

What Happens Next – Sunday June 13, 2021
War on Cops, Risk in Finance, Be Happy, Casablanca
Aljean Harmetz QA

Larry Bernstein

What surprised me was that in literature, we don't have multiple authors for one piece of fiction. But here we had, I think, at one point there were nine different people involved in the script and you highlighted the Epsteins and Howard Koch, but there were others working on the script. Why were they so successful in piecing together a script that frankly makes the movie?

Aljean Harmetz

Yes. The script does make the movie and there were seven writers, but the first four that tried were discarded. Some of them only wrote a scene or two. Only one of them actually had any effect on the movie. It was the last and the only effect was in one scene. The last three were the writers of the movie, Philip and Julius Epstein and Howard Koch. They were the three that wrote the movie.

Larry Bernstein:

And the Epsteins are really funny. I mean, it seems that every one of those funny lines that Bogart gives, those all deserve to be given to the Epsteins. Is that a fair assessment?

Aljean Harmetz:

They were written by the Epsteins, yes, definitely.

Larry Bernstein:

You also highlighted how times change when we look at films. You gave the example of *Gone with the Wind* and how recently it is not as appreciated because of their treatment for black characters. As I watched *Casablanca*, I kept asking myself the question, could a film like this be made now?

In particular, I was thinking more of the natives to *Casablanca*. Really the only scene where there are natives is a scene where the Ingrid Bergman character, Ilsa Lund, is looking at buying some fabrics. The native says, "It's £700," and then when Rick comes by says, "Oh, you're a friend of Rick's. I'll make it 200." She says, "No, thank you. How about a hundred?"

So, they make the natives out to be shysters and that's it. Here we are in a foreign country set in a foreign place, and there's almost no indication that there are foreigners even living there. Do you think that would be acceptable in today's environment?

Aljean Harmetz:

Well, I think there are other reasons that *Casablanca* couldn't be made today. There's too much talk and not enough action. There are too many characters and the plot thins in a hard-to-catch-your-balance way instead of walking a straight line.

I think there's no Humphrey Bogart to allow the audience a permissible romance without feeling somewhat sappy. In my last line in the book I say, "And the studio would insist that all the ambiguity be written out in the second draft." There were about eight drafts of Casablanca, by the way.

I don't know, in terms of the native characters. Certainly, some people I think would scream about it, but would real audiences? I haven't heard about anything on social media and Casablanca is widely available on streaming.

Larry Bernstein:

Fair enough. One of the ambiguities in the film that was never answered was, what was Humphrey Bogart even doing in Casablanca? Claude Rains' character, Captain Renault, suggests that, "Did you steal the church's funds? Did you run away with a senator's wife? Did you kill a man?" Bogart responds, "A combination of all three." They never answered the question. I guess why can't we have ambiguity? Why do we have to have all our questions answered? Doesn't a better film allow for ambiguity?

Aljean Harmetz:

I think so, but if you see what's successful today, which is mostly comic books blown up into film, there are heroes and there are villains. There always have been, but in this movie, Casablanca, there are heroes who are flawed, and there are villains who have the possibility for redemption.

Larry Bernstein:

I have a half a dozen interns who work on the show. And I asked them what they thought of the movie, Casablanca. And none of them had seen it. And I think there's a distaste for older films, particularly black and white ones.

I mentioned earlier that, as a child, I got to watch Turner Classics. I was exposed to these old films. And it was because there was very limited stuff on TV. Now with it seems like with an infinite amount of material, the older films have been discarded.

Aljean Harmetz:

I think you're absolutely right; I had the same experience the other day when somebody of 20, 22 had never heard of Casablanca. So, I think it's now going to be kept alive in film classes.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned the current blockbusters are a bunch of cartoon characters. And it's been true for a long time now. I looked at a list of the top 10 movies over the past decade and they were virtually all of that genre and I hadn't seen any of them, but when I looked at the best pictures or that have been nominated for best picture, I had seen those films.

Does this reflect a split in the type of viewing experience that people want? There are still the sophisticated, sharp, interesting, comedic films that fit the needs of critics like you. But also, giving the 17-year-old boy what he wants as well. Can't they both be made?

