

# THE TALKIES



## BETTE DAVIS, RIP

by Bruce Bawer

To view, in quick succession, a half dozen or so of the movies that Bette Davis made during what we may call her Golden Age—during the decade, in other words, between the late 1930s and the late 1940s—can be a rather startling experience. One is surprised, for one thing, to realize how exceedingly narrow an acting range Davis possessed. Like her contemporary Katharine Hepburn (whose striking looks she always envied), Davis specialized in “independent” women; but the characters and stories that she burned into our memories are far less varied than those for which Hepburn did similar honors. While Hepburn, for instance, moved smoothly—and without losing any of her authority and allure and presence—from screwball comedy (*Bringing Up Baby*) to sophisticated comedy (*The Philadelphia Story*) to Tennessee Williams (*Suddenly Last Summer*) to Eugene O’Neill (*Long Day’s Journey Into Night*), Davis excelled only within a strictly confined territory. The queen of the so-called women’s picture, she specialized in melodramatic heroines who were either outrageously blunt and headstrong or pathetically meek and self-sacrificing or some remarkable combination of the two.

To be sure, she performed capably enough in an urbane romantic farce like *It’s Love I’m After* (1937), in which she played half of a jealous, competitive Lunt-and-Fontanne-type Broadway acting team (Leslie Howard played the other half)—but from a 52-year distance she seems oddly misplaced in the role. Her talent is there, but *she* isn’t—or, perhaps one should say, her distinctive personal magnetism isn’t. It’s as if somebody forgot to turn on all the lights. And without those lights on, the talent seems astonishingly run-of-the-mill.

But if one is surprised by the narrowness of Davis’s range, one is surprised, too, to notice how masterfully she worked within that range, how skilled she was at making each of her

heroines utterly distinctive. For, though they’re mostly variations on a handful of familiar types, there’s no mistaking Davis’s most renowned heroines for one another. They even carry themselves differently: the spinster schoolteacher Miss Moffat in *The Corn Is Green* (1945) treads firmly and resolutely, without a wasted motion, while the spinster heiress Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager* (1942) strolls with a graceful sweep, vivacious and self-confident; belle-of-the-ball Fanny Skeffington in *Mr. Skeffington* (1944) glides coquettishly, while belle-of-the-ball Julie Marston in *Jezebel* (1938) moves with every step as if she’s trying to pull away from someone’s grasp.

One is struck, too, by how contrived the stories of Davis’s best films are. They’re full of people going blind, of letters that destroy people’s lives, of mothers who keep their motherhood secret over decades (with, needless to say, disastrous results). In not one but two movies—*A Stolen Life* (1946) and *Dead Ringer* (1964)—Davis plays twin sisters, one of whom loves the other’s husband and (after her death) masquerades as her in order to possess her husband. Implausible transformations abound (making possible a tour-de-force Davis switch from meek to headstrong or vice-versa): in *Dark Victory* (1939), the frivolous, fun-loving heiress

Judith Traherne learns she’s suffering from a fatal brain tumor, and (after marrying her doctor) dies with selfless stoicism; in *Now, Voyager*, the shy, sexless, mother-dominated Back Bay heiress Charlotte Vale is changed by a psychiatrist (Claude Rains) and by a married man named Jerry Durrance (Paul Henreid), whom she meets and falls in love with on a South American cruise, into a model of poise, conviviality, and romantic passion; and in *Mr. Skeffington*, the shallow, self-indulgent belle Fanny Skeffington is given a chance to redeem herself as a loving helpmeet when diphtheria robs her of her extraordinary beauty (and of her legion of admirers), and fate brings to her doorstep the still-adoring but now penniless ex-husband (Claude Rains) whom she cruelly neglected throughout their marriage, and who has (conveniently) lost his sight and therefore will always see her as beautiful. (Got that?)

