

The Buffalo Film Seminars



Directed by Irving Rapper
Based on the novel by Olive Higgins Prouty
Screenplay by Casey Robinson
Produced by Hal B. Wallis
Original Music by Max Steiner
Cinematography by Sol Polito
Costume Design by Orry-Kelly
Makeup Department Perc Westmore

Bette Davis...Charlotte Vale
Paul Henreid...Jerry Durrance
Claude Rains...Dr. Jaquith
Gladys Cooper...Mrs. Henry Windle Vale
Bonita Granville...June Vale
John Loder...Elliot Livingston
Ilka Chase...Lisa Vale
Lee Patrick...'Deb' McIntyre
Franklin Pangborn...Mr. Thompson
Katharine Alexander...Miss Trask (as Katherine Alexander)
James Rennie...Frank McIntyre

Selected for the National Film Registry by National Film Preservation Board, 2007

Irving Rapper (16 January 1898, London, England—20 December 1999, Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California) directed 22 films, some of which were *Born Again* (1978), *The Miracle* (1959), *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958), *The Brave One* (1957), *The Glass Menagerie* (1950), *Anna Lucasta* (1949), *The Voice of the Turtle* (1947), *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), *The Corn Is Green* (1945), *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Shining Victory* (1941).

Sol Polito (1892, Palermo, Sicily, Italy—23 May 1960, Hollywood) was cinematographer on more than 160 films, beginning with *Rip Van Winkle* 1914 and ending with *The Plunderers* 1960. Some of his other films were *Anna Lucasta* 1949, *Sorry, Wrong Number* 1948, *Cloak and Dagger* 1946, *A Stolen Life* 1946, *Rhapsody in Blue* 1945, *Arsenic and Old Lace* 1944, *This Is the Army* 1943, *Now, Voyager* 1942, *Sergeant York* 1941, *The Sea Wolf* 1941, *Santa Fe Trail* 1940, *Virginia City* 1940, *Angels with Dirty Faces* 1938, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* 1936, *The Petrified Forest* 1936, *The Woman in Red* 1935, *'G' Men* 1935, *Gold Biggers of 1933* 1933, *42nd Street* 1933, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* 1932, *No, No, Nanette* 1930, *The Girl of the Golden West* 1923 and *Fruits of Desire* 1916.

January 29, 2008 (XVI:3)
Irving Rapper, *Now, Voyager* 1942 (117 min.)



Max Steiner (10 May 1888, Vienna, Austria-Hungary—28 December 1971, Hollywood, congestive heart failure) is credited as musical director or for stock music on 259 films and as composer for 271, some of which are *Spencer's Mountain* 1963, *The Sins of Rachel Cade* 1961, *The FBI Story* 1959, *A Summer Place* 1959, *Marjorie Morningstar* 1958, *The Searchers* 1956, *Battle Cry* 1955, *The Caine Mutiny* 1954, *The Jazz Singer* 1952, *I Was a Communist for the FBI* 1951, *White Heat* 1949, *The Fountainhead* 1949, *Flamingo Road* 1949, *Key Largo* 1948, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* 1948, *Dark Passage* 1947, *Cloak and Dagger* 1946, *The Big Sleep* 1946, *Night and Day* 1946, *Mildred Pierce* 1945, *Arsenic and Old Lace* 1944, *Watch on the Rhine* 1943, *Casablanca* 1942, *Now, Voyager* 1942, *They Died with Their Boots On* 1941, *Sergeant York* 1941, *Santa Fe Trail* 1940, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* 1940, *The Letter* 1940, *Gone with the Wind* 1939, *The Dawn Patrol* 1938, *Angels with Dirty Faces* 1938, *Jezebel* 1938, *The Informer* 1935, *King Kong* 1933, and *The Bondman* 1929. He was nominated for 23 Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture and won for *Since You Went Away* 1944, *Now, Voyager* 1943 and *The Informer* 1936.

