



You simply must remember this...

by Nick Zegarac

Arguably, no *one* film will ever satisfy everyone's opinion as being the greatest of all time. But if a decision has to be made, Michael Curtiz's penultimate and Oscar-winning wartime melodrama, **Casablanca** (1942) is a worthy contender for the top spot. At the time, nobody associated with the film had any idea of the cultural impact it would eventually have. And truth be told, there were more than a few sweaty palms in the front office and on the set when the script continued to change almost daily throughout the shoot.

It seems nobody could decide which man Bergman's character, Ilsa ran off with in the end; the suave saloon keeper with a past, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) or handsome hubby, Victor (Paul Henreid). Yet under Curtiz's unerring direction, and with a script eventually patched together by Howard Koch and peppered throughout with the indelibly witty dialogue of the

Epstein brothers, **Casablanca** emerged as the most clever, most romantic and ultimately, most memorable film of the 1940s. It frequently hovers in the top five of most critics' lists but that isn't why I've chosen it as my number one pick. Rather, the reason herein is for the film's ability to generate perennial freshness each time I sit down to watch. After 100 plus viewings, **Casablanca** continues to hold me spellbound in the dark – a rarity amongst film favorites. *Sam, play it again.*



PLOT: Embittered saloon keeper with a checkered past, Rick 'Richard' Blaine (Bogart) runs a fashionable night spot in Casablanca, populated by the spurious and the desperate attempting passage to America during WWII. Rick sticks his neck out for nobody – a point he illustrates when parasitic cutthroat, Ugarte (Peter Lorre) is taken prisoner by the puppet French regime, run by prefect of police, Capt. Louie Renault (Claude Rains). Before his capture, Ugarte leaves letters of transit in Rick's trust – letters which guarantee whoever owns them free passage to the U.S.

The situation is precariously simple; the Nazis want those letters and Rick has them. But a wrinkle of a very different kind materializes with the unexpected arrival of Rick's old flame, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) and her husband, the dashing freedom fighter, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid). From the onset the Nazi commander, Major Heinrich Strasser (Conrad Veidt) is determined that Laszlo stay in Casablanca. Discovering that Rick has the letters of transit, Victor cajoles, pleads and eventually begs for the opportunity to purchase them, but to no avail. Frustrated Ilsa sneaks into Rick's bedroom one evening after the café has closed to acquire the letters herself. She offers Rick money, sex, and even momentarily threatens his life with a gun.





Eventually, Rick concocts an ideal escape plan – one in which he at last makes clear to Ilsa that their love is a thing of the past and that she belongs with Victor. Learning of the escape, Strasser attempts to intervene but is murdered by Rick. Having witnessed the escape and killing, Renault turns to his inspectors with the cleverly revisited theme of ‘Round up the usual suspects.’ The two men reconciled to join the resistance Rick and Louie walk off into the fog with Rick poignantly surmising, “*Louie, this looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.*”



So ends *Casablanca*. The film is a carefully constructed tangle of high espionage and low comedy – seamlessly concocted into one intoxicating blend; such as the moments of clever reflection provided by loveable head waiter, Carl (S.Z. Sakall).

After observing a fixed roulette game and asked by a patron if the gambling is ‘honest’ – Carl nervously replies, “Honest? As honest as the day is long.”

When instructed by Rick to see that Major Strasser and his Nazi cronies receive a good table, Carl responds, “I have already given him the best. Knowing he is German he would have taken it anyway.”

And finally, when confronted with an Austrian couple, who continually fracture the English language, Carl simply shrugs his shoulders and says, “You will get along beautifully in America.”

What is remarkable about **Casablanca** is how much socio-political commentary is subtly nuanced throughout the remarkably adroit and witty dialogue. The film is an enduring masterwork on a multitude of levels, but chiefly at generating the sort of high stakes melodrama that was the forte of Warner Brothers during this period in their illustrious history.



FUN FACTOIDS

- Though studio publicity of the day suggested that both Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan were considered first for the leads, only George Raft was ever considered.
- *Casablanca* marked a turning point in Humphrey Bogart’s career. Previously he had been relegated to playing the gangster or victim of gang violence in a series of high profile Warner films. *Casablanca* represents the first of Bogie’s ignoble loner types that would eventually constitute the bulk of his career.
- Conrad Veidt often played the evil Nazi during his Hollywood career – an irony, since in real life he was of Czechoslovakian extraction and, in fact, had fled Nazi persecution.
- *Casablanca* is based on an un-produced play written by Murray Burnett, entitled ‘Everybody Comes To Rick’s.’ Burnett got the idea from his own world travels including a visit to an exotic Moroccan nightclub where a black man entertained at the piano.
- Rick’s Café Americaine is the only original set especially built for the film. The rest were recycled from various other projects. At the time of shooting



BOGART BERGMAN HENREID

the train depot was doing double duty for *Casablanca* and Bette Davis' *Now Voyager*.

