

Blu-ray Review: 'Casablanca: 70th Anniversary Edition' Worth Remembering

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on March 30, 2012 - 9:36am

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CHICAGO – Every seasoned movie lover can attest to having a favorite shot in Michael Curtiz's 1942 classic "Casablanca," a picture practically overflowing with indelible imagery. The first appearance of freedom fighter-turned-café owner Rick (Humphrey Bogart) decked out in a white tux, the tearful letter that turns to literal tears in a rainstorm, the final walk through the fog...all unforgettable.

Yet the shot that remains closest to my heart is the one that lingers on the face of Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), as she becomes hopelessly lost in the evocative notes and lyrics of a song from her past. No actress embodies earthy sensuality and misty-eyed passion quite like Bergman, who was at the peak of her luminous beauty at age 26. Her trancelike state of nostalgic longing never fails to mesmerize me, as her eyes convey what words could only feebly articulate.



Blu-ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Unlike other landmarks of cinema history, "Casablanca" is still as marvelously entertaining as the day it was made. The colorful dialogue is a consistent pleasure to hear, the comedy is laugh-out-loud funny, the suspense is nail-biting, and the bittersweet melodrama is genuinely heartrending. That's because the characters are actually worth caring about. Whereas the love affair between Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler really doesn't amount to a hill of beans in "Gone With the Wind," there's real substance to the romance between Rick, the rugged softie, and Ilsa, the conflicted woman caught between two men. She arrives in Casablanca with Czech underground leader Victor Laszlo (stern Paul Henreid) just as Rick snags two letters of transit that could serve as his ticket out of the wasteland. The sudden appearance of Ilsa resurrects painful memories of her affair with Rick in Paris, but as she informs her former flame about her reasons for leaving him, their love is rekindled. Can the lovers make an escape with sly police Captain Renault (Claude Rains) and Nazi Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) breathing down their neck? What will come of Laszlo's dreams for a more enlightened age? Is Rick really intent on sticking his neck out for nobody? Even if you already know the answers, it's irresistible to become tantalized by the questions.



Casablanca: 70th Anniversary Edition was released on March 27, 2012.

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

Rains steals the show with his witty retorts and ambiguous allegiances. When Rick has his gun pointed at Renault's heart, the unflappable captain warns, "That is my least vulnerable spot." Yet the true greatness of "Casablanca" lies in the richly detailed corners of the screen that reflect its pivotal period in history. Warner Bros. was the first studio to pull its distribution out of Nazi-controlled Europe, and its output at the time was uniformly patriotic, but Curtiz's film is anything but flippant propaganda. So many of the extras populating the streets of Casablanca are European immigrants whose accents are noticeably authentic. Curtiz himself added many of the vignettes centering on stranded refugees desperately waiting for their opportunity to leave for America. In fact, the real emotional highpoint of the film has nothing to do with the main love story. It's the moment when the Nazis sing "Die Wacht am Rhein" in Rick's bar only to find themselves defiantly drowned out by Laszlo conducting a rousing performance of "La Marseillaise." No acting was needed for the extras to conjure tears during this sequence, which is one of the most powerful examples of art mirroring life in cinema history. Without this crucial scene, audiences may have found themselves let down by the ending of "Casablanca," which is wiser and more touching than any standard "Hollywood ending" could've ever been.



Dooley Wilson and Humphrey Bogart star in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*.

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

"Casablanca: 70th Anniversary Edition" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.37:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French, Spanish, Italian, Castellano and Portuguese audio tracks and includes both Blu-ray and DVD versions of the film. No restoration can erase conspicuous film grains, but even they look utterly radiant in this Blu-ray's new 4K scan of the immortal images. Over 13 hours of extras are contained within this set's two Blu-ray discs, including two new documentaries featuring insights from historian Alan K. Rode, a recent host of the Music Box's Noir City festival. The 34-minute "Casablanca: An Unlikely Classic" assembles familiar behind-the-scenes tidbits about the project's unexpected success, and how it was spawned from Murray Burnett and Joan Alison's play, "Everybody Goes to Rick's." It offers a succinct dissection of the screenplay, highlighting each writer's distinctive contributions. Julius and Philip Epstein handled much of the witty, quotable banter, while Howard Koch kept the story centered on the theme of sacrifice. Yet it was the uncredited work of Casey Robinson that was responsible for shaping the love story (it was also Robinson who felt that Ilsa should be "a foreigner," which led to the casting of Bergman). The confusion on the actors' faces in regards to their fate was often genuine, since the script was being completed onset.