Bette Davis (5 April 1908, Lowell, Massachusetts—6 October 1989, Neuilly, France, metastasized breast cancer) performed in 120 films and TV dramas, among

them *Wicked Stepmother* 1989, *The Whales of August* 1987, *Death on the Nile* 1978, *The Nanny* 1965, *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* 1964, *The Virgin Queen* 1955, *A Stolen Life* 1946, *Watch on the Rhine* 1943, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* 1942, 1941, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* 1939, *Jezebel* 1938, *Satan Met a Lady* 1936, *The Petrified Forest* 1936, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* 1932, *So Big!* 1932, and *The Bad Sister What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* 1962, *The Star* 1952, *All About Eve* 1950, *Mr. Skeffington* 1944, *Now, Voyager* 1942, *The Little Foxes* 1941, *The Letter* 1940, *Dark Victory* 1939 and *Of Human Bondage* 1934. She won for *Jezebel* 1938 and *Dangerous* 1935.

Paul Henreid (10 January 1905, Trieste, Austria-Hungary—29 March 1992, Santa Monica, California, pneumonia) is best known as a film actor (he appeared in 56 films and tv dramas) but he also had a career as a tv director for such series as "Bracken's World" (4 episodes, 1969-1970), "The Big Valley" (9 episodes, 1965-1968), "The Third Man" (6 episodes, 1962-1964), "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" (28 episodes, 1957-1962), and "Schlitz Playhouse of Stars" (5 episodes, 1957-1958). Some of his films are *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977), *The Madwoman of Chaillot* (1969), *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962), *Of Human Bondage* (1946), *In Our Time* (1944), *Casablanca* (1942), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Night Train to Munich* (1940), *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939), *Hohe Schule* (1934 as Paul von Hernried) and *Morgenrot* (1933).

Claude Rains (10 November 1889, London, England—30 May 1967, Laconia, New Hampshire, intestinal hemorrhage) appeared in 76 films and tv series, among them *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), "Dr. Kildare" (1964), "Rawhide" (1963), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), "Wagon Train" (1962), "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" (5 episodes, 1956-1962), "Naked City" (1960), "Playhouse 90" (1959), "The Alcoa Hour" (1956), *The Unsuspected* (1947), *Angel on My Shoulder* (1946), *Notorious* (1946), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945), *Mr. Skeffington* (1944), *Passage to Marseille* (1944), *Phantom of the Opera* (1943), *Casablanca* (1942), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Kings Row* (1942), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939), *They Won't Forget* (1937), *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *Build Thy House* (1920).

IRVING RAPPER from *World Film Directors, V. I. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Company, NY.1987.*

American director born in 1898 in London. According to William R. Meyer in *Warner Brothers Directors*, he went to the United States after World War I to study law at New York University, though other sources claim that he was in America from the age of eight. At any rate, it seems clear that he joined the Washington Square Players as a stage director while still at NYU, and then "got caught up in the flourish of theatrical activity in the Manhattan of the 1920s." Interviewed by James Bawden in *Classic Images* (June 1982), he said that he was "a struggling

actor and not a very good one at that" before becoming Miller's protégé" and a Broadway director.

Meyer says that Rapper first went to Hollywood in 1929, assisting Robert Florey on *Hole in the Wall* for Paramount. He returned in 1933 "during a lull on Broadway called the Depression," when MGM hired him as dialogue director on Robert Leonard's *Dancing Lady*, with Joan Crawford. After that Rapper returned to Broadway for a few more years, until the success of a stage thriller called *Crime* secured him a contract with Warner Brothers. Beginning in 1936, Rapper was dialogue director there for five years, coaching actors in the delivery of their lines and often the execution of movement during both rehearsals and filming. Dialogue directors were much in demand during the early years of sound, when filmmakers trained in the silents lacked experience of the spoken word.

As he told James Bawden, Rapper's "guide and mentor" during those early years at Warners was Michael Curtiz: "By working so closely with him I received a crash course in film directing." Rapper served Curtiz as dialogue director on *The Walking Dead* (1936), *Kid Galahad* (1937), and *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), among other films. He also worked with William Dieterle on *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) and several other Warner biopics, with Anatole Litvak (*All This and Heaven Too* 1940), and Curtis Bernhardt. "Many of these pictures," he says, "were made for the producer Henry Blanke, the most sympathetic, versatile and intelligent producer at Warners." And these films "were made with such care that a dialogue director really was a necessity so the actors could come on the floor thoroughly prepared. They really need dialogue directors today—it's a poor economy not to have them."

