TOBACCO ROAD

By Jack Kirkland

From the Novel by Erskine Caldwell

Directed by

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TOBACCO ROAD opened on Broadway in December 1933, and closed after eight years and over 30,000 performances in 1942, making it one of the longest-running plays in theatrical history. During the Broadway run, road productions toured 48 states, and played to sold out houses in every major American city. Caldwell's comic portrayal of the tragic horror of rural Depression Georgia is considered one of the earliest examples of "black humor."

Novellist, Erskine Caldwell

TOBACCO ROAD March 18-April 11

by Jack Kirkland, adapted from Erskine Caldwell's Novel

My recollection of how TOBACCO ROAD had its beginning is stark and vivid.

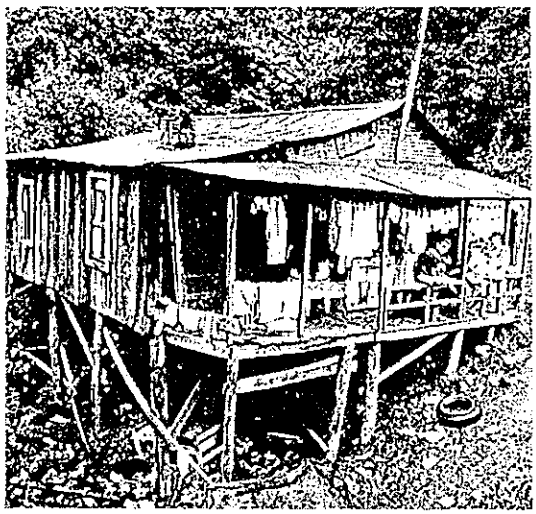
It was in the heat of midsummer in Georgia, below the Piedmont, and I was walking along a dusty, weed-bordered, wagon-rutted road. Here I was in my own country, among eroded clay ridges and barren sand hills, a land I had known all my life.

All around me were clusters of stunted, scrawny, scraggly cotton plants trying vainly to exist in the depleted soil. The land was desolate.

Not far away across the fields were several tenant houses, shabby and dilapidated, two-room shacks with sagging joists and roofs. Around the buildings were groups of human beings. The children were playing in the sand. The young men and women were leaning against the sides of the houses. The old people were merely sitting. Every one of them was waiting for the cotton to mature. They believed in cotton. They believed in it as some men believe in God. They had faith in the earth and in the plants that grew in the earth. Even though they had been fooled the year before, and for many years before that, they were certain the fields would soon be showered with tumbling, bursting bolls of glistening white cotton.

But I had walked along that same road and had stopped and gazed upon those same fields the previous autumn, and I did not know how many autumns before that, and I had never seen any man gather enough cotton from those stunted plants to provide himself with food and clothing.

It was not difficult to survive in summer when it was warm and balmy, and when there was the vision of cotton to look forward to in the autumn. One could always find blackberries and wild onions and, sometimes, rabbits.



But when it was fall and winter and early spring it was a different matter. I had walked along the road in midwinte and had seen hungry people wrapped in rags, going nowhere and coming from nowhere, searching for food and warmth, wanting to know if anywhere in the world such things still existed. They asked for only enough food to keep them alive until spring so they could plant next year's cotton.

Henry Hull and Ruth Hunter in the original production of TOBACCO ROAD, 1933.

They had so much faith in nature, in the earth, and in the plants that grew in the earth, that they could not understand how the earth could fail them. But it had failed them, and there they were waiting in another summer for an autumn harvest that would never come.

It had happened once before.

Not to these same people, but to their forefathers.

Their forefathers had seen tobacco come and flourish on these same plots of earth. But after its season it would no longer grow in the depleted soil.

The fields lay fallow for many years.

Then came the cotton.

Cotton thrived in abundance for several generations, and then it, too, depleted the soil of its energy until it would no longer grow.

First, tobacco, and then cotton; they both had come and gone.

But the people, and their faith, remained.

Erskine Caldwell's Preface to TOBACCO ROAD

ERSKINE CALDWELL'S WALK DOWN TOBACCO ROAD--A JOURNEY TOWARD SOCIAL TRAGEDY OR SENSATIONAL COMEDY?

