



Casablanca

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I have lost track of how many times I've seen *Casablanca*. But I saw it again the other night and was entranced all over again. It is one of those timeless films that has aged well and still moves and inspires me just as powerfully as it did the first time I saw it.

Casablanca was released in the United States in January 1943. The Second World War was raging in Europe at the time and the film, which was part of the U.S. propaganda effort, captured some of the drama of that epic struggle. The Germans took Paris in 1940, forcing the exodus of anyone trying to avoid being rounded up by the occupying forces. Many headed south, taking a circuitous route across the Mediterranean to Casablanca, a port city in Morocco on the Atlantic coast of North Africa. From there, they hoped to make their way to Lisbon, in neutral Portugal, and, with luck, to the United States.

Rick Blaine, an American with a checkered past who managed to get out of Paris in time, owns a nightclub and gambling den in Casablanca. *Rick's Café Américain* is a popular place catering to an eclectic clientele that includes the local Vichy French, Nazi officers, and desperate refugees who are trying to buy, bribe, or barter their way to freedom. Rick is, of course, played by Humphrey Bogart in one of the defining roles of his career. He is a bitter, cynical man who makes no secret of the fact that he "sticks his neck out for no one." But one day his past catches up with him, in the shape of Ilsa Lund, his former lover, played by the luminous Ingrid Bergman. Rick believes she betrayed him back in Paris. She certainly broke his heart, and her arrival prompts him to utter one of the movie's famous lines: "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine." This is the love story at the heart of the film, and, like any good love story, it has a few twists and turns. When Rick hears Ilsa's version of what happened in Paris, his bitterness dissolves and he offers to help her and her husband, a renowned resistance leader who is wanted by the Nazis. A classic love triangle, but one whose ultimate denouement is far from clear.

So, why is *Casablanca* such an enduring favourite? It has a strong plot, fine acting, credible dialogue, and is set in an exotic environment at a pivotal time in our history.

The love story is compelling and believable. The direction is old school. There is no gratuitous sex or violence, no brawling or falling downstairs, no special effects, no expletives, no yelling. The protagonists act like civilized people in ways that remind me of the world I was born into. They wear elegant clothes or uniforms; Bogart looks terrific in a white dinner jacket and Bergman's period hats add style to her natural beauty. Characters speak in full sentences, making conversation and communicating clearly and coherently. There are a few corny parts, but they somehow add to the authenticity of the production. It's a good story, with veteran actors playing supporting roles that expand the main narrative. The undercurrents of tension and danger, and occasional humor, mingle with themes of integrity and high-minded conviction, and the surprise ending superbly reinforces the film's message of honor and decency. It went on to win three Oscars, for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. The Library of Congress chose to preserve it in the National Film Registry as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." It has achieved iconic status and is consistently ranked as one of the greatest films in history.

Works of art usually encourage reflection and introspection and this one is no exception. When I watch *Casablanca*, I am moved to wonder what I might have done if I had had to contend with the ethical and existential challenges that Rick Blaine faced. Would I look out for myself, or would I choose a higher road and look out for my fellow man or woman? This exercise is good for our moral and spiritual growth and is one reason *Casablanca* remains a classic to this day.