By 1938 Warners had decided that Rapper was ready to direct films of his own. However, he was at first offered nothing but "really bad 'B' pictures," and astonished his colleagues by turning them down. "I just kept doing dialogue and waiting my turn." He saw his opportunity with *Shining Victory* (1941), a modest melodrama adapted from a play by A. J. Cronin. James Stephenson plays an ambitious and sexist psychobiologist pursuing his researches in a Scottish sanatorium. Geraldine Fitzgerald, as his unwelcome assistant, wins his reluctant admiration and his heart before sacrificing her life to save his research notes from a fire set by a jealous rival (Barbara O'Neil). The solid cast also included Donald Crisp and Sig Ruman, and Bette Davis, a friend of Rapper's since *Kid Galahad*, made an uncredited walk-on appearance as a nurse.

Though he seems to have relinquished the practice later, Rapper says in *The Celluloid Muse* that he preplanned *Shining Victory* and other early pictures: "I'd plot out the opening and closing of a sequence, and its highest dramatic point. . . . I'd sometimes begin with fully detailed plans and sketches, but then Bette or someone would yell out, 'Why did you do that?' and I'd throw them all away. I would improvise a good deal, but I always followed the scripts I was given to the letter. At Warners they would give you a finished script, and if you refused to do it, you were out on suspension." Rapper reportedly collected ten suspensions in that way at Warners: "I would refuse, say, a crime picture I wouldn't even know how to begin, or some Nazi pictures when I thought people were tired of them, or nonliterate scripts."

Shining Victory was moderately well received, though some found it pedestrian, and Rapper had a critical and commercial success with his second feature, a nostalgic piece of Americana called *One Foot in Heaven* (1941), assigned to him when Anatole Litvak was taken off the film. Scripted by Casey

Robinson it deals with the vicissitudes of thirty years in the life of a hard-up Methodist minister (Frederic March) and his wife (Martha Scott). Bosley Crowther found it “cheerful and warmly compassionate...one of the finest pictures of the year,” and Howard Barnes thought that the “challenging subject matter has been handled with great skill and authority.” The British critic C.A. Lejeune liked its “human and salty” humor and put it “very high up” on her list of favorite movies—special films not necessarily great or celebrated which...are remembered with a glow when better films have been forgotten.” It was nominated for an Oscar as best picture.

Barbara Stanwyck starred in Rapper’s next film, *The Gay Sisters* (1942). She plays one of three impoverished heiresses struggling through years of litigation in an attempt to gain control of their father’s estate. George Brent plays her opponent (ad the father of her child) and the movie gave a young actor named Byron Elsworth Barr his first featured role as second leading man Gig Young—the name that thereafter appeared on his credits. Rapper says that he “tried to use Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* in a modern Manhattan location” but “it didn’t jell.” Some reviewers like the film nevertheless for its “good narrative sense” and acting.

The film that followed, *Now, Voyager* (1942), is generally regarded as Rapper’s masterpiece. Adapted by Casey Robinson from a novel by Olive Higgins Prouty, it as originally assigned to Michael Curtiz, who promptly fell ill (or pretended to; he reportedly loathed its star, Bette Davis). Rapper, who had just completed *The Gay Sisters*, was in great distress over the death of his mother and desperately needed a break, but was ordered to take over with only two weeks’ preparation time. “I think I ploughed my own emotions right into it” he says. The picture was already partly cast, but the director was able to hire Gladys Cooper as the heroine’s autocratic mother, and Ilka Chase and Bonita Granville as a couple of spiteful socialites. For the romantic lead he wanted Charles Boyer but had to “make do” with Paul Henreid.

