

## ✓ In the Heat of the Night (A) USA 1967 22 January 2018

DIRECTOR: **Norman Jewison**

Running time: 108 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Sidney Poitier** (Virgil Tibbs), **Rod Steiger** (Gillespie), **Warren Oates** (Sam Wood), **Lee Grant** (Mrs Colbert), **James Patterson** (Mr Purdy), **Scott Wilson** (Harvey Oberst).

SCRIPT: **Stirling Silliphant** based on a novel by **John Ball**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Haskell Wexler**. EDITING: **Hal Ashby**. MUSIC: **Quincy Jones**.

1967 was in a way a watershed year in Hollywood, reflecting political unrest in the US as a whole. Peter Biskind may have pointed to 1969 and *Easy Rider* as the cusp moment for the new wave of filmmakers who made films for a younger audience, instead of for those who fought in the war, films that cost less money to make and had a fresh crop of actors on which to draw. However, 1967 saw the release of *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, both of which dealt more or less obliquely with the drop-out culture and a rejection of conventional mores. In addition, *Hombre*, *Cool Hand Luke* and *Point Blank* have a similar sense of rebellion running through them.

*In the Heat of the Night* (*ITHOTN*), which actually carried off the Best Picture award that year, may be a more safely liberal subject for the Academy to ponder, but does embody some of that new way of doing things that meant that making films like *Hotel* (also 1967) for an audience that was staying at home was no longer going to make economic sense. (Interestingly, Poitier's other US film that year, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, was made for precisely that audience, and was highly successful, but only cost four million dollars. Producer Walter Mirisch insisted on bringing *ITHOTN* in for half that amount.)

So much for the background, what of the story? The film is set in Sparta, Mississippi, where the protagonist, Virgil Tibbs, a Philadelphia PD detective, is caught between trains. Literally caught, as it turns out, for he is summarily arrested for the murder of a visiting businessman, who was scouting locations for a new factory. A black man in the wrong place at the wrong time: a familiar staple of the racial drama; but the wrong man, as is soon apparent to the local police chief, even if he is no less bigoted than his subalterns. Ultimately, Tibbs is requested to stay on and help in the

investigation, him being a top homicide detective 'n' all, and we are in the grip of a conspiratorial murder mystery with racial trimmings.

Just over thirty, director Jewison had come up through television, then directed a string of sex comedies for Ross Hunter at Universal, before coming out with a cracking Steve McQueen picture called *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965). There he had met editor and director to be, Hal Ashby, who edited his next three films, the second of which was *ITHOTN*. However, the relationship was closer than that, and Ashby more or less acted as Line Producer, watching Jewison's back from Hollywood, besides overseeing every conceivable detail on the production schedule.

The look of the film owes much to cinematographer Haskell Wexler, one of the new breed himself, who admired the work of Jean-Luc Godard's director of photography, Raoul Coutard. Thus, he broke with the received wisdom that if you were filming in colour it had to look good, and so you kept your set-ups still and lit the hell out of it. Wexler instead uses pinpoints of neon green or red as islands of light in murky night scenes to adumbrate the mysterious and ambivalent moral ambience of the town. For the jerky chase sequence with Scott Wilson he had himself carried on an improvised sedan chair!

One interesting bit of trivia: because of Poitier's understandable reluctance to film in Mississippi, the production settled on Sparta, Illinois, changing the name of Wells in the script to Sparta in order not to have to repaint the signs. Plantation scenes were shot, briefly, in Tennessee.

**David Clare**

**Elders** UK (2015), directed by Glen Milner.  
Running time: 7 minutes.