

Breathhtaking: Bette Davis's Performance at the End of *Now, Voyager*

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IRVING RAPPER'S *NOW, VOYAGER* (1942) IS WIDELY CONSIDERED one of the finest examples of classical Hollywood melodrama, and Bette Davis, the star of the film, is widely regarded as one of the finest exponents of melodrama and of melodramatic acting. A commonly held view is that melodramatic acting involves a set of heightened and elaborated gestures and expressions: histrionic and conventionalized, even stereotypical. Over time, specific gestures, poses, movements, and expressions have become codified, acquiring particular meanings. Even in their more modern forms, they still bear the traces of a historical legacy rooted in pantomime, dumb-show, tableaux, and spectacle, resulting in something essentially gestural. Peter Brooks, in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, has described this as an aesthetic of "muteness," in which unspoken words and inexpressible emotions are rendered physically by the actor (62).

Melodrama, however, is not necessarily devoid of dialogue; far from it. As Sarah Kozloff has argued in *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, melodrama involves excessive talk (i.e., "talkativeness"), through which the central characters reveal their innermost thoughts, feelings, and anxieties (241). The often forbidden (i.e., socially unacceptable) nature of these thoughts,

feelings, and anxieties leads characters to use metaphor and hyperbole, producing language that is highly rhetorical, ornate, aphoristic, sententious, literary, and overblown (239). Both *Now, Voyager* and Bette Davis have been seen to correspond to this view of melodrama. Sarah Kozloff writes that "More than just revelatory, the dialogue in *Now, Voyager* is often blatantly ornate" (250). She adds, "The film's use of melodramatic gesture is equally noticeable" (250). Davis, meanwhile, has been described as theatrical and exaggerated. In answer to the question, "Who is this woman, Bette Davis?" Stanley Cavell has written that:

She is the one who can deliver a line—who has the voice, the contained irony, the walk, the gaze, and the glance away, to lay down a line—such as "I am the fat lady with the heavy brows and all the hair." . . . And she, this actress, is the distinct one who can close a film by saying, "Oh Jerry, don't let's ask for the moon. We have the stars." She is, that is to say, capable of that flair for theater, that theater of flair, exaggeration it may be thought, call it melodrama, that these films of unknowness require. (226)

During the 1930s, Bette Davis developed an idiosyncratic speech style along with a particular set of physical mannerisms, most notably rolling eyes, fidgeting fingers, and a hip-swinging walk. Her style of speaking would become a defining feature of her star persona, one much imitated. The staccato rhythms of the famous line "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night!" (from *All About Eve* [1950]) most

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fully convey this signature style, epitomized by a clipped mid-Atlantic accent and an upper-class intonation. This is created largely by a stress upon the consonants, by hitting each consonant forcefully and precisely, emphasizing the Ps, the Ts, and the Bs, emphatically using the tongue to produce the stops, creating a series of rhythmic beats. This produces a percussive sound. However, it is combined with an intermittent lengthening of the vowels, for instance, "*Faesten* your seatbelts . . ." This slight and occasional drawl injects a relaxed element into her lines, contrasting with the otherwise clipped intonation. This is not, however, Davis's only screen voice. In a number of films she adopted a soft Southern drawl, as in her Academy Award-winning performance as Julie Marsden in *Jezebel* (1938). For much of this movie, Davis speaks in a tiny voice, little more than a soft, high whisper, even when her character is angry.

The combination of a quite hard, loud, projected voice with something softer, quieter, and more intimate had become, by the late 1930s, a distinctive feature of Bette Davis's vocal style.

The final scene from *Now, Voyager* reveals Davis to be in total command of her vocal technique and able to use it to tremendous effect. She seems to know exactly how to pitch her voice and how to vary volume and tempo in order to convey changes in the character's mental and emotional state. It is a bravura display, as she glides through her character's ever-changing thoughts and emotions, all subtly conveyed through the actress's body and voice. One of the most remarkable aspects of this performance is the fact that the scene culminates in a line of dialogue that some consider one of the corniest in Hollywood history. Yet the strength and subtlety of Davis's performance makes it possible to accept the line when it comes as a truthful and heartfelt expression. Remarkably, the infamous final line, "Oh Jerry, don't let's ask for the moon, we have the stars!" hardly feels like an aphorism at all. Somehow Bette Davis makes one of the great rhetorical flourishes of Hollywood melodrama seem real.