Davis plays Charlotte Vale, plump, plain, and repressed in thick-lensed glasses, slumping into middle-age in a Boston Back Bay mansion. Fleeing from despair into a nervous breakdown, she finds a friend in Dr. Jacquith (Claude Rains), America’s greatest psychiatrist. After repairing her battered psyche, he packs her off on a luxury cruise that introduces her to Jerry (Henreid), an unhappily married architect. They fall in love in Rio, and Charlotte is transformed into a passionate and beautiful woman with 20/20 vision. Contentedly assuming the role of Other Woman in Jerry’s life, she also becomes surrogate mother to his teenaged daughter, rescuing her from the kind of repression she herself had escaped. “Don’t let’s ask for the moon,” Charlotte admonishes herself at the end. “We have the stars.”

“This very clever wish-fulfillment fantasy...,” wrote Higham and Greenberg in *Hollywood in the Forties*, “is directed by Rapper with mesmerizing skill. Max Steiner’s hypnotic variations on a series of cellophane love-themes (“Wrong, could it be wrong to kiss?” is the most famous of these) underline every



scene and give the film a strong romantic coherence. Sol Polito’s glamorous photography evokes the shimmering paradise of the Bahamas, the Boston mansion, the soft moonlight of the African coast.” Dvid Thompson called it “a gorgeous wallowing film,” and “rather better Litvak than Anatole could have managed.”

Rapper was already establishing his reputation as a director of actors, and he elicited from Bette Davis a “precision and control” that delighted her admirers. Paul Henreid, in his first Hollywood film, distinguished himself chiefly by lighting two cigarettes at once and handing one to his lover. He was hailed as the “creator for all time of the two cigarette routine,” but Rapper says he stole the gimmick from Alan Dwan, “so you can see nothing is new.” Some reviewers found the picture weakly structured —“diffuse and overlong”—but the public didn’t care, making it one of the top

moneymakers of the year. And there were Oscar nominations for best actress, best supporting actress (Gladys Cooper), and Steiner’s score.

Having cut his teeth as a dialogue director on Warner biopics, Rapper was finally assigned one of his own, *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (1944). He was not happy with Alan Le May’s screenplay, which lacked “the close feeling of progressive excitement that a script should have,” but once again had Sol Polito as cinematographer and Max Steiner as his composer, as well as a fine cast headed by Frederic March. Centering on Mark Twain’s career as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi (splendidly evoked in Steiner’s score), this rambling film (130 minutes) is another amiable exercise in Americana—Higham and Greenberg called it “a *tour de force* of historical reconstruction.” It ends with a scene in which the dying author is led over the brow of a hill into the sunrise of immortality by the children of his imagination in miniature—Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and their friends. Found sentimental by some, this remains one of Rapper’s favorite sequences.

The director again had the services of some of his most congenial collaborators in *The Corn Is Green* (1945), from the play by Emyln Williams about a surly young Welsh miner with great academic gifts (John Dall) who is cajoled and bullied into an Oxford scholarship by a dedicated village schoolteacher. Bette Davis played this tough-minded idealist, and the film was scripted by Casey Robinson and Frank Cavett, photographed by Polito, and scored by Steiner.

“The sets in *The Corn Is Green* are appalling,” wrote a critic in the *London Times*, “the singing is overdone, and an occasional false note is struck, but it is a most courageous, exciting film.” Most reviewers, whatever their reservations, shared this last conclusion, praising in particular the “sharp vitality” and “unique sincerity” of Davis’ performance and the fidelity with which the scriptwriters had preserved “the witty, human, nervous dialogue” of the play. Rapper had agreed that the Carl Weyl sets were poor: “If you strain you can see the painted backdrops, which distressed me a bit.” But “shooting in Wales was impossible with the war on.”

Rapper’s second screen biography was *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), about George Gershwin’s progress from a penny arcade

pianola on the Lower East Side to fabulous success and tragic death. The script was credited to Howard Koch and Elliot Paul, from an original story by Sonya Levien, but it is rumored that the film also draws on an earlier script by Clifford Odets, written with Odets' friend John Garfield in mind as the composer. The front office apparently concluded that Garfield wouldn't look right in a full dress suit," and Odets eventually recycled his Gershwin script as *Humoresque* (1946).

