

# Quarantine Treasures Found in “Casablanca”

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This old classic has a scene easily missed if you are not careful, which was very meaningful to 1942 audiences during WWII.

Casablanca is on the coast of Morocco facing the Atlantic. It is the largest city in the country hosting over three million with another three million in the surrounding area, and it has one of the largest ports in the world, contributing to it being a major financial center for Africa.

In 1940, Nazi Germany invaded France, and Charles de Gaulle fled to London to maintain what government of France he could in exile. The Nazi collaborators, as if they had a choice, met in Vichy, and hence became leaders of the French State under Nazi occupation, aptly called Vichy France.

Now then, Morocco had been under French control since 1906, and when Vichy France took over in 1940, one can easily see the patriotic tensions always on the cuff. The native Moroccans and host of local and international residents were forced between loyalties to their native land, Nazi control of the Vichy police forces, and those still loyal to de Gaulle.



The movie takes place sometime between 1940 and November of 1942 when the American forces freed Morocco from Vichy control. Most of the drama takes place inside Rick’s Café Américain, with owner Rick Blaine, aka Humphrey Bogart, negotiating tensions.

The nondescript silent scene I implore to your attention takes place near the movie’s beginning. After a bit of ruckus at a Rick’s nightclub, a man is chased through the sunny hot streets of dusty Casablanca. He doesn’t get far, is shot, and dies in front of a building.

Pay attention here, for the camera slowly pans up an archway and lingers for a few seconds on the inscription above the archway which spells three words: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. And do not blink, for if you look very close, you will a flash of where that inscription resides—irony of ironies, above the Casablanca Police Station. Those words were the motto that embodied the principles of the French revolution, and those principles were high in everyone’s mind, and not merely to the people portrayed in the movie but also in real life 1940 Casablanca and throughout the free world as the Nazi juggernaut swiped over Europe with goals of world domination.

The only way out of Casablanca, and perhaps out of Tarrant County soon enough, were the movie’s treasured Letters of Transit.

If we go into lockdown, then Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity increasingly take on attributes of martial law over our lives, forcing us to stay home, preventing us from freedoms we normally take for granted. We debate on Facebook, watch the news, complain, and wonder at it all. During this election year our political and patriotic loyalties are tensioned by an insidious virus that covertly afflicts without discrimination. I mean like a foreign spy. And China is not innocent.

In 1942 Casablanca, in the high-class nightclub of Rick’s Café Américain, the American owner Rick had spent some time in Paris with Ilsa prior to the Nazi occupation—we assume—and then they meet again. Old love kindles and conflicts.

The treasure in quarantine is the mystery of whose side that Rick will take. Bogart, cool and nonchalant as usual, plays all sides like a master, leading to some of the most quoted lines in the history of cinema.

Another less obvious treasure, and not peculiarly a value evident in East Texas, you must notice that everyone is repressed. No one can show their true feelings. Or show any feeling most of the time. Everyone seems to be holding back something. The Nazis in their superiority seem to be holding back their disgust for the low-life French they must endure at Rick's place to have a nice dinner. Vichy puppets reluctantly hold control over their own. Patriots whisper. And the co-star Ilsa, aka the gorgeous Ingrid Bergman, and her husband quietly seek the Letters of Transit to leave Casablanca and carry on the resistance against the dreaded Nazis.

I want to assume most have seen it and hope to tickle a fancy to see it one more time.

Patriotism is a hot topic today. No matter your political affiliation, and spite of your affiliation, you will see this movie a study in scruples.

Casablanca itself has grown to become a cold-war cultural term to many movie buffs. In 1942, when it came out, even the A-List actors did not think it would muster much applause, but rather felt it would turn out to be one among many "war films" designed to inspire patriotism and fade like the sunset.

Who knows for sure the ultimate cause of its longevity? The actors were the best of the time. "Casablanca" won the 1944 Academy Award for Best Picture and for Best Screenplay. Among the many lists of "100 Greatest Movies," both the New York Times and the American Film Institute rated it #2 between #1 "Citizen Kane" (1941) and #3 "Godfather" (1972), Hollywood Reporter #6, International Movie Database (IMDb) #5, Empire #28, TIME #13, and of the 100 best classics, #6 by Rotten Tomatoes. That is all the more remarkable when you consider that such an old movie is competing with modern blockbusters like Godfather, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Space Odyssey 2001, Lawrence of Arabia, Star Wars, and other lavish no-expense-spared epics.

Why? The British Film Institute 2017 article hit on "Why we're still quoting Hollywood's most quotable film," celebrating its 75th birthday, in which Pamela Hutchinson noted, "Casablanca's immortal dialogue and gestures of defiance have taken on an extraordinary afterlife."

After all that, I still doubt a teenager will appreciate it. But serious critics still place it as one of the best of all time. If you care for that magical combination of espionage, love, patriotism, and beating Nazis at their own game, I suspect you will find this, too, another treasure in quarantine.

If you pay attention, and pause your DVD player (or whatever format) at the scene near the beginning of the movie, where the camera pans up to the engraved words Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, then you may also prepare for the journey of the movie Casablanca. Therein, in reflection during this virus-riddled, locked-down, border-sealed, paper-short, and social distancing enforcements, perhaps those words will come more alive for you, yet again, perhaps just touching those days of old when the Greatest Generation freed the world from evil.

I would say, truly, you can have my hand on that, but we are under orders. So then, with fond memories of the past and a freer time, I will just say softly, "Here's looking at you, kid."