THE CASABLANCA MAN

The cinema of Michael Curtiz

JAMES C. ROBERTSON

ROUTLEDGE

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ABBREVIATIONS

HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
IRA	Irish Republican Army
MGM	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
OWI	Office of War Information
TCF	Twentieth Century-Fox
USC	University of Southern California

INTRODUCTION

For just over half a century the author has been an incurable but inexpert film fan whom *Yankee Doodle Dandy, Casablanca*, and *Mildred Pierce* much impressed when as a boy in his early teens he first saw them in the 1940s. As an adult he has seen each of them again many times, initial wonderment being gradually transformed into a fascination extending to other post–1945 films of Hungarian-born director Michael Curtiz as well as to some of Curtiz's earlier works which he had been too young to see upon their original release. Puzzled in later life as to why a director who could turn out such outstanding films remained comparatively unrecognized relative to other eminent contemporary Hollywood directors, he at length set out to discover as much about Curtiz and his films as possible.

Nowadays Curtiz is best known for the superb *Casablanca*, for a handful of other 1930s and 1940s features, for his genre versatility, for his fractured English, and for his verbal abuse of players. However, there was clearly much more to his career than all this, for his overall output from 1912 to 1961 remains one of the highest in cinema history. More than two-thirds of his approximately 160 films were made outside his own country, while about half of them were sound movies not in his native tongue. This of itself ranks as a considerable achievement even if all his films had been mediocre, but in fact some like *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), and *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938) as well as the three 1940s films already mentioned are acknowledged classics of their various genres and many others are of well above average quality. Yet at Curtiz's death in 1962, when the cinema was in manifest decline, he was accorded little more than token recognition.

At that time an academic debate was in full swing between writers who saw the director as the main element, or the auteur, of a film, purveying an identifiable attitude or message, and critics who denied that the director's function was all-important. As early as 1917 in Hungary Curtiz expressed the view that the director acted as the supreme

co-ordinator,[1] but by virtue of his position as the recently appointed head of the Phoenix company he was then both director and producer, and it is unclear how he regarded the function of a separate producer as the representative of studio administration and policy, the later American pattern within which he worked after joining Warner Brothers in 1926. Although, like all Hollywood directors, Curtiz from then onwards operated within a studio assembly-line system, the Warner Brothers records at the University of Southern California reveal conclusively that his basic 1917 film-making philosophy never changed. It might have lain largely subdued prior to the mid–1930s success of *Captain Blood*, but when he had become Warners' top director, he once compared a film scene with characters and background to an artist's unfinished canvas and saw himself as mixing the paints to finish the canvas properly.[2]

Thus Curtiz might have been an example for the auteurists to cite in support of their theory. However, because his individualism was hidden from public view and he could not be associated with any one genre, they implicitly regarded him as merely a studio workhorse. This was an interpretation to which his long service for Warners lent surface plausibility. Those who challenged the validity of auteurism, the disciples in varying degrees of distinguished American film critic Robert Warshow who had died in 1955, viewed Curtiz in much the same way since the course of his Hollywood career seemed to confirm the accuracy of their general approach.

The disagreement over auteurism persists to this day. In Curtiz's case neither faction was ready to claim him directly in his immediate *post mortem* years, but whereas the auteurists simply ignored him, some film writers tending towards anti-auterism applied the theory to his work. The most influential was Andrew Sarris who within a year of Curtiz's death declared,

> Perhaps more than any other director, Curtiz reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the studio system in Hollywood. This most amiable of Warners' technicians faithfully served the studio's contract players. . . . If many of the early Curtiz films are hardly worth remembering, none of the later ones are even worth seeing. . . . The director's one enduring masterpiece is, of course, *Casablanca*, the happiest of happy accidents, and the most decisive exception to the auteur theory.[3]

In the same vein an article soon afterwards attributed the quality of *Casablanca* more to its players than to Curtiz without taking into account the possibility that Curtiz had chosen the players in the first place.[4] This 1960s trend went so far that one retrospective *Casablanca* reviewer commented that nobody had yet erected Curtiz into a cult figure, and that it was hard to imagine anyone ever would do so.[5]

