

CASABLANCA

A comparison between
the classic motion picture
and its stage play source

Essay

by

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It is a sad truth that the visual media have a history of neglecting to prize that which lies at the bottom of any of their creations, however well received and whether deservedly so or not: the written word. This has likely never been more so the case than with one of Hollywood's all-time-classics, the film that reached third place in the American Film Institute's (AFI) call for its members to vote for the ten best American films of all time in 1977, and second place in AFI's repeated voting in 1998: *Casablanca*.¹ Not only are the names of credited screenwriters Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, and Howard Koch likely not to be known by the majority of the audience, but much less the fact that the film is based on the stage play *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, written by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, even though they, too, received screen credit. This, however, might be attributed to the fact that the play has to this date only been produced twice: as *Casablanca* in 1946 at the Casino Theater in Newport, Rhode Island, and as *Rick's Bar Casablanca* in 1991 at the Whitehall Theatre in London.²

A written text, when compared to an audiovisual product, can hardly ever imprint so distinct a memory in the recipient as its counterpart, for it lacks the kind of stimulus to the senses the combined effort of twenty-four frames per second and accompanying audio arouse. Therefore, to have a fairer and sounder basis for judgement, the present text is restricted to analysing the written play against its film counterpart: the screenplay to *Casablanca*. However, as it is often the case with the motion picture industry, there is no one definitive and complete screenplay, and the one used for the purpose of this text is "a synthesis of extant versions of the shooting script, the continuity script, and a close analysis of the finished film."³

Upon first reading both stage play and screenplay, one is tempted to jump to the conclusion that *Casablanca* is one of the rare occasions where a story, through adaptation from one medium to another, is elevated from a mediocre (if promising) source material to a gem of rare beauty. And indeed, the tale of Rick Blaine, the protagonist in both play and film, rang true in the hearts of its audience back in 1942, when Warner Bros. first released it, and continues to inspire generations

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- 1 Charles Francisco, *You Must Remember This... The Filming of Casablanca* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), p. 5. and "AFI's 100 Years 100 Movies" *AFI's 100 Years*, <http://www.afi.com/tv/movies.asp> (15 November 2003) respectively.
 - 2 Kathy Merlock Jackson, "Playing It Again and Again", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Winter 2000, p. 35 and Herb Greer, "Casablanca, the Play", *The World and I*, <http://www.worldandi.com/specialreport/1991/july/Sa19175.htm> (15 November 2003).
 - 3 Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, and Howard Koch, *Casablanca*, title page, available on-line at <http://www.godamongdirectors.com/scripts/casablanca.pdf> (17 November 2003).

onward. The play itself, however, was lost in oblivion, even though many of the distinct elements of the screenplay appear therein.

The character Rick, a former rebel with apparently inviolable values and principles, who has lost faith in the world and humanity, but is reborn through a past that catches up with him and forces him to rediscover the hibernating fighter within himself, feels much truer and embedded with a much profounder message in the screenplay. Whereas in the stage play he seems, up to the third act, whiny and weak, always complaining how “burnt out” he is, that he has “no cause to believe in” and “nothing to fight for”, the screenplay conveys a man that, even though his principles seem to have been reduced to sticking out his neck for nobody, has a strong and powerful heart pounding in his chest.⁴ Moreover, his vernacular in the play places him on a lower social scale than his speech in *Casablanca* does, as he often casts direct insults at both Ilsa and Laszlo, literally calling them “bitch” and “high class pimp” respectively.⁵ Not only does the act of resorting to such blatant vilifications reduce the heroic appeal of the character, but it also propels the reader towards identification with the supporting cast, which runs counter to the classical *modus operandi* of Hollywood film-making. This, indeed, is one of the essential differences between the two pieces: the employment of subtext to impart significance and purpose. Characters in the stage play often actually mean what they say, while the screenplay weaves a translucent carpet of dialogue that very skilfully hints at layers of meaning underneath the surface of the spoken words.

