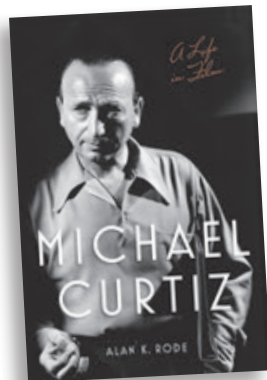


Warner Bros.' Crown Jewel

By Steve Chagollan



THE SUBJECT OF Alan K. Rode's exhaustive biography, *Michael Curtiz: A Life in Film* (University Press of Kentucky), was responsible for some of the most enduring classics of Hollywood's Golden Age. And yet the prolific director—whose career spanned from the silents in his native Hungary to the early '60s—was rarely afforded the same high regard as more auteurist contemporaries like Hitchcock, Hawks and Sturges. Instead of imposing a signature style, Curtiz served the story, whether it be a costume epic, literary adaptation, Western or melodrama. His career is irrevocably tied

to peak performances by some of the silver screen's biggest stars, including Errol Flynn, James Cagney, Joan Crawford and Humphrey Bogart, even if they all, to varying degrees, chafed at the director's often brusque and autocratic manner. Curtiz just as frequently rebelled against the mandates of studio heads and producers at Warner Bros.—his employer of some 30 years—not to veer from the script, and to simplify his style to keep costs down. But the work speaks for itself, and as Rode's book amply illustrates, Curtiz is being viewed in an entirely new light.

THE SEA HAWK (1940)

► Curtiz demonstrates the proper thrust and parry while making *The Sea Hawk*, the ninth of 11 films he'd make with Errol Flynn between 1935-1941. Although Rode writes that the actor "believed Curtiz was responsible for typecasting him as a comic-book hero of Westerns and swashbucklers," Flynn's star wattage was never higher than when Curtiz was in command.



CAPTAIN BLOOD (1935)

► This would be the first collaboration between Curtiz and newbie WB contract player Errol Flynn, and the highest-stakes project for Hal Wallis since taking over as head of production for Darryl Zanuck. But the director wasn't kind to his novice leading man. Nevertheless, "Curtiz's brutal critique of a raw Errol Flynn, in order to shape his performance ... would end up paying immediate dividends."



THE PRIVATE LIVES OF ELIZABETH AND ESSEX (1939)

► “There was no way that Jack Warner would entrust a picture of this magnitude to any other director than Curtiz,” Rode writes. And although there were clashes aplenty between star Bette Davis and Curtiz, what the two shared, assures Rode, “was a burning desire to make the best picture possible.”

(TOP) KOBAL COLLECTION; (BOTTOM LEFT) PHOTOFEET; (BOTTOM RIGHT & OPPOSITE) EVERETT



KING CREOLE (1958)

► After a trio of pictures that capitalized on his gyrating pop persona, Elvis Presley was given the chance to stretch his dramatic wings on *King Creole*. And producer Hal Wallis, who signed Elvis to a film contract, advised Curtiz to treat the star with kid gloves. “He provided the 21 year old with a minimum amount of direction and allowed him to exercise his own initiative,” writes Rode. “Elvis responded enthusiastically to Curtiz: ‘For the first time, I know what a director is,’” said the young man who would be King.

“(Curtiz) provided (Elvis Presley) with a minimum amount of direction and allowed him to exercise his own initiative.” —ALAN RODE



MILDRED PIERCE (1945)

► Starring Joan Crawford—cast off by MGM in 1944 as a has-been and regarded as little more than such by Jack Warner, who signed her on the cheap—*Mildred Pierce* would end up a triumph for the actress and the studio. And although the first week of production was characterized by more than the usual sparring between leading lady and director, “after the smoke cleared, Curtiz respected Crawford for doing what was best for the film,” writes Rode.

ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES (1938)

► Although Curtiz never helmed a gangster picture, the film—about the relationship between a hoodlum and a Catholic priest—stands as a high-water mark in the WB outlaw canon. Curtiz’s chemistry with James Cagney proved elastic and fruitful. “Both the star and the director made changes and additions that raised *Angels with Dirty Faces* to the level of something memorable”—a film of both epic scope and intense, character-driven intimacy.



“The star and director had developed a bond of trust.”

—RODE ON CAGNEY AND CURTIZ



YANKEE DOODLE DANDY (1942)

► Shooting commenced on this George M. Cohan biopic the day after Pearl Harbor, adding to the patriotic fervor on the set. As Rode writes, “The star and director had developed a bond of trust. Curtiz knew he did not have to explain to Cagney how a scene should be played, nor did Cagney need to tell the director how to shoot the picture.” Cagney would win an Oscar for his performance.



PHOTOS: (TOP & BOTTOM RIGHT) PHOTOFEET; (BOTTOM LEFT & OPPOSITE) EVERETT



THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD (1938)

► William Keighley, who would receive a co-director credit, was replaced by Curtiz two months into production on Warners’ most expensive picture to date, shot in what film scholar David Thomson described as “stained-glass Technicolor.” Producer Hal Wallis later recalled that “only Mike Curtiz could give the picture the color and scope that it needed.” According to Rode, the energetic pace and pictorial dynamics established by Curtiz were immediate.

THE SEA WOLF (1941)

► An adaptation of Jack London’s celebrated novel, *The Sea Wolf*, was a marked departure from Curtiz’s high seas forebears. “Instead of a rousing adventure film,” Rode writes, “Curtiz staged *The Sea Wolf* as an exercise in anxiety-laden dread... The shots of the ship in motion are silently sepulchral.”

FOUR DAUGHTERS

(1938)

► Although the success of this film led to three sequels, *Four Daughters* is best remembered as the striking debut of Group Theatre alum John Garfield. As Rode notes, Curtiz and Garfield shared “a unique artistic sensibility wedded to fierce ambition,” as well as a mutual respect. Given Curtiz’s heavy Hungarian accent, directives were not always clear to those new to working with him. “Although it took him a while to decrypt the director’s bollixed syntax, Garfield realized that Curtiz knew exactly what he was doing,” writes Rode.



“Garfield realized that Curtiz knew exactly what he was doing.” —ALAN RODE

THE EGYPTIAN (1954)

► In his first post-Warner Bros. film, Curtiz reunited with producer and ex-WB colleague Darryl Zanuck, who famously hired Marlon Brando, fresh off of *On the Waterfront*, for the title role. But one encounter with Curtiz and Brando was out. The film was meant to capitalize on the epic sword-and-sandals craze of the time, not to mention 20th Century Fox’s Cinemascope technology. “No expense was spared to make every detail as authentic as possible,” Rode writes. “From a pictorial perspective, *The Egyptian* is probably one of the most historically accurate movies ever made.” But ultimately, the spectacle was undone by unfortunate casting and a passive, existential hero.



CASABLANCA (1942)

► *Casablanca* was known for many things: as a rousing call to arms during the war years, its colorful ensemble cast, Bogart’s breakthrough performance, and its revolving door of scribes. “The screenwriters didn’t have an easy time working with Curtiz, whose story conception often relied on his mind’s eye with the camera,” writes Rode. The author quotes one of the film’s co-screenwriters, Julius Epstein: “Curtiz was marvelous on the visual side of directing,” recalled the Oscar winner. “He knew just when the cigarette smoke should curl backward...”



PHOTOS: PHOTOFEET, (OPPOSITE) BFI