Aljean Harmetz:

Sure they can both be made, but they may both have to be distributed differently. In other words, I think you will be able to pack theaters with the Marvel Universe. And I think you can pack streaming, not only with those films, but with the more serious, or the more subtle, or the more interesting, ambivalent films.

Larry Bernstein:

You highlighted the singing of the song Marseillaise as a high moment in the film. And what I thought was interesting was they turned to Humphrey Bogart's, Rick Blaine's characters, old girlfriend, Yvonne, who is at the bar, and she is belting it out. And there's tears running down the side of her cheeks. At the same time, she is the one who has brought a German officer to be her date, which also caused a bit of a kerfuffle with a French officer who calls her a boche, someone who is sleeping with the enemy. Why do you think they combined the girl who's sleeping with the enemy to be the one belting out the song and is so emotionally charged?

Aljean Harmetz:

I think, by the way, she's sleeping with the enemy because it's the best way she can get back at Bogart for spurning her. And I think that choosing her to have the tears shows even more the depth of the song on all of the people there.

Larry Bernstein:

The film also, it's an archetype in many dimensions. I agree that it's a very romantic movie, but in some way, I think of it as a buddy movie. Just like one of those Eddie Murphy, Nick Nolte films, here is Claude Rains and Humphrey Bogart, two buddies going at it throughout, and they are constantly intertwined. And at the end, it appears that the buddy relationship has gone to the next level. How do you think about Casablanca as a buddy film?

Aljean Harmetz:

I've never thought of it that way because they're sparring all the way through the movie. You picked part of that conversation. I thought that the part you didn't say, between Claude Rains and Humphrey Bogart, was even funnier. "Why did you choose Casablanca?" "I came for the waters." "What waters? We're in the desert?" "I was misinformed."

Larry Bernstein:

Fantastic.

Aljean Harmetz:

Yeah. I'm laughing when I repeat it.

Larry Bernstein:
It's great dialogue.

Aljean Harmetz:
You know that that last line, "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," was written by Hal Wallis, the movie's producer, several weeks after the movie was finished. He was not satisfied with the end of the movie.

Larry Bernstein:
It's done as a voiceover because the film had already wrapped.

Aljean Harmetz:
Yes. Absolutely. Yes.

Larry Bernstein:
But I think the reason why that line is so successful is it's built on the buddy movie that preceded it was my point.

Aljean Harmetz:
I see. I hadn't seen it as a buddy movie because the buddies are usually more attached. They're not sparring most of the way through.

Larry Bernstein:
All right. Let me try a different question. Casablanca wins the Academy Award for best picture in 1943, and it disappears after a while. And then it reappears after Bogart's death. In the book, you mentioned it started being played at some Harvard theaters, and then it blossoms. Why do you think it became a cult film?

Aljean Harmetz:
I think part of it was because it started with the college students. And probably because of Bogart's death, when a major actor dies, usually all of his films are suddenly available in a way that they maybe had been forgotten before.

Larry Bernstein:
My favorite movie growing up was It's a Wonderful Life. Why that became a cult film, I think it's because Frank Capra, who was the director of that film, it was made by his own film company. After he passed, his heirs forgot to renew the copyright, and It's a Wonderful Life entered the public domain. And it was free to show it. It was on television, almost continuously between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And as a result, it became a cult film in the 1980s.

And Turner acquired Casablanca, and they showed it more than any other film on the Turner Classic Station. Do you think that potentially the sale to Turner and the re-runs on the Turner Classics allowed Casablanca to be such a watched film and loved?

Aljean Harmetz:

It's pretty likely that it had a great effect. But the film's ambiguity is what has kept it from feeling stale today. The one character whom the film critic Pauline Kael referred to as stale is Victor Laszlo. And he's the one character who's perfect. Everybody else in the film has some ambiguity, and there's none in him. And he's the only person in the film who's uninteresting today.

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah. He is a bore.

Larry Bernstein:

What did you think of Ingrid Bergman's character and her performance? Did it make the film?