Several writers have noted this. For instance, Charles Affron, in *Star Acting: Gish, Garbo,*

Davis, writes that "This line is one of the most famous in all of Bette Davis's films, and I am always surprised at the naturalness of its delivery" (290). Affron describes the film as "attractive claptrap," suggesting that its saving grace lies chiefly in the strength of Davis's performance. He is not alone in making such claims. One of Davis's biographers, Charles Higham, writes that:

As a dream, a shimmering fantasy, the movie still works. All the formidable resources of a major studio were brought to bear on an insubstantial plot. The throbbing music of Max Steiner with rich, sweet melodies lulls the audience into submission before the most rampant absurdities. But above all it is Davis's performance which sustains the work. Her atmosphere of brisk New England common sense, her uncanny ability to hold the eye overcomes many weak or soggy passages. She has a logic, energy, drive and charm that no dialogue can defeat. By seemingly believing in the plot, the star almost makes us accept it. (208–209)

Higham assumes that both the plot and the dialogue are inherently weak and unconvincing, and yet, nevertheless, Davis's performance and conviction turns these into something he can almost accept as truthful. Although I consider the plot and dialogue of *Now, Voyager* to be nothing short of magnificent, it intrigues me that even those, such as Affron and Higham, who find these elements to be lacking can still appreciate the film due to the quality of the acting. For Affron, Davis imparts naturalism to the attractive claptrap. For Higham, she transforms an insubstantial plot with weak dialogue into something believable. So what exactly does Davis do to transform (what some think of as) a thin plot with phoney dialogue into something powerful, meaningful, and affective? What does she do with her body and her voice to overcome what some see as weaknesses in the film?

The reason why audiences who regard the closing lines of *Now, Voyager* as trite or artificial still find Bette Davis compelling, convincing, and believable must surely have

something to do with what occurs before the final words are uttered. What precedes the final line is a magnificent display of acting talent, showcased by Davis's roller-coaster ride of conflicting emotions: starting with confusion ("Take her home! . . . But you can't"), proceeding through anger ("Why Jerry, that's the most conventional, pretentious, pious speech I ever heard in my life!"), superiority ("Oh, I know. Forgive me, Jerry. . . . Let me explain"), impatience ("Some man who'll make me happy?"), bitter sorrow ("Again I've been just a big, sentimental fool. It's a tendency I have!"), resolve ("Let me go"), hope ("if we both try hard to protect that little strip of territory that is ours"), and gratitude ("Thank you") before we come to the ultimate moment of—almost—happiness ("Oh Jerry, don't let's ask for the moon"). Bette Davis moves swiftly and artfully through these units of action and from one emotion to another, her voice responding with significant changes in pitch, volume, pace, and tone. As she speaks, she moves. The movements of her body can be heard in her voice, both body and voice being carefully orchestrated to bring the words of the script to life.

The final scene of *Now, Voyager* is made up of three movements: introduction, conflict, and resolution. The first takes place at the fireside, where Charlotte Vale (Davis) explores her lover's (Jerry, played by Paul Henreid) reasons for wanting to take his daughter Tina away from her. The second takes place before a grand piano, which provides the setting for Davis's longest and most dramatic speech, where Charlotte exposes her feelings for Jerry and Tina. The third movement, a coda, takes place by the window overlooking the garden; Charlotte and Jerry share a last lingering smoke and resolve to sacrifice their romantic feelings in order to make Tina their primary concern. Each of these movements has its own emotional temperature. The first is one of surprise and bewilderment. The second is the most intense, involving extremes of anger, despair, and desire. The third is more calm and uplifting. Within each movement, however, Davis is required to express a range of emotions. In

the first, she moves from shock and horror to a more controlled, confident, slightly haughty attitude as she begins to question and explore Jerry's motives. In the second, she moves from shock to anger, self-pity, pride, bitterness, despair, passion, and restraint. In the third, she makes a rapid transition from dejection and defeat to love, hope, resolve, assurance, gratitude, and, finally, contentment.

