



BETTE DAVIS: HOLLYWOOD REBEL

The Star

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In a role said to have been based on her nemesis Joan Crawford, Bette Davis plays Margaret, a struggling movie star desperate to relaunch her career despite being caught drink-driving. With the help of her daughter (Natalie Wood) and former actor Jim (Sterling Hayden), Margaret tries to find work but is unable to function outside of the industry she knows so well. None of Davis' films in the 50s delivered the box-office success of *All About Eve*, but *The Star* did provide her with yet another Oscar® nomination.

bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

Two recent films are dedicated to the splendours and miseries of Hollywood: *The Bad and the Beautiful* is a journey towards the interior of Babylon and one of its mighty, full of incidents and encounters, in structure derived from *Citizen Kane* and like Welles' film an attempt to explain the mysteries of a megalomaniac's progress; *The Star* is a close, direct character study of a famous actress who has passed her prime and is engaged in a death struggle with box-office poisoning. The first is nearly a good film, the second does little more than provide a rather dilapidated shrine for a remarkable performance by Bette Davis, but both are agreed in certain verdicts on Hollywood – the ephemeral nature of success, the violent dislocations of private life, the follies of uncontainable ambition, the narrow corner round which luxury turns to squalor, the moment of triumph to the eternities of abasement. Each offers its own reiterated metaphor for the conditions of life in Hollywood; *The Bad and the Beautiful* refers to 'the rat-race', *The Star* to 'the sleigh-ride', but whatever the method the end of the journey is a graveyard of overgrown hopes and illusions without memorial.

There is no doubt about the centre of *The Star*. Bette Davis, introduced in a memorable opening shot, as Margaret Elliot, once a top-line actress who now faces a sagging neckline, greedy creditors, a squalid furnished apartment, and in fact the annihilation of her *raison d'être*. She is a star or she is nothing. Berating her agent and her sponging relatives, going on a binge with her Oscar, trying to preserve her own legend for the young daughter who is living with her successful ex-husband and his second wife, she at last manages to gain a test for a character part and makes a fool of herself by trying to play it like a young star – and a spectacular crack-up seems inevitable. A rich subject: but the writers, having gone this far – already, from many points of view, quite a long way – vitiate it fatally with a banal regeneration motif (a faithful lover converts her to retirement, domestic bliss and the simple life), and the director, Stuart Heisler, offers only an inept technique and an apparently total lack of imagination. Apart from what it intermittently gains by being shot in and around Hollywood, the film is so slackly and uninterestingly put together that, at moments, a point in Bette Davis' own performance is sadly muffled.

All the same, it is well worth seeing not only for what it might have been but for the star; this actress of wonderful temperament and precision creates a

vivid , genuine figure, alternately pathetic and exasperating, gay and decrepit, vain, impossible and defenceless. That the character does not achieve complete coherence is due not to her but to inadequate construction. It is a portrait clearly drawn to some degree from personal experience, but on the artistic level not in the least self-indulgent or self-glamourising. One only hopes the film’s conclusion is not a portent of personal intention;·for Bette, it can at least be said, is better than ever.

James Morgan, *Sight and Sound*, April-June 1953

[The film] is redeemed, though not rescued, by Bette Davis’ performance. The part, a little less outsize than that in *All About Eve*, gives her better opportunities than she has had for some time, and she tears into it with a wonderful bravura display of rage, defiance, misery and ironic comedy. The tension and precision of her playing magnetically hold the attention, and, in such a conventional sequence as the drunken drive, or in the film’s best episode, the abortive screen test, she brings a vitality and an uncompromising conviction of her own to the fundamentally novelettish part.

Monthly Film Bulletin, April 1953

THE STAR

Director: Stuart Heisler
Production Company: Thor Productions
Producer: Bert Friedlob
Script: Katherine Albert, Dale Eunson
Photography: Ernest Laszlo
Editorial Supervision: Otto Ludwig
Music: Victor Young

Cast:
Bette Davis (*Margaret Elliot*)
Sterling Hayden (*Jim Johannson*)
Natalie Wood (*Gretchen*)
Warner Anderson (*Harry Stone*)
Minor Watson (*Joe Morrison*)
June Travis (*Phyllis Stone*)
Katherine Warren (*Mrs Morrison*)
Kay Riehl (*Mrs Adams*)
Barbara Woodell (*Peggy Morgan*)
Fay Baker (*Faith*)
Barbara Lawrence (*herself*)
USA 1952
90 mins

A BFI National Archive print

With thanks to Martin Shingler



Eve’s Poison Grab a Betty Davis inspired cocktail specially made with Sipsmith gin at BFI Riverfront this August.

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
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

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**