

Who Do You Choose To Be?

Dear friends, I trust you'll forgive the rather sombre tone of this column in contrast to what I can only surmise are fairly light-hearted goings-on upon the stage before you. 'Casablanca – The Musical', I am reliably informed, is a spoof version of the classic 1942 movie, so the more complex political nuances of the story may well get lost in the scrum for laughs. I know it will be enjoyable, delightful and enriching as all Workshop productions are. But I want to take this opportunity to highlight just one of the moments in the movie to help me draw out something I've been chewing on a lot lately.

You see, as I'm sure you don't need me to remind you, these are difficult times we're living through. Complex, messy, angry, upsetting and scary times. Divisive times. Terrifying times. Times when it sometimes – let's face it, most of the time – feels like the only thing we can do is bury our heads in the sand (TV, Youtube, alcohol, drugs, Bodyguard...) and ignore the world until it jolly well sorts itself out... But the world 'sorting itself out' doesn't look like it's going to happen any time soon, does it? In fact, quite the reverse... it looks like we're rapidly on the way to an extremely warm and uncomfortable place in a wheeled receptacle that can be manually pushed...

So, what has the story of 'Casablanca', as featured in the Warner Bros. classic film, got to teach us about the times we're living in? Let's focus in on one key moment in the story, shall we?

Spoilers for the film from here on inAlthough if you haven't seen Casablanca yet, what the hell kind of life are you living?***It's a total, stone cold, unadulterated classic, donchaknow?***

Here's the scene. We're in Rick's Bar, a den of vice and iniquity in Casablanca during World War II. This town is beyond the control of the Nazis and the Allies and people come here trying to escape from Nazi-occupied Europe to freedom in the US (those were the days...). Rick is a hard-nosed, cynical opportunist who takes no sides in this conflict, preferring to profit from all. When his long-lost love, Ilsa, comes to his bar with her husband, freedom fighter Victor Laszlo, seeking a way out of Europe, Rick is determined not to help them to escape. Victor appeals to his sense of humanity – and Rick argues that he doesn't have one. He's not taking sides. And that's that.

And then this happens...

The Nazis hanging out in the bar downstairs commandeer a piano and begin bashing out a hateful nationalistic tune about the Fatherland called 'Die Wacht am Rhein' (The Watch on the Rhine). Laszlo promptly marches over to Sam, the house pianist, and his band, and demands that they play 'La Marseillaise', the French National Anthem. A horrible moment of doubt hangs in the air as Sam looks to Rick for guidance... And Rick nods...

The band play and the whole bar stands and sings in defiance, drowning out the Nazis who are forced to stop singing. It's an incredible scene in the film and a wonderful statement of defiance made all the more poignant by the fact that it was filmed during World War II.

The key moment is when Rick nods. It is this moment when he takes a stand, when he decides which side he is on in the face of all this division and hatred. It is this moment when he chooses who he is.

I would argue that we are all faced with the same choice as Rick. Right now. Today. Who do WE choose to be? Do we prefer not to take sides, not stand up for what we believe, stick our heads in the sand – or the latest series to binge watch – and hope it will all just work itself out? Or do we take a stand?

I understand why it is hard to make such a choice. It was hard for Rick. In fact, it totally changed the course of his life, that nod to his band. Choices like that have consequences far beyond the moment in which they are made. But sometimes that's just what life is all about. Making choices. Standing up. Saying "enough". Saying "no"... You see, the real difficulty with taking a stand is this:

First you have to take a stand.

And then you actually have to stand there...

So... I hope you enjoy the show. And I hope you take this question home with you:

Who do YOU choose to be?

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