The scene begins when Charlotte walks casually into the library to find Jerry standing at the fireplace. She asks him why he is there alone rather than with the rest of the party, only to be told that he intends to take Tina home with him. Charlotte is visibly shocked and, hurriedly closing the door so that Tina (in the next room) will not hear their conversation, she tells Jerry he cannot possibly think of taking her away now. She advances toward Jerry, coming to rest behind an armchair near the fire, first taking hold of it and then resting her arms upon it, supporting herself. The armchair provides a barrier between Charlotte and Jerry while he explains that he cannot allow her to go on making sacrifices for him and his child. Charlotte responds angrily and moves forward to confront him before the fire. Paul Henreid delivers Jerry's next line leaning on the mantelpiece. After stating that he is not prepared to go on continually taking from Charlotte in this way, he seats himself in an armchair on his side of the fireplace. Once he is installed there, Charlotte changes her attitude, from anger to restraint. She seats herself in the chair opposite and, in a rather superior tone, proceeds to comfort him with the idea that, by allowing her to keep Tina, he will be giving; she will be taking from him. But Jerry is unpersuaded. Charlotte continues to question him, trying to find out what really concerns him. When she asks if it is to do with their relationship, Jerry springs from his seat and swiftly crosses the room to stand by the piano. Max Steiner's music appears on the soundtrack at this point: fast, tense, and wavering, filling the void between the two characters. For the next ten seconds the drama is suspended, the musical interlude acting as a boundary demarcation between the first and second movements of the scene.

Within this first, introductory movement, Bette Davis establishes a number of devices that she will repeat later with more force. These consist of breaks or cracks in her voice, audible intakes of breath, the projecting or the flinging of words away from herself or at her costar, the elongation of small (monosyllabic) words of significance, the softening of her voice, and the use of her last breath at the end of her line. The first of these, the crack in her voice, is sounded early in the scene when she cries, "But you ca-an't!" The final word of this line contains a slight break, the note being sounded unevenly, signalling Charlotte's alarm. As she makes her way across the room to the fireside, continuing to speak, she sounds rather breathless, suggesting a nervous state. Having caught her breath, resting upon the back of the armchair, Davis flings the words "conventional, pretentious, pious" at Henreid in a fast, deep, but slightly exhausted voice. Davis uses her very last breath to reach the end of this line, thereby forcing her to increase her volume in compensation, producing a harsh tone. Once seated in the armchair and feeling calmer, Charlotte's voice takes on a rather superior tone (she's at her most posh and anglophone here) in order to present her argument to Jerry. She also adopts a particular way of delivering her lines, beginning rather quickly, then slowing herself down, pausing, forcing herself to explain the situation as calmly as she can. She begins each line firmly, projecting her voice, but she allows it to fade almost to a whisper by the time she reaches the end. In this way, she softens the blow, taking the edge off her argument, defusing the tension. Shortly, however, Charlotte will reveal a more anxious attitude when she asks Jerry if his reason for wanting to take his daughter away is to do with their love affair. When Davis asks "Is it something about us?" she speaks in a higher pitch, with the little last word stretched over two beats and sounded in a thin, fragile voice. This sounds a note of alarm, one that provokes Jerry to spring from his seat and cross the room, summoning up Max Steiner's music and bringing the first movement of the scene to a close. This introductory movement of the scene

ends at the first implicit mention of Charlotte and Jerry's adulterous affair. It also ends on an anxious note, betraying Charlotte's anxiety, a theme taken up by Steiner in his music.

The second movement begins when Davis joins Henreid by the piano. Here Jerry explains that he is taking his daughter away from Charlotte so that she will be free to find a man who can offer her marriage. Charlotte is devastated by this and angered that Jerry should so grossly misjudge her desires. It provokes an angry outburst from her, in which she reveals how she truly feels. Her anger rises to fever pitch when she tells Jerry what it feels like being shut out from his life, but her anger is subdued when she speaks of the affection and attachment his daughter has shown toward her. She tells him how moved she was when Tina said she wanted to come and live with her and how, subsequently, she entertained the fantasy of permanently assuming a maternal role. Her anger returns when she contrasts Tina's attitude toward her with Jerry's. The second movement culminates with Charlotte admitting her folly in presuming that Jerry shared her fantasy. Feeling humiliated and let down, Charlotte dissolves into despair and tears. This is the cue for Henreid to stride across the room, spin Davis around and take her in his arms. We see her gazing up into his face as he tells her that he only thought she was keeping Tina out of pity but that now he understands her true feelings. He declares his own, his love for her. Charlotte, however, resists and pleads with him to let her go in a voice full of emotion. They separate, and Jerry walks away to the window.

