

By Nick Zegans

# The girl most likely...

**Bette Davis** once said that *“getting old is not for sissies.”* Two strokes, a cancer scare, broken hip, and, a belligerent child and she should know. In her later years, despite failing health, Davis remained the amiable raconteur. When asked how she would like to be remembered, Davis replied, *“You know what I’m going to have on my gravestone? She did it the hard way.”*

In her prime, Bette Davis was rather antiestablishment – at least by Hollywood standards. *“They wanted me to be pretty,”* she mused, *“But I fought for realism.”* After daughter Barbara Davis Hyman’s book *My Mother’s Keeper* attempted to do for Davis’ rep what Christina Crawford’s *Mommie Dearest* had done to Joan’s, Davis simply surmised, *“If you’ve never been hated by your child, you’ve never been a parent.”* Yet, despite the Kim Carnes pop song from the eighties that immortalized Bette’s eyes as the key to her legendary status amongst truly great stars, as an actress Davis has always been more about ‘raw’ talent than looks...though what looks she could give.

She was born Ruth Elizabeth Davis on April 5, 1908 – a rather stoic and demanding survivor of divorced parents. Her dissatisfaction as an individual paled to her desperate need for attention. *“I am doomed to an eternity of compulsive work,”* she said, *“No set goal achieved satisfies.”*



Davis was nothing if prolific, appearing in 103 films – some among the most fondly remembered in screen history. Although her talent eventually won out, Davis' bombastic desire to dominate made her many enemies along the way. Her driven personality and obsession with greatness were hindrances to getting her foot in the door.

A rather tactless rejection from the prestigious Manhattan Civic Repertory did little to quash her determination. Instead, Davis enrolled in John Murray Anderson's Dramatic School where she quickly became its star pupil. Her Broadway debut in 1929's **Broken Dishes** garnered initial interest from Carle Laemmle and Universal Studios.

Both quickly lost interest once the ink on the contract had dried. Instead Universal tried to mold Davis into a 'dolly' – a blond sexpot which Davis eagerly and frequently acknowledged she never was. *"What a fool I was to come to Hollywood,"* she told fellow actor and ardent admirer, George Arliss, *"they only understand platinum blondes. Legs are more important than talent!"* Disillusioned and let go from Universal after only five pictures, **Bad Sister** (1931) being the best, Davis was ready to return to the stage. At the behest of Arliss, she reluctantly screen tested at Warner Bros. and to her surprise was offered a seven year contract on the spot.

Her tenure at Warners was never smooth, particularly during those formative years when studio head Jack Warner attempted to mold Davis' startling looks along the lines of a vamp or kitten. Though Davis made cordial attempts to convince the head office otherwise, she was quietly and repeatedly rejected. The powers that be knew best...or so they thought. *"When a man gives his opinion he's a man,"* Davis would later muse, *"When a woman gives her opinion she's a bitch."*

Bette Davis began her Warner tenure with a stunning performance opposite Arliss in **The Man Who Played God** (1932). In his biography the veteran actor states, *"I did not expect anything but a nice little performance... I got from her a flash that illuminated mere words and inspired them with passion and emotion."* Evidently, the public concurred with Arliss' fascination. Davis was an instant, palpable and growing sensation.

Perhaps in part because Jack Warner was too involved with other projects, but also because he



was not accustomed to having his ingénues run off with the show and recognize that they had, the mogul chose to loan out Davis for her next great role, opposite the lovelorn Leslie Howard in RKO's **Of Human Bondage** (1934). The film only served to enhance her reputation as a solid actress. Still, she felt her talent was being wasted.



Though Davis took home the Best Actress Academy Award twice; for **Dangerous** (1935) and **Jezebel** (1938), intervening projects were less than what she expected and began to demand for an actress of her talents. Her polite requests of Jack Warner soon became volatile arguments. That same year Davis made an unsuccessful attempt to break her Warner contract. She departed for Europe but was prevented by a court order from making any movies abroad. The studio countered with a lawsuit of its own, citing a breach of





contract. Although the whole affair was amicably settled, the rift between studio and star was instrumental in getting Davis better scripts and several key perks at the studio – including first choice of projects and director approval.

