

# Everybody Comes to *Casablanca*

In film scholar Noah Isenberg C'89's engaging investigation of "Hollywood's Most Beloved Movie," the lives of the émigré actors who made up most of the cast share the spotlight with the famous love triangle and wartime call to arms. Their stories also echo forward to our own era's debates over the treatment of refugees and immigration policy. **By John Prendergast**

The film's focus on people caught up in war trying desperately to make their way to a better life is also freshly relevant given our own era's controversies over the treatment of refugees and immigration issues generally. "Nearly all of the some seventy-five actors and actresses cast in *Casablanca* were immigrants," Isenberg writes, noting that the movie's set was known as "International House."

**A** pleasing but somewhat unnerving feature of the talks Noah Isenberg C'89 has been giving to promote his book, *We'll Always Have Casablanca*, is the sensation that the audience's warm regard for the film has rubbed off on him. "They shower the same sort of affection on me," he says, "as if I somehow had a hand in making the movie." This makes him feel a little bit guilty; but also, "I love it."

Subtitled *The Life, Legend, and Afterlife of Hollywood's Most Beloved Movie*, Isenberg's book doesn't lay to rest the question of why this Hollywood product—among the hundreds released by Warner Brothers and its fellow studios during World War II—has meant so much to so many for so long. But it does offer a lively, thorough, and often surprising narrative of how that emotional response has played out both here in the United States and around the world in the 75 years since its debut in November 1942 (just weeks after Allied troops in North Africa liberated the real Casablanca).

The many refugees cast in parts large and small helped give the film its distinctive, authentic atmosphere, undergirding the iconic romance of Humphrey Bogart's Rick Blaine and Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa Lund and the timely wartime message contained in Rick's shift from disillusioned isolationism ("I stick my neck out for nobody") to a renewed commitment to the fight against fascism.

Isenberg opens the book with the story of one minor player—French-born actress Madeleine Lebeau, who died in 2016, the last known survivor among the cast. She played Yvonne, "the young woman who gets snubbed by Humphrey Bogart in the film's first act," returns on the arm of a German soldier, and ends by joining passionately in the singing of "La Marseillaise," tears streaming down her face as she cries, "*Vive la France!*"

Lebeau had fled Paris in 1940 and made her way to Hollywood in a months-long journey that recalled the "tortuous, roundabout refugee trail" described in *Casablanca's* opening voiceover. Isenberg quotes an American-born actor, seeing her and others in the scene also weeping, as suddenly realizing "they were all real refugees."



The number of times Isenberg has seen *Casablanca* is “deep in the triple digits,” he says. “I enjoy it every time.”



The “Marseillaise” scene—one of the film’s most famous and emotionally affecting—has not lost its resonance. Isenberg builds his talks around different clips from the film. On one occasion last May, the event was running long and he was planning to skip that scene—but the audience wouldn’t let him. It was the day after the French presidential election in which Emanuel Macron defeated the National Front’s Marine le Pen, and “they all insisted, you’ve got to play it, you’ve got to play it!” Isenberg recalls.

**T**hough he was born in Los Angeles, Isenberg doesn’t come from a film industry family—his mother taught high school English and his father was a gastroenterologist and professor at UCLA. The family lived in Santa Monica and La Jolla, and he chose Penn for college after accompanying his father East for a lecture at the medical school. “I got a chance to tour the campus and just kind of fell in love with the place,” he says.

A swimmer in high school, he dropped out of Penn’s team as a freshman because the double workouts were “just too grueling.” He claims he wasn’t much more dedicated academically—at least at first. “I enjoyed everything about [Penn], including the social life,” he says with a laugh.

That began to change during his junior year abroad in Munich. “It was a kind of fateful experience for me,” he says. “I came back and was a pretty solid student in my senior year—I guess better late than never—[but] it also really shaped me as a person and dictated to a large degree what I would do after Penn.”

After majoring in European history, he gravitated to German studies for his master’s degree (University of Washington) and PhD (Berkeley), initially focused on literature but “segueing, as time passed by, more squarely into film.” He taught at Wesleyan University from 1995 to 2004, splitting his classes between German and film studies, and then

moved to the New School in New York, where he currently directs the screen studies program and is professor of culture and media.