Max Steiner's music soars, once more filling the space and silence between them. Davis slowly and hesitantly follows Henreid to the window and stands several paces behind him, explaining in a broken voice that Dr. Jacquith, Tina's doctor (and her own), knows of their affair and that he has permitted Jerry's visit as a test to see how she behaves. She explains that if she fails this test she will lose Tina and they will lose each other. Her speech ends with a defeated and desperate "Jerry, please help me!" It takes a dramatic gesture to raise

Charlotte's spirits, involving the simultaneous lighting of two cigarettes, a heavily significant gesture and one that Jerry has repeatedly performed for Charlotte during their most intimate moments together. Almost forty seconds elapse before the characters speak again, the time occupied by the lighting of the cigarettes and by the first long exhalation of smoke, mingling in the space between them. All of this is accompanied by the strains of Steiner's love theme. Davis and Henreid then take up a position at the window, looking out into the garden, for the coda that will draw the scene to a close, establishing some resolution. In this third and final movement, Charlotte and Jerry establish the future terms of their relationship, Charlotte giving Jerry permission to visit them and Jerry granting mutual parentage of his daughter to Charlotte. Charlotte thereby gains her ultimate desire, a child of her own, whilst sacrificing her love affair. Just as Charlotte gets her heart's desire, Davis gets the last line: a grand rhetorical line that ends the film with a flourish and on a high note.

In the second and third movements of this scene, the devices introduced by Davis in the opening movement acquire their full force. The breaks and cracks in her voice, the audible intakes of breath, the projecting and flinging of words, the elongation of small critical words, the softening of her voice, and the use of her last breath all reappear, and do so much more dramatically. The most dramatic moment comes when Davis's voice cracks during her line, "Why, when *Tina* said she wanted to come home and stay with me, well, it was like a miracle happening, like my having your child—a part of *you*." The audible crack on the word "Tina" makes this the most important line of Charlotte's speech. In an instant it establishes the true source of her love: Tina, Jerry's child and the daughter she longs for and identifies with. At the point of articulating the girl's name, Charlotte finds her anger overwhelmed by a more powerful emotion. In an instant, the crack in Davis's voice dissipates Charlotte's anger and renders her show of strength a masquerade. The crack, which

emits a fragile, high-pitched squeal, dramatically changes the emotional temperature of the speech. Though the speech continues unabated, it becomes cooler, the pace slowing and the tone softening. Her voice drops to a whisper during the course of this line. She also inserts several pauses, takes a number of audible short breaths, moves her head from side to side slightly as she appears to search for the right words to express what she felt when Tina asked to come and live with her.

Davis takes her time here, using pauses strategically to break up the line into several component parts: "Why . . . when Tina said she wanted to come home and stay with me . . . well . . . it was like a miracle happening . . . like having your child." This prolongs the speech, giving the audience more time to consider the depths of her feelings. The last phrase, "like having your child," is produced by Davis in a soft, slow, evenly paced voice as a series of regular beats, almost methodically, as though Charlotte is taking great care to say this, treading carefully and cautiously, unsure of herself but determined to admit the truth. Although softly spoken, there is a firmness here that suggests the determined effort Charlotte is making to go on revealing what she supposes must seem a flight of fancy or a mere delusion. The way she caresses the word "child" suggests the innocence, sensitivity, and devotion Charlotte genuinely feels for Jerry's child, her desire to comfort and protect her. Immediately thereafter, Davis produces a harder tone to contrast Charlotte's present attitude toward Tina's father. Here she bitterly declares, "And I *even* allowed myself to indulge in the fancy that both of us loving her and wanting what was best for her *together* would make her actually seem like our child after a while. I see no such fancy has occurred to *you*." These words are projected at Jerry loud, clear, and forceful. Davis gives them more impact by moving forward steadily, a frown across her large forehead and a mock grin across her face. The corners of her mouth are pulled back to propel the words like arrows from a bow, firing them directly at Henreid. This again repeats an action from the first move-

ment, when Davis flung the words “conventional, pretentious, pious” at him, but this time the words come with extra force, as Charlotte’s violent outburst reaches a climax.