There’s no getting around the fact that these are soap-opera stories about soap-opera characters. At the same time, however, one is struck by how engrossing these films remain a half-century later, by how sympathetic Davis’s heroines are, how compelling their often inane predicaments seem. To watch Davis’s best movies is to be fortified in one’s judgment that they

are decidedly not art—but it is also to come away with the conviction that nobody else in the history of the medium has ever been connected with a series of films that so superbly embody the idea of pure screen entertainment. Granted, there is a camp element to these pictures: watching *Now, Voyager*, one smiles at the famous business with the cigarettes (as you may remember, Henreid lights two of them in his mouth, hands one to Davis, and they blow smoke into each other’s faces while staring deeply into each other’s eyes; this happens *at least* three times); watching *Mr. Skeffington*, one laughs at the idea of Bette Davis being the most ravishing woman in New York.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time one is hooked; these stories grab one’s attention in the opening moments and don’t let go until the final credits.

It was not ever thus. Arriving in Hollywood in 1930, Davis began her movie career with a string of thirty-odd pictures, mostly quite forgettable, in many of which her roles were extremely small. Throughout this period, she played tough, even shady types: gangsters’ widows, lowlife flirts, hard-boiled nightclub hostesses. Among her few plum roles was that of the crass, licentious waitress, Mildred Rogers, to Leslie Howard’s sensitive, lovesick medical student in the widely admired but rather dull *Of Human Bondage* (1934). A year later came *Dangerous*, which won Davis the first of two Academy Awards, and which inspired one reviewer to comment that “Bette Davis would probably have been burned as a witch if she had lived two or three hundred years ago. She gives the curious feeling of being charged with power which can find no ordinary outlet.”

That power found its first major outlet in *Jezebel* (1938), for which Davis

<sup>1</sup>One must add, however, that Davis leaves the distinct impression that she’s laughing, too; part of the point of the movie is that Fanny is an absurd creature, and part of its achievement is that it manages to make her at once a joke and an object of pathos.



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won her second Oscar. Julie Marston—the antebellum Southern belle whose neurotic willfulness destroys her hopes of romantic happiness—was the first of many remarkably intense, passionate heroines. Julie was succeeded, in *The Old Maid* (1939), by Charlotte Lovell, a Civil War-era Philadelphia woman who allows her child, born out of wedlock, to be raised by her vengeful cousin Delia (Miriam Hopkins); unable to acknowledge her parenthood as she watches the child grow to maturity, Charlotte turns from a sweet young woman into an embittered, misanthropic old spinster.

Charlotte was hardly Davis's only old maid. Indeed, while she played very few mothers, Davis portrayed quite a few spinsters (including—twice—the most eminent one in all history, Queen Elizabeth I). Many of these spinsters are women who—to borrow a phrase from Davis's eponymous character in *The Nanny* (1965)—take care of “other people's children”: Charlotte in *The Old Maid* runs a nursery school; Lilly Moffat in *The Corn Is Green* (1945) is a schoolteacher in a Welsh mining town who, at the end of the film, agrees to raise her prize student's bastard child while he attends Oxford on a scholarship; Henriette Deluzy in *All This, and Heaven Too* (1940) is a governess and later a schoolteacher; Charlotte Vale in

*Now, Voyager* takes Jerry's troubled daughter Tina into her house and mothers her.

Part of the strategy in such movies, of course, is to win our sympathy for heroines who are big on sacrifice and who, as Henriette says, “must be content with picking up a few crumbs of happiness from other people's tables.” When Henriette's employer, the Duc de Praslin (Charles Boyer), with whom she shares a deep but unconsummated love, asks about the lack of fulfillment in her life, she replies: “I have the children and even though they're not mine I sometimes imagine they are.” Charlotte Vale responds in like fashion when Jerry poses her a similar question: “When Tina said she wanted to come home and stay with me it was like a miracle happening—like having your child, a part of you—and I even allowed myself to indulge in the fancy that both of us loving her and doing what was best for her together would make her seem actually like our child after a while . . .”

These are women for whom devotion to children is, in large part, a form of sublimation; they approach young people not with a mother's equipoise but with the outsized ardor of women who lack any alternative object of passion. Consequently, they're ideal characters for Davis, who was a natural at embodying fervent devotion, a not-so-natural

at quiet fidelity. It's not surprising that in those few films in which Davis does play a quietly loving mother—in *Watch on the Rhine* (1943), for example—she seems oddly passive and unconvincing as such. She is far more believable when playing an indifferent mother like Fanny Skeffington, or a substitute mother like Charlotte Vale or Maggie Patterson in *The Great Lie* (1941), or a mother, like Charlotte Lovell, who is made vicious by her inability to tell her daughter that she is her daughter and not her niece; certainly one of the most memorable mother-daughter relationships in any of Davis's films is that in *The Little Foxes* (1941) between her ruthless, tyrannical Regina Giddens—as monstrous a character as ever filled a movie screen—and Teresa Wright's meek, defenseless Alexandra. (Davis plays an equally despotic matriarch, incidentally, in the bizarre 1968 film *The Anniversary*.)

