



Tea and Sympathy

Director: Vincente Minnelli

©: Loew's Incorporated

Production Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Producer: Pandro S. Berman

Assistant Director: Joel Freeman

Screenplay/Based on the play by: Robert Anderson

Director of Photography: John Alton

Colour Consultant: Charles K. Hagedorn

Film Editor: Ferris Webster

Art Directors: William A. Horning, Edward Carfagno

Set Decorations: Edwin B. Willis, Keogh Gleason

Wardrobe for Miss Deborah Kerr by: Helen Rose

Make-up: William Tuttle

Hair Styles: Sydney Guilaroff

Music: Adolph Deutsch

Recording Supervisor: Wesley C. Miller

uncredited

Singing Voice Double for John Kerr: Gene Merlino

Cast:

Deborah Kerr (*Laura Reynolds*)

John Kerr (*Tom Robinson Lee*)

Leif Erickson (*Bill Reynolds*)

Edward Andrews (*Herb Lee*)

Darryl Hickman (*Al Thompson*)

Norma Crane (*Ellie Martin*)

Dean Jones (*Ollie*)

Jacqueline De Wit (*Lilly Sears*)

Tom Laughlin (*Ralph*)

Ralph Votrian (*Steve*)

Steve Terrell (*Phil*)

Kip King (*Ted*)

Jimmy Hayes (*Henry*)

Richard Tyler (*Roger*)

Don Burnett (*Vic*)

uncredited

Mary Ann Hokanson (*Mary Williams*)

Ron Kennedy (*Dick*)

Peter Miller (*Pete*)

Robert Santon (*young boy*)

Bob Alexander (*Pat*)

Michael Monroe (*Earl*)

Byron Kane (*umpire*)

Paul Bryar (*Alex*)

Harry Harvey Jr., Bobby Ellis (*boys*)

Saul Gorss, Dale Van Sickle (*bully men*)

Norman Ollstad (*new young boy*)

Peter Leeds (*headmaster at bonfire*)

Chuck Courtney, Jimmy Pickford, Ralph Reed,

David Bair, Parker Eggleston (*boys in soda shop*)

Charles Webster, Coulter Irwin, Tom McKee,

Rodney Bell, Wilson Wood (*alumni*)

Eleanore Tanin, Virginia Eiler, Lucille Knock

Madge Meredith (*alumni wives*)

Del Erickson (*Ferdie*)

USA 1956©

122 mins

35mm

Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Tea and Sympathy

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away plot details for *Tea and Sympathy* and *Home from the Hill* (1960).

Filmmakers David Siegel and Scott McGehee on 'Tea and Sympathy'

Neither of us believes we are more than typically concerned with our Masculinity. Still, two films we agree we are clearly obsessed with – or perhaps haunted by to an obsessive degree – are Vincente Minnelli's *Home from the Hill* and *Tea and Sympathy*, movies we have come to think of as a sort of Castration Diptych. The occasion of our first viewing these films might have something to do with their peculiar hold on us. Several years ago we and a group of friends began to get together once a week to watch and talk over a post-war American melodrama of some variety; and in that context, among the aggressively feminine concerns of *Back Street* or *Mildred Pierce*, sandwiched between social-climbing nymphomaniac daughters and love-starved but self-sacrificing mothers, we came upon the peculiar sub-genre of the Minnelli Male Melodrama.

Perhaps it is something about the weird genre/gender conflict of a man telling a story about men in this particularly feminine idiom that gives these films their disturbing and psychotic beauty. Ultimately it's hard to say what either film might mean: conflicting and refracting levels of irony make anything beyond some lame position of utter devastation untenable.

Home from the Hill follows Theron Hunnicutt (an already pretty tan George Hamilton) as he comes of age in the family of macho Texas patriarch Wade Hunnicutt (sleepy Robert Mitchum). The problem is that due to Wade's excessive womanising, he and Hannah, his dreamy wife (played with a wondrous Hollywood Texan accent by Eleanor Parker) don't get along. Almost out of spite, Hannah coddles Theron and has not allowed Wade to make a proper man of him. Theron eventually earns Wade's respect by killing an especially mean wild boar, but when Hannah tells him that his father's rough-and-ready cowboy helper Rafe (an unbelievably cool George Peppard) is really Wade's unacknowledged bastard son, Theron disowns his father and gives up his faith in romantic love. As a result, and through a turn of events that seems to make perfect sense within the insane psycho-logic of the film, it is Rafe who marries Theron's 'in trouble' girlfriend Libby, while her father kills Wade because he believes him to have sired the unwanted baby. Theron then hunts down the father of the woman he still loves (the man who should have been his father-in-law), kills him, and goes away forever, leaving a broken Hannah, a post-natal Libby and a now cardigan-wearing Rafe to reconstruct some sense of family from the wreckage.

