



TCM BREAKFAST CLUB SCREENING

The African Queen | 1951

Directed by John Huston

The African Queen (1951) based on the 1935 novel of the same name by C. S. Forester, marked a first for director John Huston – it was his debut colour film. The story is set in Africa during World War One and is woven around the boozing, chain-smoking skipper of a cranky tramp steamer (Humphrey Bogart), and a prim missionary spinster (Katharine Hepburn) who are thrown together on a perilous journey through German-occupied territory. Against all the odds, they fall in love as they travel down river towards their date with destiny – the destruction of a German warship. TCM writer David Humphrey describes how the making of the film, being shown in a new 35mm print as part of the BFI's John Huston season on tour, was almost as tumultuous as the story itself.

This, Bogart and Hepburn's first on-screen pairing, was an undoubted triumph. John Mills, David Niven, and Bette Davis had also been considered for the lead roles but the choice of Bogart and Hepburn turned out to be inspirational. But things didn't run smoothly during the filming in sun-baked east Africa: Hepburn in particular had a number of distressing experiences which she recalled in her 1987 book *The Making of the African Queen*, or

How I Went to Africa with Bogart, Bacall and Huston and Almost Lost My Mind. On the first day of shooting, five cars and trucks took the cast, crew and equipment three and a half miles from Biondo to the Ruiki river, where they loaded everything onto boats and sailed another two and a half miles to the shooting location. Here they endured such miseries as dysentery, malaria, bacteria-filled drinking water and several close brushes with wild

animals and venomous snakes. Not surprisingly, most of the cast and crew were sick for much of the shoot. Huston hired local natives to help the crew, but many would not show up because they were convinced the filmmakers were cannibals. Meanwhile, to show her revulsion at the enormous amount of alcohol Huston and Bogart consumed during filming, Hepburn drank only water, which prompted a severe bout of dysentery. Hepburn also claimed Huston was obsessed with hunting, and that on one occasion he inadvertently led her into the middle of a herd of wild animals from which they were lucky to escape alive.

Forty years later, Clint Eastwood used the film as the inspiration for *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990), describing how an obstinate, contrary director goes to Africa to make a movie but becomes obsessed with hunting down an elephant. Shot on location in the then Belgian Congo and the British colony of Uganda, *The African Queen* was Huston's ninth feature film and his fifth with Bogart. It was nominated for four Oscars - best actress (Katharine Hepburn), best screenplay (James Agee and John Huston), best director, and best actor (Humphrey Bogart), but Bogart was the only one to win (it was the sole Academy Award of his career). Filming was a truly international experience. The scenes in the reed-filled riverbank were shot in Dalyan, Turkey, and because the boat was too small to carry cameras and equipment, bits were reproduced on a large raft in order to shoot close-ups of the two stars. Interior and water-tank scenes were filmed in London, as were most of the scenes containing secondary characters. Meanwhile the redoubtable Robert Morley shot all of his scenes in London, including the

footage of him preaching, which was then edited together with shots of the natives praying, that had been filmed in Africa.

Shortly after filming was completed, a fan magazine published an article allegedly written by Lauren Bacall, who had accompanied her husband, Bogart, on location. Romulus Films protested at the publication of the behind-the-scenes photos but Bacall denied having written the story. In another unsettling episode, Berlin's film trade union requested that *The African Queen* be withdrawn from the Berlin Film Festival because of its "anti-German tendencies". Bogart and John Huston had the best time of all: they never got sick during the shoot and attributed this to the fact that they lived almost exclusively on imported Scotch. Bogart later said: "All I ate was baked beans, canned asparagus and Scotch whiskey. Whenever a fly bit Huston or me, it dropped dead." Meanwhile Bacall's decision to go to Africa to be with her husband, helping with the camp and cooking, marked the beginning of her life-long friendship with Bogart's co-star, Hepburn.

Further reading:

John Huston's *Filmmaking* by Lesley Brill (Cambridge University Press); *The Hustons: The Life and Films of a Hollywood Dynasty* by Lawrence Grobel (Cooper Square Press); *The Films of John Huston* by John McCarty (Citadel Press) *The Making of the African Queen, or How I Went to Africa with Bogart, Bacall and Huston and Almost Lost My Mind* by Katharine Hepburn (NAL) *Bogart: A Definitive Study of His Film Career* by Terence Pettigrew (Proteus)

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From **25th February – 3rd March**, TCM 2 celebrates the **75th Birthday of Elizabeth Taylor**, whose 63 year career has cemented her status as a legendary star. To pay homage to this screen siren, TCM 2 has plucked three films from her archive – **The Last Time I Saw Paris**; **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof** and **The Comedians**. Catch these and more on TCM 2 from 7pm every day.