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# Review: 'Michael Curtiz,' Seeing in Pictures

Curtiz was a "cinematic genius" with a dynamic style that would later influence a young Steven Spielberg.

*By Scott Eyman*
Nov. 24, 2017 4:23 p.m. ET

**Michael Curtiz** is the best director most people have never heard of. They know his films, though: "Captain Blood," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "Angels With Dirty Faces," "The Sea Hawk," "The Sea Wolf," "Yankee Doodle Dandy," "Mildred Pierce," "The Breaking Point." And, of course, "Casablanca." And that's just the top tier. These pictures helped define Warner Bros. in the 1930s and '40s, when it was the scrappiest, most exhilarating studio in the business. Below them are an additional dozen or so beautifully directed professional entertainments.

Curtiz's secret was a dazzling technique that could be fitted to any genre except comedy —noir, westerns, musicals, love stories, whatever was on offer. His camera was an active participant, a searcher after crucial emotional moments, making for a dynamic style that was a strong influence on the young Steven Spielberg. Curtiz liked artful compositions and rapid push-ins from a medium shot to a close-up. The camera and the editing of prime Curtiz films tend toward the energetic, the better to make the scene come alive. His visual sense was so acute that, according to writer-producer Robert Buckner, Curtiz was the kind of "cinematic genius" who "could make a picture when he didn't know what it was about." Casey Robinson, who had worked on the script for "Casablanca," called him "one of the great directors of scenes. . . . He saw it in pictures, and you supplied the stories."

Yet until now nobody has taken up the case for Curtiz in a soup-to-nuts biography. The good news is that Alan Rode's massive book is exhaustively researched, well written and frequently witty. (" Peter Lorre was the knuckleball of Hollywood character actors," Mr. Rode writes.) There are also numerous anecdotes of accidental humor arising from Curtiz's garbled English, which made it hard to take him seriously. "Please, please, make me a love nest from out of it," he told Bette Davis and Errol Flynn before a passionate scene. David Niven used Curtiz's exhortation to "bring on the empty horses" as the title for his autobiography.

Born Emmanuel Kaminer in Budapest in 1886, Curtiz changed his name to Mihály Kertész to dodge anti-Semitism, then later changed it again to the anglicized Michael Curtiz. First an actor, he became a director in 1912 and came to Hollywood and Warner Bros. in 1926, immediately becoming the studio workhorse. To the critics, Curtiz's problem was that he was a company man, happily churning out movies at Warner Bros. for more than a quarter-century. During one five-year period, he averaged six films a year, perennially driving his actors and crew to exhaustion. On the horror picture "Doctor X" (1932), he worked at least one 20-hour day—the sort of abuse that helped bring unions into the business a few years later.

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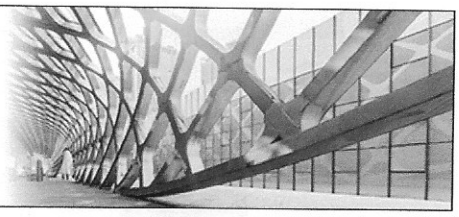
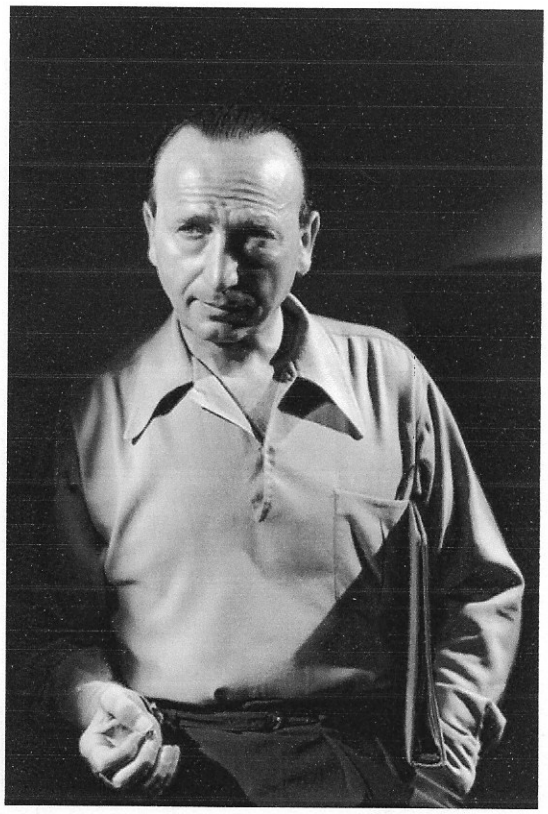


MICHAEL CURTIZ

Alan K. Rode

*University Press of Kentucky, 681 pages, $50*



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Since Warner Bros. was full of employees who weren't company people—who, in fact, loathed the company and the men who ran it—Curtiz's enthusiasm was an irritant, as was his indifference to the safety of the stunt men and the dignity of actors. After Davis became an above-the-title star, she made only one picture with Curtiz, "The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex," and avoided him thereafter. Flynn, with whom Curtiz made several hugely successful swashbucklers, including "The Adventures of Robin Hood," tried to strangle him on the set of 1941's "Dive Bomber," their final collaboration. (The two men shared a private history that would have been trouble even if their personalities had meshed—Curtiz once had an affair with the actress Lili Damita, who became Flynn's first wife.)

In fact, Curtiz was interested in little other than making movies and having sex. He had a limited psychological range and was a notorious lothario even for the studio-system era, making him a dicey biographical subject. Mr. Rode gives equal time to those who loved the director as well as those who hated him, although the author's zeal leads him to devote too many pages to some highly forgettable films. Curtiz would have rather directed anything than nothing, but even he must have swallowed hard reading the scripts for "Mountain Justice" or "Gold Is Where You Find It."

Mr. Rode's seamless research makes it clear that Curtiz was always respected by his co-workers but hardly ever liked. The generally mild-mannered James Cagney called him "a pompous bastard who didn't know how to treat actors, but he sure as hell knew how to treat a camera." When Bradford Dillman, who worked for Curtiz on 1961's "Francis of Assisi," was asked for his memories of the director, he replied: "Just thinking about him fifty years later gets me excited in the wrong way."

The good times ended when Curtiz left Warner Bros. in the early 1950s and entered a precipitous creative decline until his death in 1962. His energy lagged, and the supple

snap and compositional depth of his mature style flattened out, leading to the suspicion that Warner Bros. did at least as much for Curtiz as Curtiz did for Warner Bros. Nevertheless, he amassed a body of work without parallel at a great movie studio. His films are his best advocate of that, but Alan Rode's book is a close second.

*—Mr. Eyman is the author, most recently, of "Hank and Jim: The Fifty-Year Friendship of Henry Fonda and James Stewart." He teaches film history at the University of Miami.*

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