However, by the late 1960s the Sarris vision of Curtiz was called into question by John Baxter,[6] a Curtiz admirer prepared to judge him by what he saw on the screen. During the 1970s Baxter was supported by a number of other authors,[7] but by the later part of the decade the Sarris interpretation was still much prevalent and no consensus had emerged. This can be seen in contrasting, near-simultaneous late 1970s observations by two eminent film historians. In his discussion of the individual contributions to *Captain Blood* Jeffrey Richards remarked that Curtiz was a master technician and supreme visual stylist who had been consistently undervalued because his work lacked a programmatic auteurism.[8] On the other hand William K. Everson regarded him as a loyal studio director who accepted whatever films were assigned to him and delivered them to studio specification rather than personal preference. He used stylistic innovations, but he did not rebel artistically. Surprisingly he became a tasteful and personal director towards the end of his career, and *The Breaking Point* was arguably his one masterpiece which, however, came too late in his career and was too commercially unsuccessful for it to open up new career opportunities.[9]

This dichotomy has scarcely altered to the present day. One article and one book during the 1980s were favourable to Curtiz, but their coverage of his work lacked depth despite the availability of the massive Warners production records since 1978. Consequently Curtiz has remained suspended in a half-way house situation, although the 'studio hack' view still exerts a powerful sway, as demonstrated recently by Joel Finler. In his view Curtiz was an extremely skilled and efficient filmmaker, whose visual style was owed to his art directors and cameramen. Even though his budgets increased and his output decreased in later years, he retained a contract director's mentality to the very end of his career.[10]

Responsibility for the divisions of opinion lies partly with Curtiz himself. Too busy making films to write an autobiography, he also made only rare contributions to film journals, while his press interviews, although more frequent, were none the less few and far between. What little exists in these respects is unreliable owing to Curtiz's poor memory regarding his own past. There were discrepancies in his various Hollywood statements concerning his life in Europe,[11] but this was not an isolated phenomenon. In 1948 he recalled that his Austrian film career had begun twenty-five years earlier whereas in fact it was twenty-nine.[12] In the mid–1950s he stated that Harry Warner had signed him when he was 26 years old in Paris while he was filming *Sodom and Gomorrah*,[13] but he was actually 36 years of age (in 1925), the film had been completed two years previously, and none of it had been shot in Paris. He once imagined that he had directed Humphrey Bogart in *Santa Fe Trail*, which he had probably confused with *Virginia City*.[14] He took little interest in

his own films after their release and was surprised when reminded about sequences from them.[15] Although he seems to have left no private correspondence or other papers, this gap is partly filled by the Warners production material, particularly for the important years of 1935–51, when the studio documentation is at its most detailed. This plum source is supplemented by other papers, most notably those of Jack Warner. Impressions of Curtiz at work on the set appear in the daily reports of the unit managers to the Warners top hierarchy, while the daily time sheets and records of footage and sequences filmed, together with locations, help to establish his film priorities. He rarely committed himself to paper while actually directing a film, but on other occasions he did do so, sometimes at length, usually over scripts or casting. In addition the contemporary, largely unpublished memoranda of the unit managers have from time to time been retroactively supplemented by memoirs of some others who worked with him, mostly players.

While the Warners material is indispensable to an overall evaluation of Curtiz, it sheds almost no light on his European career because there are no extant records of his early Warners years regarding film production in action, while such material from 1931 to mid–1935 is also very sparse. English-language writers on Curtiz have tended to treat his European work as a mere prelude to a Hollywood career pinnacle and to assume that the American influence upon him was greater than vice versa. This is certainly possible, even probable, but it cannot be assumed, for when he arrived in the United States, he was already 37 years old with some sixty films behind him. It is thus unlikely that the influencing process lay purely in one direction, if only because he was the one Warners director in the late 1920s and 1930s who had also been the head of a film company, however small by comparison. The Curtiz propensity in his first Warners years to exercise his own initiative has been recorded by two of his few Hollywood close friends, Jack Warner and Hal Wallis, although their memoirs, both published after Curtiz's death, contain only brief references to him. Other reminiscences mainly reflect Hollywood gossip about his pre–1926 life rather than authenticated fact, for he was known there as a very private man, while no Curtiz family member has expanded our knowledge of his European life.