Jack Warner would never take Bette Davis lightly again. How could he? She had become his number one star. After her Oscar win in **Jezebel** Warner personally campaigned hard for Davis to assume the lead in David O. Selznick's **Gone With the Wind** (1939). Although Selznick ultimately chose Vivien Leigh, Davis emerged victorious with a pair of consolations at her alma mater; as Queen Elizabeth in **The Private Lives of Elizabeth & Essex**, and, as haughty but fatally stricken socialite Judith Traherne in **Dark Victory**. While the latter performance brought Davis particular satisfaction – and her third Oscar nomination – the former proved an almost chronic source of animosity and contention.

Davis had asked Jack Warner borrow Laurence Olivier from Samuel Goldwyn as her romantic lead. But Warner was no fool. He had been grooming resident heartthrob Errol Flynn as the studio's rising male box office draw and was determined to advance the actor's standing by casting him opposite

Davis. Warner was also conscious of the fact that his failure to secure loan outs of both Flynn and Davis for **Gone With the Wind** had the potential to damage both their popularity in the eyes of the public.

Regardless of Warner's logic behind his decision to cast Flynn, Davis was unenthused. She considered Flynn a subservient performer – just a pretty boy in tights – and behaved miserably towards him for the duration of the shoot. In a scene that called for the Queen to slap the Earl of Essex, Davis hauled off with her jewel encrusted ring and struck Flynn with such force that it left a welt upon the actor's cheek. Years later, too many, in fact, to do Flynn any good, Davis generously reviewed Flynn's performance and confided to friend and costar Olivia de Havilland, "*By God, I was wrong about him.*"

Such belated retractions were rare. In fact Davis very much believed in the strength of pronounced





belligerence. “*Evil people,*” she said, “*You never forget them. And that’s the aim of any actress – never to be forgotten.*”

As for **Dark Victory**: Warner had at first balked at Davis’ request to play the ailing Judy. “*Who the hell is going to go see a picture about a dame who goes blind?*” he insisted. But like most decisions Davis made during this period, her choice of project translated to box office gold. In fact, in what is now widely regarded as the greatest year in film history – 1939 – **Dark Victory** proved to be more successful than Jack Warner’s personally supervised production of **Elizabeth and Essex**; a coup that neither Davis nor Warner ever forgot.

The forties arguably belonged to Bette Davis. No other actress more consistently delivered high quality performances in equally sterling productions. Her association and fleeting romantic entanglement with director William Wyler helped to secure her meaty roles as the neurotic mantrap, Leslie Crosby in **The Letter** (1940), and hateful spouse, Regina Giddens in **The Little Foxes** (1941). Both characterizations are relentless and unflattering and would have likely spelled artistic suicide for any other actress, though not Davis. In her competent portrayals both characters were elevated to mythical stature. Crosby is a scheming murderess. After

riddling her married lover with bullets she attempts to concoct a rape scenario, even after a torrid love letter written in her hand surfaces to attest otherwise.

Regina Giddens is pure arsenic laced with a very thin veneer of courtly elegance. In the climactic scene, Davis is completely unsympathetic as she nonchalantly tells her wheelchair bound husband, Horace (Herbert Marshall) that their entire marriage has been a sham. She confesses that she has never felt anything but contempt and disdain for him. The announcement comes as a shock to Horace. Suddenly realizing that she has driven him to a heart attack, Davis as Regina calmly essays into the loveseat. Her eyes devour Horace’s every move, her head barely turns as she waits for him to expire.

Davis topped off these plum bitchy parts with one of her most genuinely sympathetic; Charlotte Vale, the spinster aunt who undergoes a Cinderella transformation with the subtle guidance of understanding psychiatrist, Dr. Jacquith (Claude Rains) in **Now Voyager** (1942). The role has since come to epitomize the essence of intercontinental romance. However, as the decade wore on Davis would revert to playing more unscrupulous women with a penchant for selfish, rather than selfless grand amour.