Rhapsody in Blue had a mixed reception. The unknown Robert Alda, cast in the lead, resembled the composer more than Garfield did, but made a colorless Gershwin (though his faked piano playing was found reasonably convincing). Some reviewers were perfectly happy to sit through two hours of Gershwin music performed by the likes of Anne Brown, Hazel Scott, and Gershwin's old colleagues Paul Whiteman and Oscar Levant (who has a sizable role as himself). But many complained that the story was heavily stereotyped and fictionalized (and Levant himself called it "preposterous").

There is also a good deal of music (by Beethoven) in *Deception* (1946), not to mention the three stars of *Now, Voyager*. This time, Paul Henreid is an Austrian cellist who comes to America from war-torn Vienna in search of his lost beloved (Bette Davis), slowly arriving at the distressing discovery that she has kept herself in Bechsteins by accepting the post of mistress to an egocentric composer (Claude Rains). The movie seemed to Virginia Graham "intelligently written, produced and acted," while Leonard Mosely thought that Hollywood had "at long last made a genuine and successful film about music and musicians."

Deception ends with Davis shooting Rains and going off to the clink. According to Rapper, this outcome was imposed by the all-powerful star herself, who demanded a conclusion that she could get her histrionic teeth into, in place of the "gay, light, natural, 'so what' ending" of John Collier's original script. It was also at Davis' insistence that Rapper's usual cameraman Sol Polito was replaced by Ernest Haller, who specialized in "making the stars look beautiful," and who "used those deep-focus shots that gave the story so much weight." Rapper maintains that this collaboration gave rise to a well-known Haller anecdote usually supposed to have involved either Garbo or Dietrich. Davis apparently reproached Haller for failing to make her look as good in *Deception* as he had in *Jezebel*, to which he tactfully replied, "But Bette I was ten years younger then."

A series of plays adaptations followed. *The Voice of the Turtle* (1947) derived from John van Druten's comedy about a naively romantic actress (Eleanor Parker) in New York who gives a bed in her apartment to a young army sergeant on leave (Ronald Reagan). The film was found "coyly prurient where the play was most pleasantly candid," and Rapper thought that Reagan "really didn't have a light touch for comedy."

Most critics agree that Rapper directed his best films during his years with Warner Brothers. He left the studio in 1947, and has since explained that he was angry about the casting of Robert Alda in *Rhapsody in Blue*. His first movie as a freelance was *Anna Lucasta* (1949), produced by Philip Yordan from his own play about incestuous yearnings in a Pennsylvania mill town. No one was much impressed, and Paulette Goddard was thought hopelessly miscast in the title role, where she "distinguished herself chiefly for her decor."

Rapper returned to Warners to direct his adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1950) because he "couldn't resist that one." Gertrude Lawrence was inexplicably cast as the one-time Southern belle reduced to a shabby St. Louis

apartment and obsessively intent on finding a husband for desperately shy and crippled daughter (Jane Wyman). She bullies her son (Arthur Kennedy) until he brings home a glib "gentleman caller" (Kirk Douglas), with results desolating in the play, less so in the movie. *Time's* reviewer concluded that the picture "tries conscientiously to rework the frail story in movie terms. But the charm, the magic, and the vague sadness of the play are lost."

Bette Davis took Rapper to his native England for their last collaboration, *Another Man's Poison* (1952), based on a play by Leslie Sands. Davis plays a murderous thriller writer who lives in a lonely house on the Yorkshire moors and poisons almost everyone except her horse. Frank Hauser recommended the movie to "the audience which specialises in bad films...slap-up, expensive, pretentious stinkers....No one has ever accused Bette Davis of failing to rise to a good script; what this film shows is how far she can go to meet a bad one....*Another Man's Poison* is not to be missed; it is safe to say there are few things in cinema like it."

Rapper went to Columbia for the insignificant *Bad for Each Other* (1953) and to Paramount for the slightly better *Forever Female* (1953), which stars Ginger Rogers as a middle-aged actress who wants to play ingenues. *Strange Intruder* (1956), for Allied Artists, is a turgid melodrama about a temporarily deranged vet wrestling with his promise to murder his dead buddy's children.