As her performance in a role like Regina Giddens demonstrates, Davis believed unapologetically that motion-picture characters should be at once lifelike and bigger than life. And at her best, she was capable of giving an appearance of magnitude and depth—and even of intelligence—to characters whose actual lack of dimension

would, in other hands, have been painfully manifest. But an actress who aims always for bigger-than-life performances must exercise consistent and rigorous self-control to avoid becoming merely flamboyant, garish, histrionic; and it is no secret that Davis did not always succeed entirely in this regard. Even in her finest performances she could not completely avoid gratuitous mannerisms and moments of hamminess; it is no coincidence, surely, that this actress, who at times reminded one a bit too forcefully that she was indeed acting, played more than her share of actresses, from Joyce Heath in *Dangerous* and Joyce Arden in *It's Love I'm After* to Margaret Elliott in *The Star* (1952) and Baby Jane Hudson in the incredibly goofy *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1961).

Self-control, alas, apparently became increasingly hard for Davis. After the late 1940s she grew more and more prone to self-parody, seemingly reveling in her broad trademark gestures, and sometimes offering little more by way of a performance than stiff comportment, tart and halting line readings, and periodic rolling of those protuberant Bette Davis eyes. (Then again, most of her vehicles of the past couple of decades were tawdry TV movies and gruesome horror flicks with titles like *Scream*, *Pretty Peggy*, none of which

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deserved any better from her.) It is no coincidence that her best work after the late 1940s—in *All About Eve* (1950)—was in the role of a stage actress, Margo Channing, who had a decidedly theatrical manner, and that part of the reason for the success of Davis's other most celebrated later role, in *Baby Jane*, was that the film provided a sound dramatic

context for extreme immoderation on her part. As for her wonderfully restrained performance in *The Nanny*—a first-rate Hitchcock-style thriller about an unobtrusive English governess bent on murder—it seems almost miraculous, coming as it did between the grisly *Hush . . . Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* (1964) and *The Anniversary*,

for both of which Davis pulled out a great many more stops than was probably advisable.

Yet what makes Bette Davis worth remembering is not the failings of her weakest work but the high caliber of her strongest. At her best, she mesmerized, lending a semblance of urgency to material that might other-

wise (as a reviewer suggested of *Dark Victory*) be dismissed as "emotional claptrap." In *Now, Voyager*, *The Old Maid*, *Mr. Skeffington*, and half a dozen other movies she leaves us a collection of supremely captivating diversions that, for what they have managed for so long to do so well, have rarely been surpassed. □

## THE GREAT SIAMESE SALOON SERIES



### THE AUTHORS' LOUNGE

by Richard Brookhiser

Westerners think of everything east of Crete as being unfathomably ancient—rose-red cities half as old as time, that kind of thing. Bangkok isn't. It came into existence because the Burmese, about the time of the French and Indian Wars, obliterated the then-capital of Siam, Ayutthaya. The Thais finally won the war, but they needed a new capital. They settled on Bangkok in the 1780s, which makes it about the same age as Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; much younger than Albany, New York.

It's as grim as those places too. There was a time, not too long ago, when Bangkok was the "Venice of the East," criss-crossed by bucolic canals. That time is gone for good. The canals that remain are the color of India ink. Residents go to and fro by bus, car, and motorized three-wheelers called tuk-tuks. The traffic is simply hellish. It makes cross-town travel in Manhattan in rush hour seem like rodding a jeep over sand-dunes. The only good thing about the hub-bub is that it forces you to take your sightseeing at a civilized pace, with frequent breathers.