All these factors, always coupled with Curtiz's exceptionally heavy film output, go far to explain why no comprehensive study of his work has previously been undertaken and therefore why diametrically opposed views of him as a director still obtain so long after his death. In particular his European career has been almost totally neglected, although it was in Europe where his formative, possibly the most crucial, professional years of his life were spent, and where any panoramic survey of Curtiz's work must begin.

1

EUROPE, 1888 to 1926

Nothing definite is known about Michael Curtiz's early life except that he was born as Mihaly Kertesz in Hungary during the late nineteenth century. All other supposed data ultimately derive, in one form or another, from Curtiz himself who is unreliable since he gave out different versions at different times. For example, in 1929 his father was an architect,[1] whereas in 1947 he had become an impoverished carpenter.[2] In other respects Curtiz's 1929 biography, as issued by Warner Brothers publicity department, contains several now demonstrable glaring inaccuracies, while two 1947 press interviews he gave are inconsistent in that one claimed his family was in Vienna when he was 10 years old,[3] and the other that he attended high school and university in Hungary before going to Vienna.[4] The totality of the evidence is complex and the whole truth will probably never emerge beyond all doubt, but the greatest likelihood is that he was born in Budapest on or about 24 December 1888 to upper middle-class Jewish parents, and that he attended high school, university and drama academy before making his Budapest acting début in 1910. He might also have left home for a short time in 1906 or thereabouts to become a travelling circus member.[5]

From 1910 to 1912 Curtiz, whose mother was perhaps a concert singer, acted in and possibly directed plays before he turned his attention to film-making. At that time Hungary possessed no established film industry, but Budapest's newly emerged thriving cultural life was centred upon cafés where many Jews, comprising one-quarter of the city population, were deeply involved in creative activity. Actors and theatre critics frequented such cafés which showed films, and Curtiz probably first came into contact with film in this way and naturally gravitated towards films, as many actors did, either to earn extra money or to compensate for an inability to obtain good stage parts.[6] In 1910 the only Hungarian film company was Projectograph, founded in 1898, but it had merely distributed foreign fiction films and produced short education films and newsreels for showing in Hungary until 1912 when the threat of competition appeared from new Hungarian film companies preparing to make feature films. This

prompted Projectograph to film *Today and Tomorrow*,[7] the first Hungarian feature, in which Curtiz starred. He possibly directed it as well, for thirty-five years later he plausibly maintained that when he arrived for the film, he found that Projectograph had not been able to afford a director and he himself took over as director from the cameraman on the basis of his stage experience.[8] After directing two or three more feature films he went to Copenhagen in 1913 to learn as much as possible about film-making at the Nordisk company, then the most important in Europe, with which Projectograph had close links.[9]

During his six-month stay at Nordisk, Curtiz changed his name to Michael Courtice, was taught the latest directing and editing techniques, starred in August Blom's *Atlantis*, and possibly directed another film, now unknown. Early in 1914 he returned to Budapest and directed several more films in a freelance capacity – alternating between the Projectograph, Uher and Kinoriport companies – before the First World War broke out. One of his pre-war Kinoriport films, *Bank ban* (a proper name), was Curtiz's first major commercial success and the first Hungarian film to be shot on location. When war erupted, Curtiz evidently joined the Austro-Hungarian army as an officer, but his military service ended in 1915 when he was apparently wounded seriously enough to be unable to fight again and was released to make documentary films to bolster Red Cross funds (another 1929 unsubstantiated Curtiz claim). However, before 1915 was out he was directing in Budapest once more and by the end of 1916 he had directed many more features and become a major figure in the Hungarian film world. Most of his films had been financially successful, with the result that when a new company, Phoenix, was formed from Projectograph at the beginning of 1917, he became its head and in this producer–director position considerably increased his output over the next two years. In this period he registered several large box-office draws.

During 1919 political events halted his thus far spectacular career progress. In November 1918 the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its German ally had lost the war, and in the process Hungarian internal stability had given way to turmoil. In March 1919 there came to power a Communist government which lasted barely five months, but this was long enough for the Hungarian film industry to be nationalized in April. Undoubtedly Curtiz fled from the country during 1919 when he was filming what would have been the first version of Ferenc Molnar's play, *Liliom*, but it is uncertain whether he left to escape Communist domination of his studio or collaborated with the Communists, perhaps unwillingly, and then feared anti-Communist retribution after the Communist government fell.

