

## Casablanca (1942)

Casablanca is a 1942 American romantic drama directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Humphrey Bogart (American, 1899-1957), Ingrid Bergman (Swedish, 1915-1982), and Paul Henreid (Austrian, 1908-1992). Filmed and set during World War II, it focuses on an American expatriate (Bogart) who must choose between his love for a woman (Bergman) and helping her husband (Henreid), a Czechoslovak resistance leader, escape from Casablanca to continue his fight against the Germans. The premiere was on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1942, in New York.



Exceeding expectations, Casablanca was nominated for eight Academy Awards, and won three – “Best Picture”, “Best Director” and “Best Adapted Screenplay”. Its reputation has grown, and today, the lead characters, the memorable lines and the pervasive theme song have all become iconic, and it consistently ranks as one of the greatest films in history. In 1989, the United States Library of Congress said the film is "culturally, historically and aesthetically significant".

### The Story

In December 1941, American expatriate Rick Blaine owns a nightclub and gambling house in Casablanca. Rick's "Café Américain" attracts many customers, including Vichy French, Nazi Germans and refugees desperate to reach the United States (via Lisbon). There are also many thieves and conmen waiting to prey on them. Rick claims to be neutral in all matters, although he previously sold guns to Ethiopia in 1935 and fought on the Loyalist side of the Spanish Civil War.

A thief called Ugarte tells Rick that he has stolen two letters of transit by murdering two German couriers. The letters allow the holders to travel freely around German-occupied Europe and to neutral Portugal. Ugarte plans to sell them at Rick's club and persuades Rick to hold them for him. Before he can meet his contact, Ugarte is arrested by the police, headed by Captain Louis Renault, the corrupt police chief. Ugarte dies in custody without revealing that Rick has the letters.

Then Rick's former lover Ilsa Lund enters his club. Seeing the house pianist, Sam, Ilsa asks him to play "As Time Goes By". Rick runs over, furious that Sam disobeyed his order never to play that song again, and he is stunned to see Ilsa. She is accompanied by her husband, Victor Laszlo, a famous fugitive Czechoslovak Resistance leader. A flashback reveals that Ilsa left Rick without explanation when the couple were planning to run away from Paris to Marseille together. Laszlo and Ilsa need the letters to escape, but Major Strasser, of the Gestapo, arrives in Casablanca to prevent Laszlo from leaving.

When Laszlo asks Signor Ferrari, the owner of another café, about the letters, he reveals that Rick has them. Laszlo tries to buy them from Rick, but Rick refuses to sell, telling Laszlo to ask his wife why. The conversation is interrupted when Strasser leads a group of German officers in singing "Die Wacht am Rhein". Laszlo orders the house band to play "La Marseillaise", and Rick allows it. French patriotism grips the crowd and everyone joins in, drowning out the Germans. Afterwards, Strasser demands that Renault close the club.

Later, Ilsa confronts Rick in the café, and when he refuses to give her the letters, she threatens him with a gun but then confesses that she still loves him. She explains that when they met and fell in love in Paris in 1940, she believed that her husband had been killed attempting to escape from a concentration camp. Then she learned that Laszlo was alive, but sick, and hiding near Paris. She

left Rick without explanation in order to help her sick husband. Rick's bitterness dissolves and he agrees to help, letting her believe that she will stay with him when Laszlo leaves. Laszlo, aware of Rick's love for Ilsa, tries to persuade him to use the letters to take her to safety.

When the police arrest Laszlo on a petty charge, Rick persuades Renault to release him by promising to set Laszlo up for a much bigger crime – possession of the letters. He also tells Renault that he and Ilsa will use the letters to leave for America. However, when Renault tries to arrest Laszlo, as arranged, Rick forces him at gunpoint to assist in their escape. Rick makes Ilsa board the plane to Lisbon with Laszlo, telling her that she would regret it if she stayed, "maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life". Strasser, contacted by Renault, drives to the airport. When he draws a gun on Rick, Rick shoots him dead. Policemen arrive, and Renault orders them to "round up the usual suspects", protecting Rick. He then suggests to Rick that they join the Free French in Brazzaville. As they walk away into the fog, Rick says, "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship".



## **Interesting facts**

The film was made entirely at Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, California, with the exception of one sequence at Van Nuys Airport in Los Angeles.

The cast is notably international: only three of the actors were born in the United States – Humphrey Bogart, Dooley Wilson (Sam, the pianist) and Joy Page (refugee Annina Brandel).

According to the Writers Guild of America, the screenplay (movie script) for Casablanca was the best ever written.

The difference between Bergman's and Bogart's heights caused some problems. She was two inches (5 cm) taller than Bogart, so Bogart had to stand on blocks or sit on cushions in their scenes together.

The piano that Sam plays in Rick's "Café Américain" was auctioned on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and was sold for \$3.4 million.

The director didn't know how the film was going to end until the final scene was made. Even the actors didn't know if Ilsa would go to America with her husband or stay in Casablanca with Rick. The director intended to make two different endings, but after the first one was filmed, it was considered so good that another wasn't necessary.

Although Casablanca was a film with established stars and first-rate writers, no one expected it to be anything special. The film was rushed into release to take advantage of the publicity from the Allied invasion of North Africa a few weeks earlier.

Warner Brothers released a heavily edited version of Casablanca in West Germany in 1952. All scenes with Nazis were removed, and important story points were changed when the dialogue was dubbed into German, for example, Victor Laszlo was a Norwegian atomic physicist being pursued by Interpol after he escaped from jail. The version was 25 minutes shorter than the original.

Roger Ebert, American film critic, said that "there are greater movies, more profound movies, movies of greater artistic vision or artistic originality or political significance, but Casablanca is one of the movies that we treasure the most. It has transcended the ordinary categories". In his opinion, the film is so popular because "the people in it are all so good" and it is "a wonderful gem". Ebert said that he had never heard of a negative review of the film.

## **Memorable lines from the film**

- "Play it once, Sam. For old times' sake."
- "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine."
- "Here's looking at you, kid."
- "We'll always have Paris."
- "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."
- "I stick my neck out for nobody."
- "Round up the usual suspects."

1978 interview with Ingrid Bergman about the making of the film Casablanca:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EV-r4I584A8>