Erskine Caldwell, the author of the novel TOBACCO ROAD, has had a distinguished career as a writer and journalist since the 1930's. He introduced a forceful writing style into American fiction with the gritty realism and poetic humor of TOBACCO ROAD and GOD'S LITTLE ACRE, two of the most widely read works of fiction of the 1930's and 40's. Caldwell's examination of the lives of impoverished Southern sharecroppers depicts the hard edge of truth without ignoring the kind of black humor which is never far away in even the most tragic social situations. Due to this style of humor, TOBACCO ROAD has been both vilified and acclaimed, banned or embraced, depending on whether a given critic or audience considers Caldwell's viewpoint one of condescending voyeurism or affectionate depiction of an actual condition of American life.

TOBACCO ROAD has remained one of the most popular dramatic pictures of the Depresssion South probably because it includes a sense of humor amid its despair. This sense of humor is often brutal, and always motivated by the realities of the physical life of these starving farm families who have lost their reason for, and ability to live in a changing economy. TOBACCO ROAD sparked controversy when it was dramatized because it dared to bring an unpalatable truth to the stage, and dared to do this in a way that did not romanticize the plight of the uneducated poor, nor proselytize about the need for social reform. It merely presented a particular way of life as truthfully and fully as its author knew how. As Caldwell himself has said, "There is humor in the play, along with tragedy. It is . . . very close to life."

Whether or not a way of life so elemental in its existence, so bereft of purpose higher than survival, deserved to be put upon the stage was the dilemma debated by many critics at the time of its premiere in 1933. Theatrical trends of the era tended to favor the dramatization of a far more glamourous view of life, and when Broadway did include plays which focused on the less fortunate, the view tended to be wholly tragic. When TOBACCO ROAD opened, even Caldwell said, "I didn't think it would last more than one night." Despite lukewarm reviews and early months of low attendance, TOBACCO ROAD survived and gained momentum, eventually becoming the second longest-running play on Broadway with 3,182 performances and over seven years of continuous playing.

Distinguished theatre critic Brooks Atkinson's responses to the play represent the broad gamut in which it was either condemned or championed, and the way critics' responses changed after a production that everyone expected to be a quickly forgotten flash in the pan became a theatrical institution. His first review of TOBACCO ROAD in *The New York Times* is dated Dec. 5, 1933:

Under Mr. Caldwell's influence it is one of the grossest episodes ever put on the stage. . . . The theatre has never sheltered a fouler or more degenerate parcel of folks than the hardscrabble family of Lester that lives along the "Tobacco Road." But . . . Mr. Caldwell's grossness cannot be dismissed as morbidity and gratuitous indecency. It is the blunt truth of the characters he is describing, and it leaves a malevolent glow of poetry above the rudeness of his statement.

By Sept. 8, 1935, when Atkinson wrote again about what was then one of the established plays on Broadway, his tone is notably different:

It is one thing to deplore the theatre's lack of fastidious sensibilities. But to maintain that the theatre should be devoted to the fine aspects of the human race is to imply the human race is innocent of corruption. The function of art is not to promote a code of ideals but to tell the truth about all the people who inhabit the world. What is, is, and if we are ever to get anywhere with enlightened civilizations we must know the full truth about it. Whether it is flattering or distressing, inspiring or depressing, is beside the point, and the need is not for temperate speaking but for complete frankness about every one and everything. For none of the ills of humanity can be cured until it is understood. As for TOBACCO ROAD, Mr. Caldwell has proved since the play was produced that such people as Jeeter Lester exist today in the lower depths of America.

Caldwell himself has addressed the controversy surrounding TOBACCO ROAD in several interviews and prefaces to various reprints of the play and novel. In Dec. of 1935 he told *The New York Times:*

Why does TOBACCO ROAD create and continue to create a storm of controversy? Does it touch a sore spot in the mass of the American people? . . . The reason it is a sore spot is, perhaps, that many of us try to cover up a weakness in our civilization by sweeping the dirt under the rug instead of carrying it out.

By 1966, when the controversy over the play had long since died but its popularity seemed to be reconfirmed by a film version of the play and numerous revivals both in the U.S. and around the world, Caldwell's attitude toward TOBACCO ROAD had attained the perspective of history:

The story of TOBACCO ROAD . . . evidently appeals to a considerable number of persons in many parts of the world. Even though it is a story of American life during the past decades and is concerned solely with native ways in a Southern small community, I would be hard put to it to prove that the number of persons in the United States who are acquainted with the story is a larger one than the total number of persons acquainted with it in countries abroad. . . . All this could mean, it may be, that the story told in TOBACCO ROAD is one that tends to reach into the heart and awaken the hopes and fears of man wherever he may live.