Another important aspect of Davis’s performance is the way the speech is broken up by a series of sharp intakes of breath and an intermittent forward motion. “And I even allowed myself to indulge in the fancy”—she hesitates in her forward motion, drawing a breath before continuing—“that both of us loving her”—another step and another breath—“and wanting what’s best for her *together*”—another short, shallow intake of breath before proceeding in a higher pitch—“would make her seem *actually* like our child after a while.” Here Davis closes her mouth, swallows, and appears to breathe in through her nose. Her next sounds reveal a drop in pitch and, with a bitter grin producing tension around her mouth, she says, “I see that no such fancy has occurred to you.” The word “you” is stressed, it is even slightly elongated, virtually to two syllables. Turning and walking away from Jerry (and from the camera) she declares that “Again I’ve been a big, sentimental *fool*,” again elongating the final word. Hiding her face from Jerry and presenting her back both to him and the audience, she speaks her final, broken words through tears and despair, her head dropping down to the right: “It’s a tendency I have.” She expels these words with a long breath, ending the line exhausted and deflated.

It is instructive to pause here and consider the kinds of critical decisions Bette Davis had to make in order to play this scene. For instance, she had to decide which lines and which words to emphasize. She had to consider how to vary the rhythm of her speeches using differences in pace, pitch, tone, and volume: for example, which words to whisper, which to project firmly or even loudly. She had to work out the best places to pause and decide in which pauses to breathe. She had to think about how much breath to use. She also needed to consider when to move, and, when speaking, where to look: up or down, at or away from her costar. She had to decide where she

would swallow before speaking, where to hold her voice in her throat, fill it with emotion, to let it break or crack. These, of course, are the kinds of decisions actors are continually required to make. As Gianluca Sergi has pointed out in his essay “Actors and the Sound Gang”:

When confronted by a few lines of script, the choice is not just what accent to employ, what pitch and level, how to play off other characters, or how fast the delivery should be. Several questions need to be asked of those lines: Are you going to deliver them as one long sentence? Are you going to pause? If so, where? Do you consider this as incidental dialogue or as core dialogue? If the latter is true, where are you going to put the emphasis? Which words are you going to put the stress on? The ability to answer these questions shows an awareness of some key issues: how to identify key lines; how to identify the key words within those lines; how to impose a certain metre and tempo to them. (130)

It is largely a matter of conjecture as to how many of Bette Davis’s actions, gestures, expressions, and inflections during the final scene of *Now, Voyager* were conscious and premeditated, and how many were instinctive, spontaneous, and accidental. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to support the idea that Davis came to this scene well prepared and took great pains over every moment of the action. Witney Stine, in his biography of Davis, *Mother Goddam*, includes a statement by Ilka Chase (Lisa Vale in *Now, Voyager*) that describes Davis arguing with director Irving Rapper “over every move in every scene,” and calls her a “perfectionist” (164–65). Another fellow actor in *Now, Voyager*, John Loder, similarly recalled (in an interview with Lawrence J. Quirk) that Davis “put her whole heart and being into that film. She had a passion and artistic conviction I have never encountered in another actress” (248). Meanwhile, Barbara Leaming, in her biography of Davis, includes an extract from a letter from Rapper to producer Hal Wallis, stating that “Miss Davis is a very slow and analytical lady

whose behaviour had to be treated with directorial care and delicacy" (170). Jeanne Allen writes that, at the time of the making of *Now, Voyager*, Rapper considered Davis the greatest actress in the world and consequently allowed her to become heavily involved with the direction of the film. Allen writes, "He acknowledges her marvellously probing intelligence" (32).