In **Mr. Skeffington** (1944) for example, Davis’ Fanny Trellis enters into marriage with Job Skeffington, a man she does not even pretend to love. She abuses his good nature, sadistically tramples his reputation and effectively pilfers from his estate to lead a life of playful debauchery. Diphtheria ravages her beauty, but by then Job has lost his eyesight. He returns, hoping to find Fanny reformed, and although she does indeed tearfully





take him back, there is little doubt that her sympathies are inwardly turned – realizing that no other man will ever desire her company again.

Both roles reveal Davis' maturity as an actress, her being unafraid to appear on camera as grossly unattractive – a move that most of the glamour queens of her era considered risqué to down right fatal to their careers. In **Now Voyager**, Davis' transformation from uni-browed heavy-set spinster to glamorous vixen is made all the more miraculous by her ability to play both the backward gamin and forthright woman of the world with complete



conviction. In **Mr. Skeffington** heavy latex ages Fanny well beyond her years. She is made over to resemble a ravaged gargoye with thinning hair, deep wrinkles and exaggerated distortions to her facial structure. Still, she is beautiful...inwardly, finding that special substance that Job has promised radiates genuine attractiveness from within.

By 1949 Davis was seemingly indestructible; her popularity, galvanic. But her movies were not performing as well as they had at the start of the decade. With the unqualified failure of **Beyond the Forest**, another project she had personally chosen, Davis secured her fate inside the Warner front offices. Released from her studio contract she quickly discovered that offers of employment elsewhere were scant.

Against the strenuous objection of 20th Century-Fox executive Darryl F. Zanuck, director and screenwriter Joseph L. Mankewicz typecast Davis as the thriving Broadway diva, Margo Channing in **All About Eve** (1950). The parallels



between Davis and her character were scathingly on point: both were then forty and working in a business that demands they remain twenty-one forever. Both are bitter, sullied and tired, and each desires the relative peace of a happy marriage. In an instance of life imitating art, Davis married co-star Gary Merrill, both in the film and in real life. And although **All About Eve** did not comment on what happened to Margo and Bill after the bans had been published, in life Davis' need to be at the center of the universe effectively destroyed any modest chance her May/December love affair had for longevity. "A sure way to lose happiness," she would later reflect, "I found, is to want it at the expense of everything else."

Ever grateful to director, Mankewicz, whom she acknowledged as "resurrecting me from the dead," in later years Davis' plaudits for the film grew, "I can think of no project that from the onset was as rewarding from the first day to the last." Davis was perhaps choosing to displace the very public feud between her and costar, Ann Baxter that ultimately cost both actresses the Oscar. The award went to Judy Holiday for **Born Yesterday** instead. Despite the disappointing loss, Davis continued to garner leads in a series of films throughout the 1950s – though in caliber and budget they tended to pale against the best work she had done.


In retrospect, 1952's **The Star** seems to be a disingenuous stab at Davis' realization of becoming a has-been in Hollywood. Ironically, at this point in her career she was far from being washed up. Consistently working – though in substandard material, another reprieve in her professional career came in 1962 when maverick director Robert Aldrich brought Davis back to Warner Bros. for his production of **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?** – a ghoulish nightmare that reunited Davis with her old nemesis, Joan Crawford.

The animosity proved one-sided. In 1940 Crawford and MGM had parted company. Migrating to Warner Bros. Crawford's professional reputation had been invigorated by the resounding success of **Mildred Pierce** (1945) at approximately the same time that Davis had found interest from the front office indifferent towards her own career. To Davis it must have then seemed as though Jack Warner had thrown her over for Crawford, and, in fact, he probably had. But by 1962 neither Crawford nor Davis were box office draws. **Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?** changed that. For both actresses the critical and financial success of the film launched them into a series of grand gulag-styled suspense films.

However, while Crawford's tenure in the genre quickly relegated her to B-flick status, Davis continued to attract the lower strata of A-list productions. She appeared to good effect as twin sisters with ulterior agendas in the sinister revenge drama, **Dead Ringer** (1964), and then as the mentally disturbed middle-aged frump who may or may not

have been guilty of murder in **Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte** (1964). Both stories relied on Davis' ability to generate a sympathetic underpinning that helped to offset the garish schlock.