Whatever the reason for his flight from Hungary, Vienna was his natural destination because it was the pre-war Austro-Hungarian

Empire's acknowledged cultural centre and was still exerting a powerful hold upon the central European creative mind. Moreover, Austria was more politically stable than Hungary and had no major film industry. Although the first Austrian feature film had been made in 1912, fewer than a hundred features had appeared by the end of the war and almost half of these had been made during 1918 itself. In 1919 a dramatic rise in Austrian feature-film output was taking place, and in Vienna Curtiz contacted Count Alexander Kolowrat, a most remarkable wealthy nobleman nicknamed Sascha, to whose pioneering endeavours the burgeoning Austrian film industry had owed much. Between 1914 and 1916 Kolowrat had had built a large film studio in Vienna which had produced more than twenty films by the end of the war. Under his leadership the Sascha company had become dominant within the Austrian film industry which he intended to make the most important in Europe. Accordingly he hired Curtiz, a decision which led to a fruitful collaboration between them until mid–1926 when Kolowrat was dying of the cancer which eventually killed him in December 1927. Reverting in Vienna to the name of Michael Courtice, Curtiz by the end of 1920 had established himself as the Sascha studio's leading director despite his then rudimentary knowledge of German.[10]

From 1921 until his move to Hollywood Curtiz directed close to a score of films for Sascha, and in 1922–3 he broke new ground for the Austrian film industry with *Sodom and Gomorrah*. This two-part Biblical epic was the first Austrian film to be shot on location, with spectacular sets influenced by the Babylonian sequences in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*. In 1924 Curtiz directed his best Austrian feature, *The Slave Queen*, known as *Moon of Israel* in Britain and the United States, the first film that the Sascha studio co-produced with a foreign company, Stoll-Phoebus Picture Productions of London. A virtual remake of Cecil B. de Mille's 1923 *The Ten Commandments*, its epic nature rendered it ideal for a repeat performance of the location shooting which had characterized *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Based upon the novel by Sir H. Rider Haggard who wrote the sub-titles for the British version, *The Slave Queen* traces the romance between heir to the ancient Egyptian throne Adelqui Millar and Jewish slave girl Maria Corda. However, the screenplay of Ladislaus (Laszlo) Vadja, with whom Curtiz had worked in Hungary, and Curtiz's own direction subordinated the plot to magnificent spectacle. The highlight is the Jews' flight across the Red Sea, a sequence involving 5,000 extras and splendid special effects created by Kolowrat personally. The film opened in Vienna on 24 October 1924 and a shortened version in London less than a month later.[11] One British review concluded that the film's high quality was due mainly to Curtiz.[12]

Initially *The Slave Queen* did not win its director recognition, still less acclaim, in the English-speaking world because it was not released in the United States where Paramount bought the American rights and then kept it out of circulation in case it outshone *The Ten Commandments*. But *The Slave Queen*'s success in London gave rise to further Sascha international productions which for Curtiz meant trips to Paris, Copenhagen and Berlin for scenes in his last three Austrian films. However, the president of Warner Brothers, Harry M. Warner, had travelled to Europe in November 1925 in search of new talent, and he met Curtiz in Paris when the latter was directing *The Plaything of Paris* (*Red Heels* in the United States). Agreement in principle for Curtiz to join Warners was apparently reached on the spot, but as a follow-up Warner instructed brother Jack L. Warner to find a print of *The Slave Queen* for viewing. Jack unearthed the Paramount print, and when the two brothers saw it after Harry's return to the United States, they were sufficiently impressed in March 1926 to offer Curtiz a contract by cable, which he accepted immediately.[13]

The contract was finalized on 10 May in Berlin where Curtiz was filming *The Golden Butterfly*. He was to be ready to begin work in Hollywood by 1 June, and Warners would pay his travelling expenses from Berlin. His yearly salary was 15,600 dollars, Warners receiving annual options on his services until June 1930. If these were exercised, the salary would rise to 21,600 dollars in June 1927, 28,800 dollars in June 1928, and 36,000 dollars in June 1929. In return Curtiz was obliged to accept whatever films he was assigned to, with no annual maximum limit, and to enter the United States in a legal form enabling him to remain there permanently.

