

Casablanca

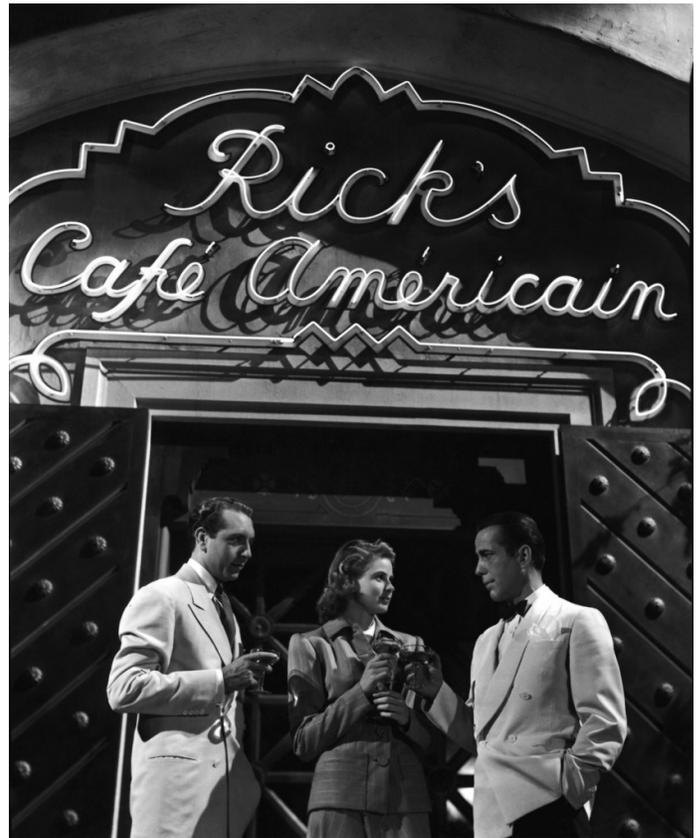
By Jay Carr

The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films, 2002

It's still the same old story. Maybe more so. "Casablanca" was never a great film, never a profound film. It's merely the most beloved movie of all time. In its fifty-year history, it has resisted the transmogrification of its rich, reverberant icons into camp. It's not about the demimondaines washing through Rick's Café Americain – at the edge of the world, at the edge of hope – in 1941. Ultimately, it's not even about Bogey and Ingrid Bergman sacrificing love for nobility. It's about the hold movies have on us. That's what makes it so powerful, so enduring. It is film's analogue to Noel Coward's famous line about the amazing potency of cheap music. Like few films before or since, it sums up Hollywood's genius for recasting archetypes in big, bold, universally accessible strokes, for turning myth into pop culture.

It's not deep, but it sinks roots into America's collective consciousness. As a love story, it's flawed. We don't feel a rush of uplift when trenchcoated Bogey, masking idealism with cynicism, lets Bergman, the love of his life, fly off to Lisbon and wartime sanctuary with Paul Henreid, while he strolls into the mist toward Brazzaville with his corrupt French police pal, Claude Rains, drawling, "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Part of what's wrong is that you believe Bogart. Although you certainly believed his earlier bitterness came from pain, you're now quite convinced that he and Rains will have a good time, trading ironic repartee, understanding one another fully, neither making uncomfortable demands on the other.

Apart from the fact that Paul Henreid's Victor Laszlo is such a saint that he's irritating, you don't want to see Bergman's Ilsa Lund go off with him. She's so obviously strong – and strong-willed – that you're disappointed to see her just knuckle under and go off and do what she's supposed to do. Her appeal is precisely that she'll let her feelings lead her to what she's not supposed to do, namely, love Bogey's Rick Blaine. Ilsa's pain adds to her poignancy. But mainly you're feeling more



Courtesy Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound Division

than a little let down by her genuflection to idealism. You feel passion is being subordinated to an abstraction. You want her to second-guess Rick and not go. "Casablanca" leaves the heart feeling cheated. And it's hardly Bergman's greatest role. Even though her face mirrors real ambivalence (she didn't know which man Ilsa would wind up with until almost the end of shooting), she's more complex and psycho-sexually interesting in Hitchcock's *Notorious*. And Rick is a little too accepting of the idea of losing her.

So if "Casablanca" really can't be said to be one of film's great love stories, what is it? Several things. When it opened, late in 1942, "Casablanca" was said to be a lucky movie, its popularity ascribed to topicality and timing – with insufficient credit given to the way creative lightning could strike under chaotic conditions any time a studio gathered under its roof a band of combustible creative types. The Allies' successful North African offensive, launched at Casablanca in November, caused Warners to move up the premiere. Shortly afterward, Roosevelt and Churchill held a summit conference

there. So the real Casablanca, by staying in the news, fed the resonances of the film. But patriotism is only the most obvious of several powerful claims “Casablanca” has made on audiences.

Movies, so central to American life, shaped the American mind, and “Casablanca” is as much about movies as about romantic adventure. It taps our love of movies, our involvement with them, our dreamy bondage by them. Some movies innovate. “Casablanca” culminates. It brings to a peak the between-the-wars imperative that one was obliged to live life with a sense of style. The style at work in “Casablanca” is marked by witty poise, but the sophistication of café society between the wars, with its white linen suits and baccarat in private rooms – and also its helplessness before corruption, its impotent sleekness. One of the many extraordinarily potent resonances comes when we notice that the croupier at Rick’s is played by Marcel Dalio, the same Dalio who played the nervous aristocrat dancing on the edge of a crumbling world in Jean Renoir’s “Rules of the Game” in 1939. There are more than a few homages to French films of the period.

