



**BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL**

# Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte

Following the unexpected success of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), Robert Aldrich didn't look far for a follow-up. Henry Farrell, author of the *Baby Jane* source novel had an unpublished story called 'What Ever Happened to Cousin Charlotte?' that screamed out for a reunion of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. In 1964's *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, Davis plays the title role, no longer so sweet, but a half-deranged ageing belle cooped up in a decaying Louisiana mansion, tormented by a grisly secret from her youth. Olivia de Havilland, who stepped in when Crawford walked out, plays her manipulative cousin Miriam. The cast is swelled by more eye-catching turns: Joseph Cotten, Mary Astor and most memorably of all, Agnes Moorehead as Charlotte's housekeeper Velma.

It's high-camp horror in the Southern Gothic vein, with a lurid first-act murder and Davis screeching in a voice that could strip paint, but there's a certain amount of classiness to proceedings too. Davis is in her element and de Havilland makes for a beautifully clinical villain, although it's hard not to imagine her predecessor in the role. Aldrich stages some remarkable set pieces, especially the mad scenes and the creepy prologue in which Davis plays the young Charlotte with her face in shadow. An especially eerie later sequence restages that scene, set at a 1920s ball, with all the guests wearing veils and the film overexposed to represent the shimmer of nitrate, or the whiff of the ethereal.

Seven Oscar nominations, including one for Moorehead and another for Joseph Biroc's monochrome photography, failed to translate into prizes, but the film remains a much-loved and admired gothic horror. Equipped as it is with mad women, leering tyrants, mysterious drugs, precipitous staircases and a seemingly reanimated corpse, it's never less than ghoulishly enjoyable.

**Pamela Hutchinson, *Sight & Sound*, March 2019**

## **Bette Davis on playing Charlotte Hollis**

The obvious question now was what parts, if any, Bette Davis felt she had had a ball with. 'I don't know. None, really, in quite that way. I find playing parts I don't believe in, parts that have to be played on sheer technique, very difficult, and I do it very badly, so I would never choose a part like that just to relax in. I really enjoy myself most in the parts I believe in most – Margo Channing, Regina in *The Little Foxes* – because if I believe in them the rest is relatively easy. Maxine Faulk in *Night of the Iguana* was a part like that; it really was a ball, because it is at once so funny and so completely true – I think the most complete and believable woman character Tennessee Williams has ever written.' (Incredibly, it was not written with Bette Davis in mind: she was approached to play Hannah Jelkes, and it was her own idea after reading the script that she should play the other.)

*Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, it would seem, has provided her with her least ball-like part of late. 'The role is a *cheat*,' she says emphatically. 'To begin with, it's the sort of film where you can't give anything away because

everything depends on keeping the audience guessing. The part of Charlotte really has to be played dishonestly, because though she didn't do the murder and knows that she didn't, she has to keep doing things in such a way that you think she might have, though there is no reason inherent in her situation in the story why she should. I tell you, it was one of the most difficult parts I have ever played; I just had to try to construct some sort of reality for the character in my own mind so that I could do it at all.'

Though in general she thinks that as a film *Charlotte* is incomparably better than *Baby Jane*, she regrets *Charlotte's* deviations from the original conception of Henry Farrell. Apparently the best scenes in the film – hers with Cecil Kellaway, the dinner, and the Mary Astor scenes ('Didn't she do them beautifully!' says Miss Davis with unaffected enthusiasm) – were precisely the ones taken over unchanged from the original treatment.

### **Robert Aldrich on Bette Davis**

*Were you pleased with [Davis'] performance in Baby Jane?*

I thought she was wonderful. But I also thought – the public won't agree, and certainly the critics won't agree – that the job she did in *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, because it was a much more difficult, narrow-edged part, and took much more talent and time and thought and care, was a better performance than *Baby Jane*, which was such a bravura, all-out Gothic eye-catcher that everybody thought it superior.