Isenberg is married to Melanie Rehak C’93, a writer whose books include *Eating for Beginners* [“A Shelf Full of Resolutions,” Jan|Feb 2011]. They met after college when he was writing freelance reviews for *The New Republic* and she was his editor. While Penn didn’t bring them together, they share an attachment to the University and Philadelphia now, he says, traveling from their home in Brooklyn for weekend trips and bringing their two young sons to Homecoming. And Isenberg was a visiting professor in Penn’s cinema studies program last spring, teaching a course on the “screwball comedy” genre.

He’s written about and edited a volume of essays on Weimar cinema, and has published articles on American and German film subjects in *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Paris Review*, *BookForum*, *LA Review of Books*, and elsewhere. His previous book—*Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins*, published by the University of California Press in 2014—was about a figure nearly as obscure as *Casablanca* is familiar.

Ulmer emigrated from Germany in the early 1930s, and was one of several future Hollywood filmmakers who had had a hand in the influential silent film *Menschen am Sonntag/People on Sunday*. His signature work as a director is 1945’s bleak film noir, *Detour* (about which Isenberg wrote a book published in 2008). But his prolific oeuvre includes the Edgar Allan Poe-meets-German Expressionism horror film *The Black Cat* with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, Yiddish-language films, the all-black-cast melodrama *Moon Over Harlem*, a series of public-service films for different ethnic groups about tuberculosis, musicals (*Five Junction*, *Club Havana*, *Carnegie Hall*), costume dramas (*Bluebeard*, *The Wife of Monte Cristo*, *The Strange Woman*), and Cold War era sci-fi

films (*The Man From Planet X*, *Beyond the Time Barrier*, *The Amazing Transparent Man*). And more.

Much of Ulmer’s work was done for PRC and similar “poverty row” studios that churned out B-movies “made for next to nothing and very, very quickly” to fill the bottom half of double features. (The acronym PRC stood for Producers Releasing Corporation but was “sometimes thought to stand for ‘pretty rotten crap,’” says Isenberg.) Ulmer’s extraordinary ability to “make stylish pictures” under these constraints became his “calling card,” but it was also a trap. “He had a lot of work, but he couldn’t break into the [major] studios.”

The director’s more ardent champions have cast him as a “renegade who turned his nose up at Hollywood,” but Isenberg’s research showed otherwise. He points to letters Ulmer wrote to his wife in the early 1940s predicting that he would soon be “the big man on the lot—and obviously that didn’t happen,” says Isenberg. “So, it was a somewhat tragic career trajectory but also a really fascinating life story.”

One challenge in telling that story was Ulmer’s “penchant for mendacity,” Isenberg says. “It was very, very hard to try to corroborate claims that he made, especially late in life.” To ferret out the truest version required “two European research stints, spread out over several years,” and ultimately stretched the process of research and writing over the better part of a decade. “That was a very twisted path and one that took a lot of detours, a lot of false turns,” he says.

It was while working on the Ulmer book, “and especially researching these communities of émigrés from largely German-speaking, but also French-speaking, Italian-speaking, Middle Europe who ended up in Hollywood during the rise of fascism,” that Isenberg decided, “that’s really something that I wanted to focus on.”

At the time he was writing *We’ll Always Have Casablanca*, “I didn’t realize how

powerfully [the refugee theme] would resonate,” he says, but soon after the book came out he drew the connection in an essay published in *The Daily Beast*. “It’s hard to miss the haunting affinities between World War II and the refugee crisis of today,” he wrote. “The number of stateless refugees, especially in the wake of the civil war in Syria and the fallout from Libya, is currently on par with the levels reached during the ‘40s. And the anti-refugee rhetoric of our own president ... matches in many respects that of the highly vocal isolationist and nativist faction in the United States at the time of *Casablanca’s* making.”

**By contrast with his extended labors over the Ulmer biography,** the *Casablanca* book had a “very hard deadline from the get-go,” which was contingent on the anticipated flurry of interest and activity in advance of the film’s 75th anniversary.

Winning a National Endowment for the Humanities’ Public Scholar Award in 2015-2016 allowed him to take time off from teaching to write full-time, he says. He also values the award as an endorsement of “the whole spirit in which the *Casablanca* book is written—namely, to appeal beyond the academy to a much broader public.” The fact that evaluators saw the book as one that “spoke to the core tenets of that newly minted grant,” he says, “was enormously important.”