Whatever effect the story does have, it was not something consciously sought for or achieved, but is the result of a desire to tell about a group of persons whose destiny it was to be born where they were born, to live where they lived, and to do what they did.

The individual's reaction to what he sees is rarely passive; it is more likely either to be welcomed or to be violently rejected. Some have said that the story is accepted because it enables many persons to feel superior to the characters in the novel and play; some have said it is liked because it provides, vicariously, release of moral and economic fears; others have said it is scandalous, scrofulous and scurrilous. Result? TOBACCO ROAD is controversial.

TOBACCO ROAD: THE PLAY is a dramatization by Jack Kirkland of TOBACCO ROAD: THE NOVEL. Shortly after I had written the novel, Jack Kirkland read it, and, being a playwright, decided that the story was one that could be adapted for the stage. A Southerner himself, Jack Kirkland was familiar with the background of the story and the way of life, and he brought the people and the happenings and the stark atmosphere of TOBACCO ROAD to the stage faithfully and forthrightly.

. . . Even though it was to become a successful play by Broadway standards, in the early years of its American tour TOBACCO ROAD was frequently censored, banned, or brought to court in various parts of the United States. . . . During those years of TOBACCO ROAD'S day-to-day experiences while on tour, it sometimes happened that it was necessary for the management to decide on short notice whether or not to cancel a performance in the face of threats by local authorities to throw the actors and actresses in jail. . . . Toward the close of the 12-year period of tour, attempts to tamper with the play dwindled and the practice eventually came to an end.

The first act of the history of TOBACCO ROAD: THE PLAY has now come to a close. The second act will tell the play's history in stock, non-professional, and local theatres. What the third act will be remains to be seen.

Caldwell himself has now witnessed this second act success of TOBACCO ROAD; major revivals of the play have appeared to critical acclaim in the U.S. The play had attained considerable success in Eastern Europe, Caldwell noted in a 1984 interview in the *Hartford Courant.* The idea of a play once subject to censorship in the U.S. now appearing in Soviet-bloc countries, no doubt controversially, stirs the imagination to disturbing thoughts of comparative social realities.

While we can now produce TOBACCO ROAD with little fear that our acting company will be thrown in jail, the plays remains provoking because it is problematic. Our challenge becomes less one of avoiding censorship, but of tredding the thin line between humor and anguish which will make this play come to life--to find that thread of truth which elicits laughter out of the brutal facts of survival. TOBACCO ROAD brings to us, with stirring force, the strength and immediacy of the theatre, because it elicits from us strong reactions, both positive and negative, which we cannot easily explain away or forget.

Janet Allen

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Jack Kirkland (Adapter) (1902-69)

American dramatist and producer, wrote a dozen plays, most of them adaptations of novels. His greatest success was his adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's TOBACCO ROAD (1933), which made millions of dollars for Kirkland.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Kirkland began as a newspaperman and had written an earlier play, FRANKIE AND JOHNNIE (1928). Later he also adapted other novels for the stage, including John Steinbeck's TORTILLA FLATS (1938), Erskine Caldwell's GEORGIA BOY (1945), and Nelson Algren's THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM (1956). Shortly before his death he began rewriting TOBACCO ROAD as a "folk musical" libretto.

Erskine Caldwell (Novelist) (1902 -)

Author of the novel TOBACCO ROAD, Caldwell was born in White Oak, Georgia, and until the age of 20 never lived longer than a year in one place. The son of a Presbyterian minister, he left home at 14 to wander through the Deep South, Mexico, and Central America. At 17 he enrolled at Erskine College, Due West, South Carolina, for a short time. He next entered the University of Virginia on scholarship, and there began writing short stories. Later he attended the University of Pennsylvania, then spent 8 years in Maine, where he wrote TOBACCO ROAD, and GOD'S LITTLE ACRE. In the field of writing he introduced an original and forceful style of his own, and in 1933 received the recognition of the Yale Review Award for fiction. TOBACCO ROAD, the dramatization by Jack Kirkland, was first produced in 1933 and received but slight critical acclaim. It played however, for a record stretch of seven and a half unbroken years on Broadway. Best known for his novels and short stories, Mr. Caldwell is also a journalist of note, having been a newspaper and radio correspondent in Europe during World War II. He has also worked as a seaman, cotton picker, cabdriver, bodyguard, cub reporter, cook, waiter, lecturer, and as an editor. Once married to the LIFE photographer Margaret Bourke-White, Mr. Caldwell now lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with his present wife, Virginia. They travel widely, in the United States and abroad.