But it’s the insistence of “Casablanca” on the importance of style, exemplifying it in the character of Rick, that has caused “Casablanca” to tilt toward Bogart over the years. That and his way of standing outside institutions and calling his own shots to his own moral code – which, as the film quickly makes clear, includes some bravely defiant idiosyncrasies, such as okaying IOUs but refusing to cash the check of an obviously solvent Berlin banker. And after the film’s revival – to an audience with its collective ear cocked to the winds of existentialism emanating from the Deux Magots on Paris’s Left Bank and the alienated howl of the American Beats – it was revelation. Bogey single-handedly solved the biggest problem facing any young generation: how to keep your integrity and still be cooler than everyone else in sight. Even when making light of fighting for the right losing causes in Spain and Ethiopia, he stays cool – replying, when asked his nationality, “I’m a drunkard.”

It’s his controlled exterior that makes Rick’s wild romanticism acceptable. With his pouchy, watchful eyes, perpetual cigarette, black bow tie, and white din-

ner jacket, his cynical crust fooled nobody – least of all Bergman’s Ilsa. He talked a good game of noninvolvement, but obviously he was nuts about her, still wounded deeply by her abandonment of him after their fling in Paris (the flashbacks were skilled montages by Don Siegel, who went on to become a well-known director in his own right). His is the emotion you feel when they meet up again in his club, over Dooley Wilson’s piano – that source of so much garbled legend.

Neither he nor Ilsa ever said “Play it again, Sam” to Wilson. What she says, after entering the club with her Resistance-hero husband, whom she believed dead when she took up with Rick in Paris, is, “Play it once, Sam, for old time’s sake. Play it, Sam. Play ‘As Time Goes By.’” Rick, rushing over, says, “Sam, I thought I told you never to play it.” Then he notices Ilsa. They exchange a long look. Later, when Rick is sitting at a table after hours (muttering, “Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine”), he masochistically asks Sam to play: “You know what I want to hear. You played it for her. You can play it for me. If she can stand it, I can. Play it!”

Max Steiner, the film’s musical director, didn’t want the song. It was there only because Murray Bennett, the teacher who wrote the unproduced play (with Joan Alison) on which the film is based, liked it. Steiner wanted to drop it and may have succeeded – except that Bergman had already cropped her hair for her next film, “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” and retakes were impossible. So it stayed.

Actually, Wilson – the only cast member ever to have played the real city of Casablanca – couldn’t play the piano. He was a singing drummer. (Studio musician Elliott Carpenter dubbed the piano-playing.) Wilson and Bogart were the only American-born members among the leads. There’s evidence on both sides, but on the whole it leans away from the story that Ronald Reagan was Jack Warner’s first choice for the role of Rick. George Raft – who made the mistake of turning down roles that Bogart capitalized on in “High Sierra” and “The Maltese Falcon” – campaigned for the role, but it was Bogey’s from the start.

Producer Hal Wallis first considered Ann Sheridan for the female lead, then Hedy Lamarr. French actress Michelle Morgan was Warner's first choice. But she wanted \$55,000, and Warners got Bergman from David O. Selznick, who owned her contract, for \$25,000 plus the use of Olivia de Havilland's services for one film. Philip Dorn was Paul Henreid's only serious competition for the role of her freedom-fighting husband. Rains, Peter Lorre, and Sydney Greenstreet had a lock on their high-profile, corruption-tinged roles, but Otto Preminger was Wallis's first choice for the role of Major Strasser, the Nazi officer played by Conrad Veidt. Even Wilson was an afterthought. Wallis first thought of women – Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, and Hazel Scott – before settling on Wilson.

Workhorse Michael Curtiz, himself a refugee from Hungary, and the director of 42 Warners films in a decade, was assigned the film after William Wyler, Vincent Sherman, and William Keighley turned it down. When Howard Koch, one of the writers, pointed out inconsistencies to him, Curtiz is reported by Koch to have answered, "Don't worry what's illogical. I make it go so fast nobody notices." It was more a case of nobody making much of the flaws, the biggest of which has the precious exit visas everybody's chasing bear the signature of Resistance mainstay Gen. Charles de Gaulle – a name not likely to be cherished by the collaborationist Vichy government running Casablanca. When the film won best picture, best director and best screenplay Oscars, Curtiz's broken English rose to the occasion. He said: "So many times I have a speech ready, but no dice. Always a bridesmaid, never a mother. Now I win. I have no speech."

Many writers contributed to the script. Oscar winners Koch and brothers Julius and Philip Epstein figured most prominently in a lineup that included Aeneas McKenzie, Wally Kline, Jerry Wald, Casey Robinson, and Wallis himself, who wrote Bogey's curtain line. Most of the best-known and most-quoted lines came from the Epsteins – "Round up the usual suspects." And the exchange between Bogart and Rains: "I came to Casablanca for the waters. Waters? What waters? We're in the desert." "I was misinformed." Or Rains's: "I like to think you killed a man. It's the romantic in me."

Somehow there was something fitting about "Casablanca" being born in a kind of chaos that paralleled that coursing through the flossy raffishness of Rick's Café. *Everybody Comes to Rick's* was the title of the original play, with its crossroads-of-the-world atmosphere. These days, everybody writes about Rick's. The movie's flaws never did matter. What mattered then, and matters even more resonantly now, is its evocation of a yeasty, corrupt atmosphere from which self-respect could somehow be won, or won back. The cynical Rick would have loved the result of an experiment by writer Chuck Ross in 1982, detailed in *American Film* magazine. Changing its name back to *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, Ross sent the story to 217 agencies. Most returned it unread. Of the 85 who did read it, only 33 recognized it. And yet, as an example of potent iconography under pressure, it has seldom been matched and never been surpassed. First, last, and always, "Casablanca" remains a triumph of stance.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.