

# 75 years since the release of Hollywood classic *Casablanca*

“And what if you track down these men and kill them? ... Even Nazis can’t kill that fast”

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As part of the celebration of 75 years since the premiere of Michael Curtiz’s classic and beloved melodrama, *Casablanca*, in New York City on November 26, 1942, the film was recently shown in select cinemas in the US. This was made possible by Turner Classic Movies, Warner Bros. Entertainment and TCM Big Screen Classics Fathom Events.

Still enormously popular to this day, the movie is an elegant, textured tale of World War II political intrigue, featuring an iconic love triangle. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Paul Henreid and Claude Rains, *Casablanca* was nominated for eight Academy Awards.

The final script for Curtiz’s work, labored on by numerous individuals (including Julius Epstein, Philip Epstein, Howard E. Koch and the uncredited Casey Robinson, among others), is responsible of course for a number of Hollywood’s most memorable lines.

Bogart plays a nightclub-casino owner in the North African city of Casablanca, then under the control of Vichy France, who is drawn into anti-Nazi efforts after his great love (Bergman) shows up at his establishment.

The film began life as an unproduced play by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, *Everybody Comes to Rick’s*, written in 1940. Burnett, an English teacher at a Manhattan high school, visited Nazi-occupied Austria in 1938 and was horrified by the fascist criminality and persecution of the Jews.

Warner Brothers bought the rights to the play in December 1941 for \$20,000. In fact, the studio received the manuscript for consideration one day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. The entry of the US into the Second World War opened the floodgates in Hollywood for anti-Nazi films.

This is not to diminish the genuine depth of the film’s sentiments and those of its creators. A number of its performers were themselves refugees from fascism and political reaction generally in Europe. One of the three lead actors, Paul Henreid, was an outspoken opponent of the Nazis. He helped a Jewish comedian friend escape from Berlin. The *Los Angeles Times* noted in an obituary that “for that and other anti-Nazi actions, Henreid was designated ‘official enemy of the Third Reich’ and all his assets were seized.”

The Berlin-born Conrad Veidt, who plays a Nazi officer, was a refugee from Hitler, as was Peter Lorre, born in Austria-Hungary. The Jewish-Hungarian S. Z. Sakall (wrongly credited as S. K. Sakall) appears in the film, as Carl the waiter. He had been forced to leave Germany in 1939. His three sisters all died in concentration camps. The German-Jewish Curt Bois (the pickpocket in *Casablanca*), who ended up having an eight-decade acting career, was also a refugee from the Nazis. Marcel Dalio, the Romanian-Jewish star of French cinema before the fall of France (especially in the films of Jean Renoir), appears as a croupier, and Helmut

Dantine, who had actually spent time in a concentration camp in Austria, is a casino patron.

Tellingly, only three of the credited cast members were born in the US.

The themes of sacrifice, nobility and love in the face of tyranny continue to inspire and move audiences. The extraordinary artistic traditions and level of skill embodied in the director, crew (more about that below), writers and almost miraculous cast, coupled with their depth of feeling about Hitlerism, helped create one of the 20th century’s most remarkable works of popular culture.

*Casablanca* begins in 1942 with credits displayed over a map of Africa.

A voice-over explains: “With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But not everybody could get to Lisbon directly, and so, a tortuous, roundabout refugee trail sprang up. Paris to Marseilles, across the Mediterranean to Oran, then by train, or auto, or foot, across the rim of Africa to Casablanca in French Morocco.

“Here, the fortunate ones, through money, or influence, or luck, might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to the New World. But the others wait in Casablanca—and wait—and wait—and wait.”

Exit visas are therefore at a premium. Two German couriers carrying letters of transit are murdered. At Rick’s Café Américain, a stylish nightclub and casino owned by American expatriate Rick Blaine (Bogart), Ugarte (Lorre), a petty criminal, approaches Rick, and asks if he will hold some letters of transit for him.

Rick makes the connection to the murdered couriers, but accepts them anyway, hiding them in the piano played by his house musician, Sam (Dooley Wilson, who in real life was a drummer). Rick, having once fought on the side of the anti-Franco Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, has now become cynical (“I stick my neck out for nobody”).

