

Actress Lauren Bacall, Hollywood star at 19, dies in New York

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Lauren Bacall, one of the few surviving performers prominently identified with Hollywood films in the 1940s, died at her longtime home at The Dakota apartment building on Manhattan's Upper West Side on Tuesday. She was a month shy of her 90th birthday.

Bacall's performances mean a great deal to anyone who cares for American filmmaking at its artistic height. She contributed her remarkable intelligence and sensuality to a number of films, and also had the opportunity to collaborate with tremendously talented performers, writers and directors.

Still a teenager, Bacall made a dazzling, unforgettable film debut in Howard Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* (1944), alongside Humphrey Bogart. Bacall and Bogart, twenty-five years her senior, began a relationship during the production that led to their marriage in 1945. They remained together until his death from esophageal cancer in early 1957. The pair made three other memorable films together: *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946), *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) and *Key Largo* (John Huston, 1948).

Bacall appeared in numerous films in the 1950s, the most memorable of which were *Bright Leaf* (Michael Curtiz, 1950), *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and *Designing Woman* (Vincente Minnelli, 1957). In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Bacall starred on Broadway in a number of successes, including *Cactus Flower* (1965), *Applause* (1970) and *Woman of the Year* (1981).

Bacall was born Betty Joan Perske in the Bronx. Her father, William Perske, from a Polish-Jewish family, played a relatively small part in her life, leaving her mother when the future actress was eight years old. Bacall's mother, Natalie Weinstein-Bacal, emigrated from Romania with her family at the age of two. She worked as a secretary in New York. (The extra l in Bacall, along with a new first name, were suggested by Howard Hawks at the outset of her film career.)

Bacall's maternal grandfather, Max, according to the actress' detailed autobiography *By Myself and Then Some* (2005), "borrowed enough from United Hebrew Charities to go to a place in downtown New York, live in a ghastly apartment, set up a pushcart with all sorts of household goods for sale," a fact she was instructed as a small child never to tell anyone about.

When Bacall began attending dance class and acting schools, her grandmother was appalled: "Who had ever heard of an actress in the family? Grandma was horrified at the thought—a nice Jewish girl, why didn't I make an honest living doing something she could understand?" Bacall's mother, however, was entirely supportive: "She always made me feel that I could do anything once I made up my mind."

After high school, in 1940, Bacall attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York for one year. A fellow classmate was Kirk Douglas, who asked her out a few times. Another early admirer was Burgess Meredith. Bacall was unable to return for the second year of the program due to the family's inability to pay the tuition. She started a modeling career in May 1941, while she also began looking for acting

work. A photo of her in *Harper's Bazaar* caught the attention of director Howard Hawks's wife, Nancy, and she was invited to Hollywood.

Bacall arrived there in April 1943. Hawks, one of Hollywood's greatest directors, already with *Scarface* (1931), *Twentieth Century* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) and *His Girl Friday* (1941) under his belt, guided Bacall through a screen test: "He couldn't have been nicer. And he frightened me—I was terrified I'd say the wrong thing." About Hawks she comments later: "He was not a demonstrative, relaxed sort of man. He was inscrutable, speaking quietly in a fairly monotonous voice. He seemed very sure of himself." When a makeup artist offered to change her look, Hawks said no. "Howard had chosen me for my thick eyebrows and crooked teeth and that's the way they would stay."

Hawks suggested putting Bacall in a movie with Humphrey Bogart. She didn't think much of the idea, vastly preferring Cary Grant. "Howard's idea was that a woman should play a scene with a masculine approach—insolent." She spent the next six months "reading aloud, studying singing, listening to Howard, meeting some people whose names had been mythical to me" and badgering studio executives about work.

Shortly after Christmas 1943, Hawks told Bacall about *To Have and Have Not*, very loosely based on an Ernest Hemingway novel, which was to begin production in February 1944. The story, set on the Caribbean island of Martinique under the pro-fascist French Vichy regime, follows a cynical, hard-bitten fishing-boat captain (Bogart) as events turn him in the direction of aiding the French Resistance. Bacall plays a young American drifter, who helps Harry against the brutal Vichy authorities and falls for him in the process.

One of the film's many memorable sequences was shot on the first day. Bacall's first line in *To Have and Have Not* is seductively addressed to Bogart (Harry, or, as she calls him, "Steve"), "Anybody got a match?" Bacall remembers, "My hand was shaking—my head was shaking—the cigarette was shaking. The harder I tried to stop, the more I shook." Eventually, "I realized that one way to hold my trembling head still was to keep it down, chin low, almost to my chest, and eyes up at Bogart. It worked, and turned out to be the beginning of 'The Look,'" for which Bacall became famed.

Hawks got the insolence he was looking for from Bacall, a 19-year-old with very little experience of life. No one who has seen the film is likely to forget her delivery of these lines, also directed at Bogart's character: "You know you don't have to act with me, Steve. You don't have to say anything and you don't have to do anything. Not a thing. Oh, maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just put your lips together and blow." Or these: "You know Steve, you're not very hard to figure, only at times. Sometimes I know exactly what you're going to say. Most of the time. The other times ... the other times, you're just a stinker." Or this line, when she sees Bogart carrying a woman who has fainted, her real or imagined rival: "What are you trying to do, guess her weight?"