Aljean Harmetz:

I think that Michelle Morgan would have been no match for Humphrey Bogart and there would have been no chemistry. The amazing thing was that if you said, "I'm going to put Ingrid Bergman in a movie with Humphrey Bogart," if you'd been a studio executive, you would have said, "Oh, but there won't be any chemistry." And wow, you would have been wrong.

But as Lauren Bacall quoted to me what Bogart would say to her, "If Ingrid Bergman looks at a man like that, that man has sex appeal." It's all on the way Bergman reacts, not the way the man reacts.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned why the characters find this film so important, but it's also very important for the audience. And each person brings their own emotional response. At the time of its release, the war had just really begun. And my own family had its own issues. My grandparents were desperate to get out of France during the war and come to the United States. When the war started, my grandfather joined the French Foreign Legion, and my mother and grandmother were stuck in Paris, and like Ilsa Lund and Rick Blaine, they were there when the Germans came into Paris and rushed for the train station where Ilsa doesn't show. But my grandmother describes the train station as absolute pandemonium.

They later found my grandfather and spent the war in Marseille. And ironically, it was the US invasion of Casablanca in November 1942, when the Germans decided to occupy Vichy France, that's when my grandfather decided it was time to make a rush for the border. They had a US visa, but like all the people in the movie, Casablanca, they couldn't get a French exit visa. No Jew got one in 1942.

So, my grandfather sent my grandmother to the old port in Marseille to get a forged exit visa, which my grandfather said cost very little money. And then they rushed for the border, fled over the Pyrenees. And like Victor Laszlo, ended up in Lisbon catching a boat to the United States.

I find, as a personal story, that my family lived a similar experience and therefore, I have a very emotional attachment to the film. But it's different for each individual who watches the program.

Aljean Harmetz:

Yes, I think it is, but in a simpler time, I think we all thought that if we were put in the situation of giving up something we wanted badly for the good of all, that we would have done it. Today, I doubt that very much.

Larry Bernstein:

That's fantastic. Aljean, thank you very much. Tal Ben-Shahar what can you add to our conversation with Aljean about Casablanca.

Tal Ben-Shahar:

Well, first of all, I can't tell you how moved I was or am, because I think there was a lot at stake here in terms of whether or not we get this generation, the future generation to watch these movies, to watch classics, to read the classics. It has to do very much with what you, which is the ability to communicate and the ability to think. If all we watch are fireworks and fast-moving entities onscreen, because that is what our brain is used to watching, then we have little hope. If we sit down and are challenged and there are ambiguities, then we learn how to think. Then we learn about the human condition.

Larry Bernstein:

Tal, why do you think Casablanca became this cult movie and of all the films made that year or even during the war is the one that's most seen, most known, most thought about, had the greatest impact?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

In many ways, it had it all. When I talk about the field of happiness studies, I talk about micro happiness and macro happiness, so individual happiness and environmental happiness, just like there is micro and macroeconomics. This movie had both. It talks about the condition of the human being on the micro level. So there's a love affair, and this is something, those interpersonal emotions that we can all connect to, relationships. But then it also talks about the environment, about the macro, about good versus evil. These are also very important conversations to have. These are all very important sentiments to experience. Again, on the individual and the macro level, it has them both and also the complexity of the characters, where it's not just good or bad. It's evolving characters, complex characters, real human beings, in other words, that we can connect to.

Larry Bernstein:

Tal, you spoke about the role of trauma and personal growth in your conversation earlier. What's unusual is that most of the characters in this film are under almost constant trauma,

fear of death, fear of capture and dying in Casablanca, as one character says in it. "I'm going to die here in Casablanca." Some of them grow, and some of them don't. There's a belief that Rick Blaine grows because he decides to join the fight. Even Captain Renault decides that he's going to stop taking advantage of young women in trouble and join the free French in Brazzaville along with Rick. How do you think about trauma and personal growth as one of the features of the film?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

I think you can sense it throughout. Again, this movie was made, released before the end of World War II and before the publication of the seminal book by Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. One of the ways to bring about post-traumatic growth, one of the ways to grow through hardship for anti-fragility is by finding meaning. When we talk about happiness, most people today talk about pleasure. "I went to the beach. I was so happy" or "This ice cream makes me so happy." Yeah, this is part of happiness, but it's a small part of happiness. The bigger chunk of a happy life is a sense of meaning and purpose. This is the transition that the characters went through throughout the book.

