



BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL

“What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?”

Over here to publicise her latest film, “*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*”, Bette Davis has about as much physical resemblance to the character she plays in it as her 19-year-old Stanley in *In This Our Life* (1942) had to her Queen Elizabeth of three years earlier. The voice, the hair, are still very Margo Channing. The figure is slim. Where Joan Crawford has generally equated playing for real with a marked absence of make-up (*Baby Jane*, *Paid*, the splendidly schizoid finale of *Possessed*), Bette Davis has often preferred to pile it on. Wearing Jane’s horrendous mask, which tops the last ravaged stages of Mrs Skeffington’s decline with Mary Pickford ringlets and a velvet pancake hat, was apparently a great strain. ‘We shot the exteriors on location using passers-by, not extras, in the streets. I’d dive out of the bank to my car, and a startled voice would say: “What the hell was *that!*”’

She agrees that there is a lot of Stanley in Jane: the same psychopathic pattern of the ruthlessly selfish and destructive child who has never grown up, the same wheedling helplessness when things get out of hand. But Jane, for all her malignity, she sees as an essentially sympathetic, tragic character, whereas the unilluminated hardness Huston insisted she bring to Stanley she found uncongenial. In common with other actresses (Nancy Price, Flora Robson) best remembered for their ‘bad’ characters, Bette Davis has no interest in uncompromisingly evil roles. This doubtless partly accounts for her loathing of *Beyond the Forest* and the tensions with Wyler (‘If I was a Callas, he was the male Bette Davis’) which surfaced during *The Letter* and flared up decisively on *The Little Foxes*. Nevertheless she regards Wyler as her most rewarding director and mentor, the one she would most like to work with again.

‘Bob Aldrich is a genius.’ This wasn’t a comment on the finished film – she hadn’t apparently seen it yet – but on his decision to co-star her with Joan Crawford, and on the way he finished the job within five weeks. ‘Joan, the great glamour star, and me, I’ve no glamour, I’m an actress.’ She didn’t have time, during such a frantic shooting schedule, even to begin to wonder whether the film would be a success. Now she marvels at the way teenagers are flocking to see a picture which, she reminds me, ‘has no sex’.

Certainly, short of a comeback by Garbo, it is difficult to imagine a more commanding star occasion. Davis and Crawford, Red Queen and White Queen, together for the first time in roles they might have dreamed up themselves. No other distaff casting, however different or distinguished the film, could produce quite the same frisson of anticipation. Stanwyck and Katharine Hepburn, Dietrich and Vivien Leigh: however auspicious the project one doubts whether any such partnership could be regarded as a factor vital to success. Only Davis and Crawford, though separately minor box-office draws for some years now, together amount to a potentially unique commodity, a film’s sole *raison d’être*.

That *Baby Jane* should have been conceived as a blatantly opportunistic vehicle is not, in itself, especially culpable. At least it *is* a vehicle. It goes. It is

the half-heartedness of its propulsion that one regrets. Agreed that a warning example of box-office mutability was recently supplied by the comparative flop of Judy Garland's *I Could Go On Singing*. But whereas musicals have always proved notoriously fallible, Associates and Aldrich could surely have assumed that *Baby Jane* would tap contemporary appetites at their safest and sickest: post-*Psycho* horrors, a decaying *Sunset Boulevard* setting, sadism both explicit and – in the cross-cutting from stewed rat or smashed skull to equally brutal comic relief – implicit.

Yet, apart from the stars, there is little sign of confidence on the screen. The production, which amassed a total of \$2,000,000 in rental fees within a fortnight of its American release opening, cost a tight \$825,000. Davis and Crawford refused to sell out their handsome stake in the profits; and in view of the picture's frequent air of incompetence one can only applaud their foresight.

One factor remains, however, and it is greatly to Aldrich's credit. Unlike certain directors who have deferred too readily to these actresses' demands, he has frequently caught them here at their best, never at their worst. (One recalls, if reluctantly, Bette Davis's jodhpurred Napoleonic tantrums in Irving Rapper's *Another Man's Poison*, or Joan's first flouncing entrance down about six flights of stairs in Ranald McDougall's *Queen Bee*.) There are times when Aldrich's disinclination to cut away from his stars leaves them high and dry, as if they were waiting for a new page of script to be delivered. But in the main they seem to have found a new maturity, a discipline encouraged perhaps by the confined sets and Crawford's wheelchair, or by the interaction of their professional rivalry upon a belated mutual respect.

