

Michael Curtiz's *CASABLANCA* (1942)

Love in Time of War

Motto: "A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace." (Ecclesiastes, 3:8)

May 25, 1942. The British RAF stages a 1,000 bomb raid on Bremen, Germany; US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appoints Major General Dwight Eisenhower as the commander of US forces in Europe; Michel Tremblay, the influential Canadian playwright is born; *Afrika Korps* - the German expeditionary force - occupy Egypt under the command of the famous "Desert Fox" – Field Marshal Erwin Rommel - threatening the British Empire's control of the Suez Canal; Albert Camus finishes his novel *L'étranger* (*The Stranger*) which will propel him to the status of world-wide respected writer and philosopher. This very same day, in the studios of Warner Bros. in Hollywood, at around 10:00 AM, filming starts on the production of *Everybody Comes to Rick's*.

The project will be soon renamed *Casablanca*, reflecting everyone's hope to repeat the 1938 hit, *Algiers*.

Casablanca is a city in Morocco, North Africa. Bordering the Atlantic Ocean and fairly close to Gibraltar (350 km) and Southern Spain (450 km), Casablanca is a very attractive tourist destination. However, throughout the Western world *Casablanca* represents - mostly and mainly – the title of a famous movie. When filming started in May 1942 nobody thought of it as more than another potential 'solid' film - of the hundreds produced in Hollywood. Or maybe even less. Stephen Karnot - Warner Bros.'s own story-analyst who read the Burnett and Alison's play - called it a "sophisticated hokum". He approved of it just because the text seemed to whisper safe investment and 'solid' revenue. In the end, the film met expectations – \$3.7 million on the initial US release over a budget of \$964,000. Michael Curtiz's production appeared to be even more than a 'money-grabber'; it was also given several accolades. The "sophisticated hokum" was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three: Best Picture (Hal B. Wallis), Best Director (Michael Curtiz), and Best Screenplay (the Epstein bros. and Koch). Critics' response was mostly appreciative although some cold shoulders were given too. For example, while *The New York Times* wrote, "The Warners... have a picture which makes the spine tingle and the heart take a leap", *The New Yorker* rated the film only "pretty tolerable". Over time *Casablanca's* status rose to stunning heights and surpassed that of a three Academy Awards winner; it turned into an iconic production of Hollywood's Golden Years and is now constantly listed among 'the best films ever made' in most polls.

To understand the attraction and sheer fascination this film emanates over various generations of viewers and specialists may be a challenging task. Albeit uncertain, the reasons for *Casablanca's* enduring appeal to the public are numerous and complex. We will attempt to look into what we believe to be the more important ones.

Let us start by examining the plot.

1940. Paris. Man meets Woman. Woman falls for Man. Man falls for Woman. The Nazis approach Paris. Man and Woman plan to flee the imminent invasion. Woman disappears unexpectedly. Man desperate and distraught at train station. Rain. Man desperate and distraught in the train. Two years later, Man and Woman meet again, inadvertently and unintentionally, in 'exotic' unoccupied French protectorate of Morocco. Casablanca is swarmed with Nazis, spies, double-agents, crooks and underground freedom fighters. Man owns a nightclub and gambling den. Inadvertently, *Rick's* is swarmed with Nazis, spies, double-agents, and crooks. Woman is married. Husband is a hero. Woman still loves Man. Man still loves Woman. Man is bitter. Woman tries to explain Paris. Man drunk. Woman thought Husband dead in concentration camp but actually.... Etc.etc.etc.

Melodrama. Drama. Intrigue. War. Film noir. *Casablanca* is not only a cross-genre but also a collection of wide-ranging stereotypes. In this respect, Umberto Eco, the world-wide respected semiotician and author of two best-selling novels (*The Name of the Rose* and *The Foucault's Pendulum*) said: - "... *Casablanca* is ... many films, an anthology. [...] When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us" (in *Casablanca or, The Clichés are having a Ball* From: *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, eds. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) pp.260- 264.

