



**BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL**

# Of Human Bondage

Bette Davis shows her considerable range and ambition with the role of Mildred Rogers, who torments a would-be doctor (Howard) who's obsessed with her. With several pictures under her belt and under contract to Warners, Davis begged to be allowed to work for RKO in a role turned down by other leading actresses afraid that the unglamorous role of Mildred would harm their careers. Considered a shoe-in for an Oscar® nomination, the omission was big news at the time and it marked Davis as a star in the making.

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Of the great stars, Bette Davis is a rare example, not only through her gifts, but because she has asserted the value of imagination and technical ability in a profession that can be followed without much of either. Her present supremacy was, perhaps, inevitable if she were to succeed at all. When she first arrived in Hollywood in 1930, after a few years in stock companies and success in a Broadway play, she was not a type to be prefabricated into any existing mould. She demanded, in fact, the creation of a new approach, which the unfortunate results of her first screen test emphasised. ('I was badly dressed for the camera, the lighting was awful ...') Her first few films were failures; in 1932 she was given a contract by Warner Brothers, then a pioneering company, but of her parts in the first 15 or so films she made there – *So Big*, an early Wellman film, Curtiz's *Cabin in the Cotton*, and *Ex-Lady*, in which she became officially a 'star' – only one, relatively small (*Cabin in the Cotton*) was really rewarding. In most of the others she was cast as a kind of mild sex-menace (fashion artist, career girl, gangster's moll), and she usually presented the spectacle of character struggling against type, and working too hard to establish the fact.

She was to remain under contract to Warners for more than 16 years, but her career as an actress was effectively started by David Selznick, then a producer at R.K.O. He had already launched Hepburn in *Bill of Divorcement*, and decided in 1934 to cast Bette Davis as Mildred in the film of Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. This was to be the first proper revelation of her talents. For the first time a film needed her, and she didn't need a film. The director, John Cromwell, had come to Hollywood from the theatre, and was skilled with actors. *Of Human Bondage*, a conscientious though not inspired adaptation, was angled to give both Bette Davis and Leslie Howard the strongest possible prominence, and indeed allowed them to present the kind of character at which they were later to excel again – for him the nervous, vacillating intellectual, for her the unscrupulous, ambitious, coldly passionate little waitress, developed as a saloon-keeper's wife in *Bordertown*, the alcoholic actress in *Dangerous*, finally reformed in *Jezebel*.

For her siren roles and publicity build-up, her hair had been dyed blonde: before, this had been irrelevant, but as Mildred she used it as she has since used a variety of make-up, with enormous skill and as an imaginative adjunct to the presentation of character. One thing that *Of Human Bondage* made clear was the degree of artifice that, as an actress, she could assimilate. Here she used cheap clothes, dyed hair, a pale make-up that fringed her eyes with black and voluptuously filled out her mouth, as positive appurtenances. Few

actresses, especially on the screen, have succeeded in doing this, and none has done it more effectively.

For, miraculously, the face had ‘taken’, the full range of mobility, expression, temperament, had broken through the earlier image. She was only 26 when she played Mildred, but her face disclosed the sort of potentialities that actresses usually attain only when they are ten years older. It was youthful, but it had a past; it had an ageless quality that could be stressed in either direction. Seven years later she was to play Regina in *The Little Foxes* – a woman in her early forties – and the year after that the spoilt, nymphomaniac Stanley of *In This Our Life*, looking more than ten years younger. The face is not beautiful, but it is mysterious, fascinating, with an extraordinary faculty for being itself and somebody else at the same time – the sort of face Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* brooded over.

**Gavin Lambert, *Sight and Sound*, August-September 1951**

In her first scene in *Hell’s House* (1932), an independently produced quickie shot in two weeks, Bette Davis is standing on a street corner and looking mightily irritated because her boyfriend (Pat O’Brien) is late. Her face looks truly disgusted, and this image of frank female loathing still seems unusual. She is very green and tentative in *Hell’s House*, but every so often the camera will catch her eyes lighting up and something seems about to happen, something bad, most likely, though it never does.

Davis is just ‘the girlfriend’ in *Hell’s House*, and she played lots of parts like that while at Warner Bros – so many that her restlessness and fury were all pent up when Warner loaned her to RKO to be Mildred in an adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (1934). A sadistic waitress obsessed over by the masochistic Philip (Leslie Howard), Mildred is a girl with no redeeming features, a manipulator on a pitifully obvious scale, always looking sideways whenever she wants to judge how badly she can treat this weak man who is enslaved to her, and Davis refuses to ask for any sympathy and she refuses to psychologise.

*Of Human Bondage* is slow and strangely edited, and it seems as if no one involved has given much thought to what it might be about. Howard is inadequate, and sometimes comically so. But Davis’s nihilistic performance as Mildred is still like a thunderstorm, full of flashes of lightning, low rumbling and one unforgettably massive outburst when Mildred explodes with all the hate in the world at the camera and at us, so that the repeated cutaways to Howard’s Philip don’t seem to be shot in the same room or on the same planet. Watching Davis tell off this man is like watching any great and fearful natural phenomenon. It’s not acting, finally. It’s something else, something closer to electrical power or some awesome disaster excitingly destroying everything in its wake.