The other new doc is a real treat. Gary Leva's 37-minute "Michael Curtiz: The Greatest Director You Never Heard Of" assembles priceless clips from the chameleon-like director's extraordinary career while showing that "Casablanca" was the ultimate summation of his versatile genre-mastery—from westerns and noir to swashbuckling adventure and romantic melodrama. His insistence on having dramatic events occur in-camera occasionally resulted in the endangerment of his onscreen talent. There's some stunning footage from his 1928 "Noah's Ark" where actors struggled to tread water while surrounded by crumbling sets. Yet most of Curtiz's collaborators stuck by his side, fully aware that their labor wouldn't be in vain. Curtiz was one of the first directors to place his camera on wheels, yet he would never move it without a narrative purpose. In 1936's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the director had a 1,000-foot dolly track constructed to follow 400 manned horses as they charged across the San Fernando Valley. Various filmmakers are on hand to profess their love of Curtiz while revealing how the unsung artist influenced their own work. William Friedkin says that the horror makeup in "The Exorcist" was inspired by Curtiz's 1932 "Doctor X," while Steven Spielberg admits that he directly quoted a key shot from 1938's "The Adventures of Robin Hood" in "Raiders of the Lost Ark."


 Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman star in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*.

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

A separate Blu-ray disc includes low-definition transfers of Richard Schickel's epic five-part series, "You Must Remember This: The Warner Bros. Story," as well as two personal documentaries on the men who founded the studio, Cass Warner's heartfelt "The Brothers Warner" and Gregory Orr's "Jack L. Warner: The Last Mogul." Additional goodies accompanying this anniversary edition include a 60-page book featuring production photos, news articles and enticing inter-office communications, such as S. Charles Einfeld's request that Bogart be sold to audiences as a romantic lead. The set also includes a framable archival poster and four collectible coasters courtesy of Rick's Café Américain, the Blue Parrot and La Belle Aurore. The rest of the Blu-ray extras are recycled from previous DVD editions, but they are all first-rate. Movie buffs intent on experiencing the film as if they were an audience member in 1942 can choose to have it preceded by a trailer (for "Casablanca" producer Hal Wallis's first independent feature, "Now Voyager"), newsreel, vaudeville acts and three vintage Looney Tunes shorts. Hardcore fans will appreciate the silent outtake reel and deleted scenes (featuring subtitles from the original shooting script), while pretty much everyone will be appalled by the flavorless "Casablanca" homage in "What Holds for Tomorrow?" Lauren Bacall provides an optional introduction to the film and reminisces about Bogie in a "Great Performances" doc, while Pia Lindstrom and Stephen Bogart reflect on their parents in "As Time Goes By." Yet another "Casablanca" tribute doc, two radio broadcasts, scoring stage sessions and the Looney Tunes spoof "Carrotblanca" round out the bonus material.

As if the preceding avalanche of extras didn't provide enough reasons to recommend this set, there are also two audio commentary tracks. One is delivered by film historian Rudy Behlmer, and the other is by film critic Roger Ebert. Call me biased, but I will always favor Ebert's track. It is such a great pleasure to sit through this timeless film as the world's most influential champion of cinema guides the viewer through each scene with his trademark wit and insight. His love of the film is apparent in every frame, and he admits to getting choked up at certain scenes, despite having seen them over 50 times. He also still chuckles at Rains's peerless comic timing as Renault feigns to be shocked—SHOCKED!—that there's gambling afoot at Rick's café. Among the interesting trivia divulged by Ebert is the way in which actor Dooley Wilson got his nickname. Before he found work in Hollywood, he played Irish characters in whiteface at Chicago vaudeville theaters. Wilson didn't initially seem to be an ideal choice to play Rick's friend and pianist Sam. The role was originally intended to be played by a woman and Wilson was a drummer rather than a pianist (even a causal glance at his onscreen "playing" reveals that he was inexperienced, to say the least). But it's unthinkable to have anyone other than Wilson croon the film's iconic tune, "As Time Goes By." He's as essential an ingredient as any to the ageless appeal of this masterpiece.

'Casablanca: 70th Anniversary Edition' is released by Warner Home Video and stars Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains, Paul Henreid, Conrad Veidt, Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, S.Z. Sakall and Dooley Wilson. It was written by Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, Howard Koch and Casey Robinson and directed by Michael Curtiz. It was released on March 27, 2012. It is rated PG.



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