So the plot is not only banal but abounds in eclectic clichés. However, the style is delightful and the dialogues exceptionally crafted. Howard Koch and the Epstein brothers did a tremendous job in finding the perfect balance between romance, drama, and even humour. Currently, The Writers Guild of America – the supreme body of script writing – lists *Casablanca* as the number one best written script ever. Ironically, the 158 pages of the script would be considered way too long by today's standards when producers pressure script writers to keep it at around 100 pages. As the matter of fact, in 1982 freelance Chuck Ross devised an experiment. He sent the original screenplay to 217 agencies under the original title (*Everybody Comes to Rick's*). Of the 217 agencies, ninety returned it unread. Seven never responded. Eighteen scripts apparently got lost in the mail. Thirty-three agencies actually recognized the script. Eight noticed a similarity to *Casablanca*, but didn't realize it actually was *Casablanca*. However, **thirty-eight agencies claimed to have read it but rejected it.** In other words, of those agencies that

actually read the script (or claimed to have), the majority did not recognize it as *Casablanca*, nor did they think the script was good enough to be worth representing. All the agencies which rejected the script agreed that: the plot is weak and the text is too long and has too much dialogue (!) Welcome to the world of dimwitted action!

As mentioned before, in spite of the disastrous result of the *Casablanca experiment*, the text is now considered one of the best screenplays ever written. It has generated not one but many unforgettable lines. "Here's looking at you, kid" was voted by The American Film Institute (AFI) as the fifth most memorable line in cinema. (Just for the sake of curiosity, the number one most memorable line in cinema was voted: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" from *Gone with the Wind*). Five other lines from *Casablanca* appear in the AFI list, the most of any film (*Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* tied for second place with three lines each):

- "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship"
- "Play it, Sam. Play 'As Time Goes By'"
- "Round up the usual suspects"
- "We'll always have Paris"
- "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine"

Casablanca also displays a collection of phrases that are so timeless that they've enriched the lexicon of clichés, like:

Rick: "I stick my neck out for nobody."

or

Ilsa: "Kiss me. Kiss me as though it were the last time."

As in the case of the (in)famous quote "Beam me up, Scotty" (*Star Trek*), "Play it again, Sam" was never uttered. Instead we have: "Play it once, Sam, for old times"; "Play it, Sam. Play *As Time Goes By*"; ...you can play it for me"; "If she can stand it, I can! Play it!"

Be that as it may, today *Casablanca's* script makes for wonderful reading, almost better than the movie itself. It can be read free on the Internet on various sites. Here is one of them - <http://la-screenwriter.com/2011/12/09/script-casablanca/>

Interestingly enough, the general public is not always aware of the quality of writing – it is not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of *Casablanca*. The public is rather caught into the web of stereotypical feelings and mindsets *Casablanca* brings forth. As Eco said: "A hundred clichés move us". It so happens that all the clichés used in this movie are exceptionally well represented, each one of them being squeezed almost to the essence. Here are only the most important ones.

Sacrifice is almost the theme of the film. All the main characters give up something important and personal and are ready to do so for a higher ideal. Ilsa gives up Rick in Paris to tend to her fugitive ill husband. When she meets Rick again in Casablanca, Ilsa is ready to sacrifice her marriage and reputation to stay with Rick. Rick gives up Ilsa – the love of his life - to spare her the future torment of leaving a husband who was engaged in freedom fighting. Laszlo is ready to sacrifice his marriage in order to save his wife's life - he asks Rick to use the free-pass letters to take Ilsa to safety. All the more, at the last moment Laszlo is prepared to let his wife stay behind with the love of her life – thus fulfilling Ilsa's dream of happiness - while he continues the underground fight against the Nazis. Even police Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains) – far from being a prototype of honesty and heroism - sacrifices his comfort to a higher and more generous end.

The theme of sacrifice entails another – that of duty, of doing the right thing. This attitude was not only very popular during WW II but also highly praised. It was the measure of all things. Duty, above anything else was the word of the day, the very core of the war resistance and propaganda. Moreover, most of the citizens were truly engaged in a war effort that requested a supreme level of responsibility. In sacrificing their personal interests or feelings, the characters of *Casablanca* bring their contribution to the general war effort. Through duty and sacrifice Rick, Ilsa, Laszlo and Renault become icons of a generation who fought to its last drop of blood against the Nazism's 'night of reason'.

What I think is even more important than duty and sacrifice - *Casablanca's* main themes - is the way they are woven into an overwhelming romantic canvass. Romanticism may be felt throughout the story in two main ways. First, all main characters go through a process of transformation which leads them to a better self. While Romanticism strongly believed in Good and Evil ('shadows of grey' were not welcomed in the 19th century literature or music) it also asserts the triumph of the former over the latter. In this sense, romantics held that profound inner changes can be possible in human beings of great spiritual power or of those who experience life-altering events (Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Heinrich Faust in *Faust*, Nietzsche's *super-human*, Byron's *Manfred*, Julien Sorel in *The Red and The Black* by Stendhal, etc). Our heroes end up by sailing towards more luminous waters while embracing higher ideals. Rick and Captain Renault (what an unlikely association!) decide to join the French Résistance together leaving behind their rather comfortable lives and lucrative businesses. Ilsa becomes a true supporter of a war hero leaving behind her doubts and her youthful dreams.