Isenberg delivered the manuscript in April 2016, and Norton published it in February 2017, “in time for Valentine’s Day,” he says. Marketers hoped that the seasonal tie-in would resonate with fans of *Casablanca’s* love story, to be followed by a second wave of interest as the anniversary hit, he says, sounding impressed by their ingenuity.

The book made the *LA Times* best-seller list last spring—especially satisfying for him “as a native Angeleno.” As hoped, it has also reached an audience beyond his peers. “Suddenly I get people I wouldn’t ever have occasion to have met writing to me and sending these—

## A review in *The Aufbau*, a German-language Jewish newspaper read by immigrants, “talked about the significance of the story for ‘those of us who have gone through this,’” says Isenberg.

the term, I guess, is fan mail,” he says. “They’re writing to say that they read it, and they have questions about this [or that]. Almost on a daily basis I’ll get an email saying, ‘I saw the movie when it came out.’”

Despite the compressed writing schedule and the many previous books about *Casablanca*—from production histories like Aljean Harmetz’s *Round Up the Usual Suspects*, originally published in 1992, to the often-at-odds memoirs of various participants—Isenberg nevertheless managed to bring new information about the film to light, as well as updating the story of its “Afterlife” into the 21st century.

One find was in the German-language Jewish newspaper, *The Aufbau*, which was read by newly arrived immigrants, where he discovered a contemporary review of the film that highlighted its impact on the refugee community. The unnamed reviewer “talked about the significance of the story for ‘those of us’—I think they did in fact even use the collective pronoun—‘those of us who have gone through this,’” says Isenberg.

He also unearthed a contemporary review in the black-owned *New York Amsterdam News*, which singled out Dooley Wilson’s nuanced portrayal of Sam, Rick’s companion and the pianoplayer at his café. Critic Dan Burley called it “one every colored person should make it his business to see since no picture has given as much sympathetic treatment and prominence to a Negro character as occurs in this story of war intrigues in North Africa,” with “not the slightest semblance to the objectionable Uncle Tomming that characterizes most of the Hollywood output.”

In both reviews, the critics were emphasizing the element of the film that spoke most directly to their respective audiences, unlike the majority of reviewers who focused on the film’s stars, love story, or adventure, he says. Isenberg thinks of Wilson as a kind of refugee as well, as the only African American in the picture, “being somehow displaced in Hollywood, and relegated to playing these marginal characters, which he shared with these refugees who were also playing these marginal characters.”

Besides Wilson and Joy Page (the Bulgarian newlywed whose honor Rick saves by letting her husband win at roulette, allowing them to pay for their exit visas), Humphrey Bogart was actually the only American-born actor among the 14 credited roles in the film. Some, like Ingrid Bergman, who’d come seeking stardom after success in her native Sweden, and British expatriates Sydney Greenstreet (rival café owner Signor Ferrari) and Claude Rains (Captain Renault, aka Louie), were in Hollywood for reasons unrelated to the war.

But others had sought refuge in the US because they were Jews, or anti-fascist, or gay and faced possible imprisonment and death at the hands of the Nazis. These included the Austrian-born Paul Henreid (incorruptible Resistance leader Victor Laszlo), a staunch anti-Nazi who had been designated an enemy of the Reich, and Conrad Veidt (Major Strasser), a star in Weimar films, including the German Expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, who had left Germany with his Jewish wife after Hitler came to power—and found himself playing mostly Nazis thereafter.

Among the better-known secondary characters were Peter Lorre and S. Z. Sakall, who were Hungarian Jews. Lorre had worked in German films (as the child-murderer in Fritz Lang's *M*, most famously) but left in 1933 for England (he played the villain in the 1935 version of Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*) and then America. In *Casablanca*, he is indelible in the small but vital role of Ugarte, the criminal who murders the two couriers carrying the "letters of transit" that set the plot in motion, and whose capture after begging Rick for help prompts the famous line, "I stick my neck out for nobody."

Sakall, nicknamed "Cuddles," played Carl, the head waiter at Rick's Café. He had been a popular cabaret entertainer and stage and film performer in Budapest, beginning when it was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (In 1954, he published an autobiography titled *The Story of Cuddles: My Life Under the Emperor Francis Joseph, Adolf Hitler, and the Warner Brothers.*)

Isenberg singles out an encounter that Sakall as Carl has with another refugee actor, Curt Bois, the solicitous pickpocket who warns his unsuspecting victims of "vultures, vultures everywhere" as he lifts their wallets. When Bois brushes against him, Sakall does a whole-body-double-take and starts patting his pockets frantically. "That's the ability of a great kind of comic mime. There's no dialogue there; it's all just gesture."