The best of Rapper's post-Warner films, *The Brave One* (1956), was made for the King Brothers. It is a variation on the Androcles story. Leonardo (Michel Ray), a Mexican peasant boy, raises a bull calf, Gitano, on the ranch where his father works. He gains and loses ownership of the animal and in the end follows it to the bullring in Mexico City, expecting to see it die there. But Gitano shows such courage the crowd demands the *indulto*—the rare sparing of a fighting bull's life. Leonardo runs into the arena, calms the frenzied animal, and leads it away to freedom.

The Brave One was shot in Cinemascope and Technicolor by Jack Cardiff on location in Mexico, apart from a few sequences filmed in the Churubusco Studios. The script, written under a pseudonym by the blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo, won an Oscar. The film was warmly received by the critics, and Rapper says in *The Celluloid Muse* that this was "one picture of mine in recent years [that] wasn't compromised....My friends and my agent even advised me against making it....They said, 'what do you see in it?' And I said, 'It's so simple, it reads like a fairy tale.' And it cost \$430,000 to make, and grossed eight and a half million. After that, I'll follow my own judgment all the time."

If he did so, his judgment let him down. His next assignment took him back to Warners for an adaptation of Herman Wouk's bestseller *Marjorie Morningstar*, about growing up Jewish and middle-class in New York City in the 1950s. Natalie Wood played the virginal Marjorie and Gene Kelly the second-rate hooper she falls in love with while working one summer as a drama counselor on the borscht circuit. Two more non-Jews, Claire Trevor and Everett Sloane, played her loving but overprotective parents. Reviewers found the film competent but unexciting.

The Miracle was based on Max Reinhardt's famous piece about a medieval nun who falls in love with a knight, forsakes her vows, and after many colorful adventures returns contrite, to find that a statue of the Madonna had left its pedestal to cover for her during her absence. Frank Butler's script transposes the story to Spain in the early nineteenth century. The nun is now only a

postulant (Carroll Baker) and her lover a dashing English officer (Roger Moore). Hollis Alpert suggested that this was “the kind of movie they don’t make any more—but they did, unfortunately.”

Now typed as a “religious director,” Rapper next found himself involved in two spaghetti biblical epics, neither of any merit: *Joseph and His Brethren* (1960), the English-language version of a film by Luciano Ricci, and *Ponzio Pilato* (*Pontius Pilate*, 1962). Eight years passed after that before Rapper went back to work on *The Christine Jorgensen Story*, about the first American male to undergo a sex-change operation. David Watts wrote that Rapper had “sealed it with the depressing glaze of old Hollywood” but “does give the pulpy script certain disturbingly sinister accents by means of cheesy old-style lighting and a pseudo-Tchaikovsky score.” For David Thompson, however, this was “possibly the most bizarre departure by any director once in steady work.”

Rapper reached the dismal end of his career in 1978 with another religious assignment, *Born Again*, based on the experiences of Charles W. Colson, Nixon’s former special counsel, who had undergone a religious conversion while serving time for obstruction of justice in the Pentagon Papers case. Warmly received by evangelical Christians, the film was largely ignored by godless critics.

According to *The Celluloid Muse*, Rapper lived in a luxurious apartment crowded with fine paintings and “set high in a glistening white building in the very heart of Hollywood.... Comfortably plump and relaxed, with an elegant and cultivated personality, he is utterly unlike the brisk new generation of grey-suited, fiercely efficient Hollywood men. His best known films were made with Bette Davis...but his unacknowledged technical skill, his tremendous flair for the cinema, were perhaps more formidably displayed in his biographies.” David Thompson says that “the mark of Curtiz, Dieterle, and Litvak shows in his...films—if nothing else, Rapper learned a gilded craft.”

Now, Voyager. Dana Polan in *Senses of Cinema*, August, 2006.

