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On its 75th anniversary, the movie reminds us that only a director, not an *auteur*, could have created it.

One of the greatest movie directors of all time held that you should never notice the director. “He should be invisible,” said Billy Wilder, noting that he’d been taught this lesson by his mentor, Ernst Lubitsch, who directed *Ninotchka* from a script co-written by Wilder. “You should notice the characters,” Wilder insisted. What about the extravagantly showy mode that became known as German Expressionism? Even Lubitsch had made films along these lines back in Europe. Wilder scoffed. “Yeah, sure. They did all those angles and that lighting because they couldn’t afford sets. When they got money, in Hollywood, they dropped all that stuff.”

Today, with directors having picked up the dropped stuff and sometimes dropping other stuff like storytelling in the effort, film nerds tend to rank directors on sheer visibility. The films of, say, Paul Thomas Anderson (dubbed the best filmmaker today by *The Guardian* five years ago) may not quite add up. But there’s no denying he directs the crap out of them.

Few conversations about Film down at the local university watering hole are going to mention Michael Curtiz, the Warner Bros. craftsman nonpareil of the 1930s and ’40s. And yet Curtiz merely directed, among many others, *Captain Blood* (1935), the best pirate movie until the first *Pirates of the Caribbean*; *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), which remains the best Robin Hood film ever made; *Mildred Pierce* (1945), a defining noir; the great comedy *Life with Father* (1947); and the superb musicals *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) and *White Christmas* (1954). **Advertisement**Oh, and *Casablanca* (1942), which among romantic dramas remains rivaled only by *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Titanic* (1997).

*Casablanca*, which is observing its 75th anniversary this season with an airing on TCM December 16 and is also available on the TCM app, is more than a romance — it’s suspenseful, exotic, funny, patriotic, and sophisticated, with a plot full of sharp turns. Despite the constraints of studio work at the time — the entire picture, except one scene shot at the airport in Van Nuys, was filmed on the Warner Bros. lot — Curtiz created a rich sense of an unfamiliar but attractive land where violent scheming wore a dinner jacket. The script was a mess as filming got under way — “Every day they were handing out the dialogue and we were trying to make sense of it,” Ingrid Bergman, who starred as Ilsa, recalled later. But Curtiz, who had so shrewdly handled both the love elements and the action scenes in *Robin Hood* and *Captain Blood*, was a master at uniting disparate talents to make something more satisfying than any member of his team could have devised by himself.

*Casablanca* is a rebuke to auteurism, the theory that a film has a single author identifiable by his style that grew into a generalized critical worship for auteurs. Curtiz stitched together complementary talents to create a seamless whole. The leftist writer Howard Koch gave the picture its stirring anti-Fascist undercurrent — he created for Rick a backstory of having fought against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War and, before that, for Ethiopia. And the uncredited romance specialist Casey Robinson crafted the eight-minute flashback to Paris that establishes Rick’s love for Ilsa and his despair when he learned in a rainy train station that she had left him.

What makes those elements so effective, and renders the film timeless instead of cloying and propagandistic, is how they’re set off by the tartness of the writing of Julius and Philip Epstein, who gave the film its zingy, arch dialogue, the ironic quips of self-aware characters in touch with their own failings: Rick’s rejoinder when his exploits for Spain and Ethiopia are mentioned is, “And got well paid for it on both occasions.” That Rick is both an unflappable cynic and a secret humanitarian makes him irresistible, built from the same parts as Rhett Butler and Han Solo. On top of everything else the film has going for it, Curtiz turns it into a kind of treasure hunt for Rick’s soul, which isn’t fully revealed until the sublime closing moments.

Without the Epsteins’ banter, the film would be too sweet; without Robinson and Koch, it wouldn’t have enough heart or inspiration. References to the enormous stakes keep getting balanced by sly understatement: When Rick says, “Nine chances out of ten, we’d both wind up in a concentration camp,” the corrupt Vichy police officer Captain Renault (Claude Rains) interjects, in a reference to the German who pulls his strings, “I’m afraid Major Strasser would insist.” When Renault is praised for picking up a tab at Rick’s Café, he clarifies that corruption, not generosity, is behind it: “It is a little game we play — they put it on the bill, I tear up the bill. It is very convenient.” Rick downplays a world-historical calamity, the German occupation of Paris, by juxtaposing it with a fashion choice: “I remember every detail. The Germans wore gray. You wore blue.”

The film does have a few flaws. The handsome but milky Henreid doesn’t have the screen presence to make his character, Laszlo, even interesting, much less come across as a legendary freedom fighter or a rival for Bogart’s magnetism. And it beggars belief that, given Laszlo’s status as a most-wanted escapee from the Third Reich, Major Strasser wouldn’t simply order the opportunist, toadying Renault to arrest him, especially considering the lack of respect for judicial niceties in town. As Renault says of the unfortunate Ugate (Peter Lorre), “I’m making out the report now. We haven’t quite decided whether he committed suicide or died trying to escape.”

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We forgive the film’s flaws because Curtiz stages the dramatic highlights so movingly. The finale is an excellent illustration of why a film should conclude rather than, as P. T. Anderson prefers, trickle out unresolved. But there are equally gripping moments scattered throughout, such as the sequence in which Rick, alone in the darkness with Sam (Dooley Wilson), gets drunk and bitter on his memories of Ilsa. And the Curtiz touch is unmistakable in the singing scene: As the German troops at the café let loose with “Die Wacht am Rhein,” the French and anti-Fascists drown them out with an even more robust “La Marseillaise.” Curtiz, himself a Hungarian Jewish refugee from Nazism, filled out the background of the scene with actual refugees. In 1942, America was only a year into what for us would be a four-year war. Few filmmakers would ever deliver wartime inspiration of such simple potency as the most arduous days awaited us.