In **Dead Ringer**, for example, Davis plays identical twins Edie and Margaret. Edie murders her sister as revenge for having stolen the man she would have liked to have married herself. However, when Edie (now pretending to be Margaret) realizes that her sister has, in fact, murdered her husband to be with a much younger man, she feels a sense of vindication. Edie's boyfriend, Jim Hobbson (Karl Malden) eventually unravels the truth about Margaret, though he cannot bring himself to accept that the woman standing before him and accused of murder is actually the woman he once loved.



In **Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte**, Davis is Charlotte Hollis, the heir to a dilapidated southern plantation slated for demolition. Never entirely recovered from the mental shock of seeing her father slaughter her lover, Charlotte believes her cousin Miriam (Olivia de Havilland) will be able to save the estate from being knocked down. But Miriam has her own agenda in mind – one that will drive Charlotte to the brink of a nervous breakdown.

By the end of the sixties Davis was relegated to character parts that largely played off of these earlier performances – reprising the role of the sycophantic, slightly deranged, and often quite mad woman whom nobody suspects of impure thoughts until it's too late. Throughout this time Davis had been contented to live in Connecticut, far from the craziness of Hollywood. The studio system that had coddled stars of her generation was a thing of the past and many of her old colleagues were either retired or dead. But in 1977-78 Davis returned to Los Angeles to film the pilot for the television series **Hotel** which she nicknamed *Brothel*.

Dissatisfied over the show's content she refused to commit to the series and later that same year suffered a mild stroke. It was during her convalescence that daughter B.D. Hyman wrote *My Mother's Keeper* – a scathing and brutal account of Davis' later years. Despondent and estranged from Hyman and struggling to regain her mobility, Davis appeared briefly in 1980's **The Watcher in the Woods** as Mrs. Aylwood, a dowdy landlord whose daughter was abducted by ghostly apparitions. Abysmal and waffling in its structure and content, the film was a colossal failure – partly perhaps because it had been produced under the Walt Disney banner more generally thought of as family entertainment. As therapy, Davis also committed to writing several biographies, including the very frank and funny, *This N That* and *Bette Davis: The Lonely Life*.

Ironically, during this same tenure Davis discovered a renewed interest in her films and career. A welcomed guest appearance on the **Phil Donahue Show** paved the way for several more film projects. Despite being disfigured by





another stroke, she diligently worked on her performance in **The Whales of August** (1987) – a film that brought her great personal satisfaction even as she feuded with costar, Lillian Gish. However, her final film **Wicked Stepmother** (1989) proved to be such a travesty that Davis walked off the set – leaving director Larry Cohen with nothing but to patch together a story with the limited footage that had already been shot.



This time, seemingly retired for good, Davis departed the United States for San Sebastian, Spain where she finished penning an update to her biography that included her later film work in the 80s. In it she wrote, *“I have been uncompromising, peppery, intractable, monomaniacal, tactless, volatile, and oft times disagreeable...I suppose I'm larger than life...My passions were all gathered together like fingers that made a fist. Drive is considered aggression today; I knew it then as purpose.*

On October 6, 1989 Bette Davis passed away in France. To her fans, who only knew her as that indestructible force of nature that they had fallen in love with on the screen, the loss seemed improbably. How could such a legend die? She was ever more the survivor than the victim, always greater than her diminutive five foot three inch frame, somehow impossibly resilient and haunted by that driving determination that made her succeed against any and all odds set in her path.

While some critics have argued that Davis never acted so much as she played herself and ‘reacted’ the proof for many remains in Davis’ body of work. That she continues to be discussed, revered, researched and written about today is a testimony to her craft. Perfectionist? Definitely. Control freak...perhaps. But in the final analysis Bette Davis was and remains a singularly great tower of electricity and excitement to behold on the silver screen...and yes, she had Bette Davis’ eyes.