Carl is also present for the poignantly comic exchange between Herr and Frau Leuchtag (émigrés Ludwig Stössel and Ilka Grüning), an elderly couple celebrating their impending departure for America. Having decided to speak only English in anticipation of their new lives, they charmingly mangle some common endearments ("*Liebchen*—uh, sweetness heart") and idioms involving time ("What watch?" "Ten watch." "Such much?"). Isenberg notes that Rainer Maria Fassbinder, "the late bad boy of New German Cinema," described this as "one

of the most beautiful pieces of dialogue in the history of motion pictures."

Bois, Grüning, and Stössel are examples of émigré actors who lived a more precarious existence, often going many weeks or months between small roles in Hollywood. In the German typescript of a memoir by another, Lotte Palfi—she has one line as the lady selling her diamonds who is told they are "a drug on the market"—Isenberg found a passage that evokes the quiet sadness of their stories.

Palfi and her husband—Paul Andor, yet another *Casablanca* bit-player, as the man carrying Free French pamphlets who is gunned down beneath the portrait of Marshal Pétain—were invited with other émigré actors to be honored at the Berlin Film Festival. She wrote:

"Not only was our joy about this honor immense ... but we were even more moved by the noble attitude to which the invitation testified: the desire 'to make the crooked straight again.' Of course, one's lost career can never be replaced. We had to resign ourselves to that long ago. But it feels good realizing that, fifty years after Hitler's seizure of power, 'You haven't been forgotten.'"

**C**asablanca was a commercial hit, and a prestige picture as well, winning Academy Awards for Best Picture, Director (Michael Curtiz), and Adapted Screenplay for writers Philip and Julius Epstein and Howard Koch. Most critics praised it, too, but the view wasn't unanimous. Manny Farber, who titled his review in *The New Republic* "The Warner Boys in Africa," considered it just another of Hollywood's "epic phonies" and the locale "a timely place to carry on Warner's favorite cops and robbers." James Agee, writing in *The Nation*, called it "the year's clearest measure of how willingly, *faute de mieux*, people will deceive themselves."

But most critical naysayers have offered at least a backhanded compli-

ment to the film's power to seduce. Pauline Kael called it "a movie that demonstrates how entertaining a bad movie can be." Among more sympathetic observers cited by Isenberg, *Philadelphia Inquirer* critic Carrie Rickey, on the occasion of the film's 50th anniversary in 1992, said it was, if not the best movie ever made, "the best friend among American films," and David Denby, in *The New Yorker*, has deemed it the "most sociable, most companionable movie ever made." Isenberg, whose tally of viewings is "deep in the triple digits," says, "I enjoy it every time. It's really amazing."

#### **If anything springs eternal in Hollywood, it is the impulse to repeat a successful formula.**

Isenberg glosses the various attempts to fashion a sequel to *Casablanca*. During the war, members of the cast and crew were reunited in movies that echoed the story and locale, but only one, *To Have and Have Not*, very loosely based on the Hemingway novel, is a "deeply cherished, widely appreciated film in its own right," he writes. Later there were attempts to adapt the film as a Broadway musical and a couple of ill-fated stabs at TV versions, most recently in 1983 starring David Soul, of 1970s-cop show *Starsky and Hutch* fame, which was yanked after three episodes.

But the film itself was a smash success on television—it was the most frequently broadcast film throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and would continue its dominance of the airwaves into the cable era, with 125 showings on TCM as of 2015, Isenberg writes. (Just so you know: TCM's website lists upcoming broadcasts on Sunday, November 12, at 3:45 p.m.; Friday, December 8, at 11:45 a.m.; and Saturday, December 16, at 4 p.m., all EST.)

Revival house screenings—motivated by the "Bogie cult" that emerged following the actor's death in 1957—also kept the film in front of live audiences, especially college students. At Cambridge's Brattle Theater near Harvard Square, going to see *Casablanca* during exams in



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winter and spring became a popular ritual. Isenberg quotes the theater’s programmer that being there when *Casablanca* was playing “was, in a small way, like being at a theater in ancient Greece watching *Oedipus*.”