Second, the romantic vision of *Casablanca* is also represented by an acute sense of longing. There is a longing for exotic, warm, and distant places, for a Paradise Lost which the Western World

associated with the fascination for the Arab culture and ethos during the 1940s. There is also the melancholy of passage. As life itself is a passage, so is Casablanca – a city of shadows. Nobody truly wants to settle down there. People just pass by. And those who are stuck there for various reasons dream of leaving soon. The story itself brings up another sense of passage – that of the two impossible lovers. As Ilsa is passing through Rick’s life and Rick passes through Ilsa’s, they both leave behind an unfathomable, bitter-sweet memory of an illusory happiness. Although viciously carving deep scars into their hearts, the unspeakable tragedy that surrounds them pushes Rick and Ilsa to embrace duty and sacrifice. This supreme gesture saves them from become yet another banal love story, lost in the lukewarm waters of melodramatic seas.

It is now time perhaps to say a few words about the two leading actors - Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. Both glow in this movie with “the unbearable light of being”. *Casablanca* turned them into super-stars. The film represented Bogart’s definite *adieu* to his gangster characters and imposed Bogart as a romantic character – the crook, the bad boy turning good in the end. Although Bogart was already a star – he already had done *High Sierra* and *The Maltese Falcon* – *Casablanca* literally launches his super-star status. Likewise, Ingrid Bergman – a Swedish actress who started her American career with *Intermezzo* (1939), a smashing success – was already a well-known presence. Nevertheless, her memorable role in *Casablanca* will make her a super-star, one of the most wanted and best paid actresses in Hollywood. Apparently, Bergman herself was astounded by the success of this movie. According to Charlotte Chandler, her biographer, the actress felt that *Casablanca* “has a life of its own. There is something mystical about it. It seems to have filled a need, a need that was there before the film, a need that the film filled”.

Last but not least – and in the spirit of Eco’s tenet that *Casablanca* is “many films” in one – the production is brilliantly powdered with witty, albeit decent, well-toned humour:

Ilsa: ...the last time we met...

Rick: It was ‘La Belle Aurore.’

Ilsa: How nice. You remembered! But of course — that was the day the Germans marched into Paris.

Rick: Not an easy day to forget, was it?

Ilsa: No

Rick: I remember every detail — **the Germans wore gray, you wore blue.**

Rick: If it’s December in Casablanca, what time is it in New York?

Dark European: ...have you not heard?

Englishwoman: We hear very little — and we understand even less.

Renault: (to Rick) How extravagant you are — throwing away women like that. Some day they may be very scarce.

Renault: What in Heaven's name brought you to Casablanca?

Rick: My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters.

Renault: Waters? What waters? We are in the desert.

Rick: I was misinformed.

Rick: I stick my neck out for nobody.

Renault: A wise foreign policy.

Strasser: What is your nationality?

Rick: I'm a drunkard

Renault: That makes Rick a citizen of the world.

It may be interesting to know today that *Casablanca* was not spared production problems. The first problem was the script itself - nobody knew exactly how the movie will end, the script was only half completed when the filming began and the film was shot mostly in sequence. Another famous problem was that of Bergman being taller than Bogart, an unacceptable disproportion of a leading pair in the 1940s. So Bogart had to stand on blocks or sit on cushions in their scenes together. Finally, the production got into financial problems. To save money, the background of the final scene, which shows a Lockheed Model 12 Electra Junior airplane with personnel walking around it, was staged using midget extras and a proportionate cardboard plane. Fog was used to mask the model's unconvincing appearance.

But despite all of these production humps and many more other ones, despite walking a fine line between drama and "cheesy" melodrama, despite having so many clichés crammed in and in spite of the script being initially called "sophisticated hokum", *Casablanca* endures over the ages and keeps enchanting generations of viewers. If you watched it and wasn't moved by it, don't worry, it will grow on you. Insidiously and silently. Eventually, you will want to watch it again. Those who watched *Casablanca*, always return to it. In Rick's words: "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life."