Now Voyager takes its time to introduce its big star—Bette Davis as Charlotte Vale—and by means of the delay, the film demonstrates just how clever and accomplished Hollywood’s art of popular storytelling is. Whatever the function the delay has within the narrative, it also serves to show off Hollywood’s control of its fictions by offering a veritable commentary on the thrall and seduction that the star possesses.

Charlotte is first talked about by others and then she appears as nothing but the image of her ankles waddling tentatively down the stairs. Only eventually is the full face of the actress revealed to us, and even then we’re not given Davis in all her typical vibrant, vivacious splendour but with a frumpy and doughy faced version of the woman. The film plays on the connotations of stardom as well as the expectations and emotional needs with which, and for which, we’ve come to such a movie. If the nominal story of *Now, Voyager* is the fictional one in which, in its content world, Charlotte comes to stand up for herself and emerge as the self-possessed woman she always had the potential to become, the film also tells a second, more meta-reflexive one, in which we see a Hollywood film pretending to not deliver the goods only to then come through on its initial promise and to do so in a glorious fashion. Whatever else it is about, *Now Voyager* is also an allegory about Hollywood itself—its sheer magic and aesthetic perfectionism.

Predictably, the film has become a cult classic with citations of, or allusions to, its last scene showing up in works as diverse as, for example, Woody Allen’s *Play it Again, Sam* or Alan Bennett’s recent award-winning play *The History Boys*. In a famous essay Umberto Eco suggested that one quality of the classic cult film was its quotability (his example was another well-crafted narrative of renounced romance from the same year as *Now, Voyager*, namely *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz], and *Now, Voyager* is indeed rich in memorable nuggets of dialogue, choice moments of conflict and/or interpersonal congruence, and scenes redolent in emotional resonance (who can forget the battle of wits when Charlotte returns to her harridan mother and seems to be put in her place through a well-placed jab only then to triumph over the moment and establish her own will?).

This is Classical Hollywood filmmaking at its most consummate, and the seeming perfections of the form work well to override any lingering suspicion that the narrative is more than just a bit improbable (for example, Charlotte is dispatched to the same sanatorium that her lover Jerry’s troubled daughter has been sent to). Charlotte’s victory over her initial awkwardness in life is also the film’s triumph over illogic and the incoherence of its plot.

But, even so, the aura of well-craftedness comes at an ideological cost. *Now, Voyager* may appear to tell its tale with refinement but the cultural implications of its narrative remain curious. Its formal perfection can only be achieved by leaving something imperfect in the life of its protagonist who ends the film with an act of renunciation. So many of the cult classics of Hollywood are ultimately not about the achievement of romance—after all, Rick and Ilsa have to part at the end of *Casablanca*—but about its being sacrificed in the cause of devotion to a higher mission. *Now, Voyager* takes the sacrificial structure of the 1930s women’s melodramas like *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937)—a woman must give up personal happiness for a greater good—and updates it to the new context of the 1940s. While there is no explicit reference to the World War II in the film, the very extent to which romance has to be put on hold and to which Charlotte must renounce amorous pleasure for something deeper, is of a piece with the sacrificial demands placed on women in the period of war necessity. Charlotte’s choices—spinster aunt, vibrant figure of romance, self-abnegating guardian of a young girl—are presented as incompatible and unreachable, and they split the woman’s identity into pieces relegated to inviolate realms. But in this respect, the film also anticipates the double bind that American women would face in the postwar period. They would be asked to assume responsibility and agency but this meant surrender to value-laden norms about women’s needs, values, functions and basic worth. Not for nothing has *Now, Voyager* been the ongoing subject of several scholarly analyses, including pointedly feminist ones; in the complexity and complication of the positions it holds out for the woman, it presciently resonates with concerns that are still at play in culture today.

from *Bette Davis The Performances That Made Her Great*, Peter McNally. McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2008

Now Voyager

A woman of Independence

“Untold want, by life and land ne’er granted, now, voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find.” Walt Whitman

“I’m just a fool,” Charlotte cries, “just an old fool. These are an old maid’s tears of gratitude for the crumbs (of love) offered. No one has ever called me darling before.” She, Charlotte Vale (Davis) has exposed her complete vulnerability, her human need for affection, to Jerry Durrance (Paul Henreid), the man with whom she has fallen in love, while on a cruise ship to Rio de Janeiro.

