

Curtiz: A film about the filming of *Casablanca* in 1942

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Directed by Tamas Yvan Topolanszky; written by Topolanszky, Zsuzsanna Bak and Ward Parry

Curtiz is a film about Hungarian émigré director Michael Curtiz, set in Hollywood during the shooting of *Casablanca* (1942), the much-loved wartime melodrama with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. The biographical movie premiered in 2018 and now is available on Netflix.

Unfortunately, it is a very poor work, full of clichés and pretension, and not worth spending a great deal of time on. Swiss-Hungarian Tamas Yvan Topolanszky directed *Curtiz* when he was 30 years old or so. One hopes he will go on to do better things. He was certainly in no way prepared to tackle the personalities and events at the center of this film.

Michael Curtiz was one of the most prolific, talented directors in film history. He had some 180 films to his credit—a third of them made in Hungary, where he directed the country's first feature film in 1912, and other European countries, before he emigrated to the US in 1926 to work for Warner Bros. Curtiz directed an astonishing 86 movies over the course of 28 years for Warner Bros., where he was for a long time the studio's leading director.

This is a handful of his more notable films: *British Agent* (1934), *Black Fury* (1935), *Captain Blood* (1935), *Kid Galahad* (1937), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), *Casablanca*, *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Night and Day* (1946), *Life with Father* (1947), *The Unsuspected* (1947), *Flamingo Road* (1949), *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), *The Breaking Point* (1950), *White Christmas* (1954), *The Scarlet Hour* and *The Helen Morgan Story* (1957).

Curtiz directed, among hundreds of other leading performers, Leslie Howard, Paul Muni, Edward G. Robinson, Jimmy Cagney, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Errol Flynn, John Garfield, Bogart and Bergman, Cary Grant, William Powell, Claude Rains, Sidney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, Kirk Douglas, Lauren Bacall, Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Paul Newman and Elvis Presley!

Topolanszky's film opens promisingly enough, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces in December 1941, with a contentious meeting between Curtiz's longtime producer Hal Wallis (Scott Alexander Young), studio chief Jack Warner (Andrew Hefler) and "Mr. Johnson" (Declan Hannigan), a representative of the Office of War Information (OWI), the US government's propaganda arm during the Second World War.

Johnson expresses skepticism about Curtiz, refers to his

reputation as a womanizer and generally insists that the prospective *Casablanca* (based on an unproduced play, *Everybody Comes to Rick's*) be transformed along more firmly prowar lines. Appealing to Warner, Wallis says he had thought "we weren't in the propaganda business." Johnson suggests that Curtiz had better "shit stars and stripes from now on."

This theme of obligatory patriotism, however, is not genuinely or convincingly pursued, although Johnson remains menacingly present for the remainder of *Casablanca*'s filming, explaining pompously from time to time, "All I want is a film worthy of our soldiers" and such.

Curtiz (Ferenc Lengyel) himself, once we meet him, proves to be little more than a monster: selfish, arrogant, callous. He ignores his grown-up daughter Kitty (Evelin Dobos), who has arrived from the East Coast, insatiably cheats on his third wife Bess (Nikolett Barabas) and torments actors, crew members and extras alike. "I don't owe anyone anything" is a favorite and repeated expression.

The one indication that the director has any genuine human feeling in the early parts of the film comes through his futile effort, by telephone and other means, to extract his sister from Europe, where she is endangered by the Nazi onslaught. (Curtiz's sister, her husband and three children were sent to Auschwitz, where most of them died.)

The film's creators have invented various episodes, most of which either make no sense or contribute little dramatically. Curtiz refuses to allow Kitty to visit him at the studio, so she improbably finds work on *Casablanca* as an extra. She begins to spend time with Johnson, the government agent, who eventually attempts to rape her in a studio hallway. Curtiz knocks Johnson down with a punch, but a few minutes later, the pair are having a serious conversation about the film's development.

For some reason, the Epstein brothers, Julius and Philip, who wrote the script for *Casablanca* (along with Howard E. Koch, a future blacklist victim), are portrayed as ninnies, grinning and snickering in the background.

In the end, Curtiz finds a bit of humanity and redemption in Topolanszky's film, momentarily at least reconciling with his daughter and finding an ending for *Casablanca* (including the shooting of a Nazi officer played by Conrad Veidt [Christopher Krieg], which Johnson, for some reason, had ordered him not to include) that aligns with his own apparent need "to accept responsibility" for his life and actions.