An astonishing array of talent was involved in the production of *To Have and Have Not*, in addition to Hawks, Hemingway, Bogart and Bacall. Screenwriter Jules Furthman and novelist William Faulkner (who was often on the set) worked on the script. The supporting cast included Walter Brennan, Dan Seymour and French actor Marcel Dalio (who had prominent roles in two of Jean Renoir's greatest films, *Grand Illusion* [1937] and *The Rules of the Game* [1939]), an exile from fascism. (Peter Lorre, another European exile, a former member of Bertolt Brecht's acting troupe and a friend of Bogart's, was also often on the set.) Songwriter Hoagy Carmichael ("Stardust") sang and performed in the film, while an uncredited Franz Waxman composed the score, or parts of it.

The story of the Bacall-Bogart romance is the stuff of Hollywood legend, and, in this case, at least until Bogart's untimely death, a relatively happy one. By all accounts, including, above all, her own, Bacall adored Bogart, and he reciprocated the affection. One thing troubled Bacall in the early days of their relationship and she had to work up her courage to ask, "Did it matter to him that I was Jewish? Hell, no [Bogart replied]—what mattered to him was me, how I thought, how I felt, what kind of person I was, not my religion. He couldn't care less—why did I even ask?"

The couple next acted together in *The Big Sleep* (1946), also directed by Hawks, again for Warner Brothers, based on the Raymond Chandler novel about private detective Philip Marlowe (Bogart), another remarkable film.

Bacall, in her autobiography, mentions in passing that whenever Jack or Harry Warner, or any other studio executive, "came on the set to see how the work was coming, Howard [Hawks] would stop shooting. He'd never make a fuss, never say a word. ... When they left, he started again. Howard told me that whenever a producer walked on a Jack [John] Ford set, Ford would go to his dressing room until they'd gone. ... Howard told Bogie and me that Warner was an incredible monster to deal with."

Bogart and Bacall appeared for a third time in another Warner Brothers film, *Dark Passage* (1947), directed by Delmer Daves, about a man framed up for the murder of his wife. After escaping from prison and undergoing plastic surgery, he sets out to find the real killer, with the help of Bacall's character. The film is occasionally foolish, but, in its own way, quite intense and disturbing. It has a "happy" ending that the censors did not approve of at all.

In *Key Largo* (1948), directed by John Huston, based on a Maxwell Anderson play, Bogart plays an ex-serviceman who arrives at a hotel in the Florida Keys to pay a visit to the widow (Bacall) of a friend who served under him during the war. Another guest at the hotel turns out to be a notorious gangster, Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), who takes over the place along with the underlings, while he waits for his associates from Miami. Lionel Barrymore, Thomas Gomez and Claire Trevor are also memorable in the film, which suggests that postwar America may not be a paradise, with corrupt parasites like Rocco prepared to take up where they left off before the war.

By the time of *Key Largo*'s release, in July 1948, the anti-communist purges were well under way in Hollywood. Bogart and Bacall would play a fairly prominent role in those events.

In her autobiography, Bacall presents herself as nothing more than a lifelong Democrat. "Franklin Roosevelt was my god—my father, my grandfather, my true hero. I grew up with him." And while many Hollywood figures on the left retroactively "reinvented" themselves as no more than liberals in the aftermath of the witch-hunts, either through self-preservation or self-delusion, it's possible that Bacall is telling the truth. (She later became a good friend of Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, and was an acquaintance as well of various Kennedys.) In any event, in the mid-1940s, Bogart and she traveled in generally left-wing circles, including well-known supporters or members of the Communist Party, a significant force in Hollywood at the time.

During the war, the American film industry had churned out a number of pro-Stalinist films, in line with the US-Soviet military alliance. Once the Cold War began, however, the mood and conditions changed rapidly and dramatically. In October 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began hearings on "subversion" in Hollywood. After several days of testimony from anti-communist figures, the committee began questioning "unfriendly" witnesses, including well-known members of the Communist Party, the group that became known as the Hollywood Ten.

In *By Myself and Then Some*, Bacall presents a rather brief and sanitized version of the purges and her and Bogart's role in the events. She writes of the period, "There was now a blacklist alive in Hollywood—some of the most talented and creative writers, directors, and a few actors were deprived of the right to work, though they were guilty of nothing."

She goes on: "Some of us Democrats began talking it about among ourselves," and refers to a meeting at the home of Ira Gershwin attended by "Judy Garland, Eddie [Edward G.] Robinson, Burt Lancaster, Willie [William] Wyler, Billy Wilder, John Huston, Philip Dunne, Harry Kurnitz, Danny Kaye, Gene Kelly, Bogie and me, and many, many more. It was the birth of the Committee for the First Amendment. After various people rose to speak, it was agreed that a formal petition must be drawn up and sent to Washington." The petition was signed by 500 individuals.