German Major Strasser (Veidt) is welcomed to Casablanca by Louis Renault (Rains), the city’s prefect of police.

Renault: *You may find the climate of Casablanca a trifle warm, Major.*

Strasser: Oh, we Germans must get used to all climates, from Russia to the Sahara. But perhaps you were not referring to the weather.

Both men are eager to track down the letters of transit, lest they fall into the hands of Victor Laszlo (Henreid), a renowned Czech anti-Nazi partisan, who is reputed to be on his way to Casablanca. One of the principal sources of Rick’s bitterness comes to light when Victor and his wife Ilsa Lund (Bergman) step into Rick’s café.

Ilsa asks Sam to play “As Time Goes By,” “for old times’ sake.” A flashback reveals a brief but intense romance between Rick and Ilsa in Paris just as the Nazis prepare to occupy the city. At that point Ilsa

believes that Victor, her husband, has died in a concentration camp. Rick is unaware of Victor, as Ilsa's marriage was kept secret for her protection.

Ilsa to Rick: "I love you so much, and I hate this war so much."

It is only at the moment when she and Rick are preparing to flee Paris that she learns that Victor is alive. She sends Rick a brief "goodbye forever" note, and for reasons that involve the security of Victor, Ilsa and Rick, she cannot fully explain matters, leaving Rick to think the worst.

In the present, in Casablanca, Strasser closes in on Victor:

Strasser: "You know the leaders of the underground movement in Paris, in Prague, in Brussels, in Amsterdam, in Oslo, in Belgrade, in Athens."

Laszlo: "Even in Berlin."

Strasser: "Yes, even in Berlin. If you will furnish me with their names and their exact whereabouts, you will have your visa in the morning."

Renault: "And the honor of having served the Third Reich."

Laszlo: "I was in a German concentration camp for a year. That's honor enough for a lifetime."

To escape from Casablanca and rejoin the resistance, Victor first approaches Signor Ferrari (Sydney Greenstreet), a major figure in the Moroccan city's black market. When the latter cannot help, the partisan leader must turn to Rick for the letters of transit.

Laszlo: "My friends in the underground tell me that you have quite a record. You ran guns to Ethiopia. You fought against the fascists in Spain."

But Rick is not inclined to help Victor, until he realizes the painful circumstances that prompted Ilsa to abandon him at the railroad station in Paris and learns of her enduring love for him. *Casablanca's* concluding sequences, in a fogbound airport, where Rick demonstrates that he has recaptured his spirit of resistance, are legendary by now.

It is an astonishing work in many ways.

Virtually every shot, line and gesture in *Casablanca* is charged with meaning. There is so much history, so much pathos in each sequence and performance. The experience of the characters, including the peripheral ones, despite the movie's inevitably glamorized and sometimes clichéd presentation, was the experience of millions upon millions of people, in Europe especially, in the 1930s and 1940s: dictatorship, war, flight, deportation, detention, the loss of friends and family members, terror, anxiety, heroism and treachery.

*Casablanca* offers a significantly accurate reading of and feeling for the time. It remains one of the more artistically rendered readings, mediated through the Hollywood studio system, of that historical moment. It is a fiction and stands back, intentionally or not, like a parable, creating a certain distance, an almost epic objectivity. This is not naturalism, to say the least.

Again, one has to turn to the artistic wealth of talent involved, able to orchestrate big events and big emotions.

The director, Michael Curtiz, was born Mihály Kertész in 1888 in "a well-to-do Jewish family in Budapest," according to one biographical account. He worked as a leading man at the Hungarian Theatre before directing stage plays and then films. In 1919, a socialist republic was declared in Hungary, which was drowned in blood only a few months later. Curtiz was a member of the revolutionary arts council that supervised the newly nationalized film industry in the Hungarian Soviet republic. One of the surviving works from the revolutionary events is a 12-minute film by Curtiz, entitled *My Brother is Coming*, based on a revolutionary poem.