The camera swoops and swirls, smoke or light often fills the

black-and-white frames, to no particular effect. Various “daring” notions are tried out about America, about Hollywood, about sex, but none of them have much conviction behind them. It’s largely a disappointing waste of time.

Anyone seeking insight into the problems of Hollywood filmmaking, the cultural life of the early 1940s, the character of World War II and America’s role in it or Curtiz’s evolution as an artist and filmmaker will seek here in vain.

The Hungarian-born filmmaker was a fascinating, difficult figure.

Curtiz was born Manó or Emmanuel Kaminer on Christmas Day 1886 in Budapest to a Jewish family. His father was a painter and bricklayer. His mother seems to have been a singer at some point.

He aspired to be an actor from an early age and managed, although his family was not well-off, to attend the Royal Academy of Theater and Art. At some point, he changed his name to Mihály Kertész, later Michael Kertész and, finally, in the US, Michael Curtiz.

Biographer Alan K. Rode writes that “Kertész’s artistic sensibility was developed in Budapest during those heady years before World War I. The city had a tremendously robust intellectual and cultural life.” His companions included the future director and producer Alexander Korda, famed photographer André Kertész, playwright Ferenc Molnár, future producer Gabriel Pascal and future actor Bela Lugosi. Out of this rich, intense artistic experience, Curtiz developed an extraordinary and rapid ability to extract from varying materials their essential themes and almost simultaneously to envision the means of dramatizing them.

Curtiz directed his first film and the country’s first feature film in 1912. Recognizing that he knew nothing about film technique, he traveled to Denmark and worked at Nordisk, one of the most technically modern movie companies in the world at the time. He lived through the First World War and participated to one extent or another in the abortive Hungarian Revolution of 1919 (he directed an 11-minute propaganda film on its behalf). The White Terror that followed the defeat of the revolution chased him to Vienna, where he continued his filmmaking career.

Curtiz’s epic *Moon of Israel* (1924), about the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites through the parting of the Red Sea, made with a cast of 5,000, caught the attention of Jack and Harry Warner in Hollywood. The latter Warner traveled to Europe in 1926, eventually offering Curtiz a contract.

Curtiz was known for his perfectionism and demanding, even ruthless methods. The director would work and insist others work ungodly hours. He could be reckless and irresponsible in this regard. He appears to have considered anyone blocking his artistic path an enemy. Rode writes that he possessed “an incandescent mania for filmmaking.”

Screenwriter and producer Edward Chodorov once observed that Curtiz was the type of director who “could finish one film on Saturday and begin another on Monday, because he knew immediately what he could draw from a script, how he could manage it. And so, everything was so well prepared that all he had to worry about was getting it done.”

Bertrand Tavernier, the French filmmaker, noted that “Curtiz’s ability to work leaves you stunned: he would shoot without

stopping during the course of one day, through the night and the morning of the next ... which made him hated by his crews even though many respected his rigour, his prodigious visual invention that allowed him to transcend often weak scenarios. One remains amazed at the strength of resistance he could put up against the demands of Jack Warner and Hal Wallis (who also had a lot of admiration for him).”

Rode takes note of the “the protean nature of his [Curtiz’s] work.” He directed “rousing adventures, Westerns, musicals, war movies, romances, historical dramas, horror films, tearjerkers, melodramas, comedies, spectacles, and film noirs.”

And “despite his reputation,” the biographer writes, “Curtiz was neither a raving hobgoblin nor a sadist. He could be charming and maintained warm friendships with many coworkers. The accolades he received didn’t make for good copy, but they were as effusive as the horror stories from his detractors.”

Among his strongest films are those he made in the post-World War II period, holding a critical mirror up to American life during the economic boom—including *Mildred Pierce*, *Flamingo Road*, *The Breaking Point* and *The Scarlet Hour*. It is difficult to recommend those works too strongly. The German filmmaker of the 1960s and 1970s R. W. Fassbinder once wrote that he felt Curtiz had been “cruelly overlooked.” Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) was clearly influenced by *Mildred Pierce*—both are the stories of women who single-mindedly pursue monetary success at the cost of their emotional lives.

This theme, the conflict between the socially determined and relentless demands of economic life or duty, on the one hand, and the individual’s own psychological, “human” needs, on the other, is an important one in Curtiz’s work. We need a better film devoted to his life and times.



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