**Dan Callahan, *Sight & Sound*, October 2013**

OF HUMAN BONDAGE

Directed by: John Cromwell  
©/Production Company: RKO Radio Pictures  
Producer: Pandro S. Berman \*  
Unit Manager: J.R. Crone \*  
Assistant Directors: Dewey Starkey, Kenneth Holmes \*  
Script Supervisor: Betty Goode \*  
Screen Play by: Lester Cohen  
Dialogue: Ann Coleman \*  
From the novel by: W. Somerset Maugham  
Photographed by: Henry W. Gerrard  
Photographic Effects: Vernon Walker  
2nd Camera: Robert De Grasse \*  
2nd Camera Assistant: George E. Diskant \*  
Gaffer: Guy Gilman \*  
Best Boy: George Marquenne \*  
Grip: Sam Redding \*  
Stills: Alexander Kahle \*  
Edited by: William Morgan  
Art Directors: Van Nest Polglase, Carroll Clark  
Props: George Gabe \*  
Costumes by: Walter Plunkett  
Wardrobe: Ethel Beach, Tom Clark \*  
Make-up: Sam Kaufman \*  
Hairdresser: Dot Carlson \*  
Musical Score by: Max Steiner  
Recorded by: Clem Portman  
Assistant Recordist: Eddie Harman \*  
Boom: Harold Stine \*

Cast

Leslie Howard (Philip Carey)  
Bette Davis (Mildred Rogers)  
Frances Dee (Maria Del Sol ‘Sally’ Athelny)  
Kay Johnson (Norah)  
Reginald Denny (Harry Griffiths)  
Alan Hale (Emil Miller)  
Reginald Sheffield (Cyril Dunsford)  
Reginald Owen (Thorpe Athelny)  
Desmond Roberts (Dr Jacobs)  
Tempe Pigott (Agnes Hallitt, landlady) \*  
John Cromwell (man on street in last shot) \*  
Frank Baker (policeman) \*  
Douglas Gordon (hawker) \*  
Frank Mills (chimneysweep) \*  
Ma Curly (charwoman) \*  
Tom Hughes (Englishman) \*  
Nat Neahan (Slim) \*  
Al Sullivan (Jimmy Gray) \*  
Ray Atchley (J. Murphy) \*  
Madeline Wilson (girl) \*  
Frank Grandetta (newsboy) \*  
Irene Rich (baby) \*  
Sally Sage (double) \*  
Charles Coleman \*  
Pat Somerset \*  
Billy Mills \*  
Harry Allen \*  
Frank Schwab \*  
Byron Fitzpatrick \*  
James Casey \*  
Adrian Rosley \*

USA 1934©  
84 mins

\* Uncredited

BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL

Of Human Bondage

Sun 1 Aug 12:40; Thu 12 Aug 18:00

Dangerous

Mon 2 Aug 18:15; Fri 13 Aug 21:00; Wed 18 Aug 18:10

All about Eve

Tue 3 Aug 14:30; Sat 14 Aug 20:25; Sun 29 Aug 15:00

Marked Woman

Tue 3 Aug 18:10; Thu 12 Aug 20:40; Sat 14 Aug 14:45

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?

Wed 4 Aug 14:15; Wed 11 Aug 20:30; Mon 16 Aug 18:00;  
Sat 28 Aug 17:20

Jezebel

Wed 4 Aug 20:40; Sun 15 Aug 15:30; Fri 27 Aug 18:00

Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte

Thu 5 Aug 14:15; Fri 13 Aug 17:40; Wed 18 Aug 14:30; Sat 28 Aug 20:30

All about Bette Davis

Thu 5 Aug 18:10

Dark Victory

Fri 6 Aug 14:15; Mon 23 Aug 18:00

The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex

Sat 7 Aug 15:00; Sat 21 Aug 11:40

The Letter

Sun 8 Aug 15:45; Tue 17 Aug 17:50

The Man Who Came to Dinner

Sun 8 Aug 18:20; Thu 19 Aug 20:40

The Little Foxes

Mon 9 Aug 18:00; Mon 16 Aug 20:30; Thu 19 Aug 17:40

The Whales of August

Wed 11 Aug 14:30; Thu 26 Aug 20:30; Tue 31 Aug 18:10

Old Acquaintance

Wed 11 Aug 17:40; Sun 22 Aug 15:30

Mr. Skeffington

Sat 14 Aug 17:10; Sun 29 Aug 11:30

The Star

Sun 15 Aug 18:30; Wed 25 Aug 20:45

Dead Ringer

Fri 20 Aug 17:45; Mon 30 Aug 15:20

The Nanny

Tue 24 Aug 20:45; Mon 30 Aug 12:40

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