The film’s “unsullied patriotism” was inspiring to young people opposed to the Vietnam War, Isenberg writes. “Young moviegoers of the 1960s and 1970s found in the film what was absent in their world.” He quotes one political activist as saying, “*Casablanca* is the kind of film that makes a radical feel he’s part of the mainstream.”

But you didn’t have to be a college kid to take an obsessive interest in the film. Among the super-fans who make an appearance in Isenberg’s tale is Erroll Parker, a self-described “African American (and former Black Panther)” who first saw the film when he was 14 years old and stuck in bed with a broken leg and would go on watch it more than 600 times as of 1999.

No word on whether Massachusetts Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren ever took in a show at the Brattle in her years as a professor at Harvard Law, but Isenberg quotes from a December 31, 2015, Facebook post by Warren about her and her husband Bruce’s New Year’s Eve plans: “lots of good cheeses, champagne, and *Casablanca*.”

The first version of *Casablanca* to be shown in Germany (in 1952) cut out all mention of Nazis and turned Victor Laszlo into “Victor Larsen, a Norwegian atomic physicist hunted by Interpol,” in deference to the “delicate, half-hearted process of de-Nazification,” Isenberg

writes. It wasn’t well received, but after the uncut version showed in revival and on TV in the 1970s, it “became something of a cult film.” Isenberg also reports that in Hungary, starting in the 1960s and up through the 1980s, *Casablanca* was shown every Christmas Day on the one channel broadcasting and “viewing the film became an annual ritual for many of its citizens.”

When Isenberg shows the film in his classes at the New School, he informs first-time viewers, “You will now recognize lines that you have heard again and again.”

The subject of countless cultural references over the decades, it’s been mined for comedy starting with the Marx Brothers’ *A Night in Casablanca* in 1946 (admittedly far from their best work). More successfully, Woody Allen parodied the movie and the Bogie cult in the hit play and film, *Play It Again, Sam*. Other examples include Bugs Bunny (*Carrotblanca*), *The Simpsons*, and *Saturday Night Live*, most recently in a 2015 skit in which Kate McKinnon’s Ilsa grows increasingly impatient to get on that plane while Rick just ... keeps ... talking. As recently as this past summer, a *New Yorker* cartoon drew on it to comment on the US withdrawal from the Paris climate accord: President Trump in a trenchcoat tells a stand-in for Ilsa, “We’ll always have Pittsburgh” (referencing his statement at the time about representing that city rather than Paris).

Isenberg does give space to one skeptic concerning *Casablanca*’s cultural currency, quoting an August 2015 column, “Don’t Bogart Those Cultural Touchstones”

by Tim Cockey in *The Boston Globe* reporting on a talk at which lines like “Round up the usual suspects” and “a kiss is just a kiss” were met mostly with blank stares. “Why should I be shocked, shocked that not everyone I encounter can identify the cultural genesis of ‘shocked, shocked?’” Cockey wrote. But Isenberg is quick to counter that argument with our era’s ultimate arbiter: the internet. “The stubborn truth remains, on social media,” he writes, “there is no shortage of references to the film, the evocative stills and poster art, and to the iconic lines of dialogue.” (And do the kids today still get that meaning of *Bogart*?)

**W**ill *Casablanca* retain its hold on the culture? Isenberg thinks so.

“People ask me all the time, ‘So why is it that it has the legs that it has? Why is it that the staying power is as great as it is?’” he says. “I can point to a number of historical factors, but there are certain things that elude definition.

“We academics want to have everything in our taxonomies, but there are certain things that are beyond classification, and *Casablanca* may be, on some level.”

As the 75th anniversary milestone looms, Isenberg is continuing to give talks about the book and film—he’ll be in Philadelphia November 15, and two days later will travel to *Casablanca* itself at the invitation of the US Embassy to celebrate the film and mark 240 years of US-Moroccan diplomatic relations. The paperback edition will be published early in 2018, and he has a number of projects in the works—he mentions he’d like to put together a translation of writer-director Billy Wilder’s journalistic writings in German. “But I don’t have another full-scale book,” he says. “When people ask that question, I’m like, ‘I’m just trying to ride this wave as long as I can.’”

Which, given *Casablanca*’s past history, could be a while.