmmakers talk at their audience rather than with them. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* doesn't use a sledgehammer to make its points. And it reflects experiences common to too many families. That's why it is engaging, engrossing, and entertaining; and it rewards repeat viewings. This is a neglected classic.