

The Greatest Movie Ever Made! or The Greatest Movie Ever Made?

Casablanca



(1942) Director: Michael Curtiz Producer: Hal B. Wallis; Screenplay: Howard Koch; Music: Max Steiner. Casablanca won Oscars for Best Picture, Best Screenplay, and Best Director, and earned nominations for Best Actor (Bogart lost to Paul Lukas for Watch on the Rhine), Best Supporting Actor (Rains), Best Cinematography, Best Score, and Best Editing. Wallis received the Irving Thalberg Award for the second time.

Humphrey Bogart-- Richard "Rick" Blaine
Ingrid Bergman-- Ilsa Lund Laszlo
Paul Henreid-- Victor Laszlo
Claude Rains-- Capt. Louis Renault
Conrad Veidt-- Maj. Heinrich Strasser
Sydney Greenstreet-- Senor Ferrari
Peter Lorre Ugarte--Gino Corrado
S.Z. Sakall-- Carl, Headwaiter
Madeleine LeBeau-- Yvonne
Dooley Wilson-- Sam
John Qualen-- Berger
Leonid Kinskey-- Sascha

If there were ever a movie I had a love affair with, it is Casablanca . Numerous critics (cf. below) reflect the power that Casablanca has as a movie. Not only is it a romantic story, laced with humor and adventure, from a politics and film perspective, is a clear and unambiguous call to arms. The fact that it did great box office, and was a critical hit, winning Oscars for best picture, director, and script in 1942 attests to the fact that Laemmle's judgement, for once, isn't clouded. So if you're unclear as to whether or not there is a party line on Casablanca the answer is only to the extent that you are allowed to fill in the superlatives. To dispel the most common myth concerning Casablanca , remember that **never** is the phrase "play it again, Sam" uttered in this film. But there are considerable great and quotable lines, especially

"round up the usual suspects",
"We'll always have Paris"

"of all the gin joints in all of the towns in all of the world, she had to show up in mine",
"here's looking at you kid".

I stick my neck out for nobody. --- Rick

I suspect that, under that cynical shell, you're at heart a sentimentalist. --- Louis

My impression was that he was just another blundering American. --- Strasser

He's a difficult customer, that Rick. One never knows what he'll do, or why. --- Ferrari

I was informed that you were the most beautiful woman ever to visit Casablanca. That was a gross understatement. --- Louis

Apparently you think of me only as the leader of a cause. Well, I'm also a human being. --- Laszlo

Herr Laszlo, we will not mince words. You are an escaped prisoner of the Reich. --- Strasser

Captain Louis Renault - I'm only a poor corrupt official. --- Louis

You're a fat hypocrite. --- Rick

As leader of all illegal activities in Casablanca, I'm a respected and influential man. --- Ferrari

This film is truly, to paraphrase the *Maltese Falcon* the stuff that dreams are made of.

People such as Leonard Matlin refer to Casablanca as "the best Hollywood movie ever made?" while others think of Casablanca as a fortuitous accident.

"An accident it certainly was, for most successful American movies are that -- a congeries of disparate talents who somehow for one special moment in time strike sparks in a way that only happens to them, as individuals, three or four times in a career." Richard Schickel, *Favorite Movies*

Accident or no, I just love this movie!

Choosing a director. Meanwhile, Wallis tried to convince William Wyler, then under contract to Samuel Goldwyn, to direct. When this failed, he tried to get Vincent Sherman and William Keighley, but finally opted for Warners' workhorse, Michael Curtiz, director of *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938) and other gangster films, the great Errol Flynn swashbucklers, *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, and scores of others. Casting. The studio first announced that Ronald Reagan, Ann Sheridan, and Dennis Morgan would play the leads; then Hedy Lamarr was considered for the role of Ilsa, but Louis B. Mayer would not loan her out. Male lead. Though Jack Warner suggested that George Raft might do for Rick, Wallis argued successfully that the part was being written for Bogart. The third lead was intended for Henreid, but studio executives felt he would not take a lesser role than Bogart's, so several other actors were considered for Laszlo, including Ian Hunter, Herbert Marshall, Dean Jagger, and Philip Dorn. Carl Esmond and Jean-Pierre Aumont were tested for the part and found wanting; even Joseph Cotten was a contender. After Henreid's RKO contract was bought by Warners and he was promised costar billing, he accepted the role of the Free French leader

Some of the qualities that make Casablanca such a nominee derive from the persona of Humphrey Bogart as Rick. Take Bogart, who came to us in 1923 as, of all things, a romantic juvenile and left us a mystical 33 years later the quintessence of the gutsy, hard-shelled, soft-hearted, fiercely independent master of the American ideal of grace under pressure. Follow him on either side of the low, tender or tough, rich or poor, respectable or living in the shadows: there was always the essential Bogart, somehow slightly out of phase with his role * just sufficiently independent of it so that he and his part bounced echoes off each other, created an aura loaded with reverberations that connect both part and personality in a way that gave us something to work with when we left the movie house, blinked away the comfortable darkens, and refocused the world. (Goldstein and Kaufman, *Into Film*)

Rick, a man operating on the edge of the law, ([The Maltese Falcon](#)), is a man who represents a number of potential political elements. The references to Rick's involvement in the Spanish Civil War (on the 'right'

(good) side) is not coincidental, nor is the timing or the story involved. Instead of viewing this as a 'great Hollywood film', view it today as a propaganda effort, remembering the SURA acronym. Pay particular attention to the use of symbolism (e.g., Petaín's picture on the wall), the Cross of Lorraine (the symbol of the Free French), stereotypes (German and Italian), the use of music, patriotic themes, and dialog. "If it's 1941 in Casablanca, what time is it in New York", or "I bet they're asleep in America" are examples of the 'propagandistic' dialog. Howard Koch, the primary screen writer, who won an academy award for this (also Best Picture, Best Director) was blacklisted in the 50's, primarily for Jack Warner 'blaming' him for the dialog in *Mission to Moscow*. There were two endings written for the film: the foggy one we all know of, but Curtiz viewed it, the other one was not utilized. The ambivalence in ending probably contributes to the uncertainty and tentative nature of the characters. Pay particular attention to the dialog and the evolution of the plot in Casablanca. Casablanca was a lucky film in addition to being a superb one. It opened at New York's Hollywood Theater on Thanksgiving Day, 1942, three weeks after the Allies landed at Casablanca, and enjoyed further publicity generated by the Casablanca Conference two months later, when the eyes of the free world were focused upon the meeting in the Moroccan city.

Remember that Casablanca presents us with the textbook case of the process of how film is utilized to transmit political ideas. The subject and the script are ideal; the use of music essential, the technical aspects (e.g., angle shots, especially up for power, down for diminishment), and casting, especially casting, casting, casting in Casablanca. It is one film where all of these elements combine to make an effective statement.

In your journal you should address

Rick and his 'political meaning',

- the propagandistic elements contained in Casablanca, the role of French Authority and Vichy, and,
- how, at this stage in the political evolution we've viewed, women and blacks are dealt with and depicted
- . Also pay attention to the elements of effective political film making (level one production values) in the previous paragraph.

And remember, all Journals and Squibs **must start** with the phrase "Casablanca is the Greatest Movie Ever Made". (see this for previous examples of [independent judgment](#))