

Jezebel

By Gabriel Miller

In the summer of 1937, Hal Wallis, head of production at Warner Bros., asked William Wyler to direct JEZEBEL. Wyler was under contract to Samuel Goldwyn and had already directed adaptations of three successful Broadway plays, THESE THREE (1935; based on Lillian Hellman's THE CHILDREN'S HOUR), DODSWORTH (1936; based on Sidney Howard and Sinclair Lewis's dramatization of Lewis's novel), and DEAD END (1937; based on Sidney Kingsley's play). Wyler's contract allowed him to accept outside projects, and JEZEBEL was a work he was familiar with. Like the three projects he had directed for Goldwyn, JEZEBEL was based on a play, which, unlike the others, was a flop on Broadway, closing after just thirty-two performances. Its author, Owen Davis (1874-1956), was one of the most prolific writers in the history of the American stage, having contributed well over 150 plays, including the Pulitzer Prize -winning ICEBOUND (1923).

Wyler was familiar with the play. He had seen it on a trip to New York while working for Universal and had recommended it to Carl Laemmle Jr., saying, "I believe JEZEBEL contains an excellent foundation for a picture. It's a very dramatic love story....The weaknesses of the play can be overcome in a picture through the addition of many incidents and sequences only suggested and talked about. A good deal of action can be added. The atmosphere and costumes lend themselves to beauty in production."

Wyler's enthusiasm was shared by the studio's leading actress, Bette Davis, who had been trying to persuade Jack Warner that it would be a great vehicle for her. Warner Brothers promised Wyler a quality production, a name cast, and personal publicity, which he was not getting from Goldwyn. The pairing of Wyler and Davis would prove to be momentous, enhancing both of their careers and becoming one of the great director/ star pairings in Hollywood, and also one of the most contentious. Davis would win her second Best Actress Oscar for JEZEBEL, and she later received two more nominations under Wyler, for THE LETTER (1940; also for Warner Bros.) and THE LITTLE FOXES (1941; for Goldwyn).

In the months preceding Wyler's signing on to direct JEZEBEL, Bette Davis and Jack Warner were in court over her contract. She had left the studio in a dispute over the inferior roles she had been given after winning her first Oscar for DANGEROUS in 1935. Every time she refused a role, Warner forced her to take suspension. Objecting to these numerous suspensions, which also extended her contract, she left for England to make pictures there and tried un-



Bette Davis in "Jezebel" Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

successfully to break her contract. Warner not only won the suit but, in order to punish his star further, dropped his option on GONE WITH THE WIND, which was immediately purchased by David O. Selznick.

To keep the publicity machine greased by the record price he had paid for Margaret Mitchell's as-yet unpublished novel, Selznick launched a national search for an actress to play Scarlett O'Hara. The publicity surrounding GONE WITH THE WIND contributed to its becoming a best-seller and the most anticipated film in history. Jack Warner decided to take advantage of Scarlett mania by buying the rights to JEZEBEL with an eye to releasing it before GWTW. To ensure its success, Warner knew that he needed Davis. He wooed her by offering to pay her share of the legal expenses of their lawsuit and by giving her the role of Julie Marsden, the beautiful, but strong-willed and selfish heroine. It would be her first A-level film with a now top-billed director and a budget of around eight hundred thousand dollars. Much of the supporting cast came from Warner's able company of actors. George Brent, one of the studio's top leading men, played Buck Cantrell. Fay Bainter, who would win the Oscar as Best Supporting Actress, played Aunt Belle. Other players included Donald Crisp, Spring Byington, Margaret Lindsay, and Richard Cromwell. Henry Fonda, who was a year away from the roles that would make him famous, was a last-minute choice to play Preston Dillard, Julie's great love.

In Wyler, Davis would discover her ideal director. In her autobiography she wrote, "It was he who made me realize my full potential as an actress." According to Vincent Sherman, who would direct Davis in MR. SKEFFINGTON

(1944), "In the pictures she did at Warners prior to JEZEBEL, Bette had tremendous energy and a striking personality, but I don't think she was a terribly good actress. It was Willy Wyler who taught her something about films and film acting that she hadn't realized before: that the most effective moments in film were the silent moments." Davis also learned the value of small gestures and movement within the frame, which became an integral part of her characterization. Wyler's trademark techniques--deep focus photography, long takes, and staging within a scene--add depth and dimension to JEZEBEL. Wyler's classical style often plays against the melodrama of the source material by adding emotional and psychological depth. Wyler's camera collaborates with the actress, a notable example being when Pres (Fonda) breaks off his engagement with Julie. Her face and eyes follow him as he leaves, making camera movement unnecessary.

The film is beautifully structured, as Wyler builds its design around recurring and parallel sequences: the New Orleans street shots that frame the film; two formal dinners; two dinner parties in Julie's honor; her appearance at the Olympus Ball in a red dress, paralleled by her appearance at Halcyon in a white dress; and three sequences at the Long Bar at the St. Louis Hotel. Within the formality of the structure, Wyler created virtuoso sequences.

Julie's initial appearance is one such sequence. She makes a noisy arrival on horseback in the cobblestone entryway, sitting side saddle, wearing a long riding habit, and carrying a crop in her hand. She barks to her young slave who has trouble controlling the horse. Like her horse, Julie is hard to control and like Strindberg's Miss Julie, she thinks she can control her fiancé, Pres with a riding crop. Both women must learn that there are limits to their arrogance.

The arrival scene concludes with an inspired piece of business devised by Wyler. He wanted Davis to hike up the train of her dress with her riding crop and hook it over her shoulder as she strides into the house, and he asked Davis to practice it until it became second nature to her. When she thought she had perfected it, Wyler disagreed. Thirty-three takes later, he was finally satisfied. Furious, Davis demanded to see the takes, discovering that what she thought she had done the same way looked different each time. The later takes looked more natural, but because she was feeling irritable and tired, Davis seemed vibrant and excitable--which was precisely what Wyler wanted and the scene demanded.

The film's centerpiece is the Olympus ball, another of Wyler's creations, barely mentioned in the play and only briefly described in the script; early versions of the screenplay don't mention it at all. It took Wyler five days to film. The ball becomes the catalyst for Julie's descent into self-destruction. Wyler turns the dance into a study of the use of space. Julie's individualism is tested against the expanse of the ballroom, and her confidence breaks down. Julie's hauteur is dwarfed by the empty space of the ballroom floor; her red dress--which fills the screen twice, as Wyler cuts to it in close-up--emphasizes the enormity of her arrogance and her lack of judgment. The scene was set to the tempo of Max Steiner's waltz music and highlighted by Ernest Haller's camera, which darts behind pillars and travels up to the ceiling and down to the floor, taking in the costumes and the social pageantry of the occasion.

JEZEBEL opened at Radio City Music Hall on March 10, 1938. It garnered mostly excellent reviews, and Davis received raves. Some objected to Julie's conversion to goodness at the end, but Wyler's final profile shot of Davis--whose look, in one critic's words, "matches the blaze of the bonfire"--makes up for it. Wyler's filming went over schedule and exceeded its generous budget, but it made the studio a nice profit and was nominated for five Academy Awards.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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