Curtiz seems to have taken this contract none too seriously at the time, for he had also just entered into other contractual commitments which in February 1927 cost Warners 3,100 dollars to eliminate.[14] He also entered the United States on a temporary, six-month visa which caused Warners headaches with the American immigration authorities of progressively increasing difficulty until 1930. He arrived in New York on 6 June 1926 (not 4 July, as has often been stated on the basis of Jack Warner's 1964 autobiography), having possibly first paid a visit to Budapest before sailing from Cherbourg, perhaps an indication that he had not worked for the Communists in 1919. Much to Jack Warner's annoyance, Curtiz then remained in New York to meet Harry Warner again (according to Curtiz, at the behest of Albert 'Abe' Warner) to go over story material before Curtiz proceeded to Hollywood, reaching there on 21 June.[15] He had committed himself to the studio for the time being. He apparently possessed only a sketchy command of spoken English, but it speaks volumes for a self-confidence bordering on arro-

gance that he signed a contract for work in a distant nation which he had never even visited, although his poor spoken German in 1919 had not prevented his swift success in Vienna. As matters were to develop, he had arrived in the country which was to be his home for the remainder of his life.

2

HOLLYWOOD BAPTISM, 1926 to 1929

Warner Brothers, the only family concern in Hollywood, was founded in and made its first feature film as recently as 1918, but the four brothers, the sons of Polish Jews who had emigrated to the United States in the 1890s, possessed unlimited ambition. The eldest was Harry (1881–1957), an extreme financial conservative who had become company president in 1924 and directed all aspects of the studio's operations from the New York office. Abe (1884–1967) was the second son who acted as treasurer and controlled film distribution, while Sam (1888–1927), who was to die before the studio took a place among the motion picture giants, and Jack (1892–1981) were responsible for actual film production in California. By 1924 annual production had reached only seventeen films, but, with Harry as the driving force, Warners had become hell-bent on expansion at a time of general American prosperity by the end of that year. The financial basis for this was to be the credit supplied by Wall Street bankers Goldman Sachs. During 1925 this was extended to three million dollars, with the likelihood of more to come if required, the company having raised production to thirty-one features and in April announced its intention to go over to sound films. Increased production went hand in hand with investment in distribution centres at home and abroad, in cinemas, in a radio station, and in experiments with sound for films. As a result the financial statement of March 1926 had shown a loss of more than 1,300,000 dollars, but there was no danger of imminent bankruptcy owing to Goldman Sachs' continued willingness to lend Warners money and the 1925 acquisitions of assets which could be sold if necessary. Moreover, the recent film-making expansion had already begun to pay off in that of the twenty-nine features released in the fiscal year ending in March 1926 only one had registered a loss, and that a small one. The year's film profit turned out to be almost four million dollars, but this was not fully reflected in the March 1926 statement because the box-office receipts had yet to be finalized and the available figures were submerged in the large property investments.

By mid–1926, just as Curtiz joined Warners, the studio had produced

its first sound film, Alan Crosland's *Don Juan* (no spoken dialogue, but a musical score and sound effects), with a highly publicized prestige release and the charismatic presence of star John Barrymore in the title role. The film made a handsome profit of over one million dollars,[1] but it nevertheless failed to do as well as Warners had hoped.

If bankruptcy was not an immediate danger, the studio was all the same too committed to sound films to consider a retreat if the 1925 investments were to fulfil their maximum profit potential and the studio debts to be paid off. The 1926 film output had been only marginally increased to thirty-three films, but the rapid 1925–6 expansion had been undertaken without full regard to its company structure side-effects. In particular Jack Warner had become much more involved in administration and had often been drawn away from actual filming supervision. This vacuum was mostly and at first unofficially filled by chief scriptwriter Darryl F. Zanuck, signed by the studio in 1924, who had abundant creativity and wrote under three pseudonyms to conceal Warners' reliance upon his talent. By 1926 his supervisory duties covered most of the routine action adventures, comedies, and melodramas, while Jack Warner took charge of the few prestige pictures like *Don Juan*.

