

THE MAKING OF JEZEBEL - 1939

Before Scarlet O'Hara made her first appearance on the screen, Julie Marsden had already captivated moviegoers, and earned a second Academy Award for Bette Davis in her role as 1938's *Jezebel*.

While a second camera unit crew was sent to Louisiana to film exterior shots, most of the filming for *Jezebel* was done in California. But Louisiana's influence on the production of *Jezebel*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, cannot be overstated.

Director Robert Haas built a Louisiana plantation house on the Warner Bros. ranch, which was located approximately thirty miles from the California studio. To ensure authenticity in all aspects of the film, Haas hired Dalton S. Reymond, who was at that time the head of the opera department at Louisiana State University (L.S.U.).

Reymond initially thought that his job entailed simply making certain that the film's stars like Bette Davis, Henry Fonda, George Brent, Fay Bainter, Richard Cromwell, Irving Picel and John Lite spoke their lines in the natural, fluid, easy-going, soft speed of the river parishes above New Orleans. He shortly realized that his understanding was wrong.

Reymond discovered that his job included expert advice on what kind of

wallpaper had appeared in a sugar planter's home during Franklin Pierce's administration; what kind of harness was used for a fiacre; what kind of desserts and beverages would be served at the table of a slave owner of the times; and what songs were sung by the field workers in the years before the War Between the States. He was essentially given the responsibility of all articles, costumes, sets and furnishings as well as diction of the actors.

One of Reymond's innovations for the Marsden plantation home was a huge overhead fan. The fan was suspended from the ceiling over the dining table of the plantation home. It was operated by slaves who pulled gently on cords from opposite ends of the dining room. The fan measured 7' in length and 3'6" at its widest point. It was made of light wood, covered with brocaded pink damask with a gold tassel hanging from its bottom.



Reymond was also charged with overseeing the building of the various sets. The bar of the old St. Louis hotel which was located at Royal and St. Louis streets in New Orleans (demolished in 1919) was the setting for several scenes, including the place where Henry Fonda's character collapses from yellow fever. [See image below] . He also taught movie workmen how to build a pillared portico for a plantation mansion of 1840.



Another major set was the carriage approach to the plantation where 30 workmen spent two days dressing oak trees of the Warner Ranch with handmade, artificial Spanish moss.

The *Times Picayune* of January 9, 1938 reported that there was a great deal more than merely the diction which Reymond had to correct to make the film authentic.

Bette Davis had an unusually crisp New England speech, with its bit of extra emphasis upon all final consonants; George Brent had occasional relapses into brogue from

his Irish roots; Henry Fonda had a slightly Midwestern accent with its lingering vowels and Fay Bainter had cultivated New York expressions.

Also, of the 60 Black actors hired, only 6 had ever lived anywhere in the South. So Reymond had to work with the actors to hide the crisp everyday speech patterns heard on Los Angeles city streets.

(The above taken from the book ***Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview Beginning in 1898***)

FILM SYNOPSIS

In New Orleans, in 1850, Julie Marsden, a strong-willed Southern belle, is engaged to marry Preston Dillard, a prominent New Orleans banker with an equally strong mind. Their struggle for supremacy in the relationship comes to a head the night of a traditional ball to which unmarried women are expected to wear white, but Julie defiantly insists on wearing red. Pres is shocked, but ultimately agrees to escort her. At the ball, Julie begins to regret her decision, but Pres forces her to dance, and afterward ends their engagement. In disbelief, Julie waits for Pres to apologize, but he stands his ground, leaving for the North on business. When he returns, she humbles herself in front of him, begging for forgiveness, but it is too late. Pres has married a Yankee, Amy Bradford, and asks Julie to accept his wife without bitterness.

The growing threat of yellow fever in New Orleans has forced Julie and her Aunt Belle to move to their country plantation. There they entertain the Dillards, Pres's younger brother Ted, and one of Julie's persistent suitors, the rebellious Buck Cantrell.

At dinner, Pres and Buck argue politics, but Pres is called to town and it is Ted who finishes the argument in a duel with Buck. Buck is killed, and Pres is struck down with fever. Julie sneaks through the fever line with the help of her servant, Gros Bat. In town, Dr. Livingstone tells Julie that Pres must go to the leper colony for quarantine.

Amy, accompanied by Ted and Aunt Belle, follows Julie, and as Pres's wife, she insists on attending to him. In a final confrontation, Julie convinces Amy that her ignorance of Southern ways means certain death for them both. Amy acquiesces, and Julie rides into the night at Pres's side. (synopsis from AFI Catalog)

Davis reportedly received an injury during production when, while employing the Southern custom of reddening her cheeks by slapping them with the back of a hairbrush, she hit herself too hard and had to take three days off.

According to modern sources, Henry Fonda had an agreement with Warner Bros. that his work on the film would be finished by early Dec 1937 so that he could attend the birth of his child

[Jane Fonda] in the East. As the production was behind schedule, Fonda had to leave before all his scenes with Davis were completed, leaving Davis to do the scenes in close-up without Fonda there to read his lines.

According to studio publicity material, Bette Davis wore sixteen different costumes, each with a cost of over \$500, and that the now-famous red dress that she wore, which cost \$850, was, in fact, bronze-colored because red appears as grey in black-and-white film. A total of \$30,000 was spent on dresses for the film, and seventy-five seamstresses worked for a month making them.



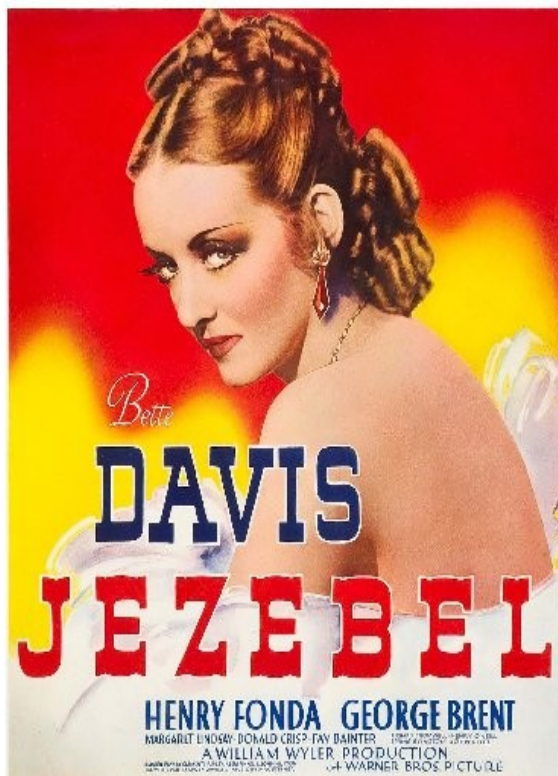
Bette Davis won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of Julie Marsden. In addition, the film received nominations for Best Picture and Ernest Haller received a nomination for Best Cinematography.

The National Board of Review named it the best English language film of the year. *Jezebel* was inducted for preservation in the 2009 National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.



MOVIE POSTERS

Warner Brothers took different approaches to its film accessory merchandising. The movie poster on the left is the one sheet released in the United States and features a glamorous Bette Davis as Julie. The poster on the right is the Italian 2-fogli. It represents the film's final scene where the narcissistic Julie unselfishly faces death by going with her love Pres to the leper colony. (Reproductions of these beautiful posters are available on HollywoodOnTheBayou.com).



Jezebel - 1938 U.S. Window Card
Louisiana Film Series



Jezebel - 1938 Italian 2 Fogli
Louisiana Film Series