Tea and Sympathy sets itself a similar domestic table. Seventeen-year-old Tom Lee (John Kerr) has been sent off to prep school by his father to become a man – and to overcome the influence of an errant maid who taught him to sew and listen to folk music. But Tom is sensitive – not a 'regular fella' and prefers to garden with the housemaster's wife Laura (Deborah 'shall-we-dance' Kerr), on whom he has a wild crush, than to play ball with the other guys. Those other guys start to call him 'Sisterboy', and despite the well-meaning but painfully embarrassing efforts of Laura, the downward spiral of his male identity threatens his very life. He visits a prostitute in a last-ditch effort to save his reputation, but she notices his hands are soft and feminine and suddenly remembers his nickname. As she laughingly repeats 'Sisterboy, Sisterboy...', Tom is driven into a hysterical fit and tries to kill himself with (what else?) a knife from her kitchen. Laura goes to him the next day and – in a moment that never seems to grow less shocking – she gives herself to Tom in the woods near the sixth tee, to prove to him that he can perform with a woman when there is love. Yikes.

Even for melodrama, these films seem jammed with anxiety and embarrassment. When Wade announces at his dinner table, with his manly tenant farmers present,

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that not he but Theron will hunt the wild boar that has been terrorising local farms, Theron can't just be drinking a glass of milk, he must spill it. Or when Theron goes to a beer hall to drown his sorrows on the wedding day of his half-brother and his own pregnant girlfriend, it has to be none other than his father's cheap mistress who comes to cheer him up. This kind of nightmare logic runs rampant. Tom Lee can't just be on the dance and drama committees, he must also play a woman in the play and have a costume with a huge pale blue skirt, and that skirt must be impossible to keep in a closet so that it appears in every scene where it is most likely to be discovered by some varsity captain or by Dad.

What is truly remarkable is that scenes like this aren't played for comedy. Moments we might find laughable in other films – impossible moments of relentless cartoonlike coincidence – we take in some version of seriousness. We want to take them seriously, perhaps precisely because they have gone so far out on a limb. In one scene in *Tea and Sympathy*, some varsity boys discover Tom sewing buttons with the housemasters' wives on the beach instead of playing ball with them. It's a tough and embarrassing scene for Tom and for us: first the wives comment with mean-spirited irony on Tom's sewing skill, and then Laura, in a vain attempt to dispel the implications to Tom's manliness, recalls that her brawny husband learned to sew in the army (the defence, as usual, cuts much deeper than the attack).

Moments later, when we join the boys who witnessed the sewing circle, Sisterboy's reputation is spiralling out of control. But the depiction of the regular fellas' afternoon is so over-the-top it is hard to believe. First we see Laura's husband Bill (played with unthrottled virility by Leif Erickson) with a bunch of beefy guys packed in tight bathing suits practising some lost form of arm-wrestling that involves holding hands and flexing torso muscles. Then one boy begins posing questions from a magazine quiz called 'Are You Masculine?' This brings together a bare-skinned huddle as Bill, with each arm draped over the naked shoulder of a varsity boy, sounds out answers – 'Scotch! Girls! Hunting!' – before dismissing the quiz with a wave of his powerful arm and a throaty, 'What kind of test is this anyway?' When Laura calls to him from her car, he shambles towards her with the embarrassment of a boy being called from the playground by his mother, pulled from the homo-protective security of his rough-and-tumble playgroup.

This comic-book depiction of the man's world is drawn with impossibly broad strokes and its immediate purpose within the film's equation is painfully clear. It reasons too simply that repressed anxiety and perhaps even homosexual desire fuel the sissy-baiting at Tom's school. But somehow, because this is not a film about sissy-baiting or even homophobia but rather one about some more mythically structured problem of maleness, we don't hold it responsible for its absurd husky straw men, or for the simplicity of this early thesis. Instead, we allow these caricatures to raise the pitch of the macho frenzy to a point far beyond anything a more subtle depiction might be capable of. Instead of dismissing them, or being offended by them, we allow them to affect us deeply, like some terrifying castration anxiety – an anxiety we don't even believe we have.

Ultimately it is their careening, psycho-driven logic that keeps these films worth watching. No matter how tidy a package the genre may wrap things into by the film's end, no matter how domestic and liberal a solution we find ourselves arriving at, the out-of-control journey has too much radical inertia to be contained. Tom Lee could wear an even bigger wedding band than he already wears in *Tea and Sympathy*'s paste-on epilogue and Rafe could drive Hannah home in the station wagon for dinner every Sunday until little baby Terrance has pathological children of his own. It wouldn't matter. We've killed the grandfather of our son and made our mother crazy. There's no hope for the family, no hope for our impossibly patriarchal mess of a culture. And certainly no hope for our own little malformed sissy/masculine psyches in this hopelessly macho world.

Maybe we are more than typically concerned with our own Masculinity?

Sight and Sound, October 1994