The remaining studio scriptwriters were nondescript except for Bess Meredyth, the future second Mrs Michael Curtiz. Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1890, she had joined the Biograph film company as a teenager and moved to Hollywood in 1911. Her subsequent career with Universal had included acting, directing, and writing, but in the mid–1920s she seemingly turned exclusively to freelance screenplay work. While her writing for Warners was spasmodic, she was entrusted with studio prestige enterprises such as Millard Webb's *The Sea Beast*, a 1925 loose adaptation of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. As a Barrymore star vehicle it was Warners' largest 1926 money spinner, and she was also commissioned to write the *Don Juan* script. Since signing for Warners in 1924 Barrymore had towered head and shoulders above all the other studio contract players but, because he was costly, his permanent contract was terminated at the end of 1926. Only the Alsatian dog Rin Tin Tin had rivalled Barrymore as a studio star box-office attraction, the other chief contract players being competent but either relatively unknown or lacking in star quality.

Warners' foremost director in 1926 was Ernst Lubitsch, whose first four films for the studio since 1924 had all been stylish critical successes, although none had produced a large profit. His last Warners film in 1926, *So This is Paris*, had done much better financially, but even so his contract was not renewed. This decision, like that ending Barrymore's contract, arose from Harry Warner's policy of cutting the number of prestige productions within a limited overall film-making budget and instead concentrating almost exclusively upon routine fare, with intended

small but consistent profits in every case, until Warners had recovered much more of its investment outlay. By comparison with Lubitsch the other main studio directors were merely efficient journeymen – the ever-reliable Lloyd Bacon, veteran Hollywood Briton J. Stuart Blackton, James Flood, Erle C. Kenton, Herman Raymaker and, second only to Lubitsch, Roy Del Ruth. In this context the acquisition of Curtiz was only one element of a wider 1925–6 search to improve Warners' directorial quality, for other new directors of the time included Alan Crosland, Ray Enright, Henry Lehrman, and Archie Mayo, while studio ace cameraman Byron 'Bun' Haskin was allowed to direct as well in 1927. Haskin, who had beautifully photographed both *The Sea Beast* and *Don Juan*, was challenged as chief cinematographer only by Hal Mohr until the 1927 arrival of veteran Barney McGill.

Thus far the studio had yet to arrive as a major Hollywood movie-making force. It still needed to attract and retain exceptional talent in sufficient depth to be able to compete with, particularly, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and Paramount. Furthermore, Warners had failed to develop any clear trademark which would distinguish the content and style of its films from those of other studios. Consequently, by mid–1926 its deep financial commitment to expansion had become a policy in which prestige features were to be kept to a bare minimum for the indefinite future.

This was the studio background into which Curtiz stepped. According to his own 1947 testimony, which in this case there is no reason to doubt, he expected to direct *Noah's Ark* immediately upon his arrival in Hollywood in line with Harry Warner's promise to him at their Paris meeting. Instead Jack Warner personally assigned him, without any explanation, to *The Third Degree*.[2] This event is consistent with Harry Warner's recent policy change against costly prestige films, and Curtiz feared that his Hollywood career might be at risk if he did not acquit himself well. As a result he speedily acquainted himself with American legal procedure and spent ten days with the Los Angeles sheriff accompanying him on his official duties. He actually lived in prison, ate with policemen, studied fingerprinting methods, and attended prisoner roll calls in the morning.[3]

Based upon Charles Klein's 1908 play and a subsequent novel, *The Third Degree* had already been filmed twice, in 1913 and 1919. Its lengthy popularity was founded upon the notion that the police use of the stringent 'third degree' interrogation method might lead to false confessions. Additionally the leading female part carried a strong sentimental appeal, and Warners' revival of such material was probably motivated by a wish for another vehicle for its newest rising star Dolores Costello, John Barrymore's mistress and later second wife. However, it was also

arguably an early manifestation of the Warners 1930s style, a concern with contemporary social issues from the viewpoint of the underdog.

The story centres upon circus artist Louise Dresser, who deserts her husband to run off with upper-class cad Rockliffe Fellowes and in the process leaves behind her small daughter Annie. Fifteen years later Annie (Dolores Costello), a trapeze performer in a Coney Island side show, falls in love with unemployed Jason Robards Senior. She marries him in spite of the disapproval of his wealthy father who, however, hires Fellowes to break up the couple. When Dresser discovers this, she decides to leave Fellowes but instead shoots him after a quarrel. Robards falls under suspicion and confesses to the murder while under the police 'third degree'. Costello comes to realize that her mother is the real culprit. Costello herself also confesses to save both Dresser and Robards, but at length Dresser comes forward to admit to her crime.