Davis shows her complete ability to expose herself as a woman and actor in this completely truthful and touching scene in the 1942 movie *Now Voyager*, probably Davis’ most popular film. The major wartime audiences were composed mostly of women and they loved this film which, in those far-gone days, was called a woman’s picture, even a tear-jerker. Today, we’d say it was a film about a woman, or a romance.

What audiences and critics overlooked at the time (and some still do!) is that the major thrust of this drama is to show the growth of a woman, how she attains purpose and independence, against prevailing cultural and familial dictates. The heroine is the daughter of Boston aristocracy who eventually rejects her clan’s rule to marry a suitable aristocrat. She is willing to give up her mother’s wealth to be true to herself; she undergoes psychotherapy to better understand herself and her importance, an ability to be useful. She sacrifices a love affair to be helpful, instead, to a disturbed child’s growth.

Emotions are paramount in this film, based on Olive Higgins Prouty’s popular novel. Davis had to fight, once again, to get this role, a role in which she is anything but a bitch. Hal Wallis, in his autobiography, *Starmaker*, asserts, “Bette Davis wanted to play the part, and we finally went with her. She was our last choice, and a lucky one.” Irene Dunne, Norma Shearer and Ginger Rogers had been approached. One can readily see why Davis was so attracted to the role, a woman of Boston, an unattractive woman who turns into a beauty, a woman who finally has to act independently, all things pertinent to Davis’ life. It is probable that Davis wished her life had been such as Charlotte’s in some respects. She had a love-hate relationship with her own mother. Although married at the time to Arthur Farnsworth, he would die mysteriously a few months later. She was still the breadwinner of her extended family, her mother and her sister. ...Stair entrances play a significant part with Davis in this film (and many others). Her careful descent tells so much about Charlotte when one first sees her feet. Later, one sees the transformed Charlotte as she comes down the gangplank of a cruise ship, viewing just her fashionably well-clad feet. The approach is used again when her uncle and brothers and their wives see

Charlotte walk down the family staircase for a formal dinner to which they’ve been invited to see her, for the first time, transformed into a beautiful and confident woman.

Davis handles each descent in a physically different way. She was a great believer in the use of the entire body for acting. She claimed she learned body movement from Martha Graham, the famed dancer, who taught at the John Murray Anderson School Davis attended in New York....

The plot and relationships seem very sentimental, soap-operaish. It is the consummate acting of Davis, Rains, and the supporting cast that move this movie to a believable level. Bernard Dick, in his biography of Hal Wallis notes.

Although Davis was not on Wallis’ short list, it is to his credit that he offered her a role, that, perhaps, for the first time in her career, revealed her myriad talents as she changed from a dowdy maiden aunt, bullied by her mother and mocked by her niece, to a glamorous sophisticate who is alternately flirtatious, witty, headstrong, sensual and, in the final scenes with her lover’s daughter, poignantly maternal.... It was a matter of shading. *Now, Voyager* required a more diverse palette; in Davis’ case, that palette existed, although its colors were not always evident....

The main interest is to follow Davis’ characterization of Charlotte, allowing her to change from an insecure dominated woman into a caring, useful, responsible adult, something rarely seen in movies at the time when a woman was always subservient to a man and his needs. Love and marriage to a man solved all women’s problems.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2008 SERIES:

- Feb 5 Billy Wilder ACE IN THE HOLE (1951)
- Feb 12 Billy Wilder WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1957)
- Feb 19 François Truffaut 400 BLOWS (1959)
- Feb 26 Masaki Kobayashi HARA KIRI (1962)
- Mar 4 Robert Altman MCCABE & MRS. MILLER (1971)*
- Mar 18 Hal Ashby BEING THERE (1982)*
- Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)
- Apr 1 Krzysztof Kieslowski THE DOUBLE LIFE OF VERONIQUE (1991)
- Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)
- Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)
- Apr 22 Ingmar Bergman THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

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