

# Wokesters Take On Classic Movies



by Bruce Bawer

**During his last few years,** Gilbert Gottfried, the great stand-up comic who died in April at the age of 67, hosted a terrific weekly podcast on which he interviewed elderly showbiz veterans, some of them legendary actors, some of them obscure craftspeople. His main objective, he often said, was to help keep alive the memory of, and affection for, the old movies he loved. He'd grown up in New York City at a time when some of the local TV stations ran several movies a day, and as a kid he'd often wake up at the crack of dawn, or stay up late into the night, to watch them. I grew up in New York during the same era and did the exact same thing. Gilbert spoke

frequently on his podcast about how New York TV – in those days before VHS tapes and Blockbuster, and very long before DVDs and Netflix – had been comparable to the very best film schools or revival houses. I agree. I'll always be grateful, as he was, to have been afforded – and for free – such a wonderful, years-long immersion course in cinema.

Looking back, I don't know how I got anything else done. There were days in my childhood when I watched three or four films, exhibiting no discrimination whatsoever in regard to period or genre or critical reputation (about which, in any case, I knew nothing). My old diaries record that on September 19, 1961, my double feature consisted of the 1961 science-fiction film *Atlantis, The Lost Continent*, and Stanley Kubrick's 1955 *Lolita*. (Although I was just 13, it never occurred to my parents to monitor my viewing habits.) On my 14th birthday, October 31, 1970, I reeled from the 1949 adventure movie *Mighty Joe Young* to the 1960 Doris Day thriller *Midnight Lace* to the 1957 Ingmar Bergman drama *The Seventh Seal*. And so on: the highlights of that November included *Lifeboat*, *Great Expectations*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Music Man*, *High Society*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

These and hundreds of other movies from Hollywood's Golden Age have been a part of my life for so long that it's strange to think that many people my age have never seen any of them, and that to almost everybody who's more than a decade or two younger than I these films might as well be relics from ancient Egypt. Yes, they may adore movies, but older fare leaves them cold. Some of them are put off by black and white. For many, the old movies move too slowly, are much too talky, and understandably (having almost invariably been filmed on backlots) look fake. In fact, for many young people these days, "old movie" means something from, at the very oldest, the 1970s or 80s – *Jaws* or *The Godfather* or *Star Wars*. Which, for me, is a shame, because the old pictures from the 1930s

through the 1960s imprinted on me a respect for such values as love, friendship, respect, responsibility, citizenship, and heroism. Along with the American popular songs of the same era, they made me a romantic.

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So I was interested recently to discover that there's an entire subgenre of YouTube videos on which younger people, almost all of them millennials or Gen Z-ers, record their reactions to old movies that they've never seen before. For whatever reason, the one movie that many of them choose to comment upon is *Casablanca*. In case you've never seen it – well, stop reading this nonsense and go watch it at once. But if you insist on sticking with me, here's a quick précis. Directed by Michael Curtiz (*Mildred Pierce*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *White Christmas*) and released in 1942, it takes place shortly before Pearl Harbor, and – excepting a flashback set in Paris just before the Nazis marched in – is set exclusively in Casablanca, mostly in Rick's Café Américain, owned by the cynical American Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) and frequented by European refugees desperate to get to America. Early on, Rick comes into possession of two "transit papers" (a plot device with no basis in reality) permitting the bearers to leave French Morocco. When a hero of the anti-Nazi underground, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), turns up, hoping to book passage to the U.S. before he falls into Nazi hands, he's accompanied by the Norwegian beauty Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), who, for reasons unknown, ditched Rick in Paris after a torrid affair. Why did she do that? And what will happen now to the three principals – and to those transit papers? To avoid spoilers, let's just say that *Casablanca* ends up affirming all those values mentioned above.

Which was part of the reason I was so curious about how these first-time viewers – who, like the patrons of Rick’s Café, had a wide range of national backgrounds – would react to this 80-year-old movie. These days, after all, you read and hear so many alarming things about the screwed-up values of today’s younger generations, whose teachers and professors have, to a remarkable extent, encouraged them to hate America, to despise traditional sex roles, to regard freedom as either a lie or an illusion, and to embrace a moral system that labels individuals as virtuous or villainous depending on the identity groups to which they belong. What would young people brainwashed by such propaganda make of a film like *Casablanca*? How would kids whose professors had likely preached pacifism and moral equivalence (at best) between America and its enemies respond to a movie whose ultimate message is to fight for your country against foreign tyrants? For heaven’s sake, how would kids who listen to Nicki Minaj and Cardi B react to “As Time Goes By”?

Well, there were challenges. Many of these young cinephiles cheerfully admitted that *Casablanca* was the first black-and-white movie they’ve ever seen – and by far the oldest. Going in, some didn’t know where the city of Casablanca is, while others weren’t even aware that it’s a place. At least one of them, perusing the list of legendary film stars who appear in the picture, confessed to not recognizing a single name. At the YouTube channel “[Popcorn in Bed](#),” a giggly blonde girl asked her equally giggly blonde sister: “Doesn’t a famous song come from this, like ‘Chitty Chitty Bang Bang’?” The doe-eyed Canadian college boy who talks like a film student and watches movies at “[RolyPolyOllie](#)” said, “I’ve never heard of Michael Curtiz before, but let’s see what he can do.” I heard the “g” in Ingrid Bergman’s last name sounded out as “zh” and Peter Lorre’s surname made to sound like the word “lore.” One of these kids even managed to mangle the sacred name of Bogart, pronouncing the syllable “bog” to rhyme with “log.” *Sic transit gloria.*

Then there's the historical background. In 1942, American moviegoers knew the difference between northern France (including Paris), which had been swallowed into the Third Reich, and southern France and French north Africa, which became Vichy France, not Nazi-occupied but having a relationship with Germany not unlike Belarus's current relationship with Russia. Most of the YouTubers weren't aware of this distinction, and hence couldn't understand, for example, why Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt), a visiting Nazi, didn't arrest Laszlo the minute he saw him.

