

CATHY COME HOME



“...an ice pick in the brain of all who saw it.”

(TV Review, 1966)

Cathy Come Home is a television play about a young family's descent into homelessness. Made in 1966 for BBC1's 'The Wednesday Play' series it was first shown on 16th November that year and was watched by over 12 million people, a quarter of the British population at the time.

The central characters are Cathy (Carol White) and Reg (Ray Brooks), a young couple much in love and with a bright future ahead of them. We see them as an engaged couple walking in a park in dappled sunshine, and going on to marry, have children, and move into a smart little modern home with their growing family. But Reg, a driver, loses his job after he has an accident and this triggers a series of events that end with their poverty and homelessness. Struggling to maintain their family in a series of dingy abodes, coping with vermin and bailiffs, and eventually ending up in a hostel where Reg is not allowed to stay with his family, the dehumanising effects of poverty and the consequences of their enforced helplessness are vividly portrayed.

At the end of the film Cathy's children are forcibly dragged away from her on a station platform by the Social Services, to be taken into care. This final scene is considered to be one of the most memorable film endings in Television history, and it hits you like a punch in the stomach with its shock and raw emotion. So much so that the BBC's switchboard crashed after the film was first shown, because so many viewers called in to ask what they could do to help.

“The film alerted the public, the media, and the government to the scale of the housing crisis and Shelter gained many new supporters”

(Shelter)

Cathy Come Home was directed by Ken Loach who soon afterwards started directing films for the cinema, and became well known for films such as Kes and, more recently, The Wind that Shakes the Barley. Ken worked closely with Jeremy Sandford who wrote the script (who later went on to write 'Edna the Inebriate Woman', and Tony Imi the Cameraman. It was Loach's abandonment of the confines of the studio in favour of location filming and Imi's innovative use of a 16mm hand-held camera to take moving shots and close-ups that gives the film its gritty real-

NOTE: The Concord version of Cathy Comes Home comes with a 'Non-Theatrical Licence', which means it can be legally shown in educational establishments. Other versions at a reduced price only have a 'Home User Licence' which means just that – only to be shown in someone's house!

ism and documentary style feel. While some critics were uncomfortable about the blurring of the distinction between drama and documentary, there was little argument about the play's power. Although Cathy Come Home did lead to the abandonment by councils of their policies of separating fathers from their families, and putting homeless children into care, Loach later considered it a missed opportunity – “There was nothing in the film that suggested what ought to have been done” he said. His subsequent more directly political path no doubt stems from this time.

“Don't mourn, organise”

(Ken Loach)

However in 1967, in direct response to the showing of Cathy the previous year, the reforming Conservatives Iain Macleod and William Shearman led a publicity campaign that resulted in the formation of the homeless charity Crisis. Another homeless charity, Shelter, which brought forward its launch to only a few days after the first showing of Cathy, got an enormous boost of support as a result of the film.

“Before the showing of Cathy Come Home on the BBC in 1966 the topic of homelessness was hardly discussed but neither Equity, the actors' Union, nor the main technicians' Union would agree to the release of any television play on 16mm film; and this was the only way at the time that they could be seen apart from watching them on Television. So I approached the Secretaries of both unions and asked them to make an exception for this most useful play which could be used to forward this cause. Both agreed and I went back to the BBC (for whom we were already distributing documentaries) and they agreed we could distribute the play”.

(Eric Walker, Concord Founder & Trustee)

In 1999 Cathy Come Home topped a British Film Institute poll as the most important single play ever made for Television. And in 2000 a BFI poll of industry professionals put Cathy second (second only to Fawlty Towers!) in the 'Top TV 100 of the 20th Century'.