So at the end, both Humphrey Bogart and Captain Renault, both of them found a deep sense of meaning and purpose that transcends everything, that helps grow through hardships, that helps post-traumatic growth. It's this sense of meaning that, by the way, not just through hardships and difficulties, but is essential for a good life. There's research actually coming out of Stanford by William Damon saying that the most harmful and dangerous affliction that our young generation experiences today is the lack of meaning and purpose, which is why this movie is so important today.

Larry Bernstein:

Aljean, I want to bring you back into the conversation. In that last scene, Rick Blaine tells Ilsa Lund that she has to get on that plane, that, "You may not regret it now, but you'll regret it later, maybe not tomorrow, maybe the next day or maybe years from now that you didn't get on that plane." What do you think? Do you believe him? Do you think that she regrets it, getting on that plane within five minutes and or regret not spending her life with her with Bogie, or have we already forgotten Ilsa, As soon as she's on the plane, we in our hearts are more focused on the concerns of Rick Blaine and Captain Renault?

Aljean Harmetz:

Oh, no, I'm sure that she already regrets it, but it is her "duty." I want to say something about the end of the movie, which is it could so easily have essentially turned into sentimental slush that would have spoiled the rest of the movie. I want to point out because Tal mentioned Claude Rains's character going off with Rick. The screenwriters Epsteins kept the movie from falling into the trap of sentimentality, I think, because when you see what Captain Renault does before that trip across the desert is instead of saying any highfaluting thing, he starts to pour himself a glass of Vichy water, and he takes a look at it and throws it in the wastepaper basket. It's a wordless scene, but it's really mentally important.

Larry Bernstein:

To show that he switched teams to the Allied side.

Aljean Harmetz:

Yes.

Larry Bernstein:

Tal, as a final question for you, Aljean was just mentioning how easily we go to sentimentality. I think that reflects a greater desire not only in the movies, but also a desire for the public to have a positive sentimental ending and slush as a typical ending. In other words, the movie studios aren't doing this for their own cause. They do it because that is what the public either seemingly wants or does want. What is that sentimentality about, and is it something that's healthy, or is it unhealthy?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

I think the question or, rather, sentimentality is part of the human condition, whether we like it or not. The question is how much do we let it dictate how we live our lives? You look at the decision that Ingrid Bergman had to make. She had to make a distinction between sentimentality and a sense of meaning and purpose. Sometimes they are in conflict, and we all experience these conflicts. It's a conflict between right and right, because yes, of course she and Rick deserve to live happily ever after. At the same time, they also understand that there is something more important than sentimentality. It's also about a larger sense of meaning and purpose. So, this choice between right and right, as Joseph Badaracco from Harvard Business School talks about, is at the center of the ultimate decision that both Bogart and Bergman have to make. This is also part of the reason why this movie has staying power, because we all face right versus right decisions in our lives, at work, in our homes.

Larry Bernstein:

That ends today's session. I want to make a plug for next week's program.

Next Sunday on June 20th, Mark Mahaney who has consistently been recognized as the Number One equity analyst in internet research on Wall Street. We are going to hear from him about Amazon, AirBnB among others.

Another speaker will be Paul Podolsky who will tell us about his challenges of parenting an adopted child who is now a criminal. He will discuss his book entitled Raising a Thief: A Memoir. I imagine the enormous heart ache and difficulty of this predicament.

In my discussion with Aljean Harmetz, I mention my grandfather's escape from the Nazis. If you want to learn more about it, please check out my grandfather's memoir The Maquis Connection available on Kindle and audio book. I do the reading of the audio book.

My Aunt Sharon has made a documentary about my family's escape from Vichy France entitled a Song for You. A link to the Maquis Connection and my Aunt Sharon Karp's film is on our website. Please take a look.