- The character of Sam, Rick's loyal confidant represents something of a breakthrough in depictions of the African American on screen. Character actor Dooley Wilson (Sam) could sing, but he couldn't play a note on the piano. Ultimately, Wilson's vocals were retained with the piano track dubbed in later.
- Paul Henreid was not at all certain he wanted the part of Victor Laszlo. It was second fiddle to Bogart's more meaty role as Rick. Henreid, who was simultaneously shooting *Now Voyager* as Bette Davis' leading man thought the part would damage his reputation – all evidence to the contrary.
- The song, 'As Time Goes By' had been around for nearly a decade before its insertion into *Casablanca* – but it had not been a colossal hit. The film's composer, Max Steiner implored producer Hal B. Wallis to reconsider the selection as Steiner had been working feverishly on his own theme and song for the film. Wallis, who had campaigned for the song's inclusion, got around Steiner's request by pointing out that Ingrid Bergman (who had already departed for Universal to shoot *For Whom The Bell Tolls*) had cut her hair short, hence, making retakes of the scenes in which the song had already been used impossible.
- *Casablanca* was almost entirely shot on Warner Brother's backlot. Clever usage of matte paintings helped extend the scope and depth of scenery in the film. However, for the arrival of Maj. Strasser's plane Van Nuys Airport stood in for a day's worth of 'location' shooting.
- The letters of transit were a plot device concocted by Howard Koch and the Epstein brothers. No such letters existed in Vichy or occupied France.
- The line, "Play it again, Sam" is never spoken in the film. What Rick actually says is "You played it for her, you can play it for me. Play it!"
- The line "Here's looking at you" was a Bogart improvisation. It proved so effective that director, Michael Curtiz inserted it into the context of several more scenes in the script.
- The real life invasion of the Allies into *Casablanca* in real life on 8 November 1942 almost forced the film into a rewrite. Though it was proposed that the final shot in the film be that of Rick and Louie listening to a radio report of the Allied landing, a last minute contractual clause prevented any reshoots. The film was released as it appears today...and the rest, as they say, is history.
- As an experiment, a well known film publication in the 1980s sent *Casablanca*'s script to various studios under its original title. Though a few readers recognized it, virtually all rejected the story as "not good enough" to make a decent film.



RETURNING to RICK'S on DVD

Warner Brother's lavish two disc special edition of *Casablanca* truly provides us with something to remember. Previously issued as a single disc, the image quality on both editions appears to be on par – though slightly more refined and cleaned up on this newer



incarnation. The black and white picture is, in a word, flawless. Blacks are solid and deep. Whites are pristine. Fine detail is present throughout. Contrast levels are immaculately presented. Film grain is practically nonexistent for a remarkably smooth visual presentation. The audio has been cleaned up and is presented at an adequate listening level.

Extras include: on disc one include glowing commentaries by critics/historians, Roger Ebert and Rudy Behlmer and a new intro to the film provided by Lauren Bacall.

On disc two we get the previously issued and extremely informative, "You Must Remember This: The Making of Casablanca," that features interviews with surviving cast members, crew and insightful bits of backstage intrigue. There's also a poignant retrospect from the children of Bogart and Bergman that is long on sentiment yet strangely short on history. The Looney Tunes take on the film, 'Carrotblanca' is a contrived bit of nonsense produced long after the golden age of Bugs Bunny.

Younger children will think it cute, but the animation and performances are neither indicative of this film or the very best of the Warner's classic animation legacy. Finally, the pilot episode of the 50s television series based on the film, entitled 'Make Way for Tomorrow' is featured in a fairly clean looking transfer - funny though how all that film magic failed to generate even an ounce of pixie dust for these subsequent attempts.

Brief and inconsequential deleted scenes without audio, the film's theatrical and reissue trailers and a stills gallery round out the viewer's enjoyment.

Bottom Line: *Casablanca* is resilient entertainment. The film remains uncharacteristically fresh and inviting and, 'as time goes by' its enduring legacy only seems to grow more fond and glorious. Owning the DVD is a no-brainer. Just 'knock on wood.'