Bette Davis and Irving Rapper's working relationship is an important one, and it began several years before *Now, Voyager*. After directing plays on the New York stage, Rapper began working in Hollywood in 1933 as a dialogue director, helping Joan Crawford interpret her lines for *Dancing Lady* (1933). Soon after, he was taken on as a dialogue director at Warners. Between 1937 and 1940, Rapper worked repeatedly with Davis as a dialogue director, on the *Kid Galahad* (1937), *Jezebel* (1938), *The Sisters* (1938), *Juarez* (1939), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), and *All This and Heaven Too* (1940). Together, Rapper and Davis spent considerable time preparing for her roles in these films, working closely on the script, developing her characterization, rehearsing her lines, and devising her interpretation. In 1941, Bette Davis repaid Rapper's hard work, care, and attention to her by appearing in a walk-on part as a nurse in his directorial debut, *Shining Victory* (1941). This suggests that the two provided each other with a large degree of mutual support and that they had a significant rapport. Consequently, as the director on *Now, Voyager*, Rapper worked closely with Davis as she painstakingly developed her performance, meticulously planning and rehearsing every line and movement.

From the moment Bette Davis began to get decent roles in decent films, she consistently undertook lengthy, time-consuming, and painstaking preparation for these roles. In 1937, she published an essay entitled "The Actress Plays Her Part" for a book on Hollywood filmmaking called *We Make the Movies*. In it she described her working methods, revealing that she spent considerable time studying the script closely and discussing her ideas with her director "to make sure that our conceptions of the character

are enough alike to avoid misunderstandings" (Davis 120). She added that if the script was based on a novel, she would always read the original and use it as a textbook, reading and rereading it "until I am thoroughly acquainted with her [character's] every thought" (122). Her time spent scrutinizing the script had little to do with actually learning the lines and everything to do with acquainting herself fully with her character and developing her characterization. Consequently, Davis wrote, "though I spend a great deal of time on the script before the picture starts, absorbing the story as a whole and developing my characterization, I seldom actually learn my lines until the night before the shooting of each scene. Then they are fresh in my mind for the day's work" (123). She noted that during shooting she would have further opportunities to study her role, that is, during the long waits that are part of the daily filming routine. These provided plenty of opportunity to work with a dialogue director or coach. Davis states that "As far as I am concerned, there can never be too much rehearsal, for during this time the cast learns to work together and often discovers bits of business that give the screen play naturalness and smoothness" (124). The letter from Rapper to Wallis, cited above, provides evidence that the production on *Now, Voyager* advanced slowly as a result of Davis's insistence on meticulously rehearsing her scenes on the set.

A day's work, and work it is—every minute of it. I don't think you can name any other profession that requires so many actual hours spent in producing something to be seen and judged by millions of people the world over. It is largely our awareness of responsibility to all those people that makes the actual shooting of a picture so nerve-racking. Every take must be approached as if it were the one which you will see in your theater. Everything we've got must go into everything we do. (Davis 126)

There is no question that Davis's approach to screen acting was one of total commitment, involving sheer hard work but also, and

more importantly, an intelligent, meticulously planned and thought-out approach to characterization. It required research, interpretation, and concentration to discover the most effective means by which to register the inner life of her characters. Cynthia Baron, in "Crafting Film Performances," has described how Davis, like many film actors working in Hollywood in the studio era, brought her characters alive by devising a series of "mental pictures," developed chiefly by studying the script, that could then be drawn on during the filming. This had nothing to do with "living the part" or feeling what the characters might be feeling. On the contrary, screen actors during this period avoided getting lost in their character's emotions, remaining alert to forthcoming actions. Many actors working in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s maintained an emotional detachment from their characters in order to remain conscious at all times of what they were doing and what they were about to do. The priority was to effectively convey their character's feelings rather than to experience those feelings. Baron argues that these actors used "synthetic memories to fuel controlled emotional experience during performance" (43). This entailed drawing on personal experience and insights only at the point of studying the script and building the character (i.e., interpretation) rather than during the performance before the cameras and microphones. Baron writes, "Training, preparation, and cool-headed acting provided the secure basis for performances and performance style that emerged from the unique demands of each script" (43). This cool-headed and emotionally distanced approach to acting is revealed in Bette Davis's own writings. In her autobiography of 1962, Davis wrote:

With young actors who talk about becoming the character and losing themselves in a role, I must argue. There is a part of you that must hold the reins and control the projection. There is a part of you that must be aware of pace and timing. . . . Without discipline and detachment, an actor is an emotional slob, spilling his insides. This abandonment is

having an unfortunate vogue. It is tasteless, formless, absurd. Without containment there is no art. (176)

Bette Davis's art was clearly one of containment, discipline, detachment, restraint: a constant holding on to the reins that never permitted her emotions to get the better of her when she was before the camera. It is, moreover, an art that required a concentrated, self-conscious, premeditated, and analytical approach to acting, permitting little in the way of spontaneous outburst or accidental reaction. Every gesture and nuance was carefully judged, timed, and paced. Every movement and utterance was the result of careful consideration.

