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Casablanca: The Crux Between Shakespeare and Spielberg

(Audience: New York Times)

When exploring the pinnacles of film from the opinions from many in the industry including critics, actors and directors, *Casablanca* is often listed near the top along with *The Godfather* and *Citizen Kane*. While *Citizen Kane* is famous for its foundational ideas and techniques to film, and *The Godfather* was a masterful adaptation of a timeless story written by Mario Puzo, it was always a mystery to me why *Casablanca* deserves to be on the top shelf with them. A mixture of both is what sets *Casablanca* so high in film rankings, a fusion of both excellent storytelling and such groundbreaking cinematographic techniques that changed the way films were made.

The film was an adaptation of an unfinished film by Murray Burnett and Joan Allison called *Everybody Comes to Rick’s*, the adaptation was written by twins Julius and Philip Epstein along with Howard Koch. It is set in 1941 just before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in a coastal North African town called Casablanca. The story revolves both around the philosophical idea of whether to act upon moral conflictions and the love between Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund, played by the excellent Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergmann, respectively. Rick begins the movie as a shopkeeper of a local nightclub in Casablanca and is known around town to be entirely neutral to all conflicts in his bar. He repeatedly does not interfere with any controversial topics presented to him, not even interfering with Nazi officials that frequent his club and repeats the line “I’ll stick my neck out for nobody”. That all changes when his former lover, Ilsa, whom he fell in love with in Paris just as the Germans were invading the city, enters the bar with her husband Victor who is a famed resistance member on the run from the Nazis. In the efford to avoid spoilers to the twists and turns of the rest of the story, the rest of it will be left to the reader to discover. There are many themes that directly tie to the state of the United States during the war throughout the movie, and the ending ties those themes perfectly together leaving the viewer with a clear message.

While *Casablanca* is known for its exceptional writing, the actors who carried out the roles written were just as exceptional. The most notable of which would be the leading man, Humphrey Bogart. His performance in this movie was masterful, as it was subtle, precise, and meticulously thought out. Everything about his performance felt sharp, it felt like it had been refined so that it exactly fit the setting and story. For example, his performance in the early scenes with Rick in the nightclub talking with Ugarte and Captain Renault fit the noir theme of the movie perfectly, adding to the overall atmosphere.

The atmosphere also includes a slight Shakespearean overtone, meaning that all the themes are slightly exaggerated to make it feel more like a performance and less of an attempt at realism. The dialogue, sets and costumes were all meant to be a bit over the top so that the audience can suspend their disbelief and not think about what would really happen in that moment in time or what characters would really say to each other. The love story between Rick and Ilsa was so dramatic that it slightly resembles Romeo and Juliet, and its twisting ending helps to make it so iconic in the same way. It was meant to be entertaining, to entertain and give its viewers a message to leave the theatre with back in pre-Pearl-Harbor isolationist America, and it does so artfully.

So artfully, in fact, that it became an extremely popular movie for its time and later became the influence for many movies that came after it. The name of the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects* is directly from a line in *Casablanca*, and the newer film *La La Land* (2016) are some more recent influences. However, there are many references and influences from *Casablanca* that can be found in Stephen Spielberg movies, namely the *Indiana Jones* franchise. The cutscenes with the red line on the map showing the viewer where Indy is going is directly from *Casablanca*’s introductory cutscene, and the over-the-top themes in movies like *Temple of Doom* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* are things that Spielberg found in *Casablanca.* In a documentary called *Casablanca: An Unlikely Classic*, Spielberg noted that “Casablanca is one of the best told narratives that I have ever witnessed as an audience – as a fan”, and “the sets look like sets… and there wasn’t a need to create a sort of naturalism… but that artificiality made it a great theatrical, slightly over-the-top production”.

All told, *Casablanca* is worthy of its pedestal at the top of the cinematic mountain along with *The Godfather* and *Citizen Kane*, commanding a viewing as one of the most influential and entertaining pieces of cinema created to date.