Gone is Crawford's galvanic facial display. In its place is the fine muscular tension of her agonised drag down the stairs, followed by some notable close-ups of pouted, terrified eyes and sagging chin at the phone; and all along that sense of silky reasonableness hiding inner steel, paving the way for the unconvincing yet histrionically memorable last-minute confession.

This scene, weirdly touching in its regression to sandcastles, ice-creams, childhood secrets and reconciliations, provides one of Bette's most characteristic reaction-shots: hands clapped defiantly over her ears, then unwillingly removed, truth dawning, body and face tautening, eyes dilated in horror, the slow turn of the head, and finally a girlish scramble to her feet and simple; spontaneous forgiveness. Showy though the part is, she still resists the temptation to caricature its obvious Charles Addams qualities. Caught dumping a corpse in the back of her car, she represses her terror under a chill, weary, sullen air of resignation. The observation here is controlled, intelligent, absolutely right. Just as sure is the acid comedy of her impersonation of Joan Crawford on the telephone, or her abstracted exchanges with the equally self-absorbed pianist to whom she confides her grotesque plans for a Las Vegas come-back.

I can't entirely agree with those critics who maintain that *Baby Jane* is disagreeable because it 'plays on the public's subconscious resentment of film stars.' It seems to me that a better case could be made out along these lines against producers. One thing the recent autobiographies of Davis and Crawford have in common is this suggestion of a reckless, almost insanely destructive resentment on the part of some Hollywood executives towards the stars they have helped to create. Sacked if they have 'about as much sex appeal as Slim Summerville' (Carl Laemmle on Davis); rewarded, if they have a

personal success, with a load of junk gathering the dust of years on a script editor's shelf; reminded continually, in case they get too uppity, that a star has only four years at the top – that celebrated old MGM litany of the Thirties. The careers of both actresses are a story of constant battles for better directors and a continuity of suitable scripts. The cost, in Miss Davis's own words, has been a (deserved) reputation for being 'uncompromising, peppery, intractable, monomaniacal, tactless, volatile and oft-times disagreeable.'

Peter John Dyer, 'Meeting Baby Jane', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1963

"WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?"

Directed by: Robert Aldrich
©/Production Company: Associates and Aldrich
Production Companies: Seven Arts Productions, Warner Bros.
Executive Producer: Kenneth Hyman
Produced by: Robert Aldrich
Assistant to the Producer: Walter Blake
Production Supervisor: Jack R. Berne
Assistant Director: Tom Connors
Script Supervisor: Bob Gary
Casting Director: Jack Murton
Screenplay by: Lukas Heller
Based on the novel by: Henry Farrell
Director of Photography: Ernest Haller
Camera Operator: Til Gabani
Grip: Dick Borland
Stills Photography: Don Christie
Special Effects: Donald Steward
Editor: Michael Luciano
Assistant Film Editor: Nick Archer
Art Director: William Glasgow
Set Decorator: George Sawley
Props: John Orlando
Costume Designer: Norma Koch
Wardrobe: Angela Alexander, Kathleen McCandless, Vou Lee Giokaris, Eric Seelig
Make-up: Jack Obringer, Monte Westmore

Hairstyles: Florence Guemsey, Peggy Shannon
Music: Frank De Vol
Music Editor: George F. Marni
Choreography: Alex Romero
Sound: Jack Solomon
Sound Editor: Harold McGhan
Stunts: Carol Daniels *
Dialogue Supervisor: Bob Sherman

Cast

Bette Davis (*Jane Hudson*)
Joan Crawford (*Blanche Hudson*)
Victor Buono (*Edwin Flagg*)
Anna Lee (*Mrs Bates*)
Maidie Norman (*Elvira Stitt*)
Marjorie Bennett (*Mrs Flagg*)
Barbara Merrill (*Liza Bates*)
Dave Willock (*Ray Hudson*)
Anne Barton (*Cora Hudson*)
Julie Allred (*Baby Jane*)
Gina Gillespie (*young Blanche*)

USA 1962©

132 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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