

## Mark James Miller: Why We'll Always Have 'Casablanca,' a Timeless Classic for Holidays

By Mark James Miller | Published on 12.19.2014 1:30 p.m.



*Casablanca* is not a holiday film in the sense of *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) or *The Bishop's Wife* (1947) or the many incarnations of *A Christmas Carol* — movies that are all related directly to the Christmas season. *Casablanca* resembles *Harvey* (1950) and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), and numerous other older movies that always seem to pop up on television at this time of year: Solid and wholesome entertainment with messages — and not always happy ones — laid between the lines.

But *Casablanca* goes a step further and embodies the spirit of the holidays with its themes of sacrifice, being concerned for your fellow human beings, and of people working together for a common and worthy goal. It appeals to the better angels of our natures and reminds its audiences that they can always choose the right path in life — and therein lies the secret of its long endurance as a classic film.

*Casablanca* premiered on Nov. 26, 1942, at the **Hollywood Theatre** in New York City. In the 72 years since, it has garnered a reputation as one of the greatest movies ever made. In 1999, the **American Film Institute** voted it the second-greatest film ever (behind *Citizen Kane*), and in 2002 the same body found it to be the No. 1 love story of all time.

The film's performances have become legendary: **Humphrey Bogart** as the unhappy, cynical Rick Blaine, a divided soul with his good and evil sides battling it out, symbolized in his usual attire of a white jacket and black pants; **Paul Henreid** as the heroic freedom fighter Victor Laszlo, his purity reflected in his off-white suits and his courage in the prominent scar on his forehead, a reminder that he spent a year in a Nazi concentration camp; and **Claude Rains** as Captain Renault, the collaborator who is finally pushed even further than he is willing to go by the Germans and, moved by the sacrifice Rick makes when he gives up Ilsa (**Ingrid Bergman**), chooses, like Rick, to do the right thing at the end.

Periodically I show *Casablanca* to my classes at **Allan Hancock College**, and I did so recently with my critical thinking class. I never do this without a bit of trepidation: Is it too “old” for younger audiences? Will they be able to relate with the nuances, the symbolism, not to mention the message of doing your part in a war that ended almost 70 years ago? Will the historical references to Vichy France, the **Spanish Civil War**, and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia fly over their heads?

Will they get it when Rick cautions Sasha “To come right back,” when he is instructed to take Yvonne home? Will they laugh when Captain Renault says, “I’m shocked, shocked, to find that gambling is going on in here!” and is then handed his take from the roulette wheel?

As always, I was happily surprised: They loved it. They always do.

“Timeless themes that are forever applicable despite the time that has passed,” one student wrote. “I went right home and told my husband, ‘You’ve got to see this movie,’” said another. “The next day we rented it and I watched it again.” “The movie is about doing what’s right, and that anyone can change for the better,” wrote another.

“I never realized all these expressions I’ve heard before came from this movie,” a different student wrote, a comment often made by students. They’ve heard “Round up the usual suspects,” and “Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine,” and the inevitable “We’ll always have Paris,” but didn’t realize where they originated.

*Casablanca* opened just as the tide of war was turning in favor of the Allies. In June 1942 the Japanese were defeated at **Midway**. The same month *Casablanca* opened, the British won the crucial battle of **El Alamein** in Egypt and the Americans were carrying out Operation Torch in Morocco and Algeria, spelling the end of Axis ambitions in North Africa. In Russia, the Germans were deadlocked around Stalingrad, “the mass grave of the Wehrmacht,” and defeat there in January 1943 would mark the beginning of the end for **Hitler** on the Eastern Front.

*Casablanca* came out before the true horrors of the Nazi regime were known, and the Axis was still standing near its pinnacle: In Europe, the Germans ruled from France to the Volga River in Russia, and the Japanese had conquered the Philippines, Indonesia and Indo-China. The world did not yet know about **The Final Solution**, which was by then in full swing. Nor had it learned of the

existence of the extermination camps in Poland — Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Chelmo, Sobibor and Belzec — factories of death that were operating around the clock as 1942 drew to an end.

But even though these horrors were not yet public knowledge, the Western world was united in its belief that Hitler and Nazism had to be destroyed. *Casablanca* was conceived of as a propaganda film designed to convey exactly that message to American audiences. Do your part! Sacrifice, the way the characters in the film do, for a cause bigger than any one person. Above all, do not be like Rick Blaine, who as the story begins, “sticks his neck out for nobody,” and says, “I’m the only cause I believe in.”

*Casablanca* opened to mostly good reviews. **The New York Times** called it “A picture that makes the spine tingle and the heart take a leap.” **Time magazine**, however, was less impressed: “Nothing short of an invasion could add much to *Casablanca*.”

*Casablanca* has endured as a classic for 72 years, and it is likely to endure 72 more. It transcends its historical setting and its original propagandistic message and appeals to deeply embedded human feelings.

“The film teaches us that we all have our good and bad sides,” wrote one student in her response, “and that we can choose our good side.” We will always have that tug of war between our good and evil selves, and so we will always have *Casablanca* as a film that embodies the spirit of the holiday season.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at **Allan Hancock College** in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the **Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College, California Federation of Teachers Local 6185**, and is an executive board member of the **Tri-Counties Central Labor Council**. [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*

Share on facebookShare on twitterShare on google\_plusone\_shareShare on linkedinShare on emailShare on printMore Sharing Services