A group, including Bogart, Bacall, Huston, Gershwin, Kelly, John Garfield, Richard Conte and others, eventually flew to Washington to witness the ongoing HUAC hearings and register their protest. In a statement, Bogart declared, "This has nothing to do with Communism. It's none of my business who's a Communist and who isn't ... I am an outraged and angry citizen who feels that my civil liberties are being taken away from me and that the Bill of Rights is being abused."

The verbal violence of the committee attack on Communism, the increasing media hostility and the terror of studio executives lest the industry be tarnished by accusations of left-wing ideology combined to chasten the Hollywood liberals. Bacall simply says, "We left Washington still caring as much, but with a bit of the wind taken out of our sails."

The campaign against the blacklist limped on for a while. Bacall and Bogart were among those who participated in a national radio broadcast on November 26, 1947, "Hollywood Fights Back." Bacall told her audience, "This is Bacall. Have you seen CROSSFIRE yet? [the 1947 film dealing with anti-Semitism, directed by Edward Dmytryk and written by Adrian Scott, both CP members] Good picture? ... The American people have awarded it four stars, but the Un-American Committee gave the men who made it three subpoenas."

In her book, Bacall writes, "It was suggested to Bogie that he issue a statement saying he was not a Communist and had no sympathy for Communists, and denouncing the unfriendly witnesses. This he refused to do." It may be strictly true that Bogart didn't make such a statement *immediately following* the Washington visit, but in the March 1948 edition of *Photoplay* magazine, Bacall appeared alongside Bogart in a photograph at the end of an utterly shameful article written by him [or perhaps some studio flunkey] entitled "I'm No Communist."

Bogart's horrible piece, which, unfortunately, was all too typical of its time, read in part, "In the final analysis, this House Committee probe has had one salutary effect. It cleared the air by indicating what a minute number of Commies there really are in the film industry. Though headlines may have screamed of the Red menace in movies, all the wind and fury actually proved that there's been no Communism injected on America's movie screens." Bogart cited his own earlier comment, "I'm about as much in favor of Communism as J. Edgar Hoover."

As disgraceful as this was, it is a sad fact that in one form or another, virtually every actor, writer and director with a "left" past or reputation had to go through this vile and humiliating process of "clearing" him- or herself in order to proceed with his or her career.

Bacall, in her autobiography, writes blandly of this period, “There was much exaggeration and distortion, and for quite a while many people relinquished their political opinions or at least stopped voicing them.”

Bacall’s career would last another half-century, but it seems safe to day that the personal and political dramas she experienced on and off the screen in her first half-decade in Hollywood were the most critical and life-shaping.

Bogart’s sickness and eventual death in January 1957, the responsibility of raising two children and, one would think, a certain inevitable disillusionment with or distaste for the film industry in the aftermath of the purges all must have contributed to Bacall’s decreased activity in Hollywood in the 1950s.

A highlight is a film that apparently neither she nor Bogart thought highly of (a “soap opera” is what Bacall terms it in her memoir), Douglas Sirk’s wonderful *Written on the Wind*, with Rock Hudson, Robert Stack and Dorothy Malone. Bacall plays the long-suffering and somewhat saintly wife of alcoholic playboy Stack, heir to an oil fortune, although his childhood friend (Hudson) would be a better match and, in fact, secretly comes to adore her.

German film director R.W. Fassbinder, who loved Sirk’s work, describes the warped relationships: “It becomes clear that Lauren Bacall doesn’t have anything to offer her husband [Robert Stack]. Instead of going out drinking with him and showing some understanding for his pain, she just becomes more and more noble and pure, more and more nauseating, and you see more and more clearly how well she would suit Rock Hudson, who’s also nauseating and noble. These people who were raised for a specific purpose and have their heads full of manipulated dreams are totally screwed up.”

Bacall went on to have a relationship with Frank Sinatra, which almost led to marriage, and to wed actor Jason Robards in the 1960s. They split up after eight years, largely due to his heavy drinking, she explains. A revived career, primarily on stage, brought new recognition to Bacall in the 1970s and beyond, although she spent the last decades of her life living alone. Almost inevitably, she received Kennedy Center honors presented by Bill Clinton in 1997 and had the misfortune to live long enough to appear in two of Lars von Trier’s dreadful films.

In any event, the actress comes across in her autobiography as a generous and thoughtful person, taking into account the almost inevitable limitations of her social class, profession and epoch. Describing her career, Bacall modestly comments, “Through pure luck—the luck of face and body, and having them noticed by others at the right time—I was given an opportunity to reach the highest of all highs at the age of nineteen. Howard Hawks invented a personality on screen that suited my look and sound and some of myself—but the projection of worldliness in sex, total independence, the ability to handle any situation, had no more relation to me then than it has now.”

The reader is encouraged to track down and watch Bacall at her best. There were few like her.



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