It is worth returning now to the second movement of the final scene of *Now, Voyager*, at the point where Charlotte has exposed not only her true feelings for Jerry and his daughter, but also her own injured pride and the failure of her aspirations. It is here that Davis made her most critical decisions, and it is therefore worth considering not just her performance on the screen but also the script Davis worked from and the novel she consulted when developing her characterization. This scene contains Davis's longest and most dramatic speech. It begins with the words "Some man who'll make me happy?" Having spoken these in a small, soft voice, Davis leans back in what appears to be a reflexive action. This subtle movement registers the insult her character feels by her lover's comment. Her next words, "So that's it," are whispered rather than shouted, not to express anger at this moment but rather to indicate Charlotte's shock in coming to terms with Jerry's ignorance, his lack of understanding for the love she feels for him. These words she says to herself rather than to Jerry, and so she says them under her breath. Davis takes a moment to catch her breath, allowing the audience to hear her breathing, in and out, signalling that something is rising inside her, a powerful emotion that she may be unable to contain. The sound of these short, rapid breaths lets her audience know that her heart is pounding and that she is on the point of exploding. Having signalled this

inner emotion, Davis moves her body, energized by the emotion, her instinct being to walk away from Jerry. She uses the rather elaborate and dramatic gesture of raising her hand to her forehead, casting her head slightly downward, as she walks away to signal her troubled state of mind, her momentary confusion as she tries to sort out her conflicting and intense emotions. The increasing speed of Davis's physical movements here again suggests that Charlotte is losing her composure.

The script does not indicate whether or not Charlotte is angry or simply stunned at the moment she says "Some man who'll make me happy!" and "So that's it." In the original novel, by Olive Higgins Prouty, Charlotte, we are told by the narrator, first exclaims "So that's it!" in a "low tone charged with reproach" (470). She then adds a further "That's it!" before exclaiming "Some man who will make me happy!" with "all the scorn of which she is capable" (470). This could be assumed to indicate anger, suggesting to the reader that Charlotte speaks these words in a bitter, even mocking voice, of which Davis was more than capable. But rather than fire these words at Jerry scornfully, throwing his own words back into his face, Davis chose to change the emphasis and create a moment of introspection for her character. In neither the novel nor the script does Charlotte appear to take the time to process Jerry's words, struggling to make sense of them and, understanding their significance, feel her anger rise up from the depths of her being. But this is Davis's interpretation. It is exactly what she created when she chose to repeat Jerry's words to herself under her breath and then to whisper rather than exclaim, "So that's it!"

When Charlotte does unleash her attack upon Jerry, Davis makes several other critical decisions, most notably where to pause and breathe. Her outburst occurs with the line, "Here I've been labouring under the delusion that you and I were so in sympathy, so one, that you knew without being told what would make me happy." The first words pour out rapidly, but the lines are broken up by a series of short intakes of breath. "Here I've been labouring

under the delusion"—breaking the line for a sharp intake of breath—"that you and I were so in sympathy"—speeding up and increasing the volume of her speech, adding in a higher voice and with hardly a pause—"so one"—another short breath, her body swaying slightly, undecided whether to move forward or stay put—"that you knew without being told what would make me happy." In the script, the natural break in this line comes before and after the words "so one," just as it does in the novel: "Here I have been labouring under the delusion that we were so in sympathy—so *one*—that you knew without being told what would make me happy" (470). Davis, however, takes her most dramatic pause and intake of breath after declaring, "Here I've been labouring under the delusion," virtually ignoring the pause before "so one." In so doing, she makes Charlotte seem breathless, an indication that she is close to hyperventilating, too tense to be able to breathe deeply and fill her lungs with air. This breathlessness, which Davis uses throughout this final scene, attaches a deep and underlying frailty to Charlotte, no matter how strong, angry, or determined she may appear to be. Her inability to breathe deeply and produce her sentences without stopping to catch her breath informs the audience that Charlotte remains anxious and nervous despite her more confident appearance.