TOBACCO ROAD--Characters, Setting and Synopsis

CHARACTERS

Jeeter Lester, father of the family, third-generation Georgia farmer
Ada Lester, his wife, mother of his 15 children
Dude Lester, Ada and Jeeter's 16-year old son; very disrespectful
Ellie May Lester, Ada and Jeeter's 18-year old daughter; a harelip
Grandma Lester, Jeeter's aged mother, who has been left to starve
Pearl Lester Bensey, Ada and Jeeter's 14-year old daughter; married
Lov Bensey, Pearl's husband; works at the railroad coal chute for $1/day
Sister Bessie Rice, a 50ish lady evangelist; recently widowed
Henry Peabody, a neighbor
Captain Tim, son of the Lester's landlord; from the city
George Payne, from the city bank

SETTING

The play takes place on the Lester farm, some miles outside Augusta, Georgia, in the 1930's. Tobacco roads were dirt roads which had been formed in earlier decades, by rolling tobacco barrels from the fields along the top of the hills to the railroad. Tobacco had long since exhausted the land, and cotton had followed in its place, but by the 1930's much of the land in the South was too devoid of minerals to grow anything. The Lester's house shows the effects of the ravaged land--as ex-sharecroppers, they have been unable to plant a crop for seven years, primarily because they cannot borrow enough money to buy seed and fertilizer. The businessman who is their landlord has given them permission to stay on in the house their family has lived in for 3 generations, despite the fact that they pay nothing to him in crops or rent. Consequently, they have little to eat, their house is falling down around them, their clothes are meagre, and they stand about idle much of the day. The play begins on a day in February when the earth is warming enough to hold the promise of spring and planting season.

The Depression hit the South harder than any other area of the country, since it had never freed itself from the shackles of Reconstruction. The well-known Southern author, James Dickey, puts it very clearly: ". . . you couldn't really call it a Depression in the South, things just sagged a little more than usual." But in 1934 (when TOBACCO ROAD opened) few Americans were aware of the plight of the rural Southern farmer. Theirs was an ongoing battle to survive another day. And often the only survival was to leave the land and move to the city, where mills had been established by Northern industrialists, or the travel to the sun-belt, as Steinbeck's classic novel THE GRAPES OF WRATH depicts.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I: Late afternoon on a day in February. Jeeter Lester is attempting to repair a tire for his broken-down automobile, in hopes of getting the car roadworthy enough to haul a load of brush pine to Augusta. Since he has been unable to farm, he has made a few dollars by selling firewood in the city, but now his auto is apparently unfixable, and there is no food in the house and no money. Dude amuses himself by throwing a baseball against the side of their ramshackle house, knocking shingles off with each throw. He even throws the ball at his old grandmother when she gets in his way. Ellie May slinks around outside, watching the men and rarely speaking, as her harelip is the cause of ridicule and scorn.

Shortly, Ada comes out of the house and reprimands Jeeter for his laziness: if he would only get the auto fixed, he could sell some wood and buy some food and snuff, which the women take to quiet their hungry stomachs when the food runs out. Ada is also concerned that their clothing is insufficient: particularly, that she will die without a stylish dress to be buried in. Jeeter joins her in concern for what will happen after he dies: he lives in fear of repeating his father's fate, whose body was left in the corncrib after he died and the rats attacked him. Jeeter and Ada appeal to the insensitive Dude to bury them properly, but Dude teases them by chanting a taunting, morbid phrase. Jeeter and Ada consider appealing to some of their other children who have grown up and left the farm to work in the textile mills nearby, but they can't even remember all of their children's names and don't know where any of them live.

Just as they are trying to recollect the characteristics of some of their children, Lov Bensey, their son-in-law, enters. He is carrying a bag of turnips, and the Lester family visibly covets this treasure. Jeeter focuses on how to convince Lov to share his wealth, or if need be, how to distract him long enough to steal the bag of turnips and run into the brush to eat them. Ada focuses on what news Lov might have about Ada's favorite daughter, Pearl, Lov's wife. And it is about Pearl that Lov had come to talk about: he appeals to Jeeter, as Pearl's father, to force Pearl to behave as a proper wife. It seems that Pearl refuses to talk to her husband, or to sleep in his bed, and Lov has tried everything to get her to do these things. We discover that Jeeter had sold Pearl to Lov for seven dollars, and Jeeter considers that to have been the end of his business with Pearl. Jeeter suggests instead that Lov consider taking Ellie May home with him; despite her disfiguration, she seems willing to perform wifely functions, and Jeeter would love to have one less mouth to feed. While Lov and Ellie May are sizing each other up, Jeeter steals the turnips and runs off. Lov gives up and goes home in disgust.