This culminates in the climax of the screenplay, which is profoundly different from the source material, and encompasses a sentence that has become one of the most quoted lines in Hollywood history: “Round up the usual suspects.”⁶ The climactic scene in the play has Rick, the hero with whom the audience is likely to identify with, arrested by the German Captain and, presumably, put into a concentration camp. This leaves the reader not only frustrated and emotionally unfulfilled, but also allows for that silent question to remain hanging in mid-air whether Rick’s decision to help Ilsa and Victor escape was ultimately the right choice. As favourable as this ambiguity might seem to fans of *film noir*, it implies a certain extent of victory by Nazi Germany that no producer in the USA,

4 Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, *Everybody Comes to Rick’s* (unpublished), p. 2-1-6, and Epstein, Epstein, and Koch, p. 22, 30.

5 Burnett and Alison, p. 2-1-17, 2-2-27

6 Epstein, Epstein, and Koch, p. 125.

particularly as the country had just joined the Second World War, would have wanted – or even allowed – to be portrayed. This, however, should not imply that the story's conclusion in the screenplay is any less ambiguous. As Laszlo and his wife fly off to Lisbon and apparent freedom, Rick and the French prefect of police, Renault, walk off into the haze of a Casablanca night pregnant with the prospect of their becoming a valuable asset in the fight against a menacing empire. The (post World War II) audience is left with an underlying – even unconscious – belief that it might just have been Rick who won the war for them, and, indeed, for all of us.

This same ending, however, contains one of the shortcomings of the screen adaptation: Captain Renault, who appears to be the epitome of neutrality and supine demeanour in both play and screenplay, abruptly performs a perfect volte-face by covering up Rick's murder of Major Strasser and subsequently joining the fight against the Nazi regime. In the play, he very much remains the same. The fact that it worked on screen – and splendidly so – has to be attributed to the acting of Claude Rains, who, throughout the film, delivers his lines with such inherent perisology that the viewer is never really sure as to where he actually stands.

Another distinction between the two materials is that between the values that are at stake. In *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, the freedom fighter Victor Laszlo is sought after by the German Captain Strasser for the purpose of obtaining seven million dollars the fugitive has accumulated through an underground newspaper publishing “foulest lies” about the Nazi regime.⁷ Once the money has been delivered, Laszlo would be allowed to leave Casablanca immediately, or so Captain Strasser wants him – and the audience – to believe.⁸ The quarrel, it seems, is all about money. In the film adaptation, Major Strasser – apparently having been promoted by the screenwriters – demands from Victor the names of the underground leaders in every major city in the Third Reich as a prerogative for freedom of passage. While never spoken out directly, the dreadful fate those leaders would face is all too obvious, and Laszlo's apparent sacrifice, even though he escapes in the end, is much more powerful and righteous.

⁷ Burnett and Alison, p. 1-23.

⁸ Burnett and Alison, p. 1-30.

Furthermore, as Dr. John H. Davis of Chowan College, North Carolina, points out, the allegorical relevance of *Casablanca's* characters and plot, especially considering the historical context, is quite perceivable to the keen observer:

Rick (Roosevelt), proprietor of the Café Americain (the U.S.) in Casablanca ("White House") in December 1941, bruised from past experiences (WWI) – though obviously leaning towards those to whom he was formerly close (Ilsa: Europe) – tries to remain detached from the conflicts about him but finally joins again in a fight against a common enemy.⁹

Even though the central idea exists within the framework of the play, these profound implications remain, for the most part, stillborn.

Unfortunately, a thorough analysis of the contrasts and similarities between the play *Everybody Comes to Rick's* and the screenplay to *Casablanca* can never be done justice within the scope of this text. Indeed, a scene-by-scene – and in some places even line-by-line – comparison would be appropriate and necessary to pinpoint the differences in greater scope, as well as in nuances of speech and behaviour, that are inherent within the two works. What remains to be said, therefore, is that *Casablanca* arguably represents one of the scarce incidents where the Hollywood system of story development, as much as it may be dreaded by many authors – past as well as contemporary – managed to produce an internationally recognised piece of art, even praised by the British Film Institute in 1983 as the best film of all times.¹⁰

9 John H. Davis, "Still the Same Old Story": The Refusal of Time to Go By in *Casablanca*", *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, Winter 2000, p. 123.

10 Merlock Jackson, pp. 33-34.

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