Let me dispose of the inescapable question, and say that I took no breathers in Patpong, which is Bangkok's red-light district. Why it should be assumed that everyone who goes to Bangkok also goes there is mysterious to me, for I would think there were better reasons to cross the Pacific Ocean than to ogle prostitutes doing tricks with razor blades and fruit. And yet not only were my wife and I asked four times by an expat journalist if he couldn't show us around, since we

would "learn about the country" thereby, but all the guidebooks take the same attitude as well. Thais are freer about sex than we are, the line goes, so the scene isn't so grim. Well, the girls are teenagers from the north who have been sold into the business by their parents, and the disease timebomb atop which they are sitting must be immense, so it sounds pretty grim to me. I'd rather cool off at the Authors' Lounge of the Oriental Hotel.

The Oriental has a prime location, on the bank of the Chao Phraya river, the main aquatic drag, bustling with ferries, plump rice barges, and darting yellow-striped taxi-boats, their propellers buzzing at the end of long free-swiveling driveshafts like angry tails. The Oriental's admirers call it the best hotel in the world. It may well have the best service: there are definite advantages to visiting a culture which is founded on the avoidance of unpleasantness.

As the premier hotel in town for more than a century, the Oriental has hosted most of the famous folk who have passed through. The Authors' Lounge is named in honor of the writers. The most important writerly guest was the first, Joseph Conrad, though there is some sleight of hand in the Conrad connection, for while he did stay at the Oriental in 1888, he checked in as a ship's captain, not a literatus. He was still, as we would say, gathering material, or, as he probably would have said, doing his job.

The other literary gents (and ladies) of whom the Oriental brags, however, came there in the bloom of their powers. On the way into the lounge, the hotel keeps a pair of bookcases stocked

with their work. Since they have been a diverse lot, the little library is an odd selection, *Of Human Bondage* jostling *Myra Breckinridge*. The Oriental also serves drinks which it bills as its authors' favorites. Some make me wonder. Do we really know, for instance, that Conrad favored lychee slings? Others—Barbara Cartland: pink champagne—have a ring of truth. I tried one of these offerings, which was assigned to James Michener, and called a Jade Dream. The list of ingredients included blue curaçao, and *crème de bananes*. It came in one of those vivid colors, whose secret I thought had been lost with the Thunderbirds of the Eisenhower Administration, and it tasted like *really good* dentist's mouthwash. I drank it, but I didn't order another. As Voltaire said when invited to a second homosexual orgy at the court of Frederick the Great, once was philosophy, twice would be perversion.

You can also get afternoon tea. When I was there, the Oriental was celebrating the one hundredth birthday of the Savoy of London, and it had imported two of the birthday girl's staff for the occasion, along with their Fortnum and Mason's tea things. There was also a pianist in black tie, performing an E-Z-2 Play version of Chopin's Nocturne in E flat.

To tell you the truth, the best thing about the Authors' Lounge is sitting there. The prevailing color is white—white stone walls and balustrades, white wooden gingerbread, white wicker tables and chairs. A double staircase curves to the second floor. Pots of stately bamboo sit in the corners. The walls are decorated with pictures of Thai royalty of the last century, testing their newfangled

automobiles, or arrayed in top hats.

It has a *raj*, Jewel-in-the-Crown feel to it, but that's not quite right. For Thailand belongs to the short list of places on earth that were never owned by Europeans. Part of its fortune was due to the fact that it lay midway between India and Indochina, so that rival empires cancelled each other out. Another part was that the heyday of European colonizing coincided with the back-to-back reigns of two energetic Thai kings. The first, Mongkut, became Yul Brynner (Thais consider both the musical/movie and the book on which it was based to be condescending slanders). He died after taking his court to a malarial island in the south to witness an eclipse he had forecasted. His successor, Chulalongkorn, is the one in the topper. If you sail up river an hour to his palace at Bang Pa-In, you can see the grounds decorated with pseudo-classical statuary, just like an Italian garden.

So the nineteenth-century Thais borrowed this and that from the Western world, not because they were forced to, but because they wanted to. Which is, of course, an even greater tribute. They wanted to because the West struck them as being, in certain respects, better. Chulalongkorn once lost a wife because when the barge she was riding on sank, none of her subjects could touch her royal person, even to pull her to safety. The civilization in which rulers could be touched was heading toward problems of its own—World War I, for instance. But it seemed, to intelligent non-Westerners c. 1910, to have solved some of its (and their) other problems along the way.

The problem of where to get a drink in the tropics in soothing surroundings is still solved by the Authors' Lounge. □

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