



## Dissecting a Great Scene

### Looking at the "La Marseilles" scene from *Casablanca*.

It's nice to believe that our camera work, audio, lighting, and directing are the magic ingredients that make or break a production. However, successful film and television production is really a delicate act of choreography that balances all of those factors and more into an intricate dance.

Once in a great while, you'll find a scene from a film that demonstrates this fact perfectly. Bruce's favorite scene in the history of film is the "La Marseilles" scene from the 1942 classic *Casablanca*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, and directed by Michael Curtiz ([www.bogartfilms.com](http://www.bogartfilms.com)).

If you dissect this scene carefully, you see that the acting, shot selection, and editing work together to heighten the emotional impact of the unfolding story. Let's break down the scene and shed some light on what makes it work so well. Grab your *Casablanca* DVD and follow along. The scene we're watching begins in Chapter 27 on the DVD, about 1:12 into the film.

As you're watching, pay attention to the total lack of special effects, other than an omnipresent haze of what appears to be cigarette smoke, and lighting that takes advantage of that smoke in the air. The production techniques are so simple that they seem almost quaint, which makes us appreciate all the more the high level of craft.

Remember that this film premiered on November 23, 1942—well over a year before D-Day, the Allied invasion that marked the beginning of the liberation of France and eventually the rest of Europe. The filmmakers had goals beyond just entertainment.

The scene opens with Rick Blaine (Bogart) in the office above his bar, Rick's Café Americain, talking to Czechoslovakian resistance leader Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid). In the background, we hear German soldiers starting to sing the unofficial Nazi anthem "Horst Wessel." Because the bar is full of Free French refugees, the singing could be seen as a provocative act. Still, the French do nothing.

The scene cuts to the German soldiers singing with gusto around the piano they have commandeered from Rick's piano player, Sam (Dooley Wilson). A wide shot from the top of the stairs follows, with Rick passing in front of the camera to establish his point of view on the scene. The shot also gives the viewer a mental map of where the major players are located.



The DVD of the 1942 film *Casablanca* makes a great tool for studying the production techniques that made the film a classic.

We cut back to an MS (medium shot) of the German soldiers singing, with their leader Major Heinrich Strasser (Conrad Veidt) on the lead. The camera pans left to another major character, Prefect of Police Captain Louie Renault (Claude Rains). Portrayed a few scenes earlier as a Nazi stooge—"I blow with the wind, and the prevailing wind blows from Vichy"—we see from the disgusted glance he throws at the Germans that he might be having second thoughts. His gaze shifts up to Rick and Laszlo. The camera takes that visual cue and cuts to Rick and Laszlo standing at the top of the stairs, surveying the scene below. Laszlo gets incensed and storms downstairs.

Next is an MWS (medium-wide shot) of the Germans singing. In the foreground we see Yvonne (Madeleine LeBeau), a French woman and Rick's jilted lover, who has been having relations with German soldiers. She's looking miserable, as if wracked with guilt over her behavior. So far in the film, she has not been a sympathetic character. The next shot features Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), who is secretly married to Laszlo. The camera dollies in as her face darkens with concern when Laszlo rushes past their table.

The camera dollies again in the next shot, an MWS that tightens to an MS as Laszlo

demands the bandleader play the French national anthem, "La Marseilles." A CU (close-up) reverse cutaway shows the bandleader sheepishly looking to Rick for permission. Rick nods, and we start to suspect that Rick might not be as neutral on world politics as he professes.

The band strikes up "La Marseilles," with Laszlo singing at the top of his lungs. You can say what you want about the French, but they have a great, stirring national anthem. There is a ton of symbolism in this shot—including a Czech rallying the French to stand up for themselves—but the camera work, lighting, and action is simple. Those elements don't get in the way of the story.

But the shot is flawed by the biggest technical glitch in the whole scene. The music cue starts well before any of the band members have raised their instruments to their lips. However, the scene is by now so wrought with emotion that you may not notice, and if you do, you probably don't really care.

The audio performance and editing is impressive. Listen carefully and you'll hear the German song and the French national anthem merge into a twisted, sardonic round, weaving into and out of each other



## PRODUCTION ISSUES



This shot of Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), Sam (Dooley Wilson), and Señor Ferreri (Sydney Greenstreet), like all of the shots in *Casablanca*, is well lit, framed, and acted. But it's the balance of these crafts and the quality of the storytelling that makes the film memorable.

as adeptly as if both were composed that way from the beginning.

The crowd really starts to get into it. A flamenco guitar player (Corrina Mura) sings in a beautiful soprano voice while strumming furiously. Cut to the Nazis, with Major Strasser exhorting his troops to sing louder. Cut to an MWS of the room, with the French on their feet and singing at the top of their lungs.

Cut back to Strasser and the Nazis realizing they are beaten. They quiet down and slink back to their table, looking like a litter of whipped puppies. A CU of Yvonne follows—she is singing while tears stream down her cheeks. It's here we regain a bit of sympathy for her.

Most directors would have considered that sequence enough, but the scene is just getting started. The next four shots shape the rest of the film. We cut back to an MWS of Laszlo in front of the band, leading the crowd. Next we have a CU of Ilsa, looking like she might faint from worry. Her husband is putting himself in the Nazis' crosshairs again, and her life is going to be turmoil—or worse. Her shoulders heave as she breathes heavily.

The next cut is perfect: an MCU (medium close-up) of Laszlo singing the chorus of "La Marseilles." Wham! Right on the beat.

*Aux armes, citoyens!  
Formez vos bataillons!  
Marchons! Marchons!  
Qu'un sang impur  
Abreuve nos sillons!*

Now I don't know enough French to buy a croissant in Paris, yet I instinctively know what Laszlo is singing, and so does any other viewer. Translated:



Neither Ingrid Bergman nor Paul Henreid have much dialog in the "La Marseilles" scene, but both move it forward largely through facial expressions.

To arms, fellow citizens!  
Let us form our armies!  
Let us march! Let us march!  
That their impure blood  
Should water our fields!

The following shot contains a masterpiece of subtle acting. Ilsa's face goes from terrified to calm and full of pride for her husband and his desire to help these people liberate themselves. Ingrid Bergman hardly moves a muscle, yet the effect is unmistakable and incredibly poignant.

The song wraps up with Laszlo, now facing the crowd, leading them ever onward. We get another CU of Yvonne, crying her eyes out and shouting, "Vive la France!" Major Strasser surveys the scene in an MCU. Well-wishers throng around Laszlo and take him off to buy him a drink.

Strasser has had enough. He gets up, strides across the room to Captain Renault, and demands he close Rick's bar. In another slight attempt at defiance, Renault protests, "But everyone is having such a good time!" Strasser insists, and Renault blows his whistle, tells everyone to leave, and then utters a famous line in the history of film.

Rick storms up and asks why he is being shut down. Renault famously replies, "I'm shocked! Shocked to find that gambling is going on here!"

Just then, the croupier (Marcel Dalio) hands him a wad of bills, his winnings for the night. Renault becomes hypocrisy in human form, a government weasel trying to get by without conviction.

The scene continues for a few more shots, including an exchange between Ilsa and Major Strasser, but for all practical purposes, it's over.

People who have no emotional reaction to this scene have a cinder where their hearts should be. Thirty-five shots, more or less, and great writing, acting, lighting, directing, and editing make this scene a classic.

It's the heart of a great film, and it is impossible to imagine *Casablanca* without it. ■

The Rev. **John Jackman** and **Bruce A. Johnson** are broadcast veterans with over 40 years of combined experience. You can reach them in the DV.com Forums.