

Now, Voyager

By Charlie Achuff

The two lovers tease around the subject of their mutual attraction, using childhood games as a metaphor for their pursuit of happiness, so difficult for each of them in their everyday lives: "'Getting warmer and warmer', as we used to say as kids, remember?" he teases. "'Look out or you'll get burned', we used to say," she replies. "Are you afraid of getting burned if you get too close to happiness?" he retorts. The teasing continues, their eventual romance all but confirmed. Finally he gives in and kisses her, roughly, as tears spill down her cheeks. "I'm such a fool... Such an old fool! These are only tears of gratitude... an old maid's gratitude for the crumbs offered. You see, no one's ever called me 'Darling' before." Max Steiner's legendary romantic score swells as the screen fades to black.

So goes the first love scene in "Now, Voyager." There is no doubt that this film is your typical "women's picture", an emotional tale of romantic drama centered on the delayed coming of age of a Boston spinster. With Charlotte Vale's struggles to make sense of the world around her, it is typical both of the actress' films of the time and of the genre: dramatic and a bit far-fetched but, as author Jeanine Basinger opines in "A Woman's View," also appealing in its madness and actually liberating in allowing its heroine to live life outside the rules.

Based on a novel by Olive Higgins Prouty, author of the equally melodramatic "Stella Dallas," "Now, Voyager" features Bette Davis as Charlotte. Fat, ungainly and severely lacking in self-esteem due to constant harassment at the hands of her domineering mother (Gladys Cooper), she is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Fortunately, her kindly sister in law has recognized Charlotte's pain and suggests a lengthy stay at the sanatorium of Dr. Jaquith, a sought-after psychoanalyst played by Claude Rains, who would costar in "Casablanca" the same year. Afterwards, Charlotte embarks on a South American cruise to test the waters, as it were, of her newfound emotional strength, Walt Whitman's short poem providing encouragement: "The Untold Want, by life



The ship's social director (Franklin Pangborn) asks "Miss Beauchamp" (Bette Davis) if she'll share a taxi with another passenger (Paul Henreid). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

and land ne'er granted, Now, Voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find".

And find she does! Meeting the sympathetic, handsome Jerry onboard, also traveling alone, she feels she has found a soulmate she can confide in, perhaps even love. But he is not free. He is trapped in a loveless marriage, finding comfort and purpose with the unwanted youngest daughter his wife despises.

"Voyager" was purchased by Warner Bros soon after the book's publication as a vehicle for Irene Dunne, possibly for Ginger Rogers, or even for Norma Shearer, and not for Warner's resident female star. Davis had fought hard for better parts and for script approval of her films. She famously battled her bosses in the English courts (and lost) in 1936. An actor could only reach the pinnacle of her craft, Davis believed, with the right associates and the appropriate films. Hearing that her home studio was considering outside stars for Charlotte, Davis recounted in her memoirs, she was apoplectic. She understood Charlotte better than anyone, she argued, because she was also a New Englander. Jack Warner and producer Hal Wallis relented.

Director Irving Rapper took it upon himself to cast the other actors in the film. This was his fourth directing effort, but he had been an uncredited assistant director on several Davis vehicles, including "Juarez" (1939) and "All This and Heaven Too"

(1940). Cast as Charlotte's love interest was Paul Henreid who, like Rains, would star in "Casablanca" that same year. He and Davis greatly enjoyed working together, although she would claim Rains as her favorite male lead. She would also star opposite Rains and Henreid several more times, and collaborate with director Rapper three more times.

However, she was greatly disappointed in Henreid's casting at first. The part should be played by an American, as the character was written, not a European; and the overdone makeup and shellacked hair he sported in his screen test made him look like Charles Boyer. Davis insisted on a second screen test, which won him the part. Playing Jerry naturally, he synced perfectly with Davis and "won every woman's heart in the audience," she would tell author Whitney Stine. His gimmick of lighting two cigarettes at once and handing one to his lover – adapted by the actor from Prouty's novel – would be copied by men across the country as the height of sophisticated Hollywood lovemaking.

Very little was actually changed from Prouty's novel – many lines of dialogue were taken directly from her text. However, the script appears to be a point of contention: Prouty and Davis both took credit for keeping the integrity of the original story intact, but screenwriter Casey Robinson claimed that no one but himself touched the film. Prouty did attempt to make many suggestions to Hal Wallis from using dual narrators to stylizing flashbacks, but Wallis rejected them all. Nonetheless, the novelist was pleased with the final product and its faithfulness to her own work.

"Now, Voyager" received mixed critical reviews but was wildly popular with audiences. The "New York Times" claimed it contained "not a little bit of quackery" in its "two lachrymose hours", while praising Davis and Rains but denigrating Cooper and Henreid. Its returns disappointed the studio and it did not win any acting Oscars (although Steiner did win for his lush score). Yet Davis received a great deal of fan mail after this, from young repressed girls like Charlotte as well as from worried, overprotective mothers like Mrs. Vale.

The film is a great coming-of-age and coming out story of sorts, which seems to have particular resonance with women. As Jeanine Basinger theorizes in "A Woman's View," the film connected particularly well with women who, then as now, may have felt deprived of something they were unable to have or to express openly regardless of their station in life. Author Ed Sikov explores also the film's popularity among and in relation to gay men in his excellent Davis biography "Dark Victory." It is easy to see why both groups would be especially drawn to the film's closing line: "Don't let's ask for the moon – we have the stars!"

The film topped the list of Davis' own favorite films, and Hal Wallis agreed it was among her best. Overcoming the barriers of her repressive home life, her insecurities and her unavailable lover's complicated marriage, Charlotte created her own fulfillment in taking on Jerry's child. Her happy ending may not have been wrapped in a neat package, but it was *hers* and she had orchestrated it herself. It isn't even certain that she and Jerry would end up together. (Davis would later say that she thought Charlotte would actually find lasting love with Jaquith.)

This was an important message for audiences as the U.S. entered World War II. We had to "protect that little strip of territory that's ours", to quote Charlotte; and like her we had to be strong and fight for our own. It may not be as overt as in Davis' "Watch on the Rhine" (1943) or as in "Casablanca," but this film provides as important and necessary a message as those films. That it comes in the disguise of a romantic melodrama starring one of the genre's best actors makes it all the more relevant to film history, to feminism and even to politics, then as now.

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

Charlie Achuff is an archivist, researcher, historian and writer. He holds degrees in Film Studies, US History and Library Science, and has worked at Library of Congress, George Eastman Museum, A+E Networks and Viacom. He lives in Baltimore, MD.