As we noted some years ago, no one is suggesting that Curtiz was a Bolshevik. But "one can tell that he brought a certain Central European vivacity, energy and tension to every film he undertook, shaped by the cultural environment and his participation in a revolutionary social experiment. [R.W.] Fassbinder called Curtiz an 'Anarchist in Hollywood,' and paid tribute to his work." There are many of his films to be recommended, including *Captain Blood*, *Kid Galahad*, *The Adventures*

*of Robin Hood*, *Four Daughters*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, *The Sea Hawk*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Flamingo Road*, *Bright Leaf*, *The Breaking Point*, *The Scarlet Hour* and *The Helen Morgan Story*.

Then, of course, there was Bogart, at the time a man of the left; Ingrid Bergman from Sweden, with her refinement and artistry; Henreid, born in Trieste, then part of Austria-Hungary, and later blacklisted in the 1950s; Rains, one of the greatest figures of the British stage in the 1920s; Lorre, a former member of Bertolt Brecht's acting troupe; cowriter, Howard E. Koch, who was in the Communist Party and later blacklisted; and composer Max Steiner, who had studied with Gustav Mahler, written for the theater and emigrated to the US along with Erich Wolfgang Korngold and numerous other composers.

Additionally, Australian-American Orry-Kelly was responsible for the costume design. *Casablanca's* cameraman Arthur Edson was one of 15 people who founded the American Society of Cinematographers in 1919. He worked extensively with Raoul Walsh, James Whale, John Huston and Jean Negulesco. The film's art director was Carl Jules Weyl, a German-born architect, responsible for a number of significant buildings in the Los Angeles area.

*Casablanca* is a quasi-phenomenon. Criticism almost seems beside the point. Nonetheless, one could point to its flaws: its popular front politics, its belief in the "democratic powers," including the US.

One also always has the right to be skeptical about the products and machinations of the mercenary and shortsighted commercial film industry. Not one to beat about the bush, studio head Jack L. Warner wrote Curtiz in May 1942, on the eve of shooting, "These are turbulent days and I know you will finish *Casablanca* in top seven weeks." New York executives at Warner Brothers also fulfilled one's expectations, so to speak, by inquiring in November 1942 whether the completed film could be modified in any way to take advantage of the landing by Allied forces in Axis-occupied Casablanca only a few days earlier!

One might add something about the film's undoubted sentimentality, its plot contrivances. There is a grain of truth to Italian novelist Umberto Eco's amusing response to the movie: "Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion."

James C. Robertson, a Curtiz biographer, refers to the elements in *Casablanca* (a city that neither Burnett or Alison had visited) that represent "the purest Hollywood nonsense. No uniformed Germans ever set foot in Casablanca throughout the Second World War, while there was no such thing as letters of transit signed by Free French leader General Charles de Gaulle ... Lazlo is the Czech with the Hungarian name," etc., etc.

However, this is an occasion where the final whole seriously and decisively outweighs the sum of its flawed, imperfect parts. Screenwriter Koch lived up to his pledge to "develop a serious melodrama of present-day significance."

And as for the film's conclusion, fellow scriptwriter Robinson's comments tell us something about the difference between today's film industry and the one that existed in the 1940s. In sending Ilsa away, he wrote to producer Hal Wallis, Rick "is not just solving a love triangle. He is forcing the girl to live up to the idealism of her nature, forcing her to carry on with the work [against the Nazis] that in these days is far more important than the love of two little people. It is something they will both be glad for when the pain is over..."

The film speaks to a grand narrative, including the illusions in that grand narrative. *Casablanca* has the undeniably mesmerizing quality of classic Hollywood, which can sometimes be incredibly truthful and incredibly false at the same instant.

It might be argued that the struggle against fascism did not involve, for the most part, haunting love songs, witty policemen, charming gambling

joints, beautiful women and eloquent club owners, but rather great quantities of suffering, blood and death. This is undoubtedly true. But it is not a sign of disrespect, however, to ask whether the resistance to barbarism, at least in art, may not also take the form of love, wit, charm, beauty and eloquence?

For good reason, the stature of the film has not diminished in three-quarters of a century. It still penetrates the heart and mind with strong sentiments like this one:

Laszlo: *“And what if you track down these men and kill them? What if you murdered all of us? From every corner of Europe, hundreds, thousands, would rise to take our places. Even Nazis can’t kill that fast.”*



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