I feared, then, that these young viewers would be put off from the git-go by the strangeness of this cinematic antique. And yes, there were a couple of tiny glitches. For example, when we're given a close-up of the "Dear John" note Ilsa left for Rick in Paris, one girl couldn't read it because it was in script. And some reactions were amusingly off: at least two of the viewers wondered if there was some significance to the fact that two of the characters, Captain Renault (Claude Rains) and Ferrari (Sidney Greenstreet), have the same name as car companies. But overwhelmingly, the response was gratifying – and then some. Every last one of these young people was drawn into the movie pretty quickly, although different viewers raved over different aspects. The blond sisters were taken up with the tension between Rick and Laszlo: "I'm Team Rick!" The Canadian boy adored the lighting: "Look at the lighting on her face! ... That closeup was so enchanting! ... I love the lighting in old movies so much!" Shaun, one of the two small-town English guys at "[Cinema Rules](#)," also responded to the lighting, while Tom, the Siskel to his Ebert, was bowled over by the "memorable, powerful, emphatic" dialogue. "A whole other level when it comes to writing and editing," said George, a young Georgian (as in Tbilisi, not Atlanta), at "[Close Up](#)." Apropos of the dialogue, by the way, several of these young people got pop-eyed recognizing one famous line after another. And while they may have been foggy on some aspects of the World War II history, they all grasped the

significance of the scene when, in response to Nazis singing “Wacht am Rhein,” the entire café erupts in “La Marseillaise” – a moment that, by their own testimony, gave one of the blondes “goosebumps” and gave the Canadian boy “chills.”

Far from being turned off, moreover, by the social mores of the 1940s – I’d particularly worried that they’d find the romance corny, or even, for some 2020s-type reason having to do with the patriarchy and/or heteronormativity, offensive – they were charmed, with several of the girls lamenting the lack of such explicit tenderness and passion in today’s culture. When Renault, the police chief of Casablanca, tells Ilsa that it’s an understatement to call her the most beautiful woman ever to hit town, one of the blonde sisters swooned, “They knew how to give compliments back then!” Several of the women, moreover, reacted to the very brief shot of Rick and Ilsa dancing at a nightclub in Paris: “Dinner and dancing! Oohhh!” “That was *real* dancing!” The bespectacled young Belgian woman of [“Movies with Mary”](#) envied people in the 1940s who danced in such a “romantic” way, so different from nights out today at places where “everybody’s crammed together and you get beer spilled on you.” And they all loved “As Time Goes By.” “Such a beautiful song!” enthused the Canadian boy. “I cannot believe how beautiful it is,” said George. “The power of music,” observed the bearded Portuguese guy at [“MagicViking,”](#) “is unbelievable.” One footnote: though I’d been sure that somebody would react – reasonably enough – to the fact that Sam (Dooley Wilson), the black piano player, addresses the white protagonists as “Mr. Rick” and “Miss Ilsa,” nobody commented on it.

And in the end? They got it. They loved it. “What a great film!” cheered Mia Tiffany, the smart, charismatic young black woman at [“Movies with Mia.”](#) And they all zeroed in on what mattered: Rick’s moral choice and the message it sends. “He loves her enough to let her go,” said one of the blonde sisters with admiration. “He’s a good guy. He’s selfless.”

“Beautiful. What a great man, Rick,” growled the Portuguese guy. “I love this finale. Incredible... What a great, great movie.” “This guy is pure man!” exulted George. “I’m overwhelmed... There is no way this kind of movie will ever be made again... I’ve still got chills.” “What’s not to love here?” asked Shaneel (who’s apparently Indian) of “[Shan Watches Movies](#).” “No jealousy. No pettiness,” pronounced the young Dan Bongino type at “[Flix Talk](#),” who’d never seen a movie from the 1940s. “I loved everything about this film. I fell in love with the passion of it, the message behind it.” “I love the last half hour of this movie,” said the Canadian boy, calling it “a movie with magic in it,” pondering what it must have been like to watch it in 1942, when the war’s outcome was uncertain, and, reacting to Rick’s statement that “the lives of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world,” commented intelligently that the whole point of the movie is that three people can make a very big difference indeed.

Of course, this isn’t a scientific sample. Far from it. These are young people who love film and who founded their YouTube channels precisely because they’re open to checking out a wide variety of movies. If anybody of their generation is going to give something like *Casablanca* a chance, it’s going to be them. Nonetheless, these YouTubers are children of their time. Like everyone else their age, they’ve been brought up in a society and a culture with values far removed in a number of ways from the values that inform a movie like *Casablanca*. And yet, watching it, they’re wrapped up in the intrigue, amused by the humor, affected by the music, touched by the love story, and, above all, stirred and deeply impressed by the selfless and noble courage of Victor Laszlo and, in that final scene at the airport, of Rick and Ilsa. It seems to me that it surely must say something about people in their 20s and 30s today – not just in America but in the many Western countries represented by this cohort of film fans – that *Casablanca*, eight decades later, can still move them all

so very powerfully. Am I wrong? Maybe. But I'll take my hope where I can find it.

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