

# THE TOWERING INFERNO

Directed by John Guillermin

Produced by Irwin Allen

Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures and Twentieth Century-Fox

Released in 1974

Most movies are lost to the ravages of time. When people complain that pictures today are much worse than ones from 60 or 70 years ago, they often forget that the dreck of disappointing cinema has been screened by the collective opinion of successive generations. Most films are bad, and wither on the vine.

Film historians and preservationists decry the number of films already lost and those on the verge of disintegration. Often, films are saved with little thought of the public—a couple hundred grand can be invested to restore a silent film, it receives a glittering unveiling before an audience of critics and professors, and is forgotten again. In most cases, if a film is worth saving, it already was. With a few cautionary caveats—Jack Warner's dismemberment of George Cukor's *A Star Is Born* (1954) and RKO's contempt for Orson Welles's near-miss *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), we really can rest easy; money talks.

It's not for the sake of posterity, but profit that fuels most restorations. Ever since studios realized they could still make money on their old films through television, they've been inclined to turn on the air conditioning. Now, with the video revolution, where any trifle can find an audience somewhere, nothing will be intentionally lost again.

With so many films, few people can ever hope to see a reasonable sampling of the cinematic past. A lifetime's worth of viewing entices and frustrates. But for practically everybody, five years max is all the viewing one person can invest. Some movies are lost to memory, movies which were once well known. *The Towering Inferno* is one. This is a big movie in every way—budget, stars, melodrama—all off the charts. Maybe it's not taken seriously enough and so it has gradually faded from the consciousness of cineastes. Of course, high brow cine-fanatics didn't take kindly to this film in '74, and usually cineastes are the only ones to cultivate a knowledge of old movies. These aren't our stars, the styles are outlandish, and it lacks the self-consciously cynical edge typical of more recent spectacles. Even now the effects are good, but the impact of such a story filmed today could have a pulverizing effect on audiences.

It's party time half a mile up; the dedication for the world's tallest skyscraper, San Francisco's Glass Tower, has galvanized the illustriously well-connected of California. But chief architect Paul Newman slowly realizes that this monument to avarice was not built to his exacting specifications, and serious misfortune could result that evening, during the gala celebration. He clashes with builder William Holden and wastrel Richard Chamberlain, who sacrificed the building's wiring to kickbacks. A huge blaze erupts, and fire chief Steve McQueen steps in to save as many people as he can. So the stage is set for some earnest romance, some buddy-up adventure, a stunning rescue here, and a blazing demise there. It's a very good film only lacking some judicious cutting.

The movie is designed to delight and awe, a quality of passing favor in Hollywood. Either producer Irwin Allen felt ashamed of his product or felt extremely proud of it—the dedication is a risk:

To those who give their lives  
so that others might live—

To the fire fighters of the world—  
This pictures is gratefully dedicated.

This notice appears at the tail end of the opening credits, accompanied by a solemn horn arrangement.

A picture this big, geared to mass audiences, can hardly be seen as a call to elevate the status of firemen. Again, the dedication is not inappropriate, but its prominent positioning is a recipe for criticism, mostly from the know-it-all critics Allen would be right to ignore anyway.

Allen, and not director John Guillerman, is the man to attract attention. It's Allen's film. He had produced *The Poseidon Adventure* two years previous. It was a big hit and made this film possible, which tops the previous endeavor with a more compelling, more identifiable story, and a stronger script.

*The Towering Inferno* is redolent of the Titanic catastrophe. Characters talk about the building like it's indestructible, like anything going awry is simply unthinkable. But its demise is cleverly foreshadowed, with no slight-of-hand. We see that corners have been cut. Not only was the wiring scaled back to save money, but the safety systems aren't on line yet. A flare up in the utility room serves as a precursor, to show us what might happen. Characters reference the sensations of heat and burning in an off-hand manner, totally unaware of their comments' dark irony. And the slogan of Duncan Enterprises, which built the Tower, is "We Build for Life." And so the fire on 81 starts. It spreads via elevator to other floors. Gas lines explode all over, and wiring continues to overheat, starting new fires. Soon the whole Tower is engulfed, and the glittering elite are faced with some hard truths.

Paul Newman works feverishly to save anyone he can, using his all-encompassing knowledge of the building to exorcise some guilt. Steve McQueen is steely and irritated. He knows this was preventable, and he wants to make sure that as he fights the fire he fights the arrogance that caused it.

The stakes are gradually ratcheted up through the whole movie. The Promenade Room celebrants first have their revels broken by the announcement that they have to move downstairs. It's a small fire, far away. Then they see a man burn to death. The stairway can't be used, only a little elevator. Soon it's out of use, so they turn to helicopter. By now they've got a lottery going, women first. At this point they all realize their odds are slim, but the people can't keep it together, freaking out and losing the helicopter escape route. Next they have a breeches buoy. That, too, is lost to selfish fear. All that is left is to wait and die, either by water or by fire, an elemental end.

The most difficult thing to watch is the death of Dan Bigelow and his secretary-paramour. Now that we've seen the primal horror of death by flame, our dread of what could lay ahead infuses the narrative with more impact. In anticipating the worst, our imagination

surpasses what we see on screen—but not by much. The picture is a marvel, sporting a succession of compelling set-pieces.

But maybe the best thing in the movie is just the simple scene of dialogue between Paul Newman and William Holden, the one we've been waiting for all along. Newman's character, Doug Roberts, starts by breaking the news to builder Jim Duncan that Will Giddings, their mutual good friend, and the first man hurt by the fire, just died. Doug then asks Jim why he made the choices to skimp on safety features. Jim argues that what he did was his prerogative and entirely legal. But Doug has taken a circuitous tour of the building to arrive at the Promenade Room; he's seen that even the barest standards of safety were not met, and the electrical system is only good for starting fires. He then admits that he is just as much to blame. "What do they call it when you kill people?"

*Entertainment.*