Even in 1926 this was outmoded material, and Curtiz, who now took the name by which he was known for the rest of his life, collaborated with scriptwriter C. Graham Baker to make numerous changes, both to the original play and to Baker's screenplay. These were mostly concerned with the circus, Robards's job-hunting and the interrogation sequences, all of which involved unorthodox camera placements. The circus shots include two of the most exciting moments in silent film history – a motor cycle accident during a Wall of Death act and a 40-ft human dive into a tiny pool of water filmed from a camera at the transparent pool bottom. Robards's fruitless attempt to gain employment is presented as a series of constantly moving, skilfully superimposed images, culminating in a long tracking shot that follows his feet through a rubbish-strewn slum area until a passing car splashes mud over him. In the 'third degree' scene, tension is built up by a progression of speedy forceful shots which end with the words 'Confess, confess' flying out of the screen until an explosion signifies Robards's confession. At one point the camera assumes the part of a speeding bullet in mid-air. Cameraman Hal Mohr recalled many years later that he had never had to work so hard on a film, and that Curtiz was incessantly prowling around the set seeking new camera angles. Curtiz rounded off the film by having the circus ringmaster hang his hat on the camera, thereby indicating to the audience its crucial role in the film's atmosphere and narrative.[4]

Critical reaction to *The Third Degree* was mixed upon its release early in 1927. The unprecedented camera angles were criticized, while Curtiz did not forge the clumsily structured script into a balanced, coherent drama. Nevertheless he had achieved enough with routine material to convince Jack Warner that he was no run-of-the-mill director, as quite apart from his camera imagination he had shown a capacity, albeit sporadically, for tension-laden, economical narrative and had guided Dolores Costello to a competent performance consolidating her position as

Warners' latest rising star. For his efforts Curtiz's salary was increased in January 1927.[5]

During 1927 Harry Warner raised the company's film-making budget for a record output of forty-three films, only one of which was for prestige. Consequently Curtiz found himself assigned to three cheaply produced, now largely forgotten programme fillers. The first, released in May 1927, was *A Million Bid*, in which Dolores Costello, falsely believing husband Warner Oland to be dead, marries again only to discover that he is alive after all. Released three months later, by which time Warners had picked up its first option on Curtiz's services, was *The Desired Woman*, standard fare dealing with the havoc wrought by British officer's wife Irene Rich among his fellow officers in an isolated desert fortress. *Good Time Charley*, released towards the end of the year, is a sentimental tale of veteran actor Warner Oland's sacrifices to further the stage career of daughter Helene Costello.

In each case Curtiz strove valiantly but unsuccessfully to revitalize unconvincing scripts through spectacular camera work and strong central performances, the most noteworthy features of all three. However, these films, all just over one hour long, contributed to Curtiz's Hollywood career in that they familiarized him with Warners' methods and brought him into contact with technicians like cameramen Hal Mohr and Barney McGill. They also involved collaboration with Henry Blanke, Lubitsch's former assistant who had remained at Warners when Lubitsch had left and who acted as Curtiz's assistant in the first two films. Zanuck also scripted the last two and, as Warners' newly appointed production chief under Jack Warner, supervised the same two. Both Blanke and Zanuck at once recognized Curtiz's potential, which was to have an important bearing on the latter's progress at the studio. So far all four of his American films had, like most Warners films of the time, registered only moderate profits. Costly location shooting at Warners was rare at this time, yet *The Desired Woman* was shot partly in Yuma, Arizona, and one of its strongest assets was the striking desert background. This might indicate that, in spite of his recent arrival at Warners, Curtiz could already influence the filming conditions of routine material. However, it did not fare as well at the box-office as *A Million Bid* and was more expensive to produce.

Warners' financial position received a spectacular boost during 1928. The tremendous impact of Alan Crosland's part-talkie *The Jazz Singer* after its December 1927 general release had transformed the studio's economic position to the point where in just under a year many of the outstanding debts had been paid off. The success of *The Jazz Singer* had also given the company a head start in sound film production, which had to be maintained for as long as possible if Warners was to reap the maximum economic harvest. However, *The Jazz Singer*'s huge profit of