Next to approach the Lester house is Sister Bessie Rice, who comes to pray for the ever-sinful Lester tribe. Sister Bessie announces that the Lord has told her to go out in search of a new husband and during the scene, she lights upon Dude as a likely prospect. Neighbor Henry Peabody appears in the midst of this with the exciting news that their landowner is coming out to see all his sharecroppers. Jeeter takes this as a sign that credit and farming will return, and quickly goes out to burn the fields and prepare to plant a new crop.

ACT II: Early morning, the next day. Sister Bessie is the first to arrive, eager to present the family with the news that the Lord has accepted Dude as a prospective husband for her. She convinces Dude to accept the marriage proposal by promising to buy an automobile to which he shall have exclusive driving privileges. Dude agrees, and the unlikely couple go off to Augusta to "get leave of the county" to get married.

Having his youngest son married off, Jeeter turns his thinking to the fate of Ellie May, who he fears will never marry because of her harelip. Jeeter continues to believe that Captain John (the landowner) will solve many of their financial woes, and looks forward to his visit. In the meantime, Lov returns with the news that Pearl has run away. As he leaves to go back to work, Pearl appears, and Lov catches her. Ada beats Lov with a stick until he releases Pearl. Jeeter, ever the first to hatch a plan to his own advantage, devises a scheme to trade Pearl to Lov for food or money. Ada refuses to return Pearl to Lov if she doesn't want to go, adding that Jeeter has no right to say what will happen to Pearl because she isn't his daughter. Somewhat taken aback by this news, Jeeter suggests that Lov take Ellie May instead. Lov refuses, saying he wants Pearl or nothing and stalks off. Ellie May attacks Pearl, for being the cause of losing her chance to get a man. Ada defends Pearl.

Sister Bessie and Dude return in their brand new automobile. It instantly becomes the center of everyone's attention, especially since Dude has already wrecked it once just driving it home. Bessie now performs the religious portion of the wedding ceremony, which consists of a short prayer, followed by hauling Dude into the house for immediate consummation. Bessie is unsuccessful though, first because the family insists on watching them through the windows, and second, because Captain Tim, the landowner's son, arrives with a banker from Augusta. The land has been lost to the bank, and the two men have come to tell Jeeter and the other sharecroppers that they must move or pay rent. Rescuing Dude from his amorous wife, Jeeter sends Bessie and Dude in the automobile to the adjoining county, where one of Jeeter and Ada's oldest children, Tom, lives. Jeeter has heard that Tom has money, and sends Dude to get rent from Tom to pay for them to stay on the land.

ACT III: Dawn, the following morning. Jeeter has begun to wonder what has happened to Dude, Bessie and the rent-gathering mission. Grandma Lester is presumed dead, as no one has seen her since the day before. They speculate that she was trapped in the burning fields. Lov comes to offer Jeeter a large piece of salt pork and money if he will persuade Pearl to return to him. But Ada refuses to allow it, favoring a plan whereby Pearl should go to the city, work in the mill, and wear fancy dresses. Lov, in despair, departs.

Bessie and Dude appear, in the almost totally wrecked car. They have spent the night in Augusta for their honeymoon. Dude tells Jeeter how Tom spurned him and refused to give any money toward the well-being of his parents. At first unbelieving, Jeeter tries to persuade Bessie to let him haul firewood to sell in Augusta in her car. She refuses. Now desperate, Jeeter grabs Pearl and sends Dude in the car to get Lov --he intends to sell her back and use the money to pay the rent and stay on the land. Ada tries to stop Dude from going to get Lov and is run over by the car in the process.

As she dies, Ada begs Jeeter to let Pearl go, just long enough to come touch her in her last moments. Jeeter refuses to let Pearl go, but Ada manages to bite Jeeter's hand, thus enabling Pearl to run off to freedom. When Dude returns with Lov, Pearl is long gone. Jeeter sends Lov and Dude out into the fields to dig a hole to bury Ada. Then Jeeter sends Ellie May down to Lov's house, giving her instructions about how to care for him so he'll let her stay. Jeeter, now totally alone, thinks about how to live another day.