*What was the origin of Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte?*

It came from a three- or four-page original idea by Henry Farrell, author of the *Baby Jane* novel, that I found very exciting. I also wanted to re-team Davis and Crawford. Then Miss Crawford fell ill and was replaced by Olivia de Havilland. And Crawford was sick, seriously sick. If she'd been faking, as some reports then suggested, either the insurance company would never have paid the claim or she would never have been insurable again. Insurance companies here are terribly tough, there's no such thing as a made-up ailment that they pay you off on.

Eventually the insurance company offered us the alternatives of finding a replacement for Miss Crawford or scrapping the picture. As you can well imagine, there were great arguments about whom we should get. A number of ladies were considered, all of whom for a variety of reasons were not acceptable to all parties. There was also a contractual problem in that Davis had star approval. Until then it had been academic because she had approved Crawford, but it now became vitally important.

Obviously the ideal candidates would have been Vivien Leigh and Katharine Hepburn. Now it's not necessary that it should become a matter of public record why Davis didn't want either of those ladies. It is fair to say however that it had nothing to do with their talent. But there are deep-seated personal and historical reasons why she didn't want them. I won't say that Olivia was third choice, but Olivia was the first choice that was acceptable.

**Interview by Joel Greenberg, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1968-69**

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## HUSH...HUSH, SWEET CHARLOTTE

*Directed by:* Robert Aldrich  
*Production Companies:* The Associates and Aldrich, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
*Produced by:* Robert Aldrich  
*Associate Producer:* Walter Blake  
*Production Supervisor:* Jack R. Berne  
*Assistant Directors:* William McGarry, Sam Strangis, William F. Sheehan  
*Dialogue Supervisor:* Robert Sherman  
*Script Supervisor:* Robert Gary  
*Script Apprentice:* Adell Aldrich Bravos  
*Screenplay by:* Henry Farrell, Lukas Heller  
*From a story by:* Henry Farrell  
*Director of Photography:* Joseph Biroc  
*Stills:* Don Christie \*  
*Film Editor:* Michael Luciano  
*Art Director:* William Glasgow  
*Set Decorator:* Raphael Bretton  
*Property Master:* John Orlando  
*Construction Co-ordinator:* John La Salandra  
*Costumes Designed by:* Norma Koch  
*Make-up:* Gene Hibbs  
*Music by:* Devol  
*Orchestrations by:* Al Woodbury  
*Choreography:* Alex Ruiz \*  
*Sound Mixers:* Herman Lewis, Bernard Freericks

## Cast

Bette Davis (*Charlotte Hollis*)  
Olivia de Havilland (*Miriam Deering*)  
Joseph Cotten (*Dr Drew Bayliss*)  
Agnes Moorehead (*Velma Cruther*)  
Cecil Kellaway (*Harry Willis*)  
Victor Buono (*Eugene Samuel 'Big Sam' Hollis*)  
Wesley Addy (*Sheriff Luke Standish*)  
William Campbell (*Paul Marchand*)  
Bruce Dern (*John Mayhew*)  
Frank Ferguson (*newspaper editor*)  
George Kennedy (*foreman*)  
Dave Willock (*taxi driver*)  
John Megna (*new boy*)  
Percy Helton (*funeral director*)  
Kelly Flynn (*2nd boy*)  
Michael Petit (*gang leader*)  
Alida Aldrich (*young girl*)  
Marianne Stewart, Ellen Corby, Helen Kleeb (*town gossips*)  
Kelly Aldrich (*3rd boy*)  
Mary Henderson, Lillian Randolph, Geraldine West (*cleaning women*)  
William Aldrich (*boy dancer*)  
Carol De Lay (*Geraldine*)  
William Walker (*chauffeur*)  
Idell James (*Ginny Mae*)  
The Teddy Buckner All-Stars (*themselves*)  
Mary Astor (*Jewel Mayhew*)

USA 1964©  
133 mins

\* Uncredited

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## 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

With thanks to Martin Shingler

### Promotional drinks partner



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