

# ‘Casablanca’ had a rocky start. Its stars never expected it to become a classic.



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Filming was not off to a great start on the movie set at Hollywood’s Warner Bros. Studio in May 1942. The script was only half-completed, the leading lady didn’t know how to play her part, and the male star was hesitant because he had never been in a romantic role.

So how did “Casablanca” become the iconic film it is today, reportedly the most watched movie in the world and almost certainly the most quoted — “Here’s looking at you, kid,” “Round up the usual suspects,” “We’ll always have Paris” — in history?

Well, a funny thing happened on the way to the theater: Somehow all the pieces managed to fall into place.

“Casablanca” was popular at the box office, received positive press from critics and even snagged three Academy Awards, including Outstanding Motion Picture (known since 1962 as Best Picture).

“The stars were all in alignment,” said film historian Noah Isenberg, author of [“We’ll Always Have Casablanca.”](#) “It was a miracle.”

This Sunday and Wednesday, “Casablanca” marks its 80th anniversary by returning to the big screen. It is being shown in theaters across the country by TCM Big Screen Classics with Fathom Events. Eight decades later, a film whose stars and studio saw little chance of major success continues to captivate audiences like few others.

The film’s A-list cast included Humphrey Bogart as cynical, smoldering Rick Blaine, Ingrid Bergman as his doe-eyed former lover Ilsa Lund and Paul Henreid as her patriotic but stodgy husband Victor Laszlo. Their love triangle — scandalous for Hollywood at the time — fuels the tension of the movie as a succession of desperate refugees visit Rick’s Café Américain in Morocco while trying to escape the viciousness of Nazi-occupied Europe.

This epic tale of love, betrayal and sacrifice against the backdrop of World War II captured the public’s attention to a degree that surprised the people who created it.

“None of them foresaw that the film would be so well-received,” Isenberg said. “Director Michael Curtiz didn’t even have an acceptance speech ready when he won Best Director at the Oscars. In a Hungarian-inflected accent, he stood up and hilariously said, ‘Always a bridesmaid. Never a mother.’ ”

Indeed, it was a wonder, especially given how the production had started. With the script still being written, Bergman fretted about how to portray Ilsa. Did she love Rick or Laszlo? Bergman said she didn’t know.

Bogart was equally uncertain because he had never played a romantic lead. He had made his mark as a tough guy playing Duke Mantee in “Petrified Forest,” Roy “Mad Dog” Earle in “High Sierra” and Sam Spade in “The Maltese Falcon,” now considered a film noir classic.

“Bogart was not that into the character,” said Ben Mankiewicz, a film critic and Turner Classic Movies host. “Bogart and Bergman had no chemistry at first. How do we get the greatest love story Hollywood ever told while all this is happening? When you realize this is going on, everything about the movie becomes gripping.”

“Casablanca” went through several sets of writers. It started as an unproduced play, “Everybody Comes to Rick’s,” by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, who created many of the stirring themes that show up in the movie. Then twin brothers Julius and Philip Epstein worked on the droll dialogue and new story arcs before handing the script over to Howard Koch. Uncredited was Casey Robinson, who was brought in to punch up the love scenes.

The Epsteins and Koch would share the Oscar for best screenplay. Despite that recognition, Julius Epstein later admitted that the script had “more corn than in the states of Kansas and Iowa combined. But when corn works, there’s nothing better.”

In addition, the film might never have been made had studio reader Stephen Karnot not reviewed it when he did: Dec. 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, drawing a reluctant United States into World War II. Karnot pushed “Casablanca” forward as a promising movie to pursue. Timing is everything, as they say.

“Suppose he read it Friday, Dec. 5,” Mankiewicz speculates. “Would he have still thought it was worth producing? Suddenly, this idea has much more emotional resonance on Monday, Dec. 8. Good thing he didn’t take the day off.”

Censorship played a big part in movie production in the heyday of Hollywood. “Casablanca” went through numerous script changes because of plot devices and dialogue deemed unsuitable to the moral standards of the day. Clever rewrites were needed to keep the plot flowing.

“Ilsa cannot stay with Rick because that would be tantamount to condoning adultery,” Isenberg said. “That was a huge no-no for the time. The only reason Rick and Ilsa could have this torrid affair in Paris on the eve of the Nazi occupation was because Laszlo was assumed to be dead.”

All this, of course, eventually leads Bogart, as the heartbroken Rick, to utter the immortal line, “Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.”

The supporting cast helped the film shine with a personal passion for its plot. At its heart, “Casablanca” was a movie about refugees played by refugees. Many of the extras — including Marcel Dalio as Emil the croupier, S.Z. Sakall as Carl the waiter and Helmut Dantine as Jan the Bulgarian roulette player — had actually escaped Europe to avoid Nazi persecution. Perhaps the most stirring performance by an extra came from Madeleine Lebeau, who fled Paris with her then-husband Dalio ahead of the invading German army in 1940, and who leads a tear-stained rendition of “La Marseillaise” and shouts of “Vive la France! Vive la démocratie!”

Of course, “Casablanca” was a propaganda film. Military censors kept a close eye on production to ensure that the movie was sending the right message to American audiences about supporting the war effort.

“This story is told through these three heroes who would rather be doing something else,” Mankiewicz says. “They end up doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do. They make the right decisions by making sacrifices. That was what we were asking of the country at the time.”

As Bogart said as Rick, “The problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.”

Miraculously, “Casablanca” managed to overcome all this and become regarded as one of the greatest films of all time. As film critic Andrew Sarris wrote, the movie’s success was the “happiest of happy accidents.” The critic Roger Ebert said that cinematically, “Citizen Kane” is a much better picture, but “Casablanca” is “more loved.”

Even Bergman, who was often reluctant to talk about her performances, was surprised that the movie endured over the decades. She later said, “I feel about ‘Casablanca’ that it 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.”

Isenberg echoed that sentiment: “‘Casablanca,’ like very few other films, manages to grab hold of us. It speaks to us arguably more than any other film because it traffics so much in archetypes. There are so many, that the Italian novelist and academic Umberto Eco wrote, ‘Casablanca is not just one film. It is many films.’ In other words, it’s not just a movie, it is THE movie.”

For film fans who have never seen “Casablanca” — or never seen it on the big screen — its return to theaters might just be, as Rick says in the famous final scene, “the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

