Here's looking at a great Bogart bio

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER  
Sunday, September 04, 2011  

After paying his dues with scores of forgettable minor roles, Humphrey Bogart got his big break in 1935 when he was cast against type in "The Petrified Forest."

The son of Belmont DeForest Bogart, a physician, and commercial illustrator Maud Humphrey turned himself into Duke Mantee, the du jor Depression sociopath. Ticket buyers paid premiums for seats close enough to see his facial hair.

Bogart learned a lesson he would apply to the screen as well as the stage: When the bad guy, with his lived-in face, grabs his wound and, in a husky voice, utters his last words, "the audience is his and his alone." Even if he has a speech impediment.

In "Tough Without A Gun," Stefan Kanfer - the biographer of Groucho Marx, Marlon Brando and Lucille Ball - provides an informative, incisive and, at times, up-close-and-personal examination of Bogart's life and work.

His success, Kanfer demonstrates, was not simply the result of luck and timing. Convinced that there were two kinds of men, "professionals and bums," Bogart taught himself how to inhabit a character. Even more important, in "The Maltese Falcon," "Casablanca" and "The African Queen," he transformed his on-screen persona from heavy to hero.

A traditional male, self-sufficient and unwilling to be pushed around, he also exhibited a new kind of masculinity: "wounded, cynical, romantic and incorrodible (sic) as a zinc bar."

This "existential morality" allowed him, through characters like the hard-drinking, apparently misanthropic Rick Blaine and Sam Spade, to make the journey from self-serving, belligerent neutrality ("I stick my neck out for nobody") to a reluctant but risky commitment. No wonder, 40 years after his death, the American Film Institute declared Bogart "The Greatest Male Star" in cinema history.

Half the fun of a celebrity biography, of course, is the backstage (and bedroom) gossip it supplies. Although Kanfer does not break any news, "Tough Without A Gun" serves up a fair share of scuttlebutt.

Bogart, Kanfer points out, suggested the penultimate line of "The Maltese Falcon," with its paraphrase of "The Tempest." He describes Bogie's futile effort to hide his affair with 19-year-old Lauren Bacall, whom he had met on the set of "To Have and Have Not."

And he reveals that Katharine Hepburn struggled to make Rose Sayer, her character in "The African Queen," "more than a dry stick in a long skirt," until director John Huston suggested that Sayer resembled Eleanor Roosevelt, "FDR's lovably naÅ“ve, somewhat censorious widow."

Kanfer likes Bogart so much he makes excuses for him. By Hollywood standards, he implies, Bogart was a faithful husband. Faced with House Un-American Activities' investigations of communists in the motion picture industry, Bogart was "not alone in scurrying for cover" or describing himself as a dupe; to assume that he should have risked his reputation by standing alone against red-baiting inquisitors "is folly."

Perhaps. But readers of "Tough Without A Gun" - and film buffs of all ages - can surely agree that when Bogart was doing what he knew best, acting, he was irresistible: "Here's looking at you, kid."
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Associated Images:

'TOUGH WITHOUT A GUN: THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY AFTERLIFE OF HUMPHREY BOGART'
By Stefan Kanfer
Alfred A. Knopf, $26.95