Davis's breath control achieves its ultimate and most exquisite effect when she delivers the final line of the movie. She prepares herself and her audience for this moment by becoming completely still and taking her time to gaze up into Henreid's eyes, holding the moment. She then swallows. Her next words are summoned up from the depths of her throat, expelling "Oh Jerry!" on a long breath, adding resonance to the words "don't let's ask for the moon." The word "moon" is very full and resonant, elongated to two beats, yet swiftly delivered. There is a slight pause before a quite amazing thing happens. Having expelled most of her breath, Davis does not use the pause to refill her lungs for the final words. Instead, using her very last breath for her very last words, she delivers "We

have the stars!" in a whisper, but in such a way that it forms a small, soft explosion on the last word. This is a contained burst, with only a little energy permitted by the last of the breath, making it fade out quickly, ending in a slightly prolonged "sss." Her lack of breath at this point enables her to project the word "stars" without the force to carry it forward and make it resonate. But what little breath she has is just enough to create the tiny, controlled explosion.

It takes everything Davis has left to produce this tiny but momentous conclusion to her roller-coaster scene. What, in both the script and the novel, is a grand gesture, a rhetorical flourish, becomes the most subtle of utterances. The grandeur of the line is subdued by Davis's performance, which holds the flourish in check. Had she taken a breath during the pause in this line, refilling her lungs to impart more energy and projection into her last few words, the effect would have been dramatically different, literally inflating an already inflated line. This would no doubt have made it seem excessive to the point of irony. Davis's decision to use her softest, weakest voice, with the absolute minimum of breath, turns the script's ultimate ornamental flourish into something sincere. The final line has arisen from the very depths of the actress's chest, a place close to her heart. It is little wonder, then, that it seems so heartfelt. For many audiences, this moment has proved to be breathtaking, somehow satisfying and deflating at the same time.

Sarah Kozloff has used *Now, Voyager* as one of a number of case studies for her chapter on dialogue in melodrama in her book *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. In that chapter, Kozloff discusses the long association between excessive talk and melodrama. In melodrama, she explains, excessive talk enables the principal characters to stage emotional revelations of their innermost thoughts, desires, feelings, and anxieties. While many leading scholars of film melodrama have taken the dialogue of such films to be ironic, Kozloff disputes this assumption. She supports her claim with reference to Peter Brooks, one of the few scholars to take the language of melodrama seriously, at face

value, rather than as an ironic comment on the subject or ideology of the drama. Kozloff argues that the excessive nature of melodrama's dialogue emerges principally from the need of the characters to reveal their inner feelings without making any explicit reference to sexual desire or sexual acts, thereby relying upon metaphor, hyperbole, and rhetorical dialogue. She writes that "Dialogue in melodramas functions to reveal feelings, and it does so through a heightened, even overblown rhetorical style" (239). She quotes Brooks's argument that melodramatic rhetoric "tends toward the inflated and the sententious" (Brooks 40). Brooks has also written that melodrama's "typical figures are hyperbole, antithesis, and oxymoron" (40). Similarly, Kozloff argues that "Dialogue in film melodramas is ornate, literary, charged with metaphor" (239).

The terms being used here by both Brooks and Kozloff (hyperbole, ornate, overblown, inflated, literary, rhetorical, sententious, metaphorical, etc.) would appear to provide an accurate description of the final line of *Now, Voyager* as it appears in the script and the novel. Indeed, Kozloff describes the dialogue in this film as "blatantly ornate," noting the considerable use of metaphor (252). She adds that "*Now, Voyager* . . . carries its visual and verbal excess with assurance," citing the final scene as an example of this (253). In fact, she argues that at the very end of the film "Her [Bette Davis's] line and its integration with the music and starry scenic backdrop, is over the top, and unabashed" (254). Having examined this scene in some detail, I would argue that although the final line of dialogue might be over the top (as, indeed, might the camera work, the mise-en-scene, and the music), Bette Davis's performance is anything but overblown or inflated—quite the contrary. Davis is clearly doing as little as possible in her final moment of the film, taking as much out of her voice as she can while still making it audible and intelligible. By starving the line of breath, Davis is deflating what on paper might well be thought of as an overinflated line: sententious, ornamental, and overelaborate. By reducing the articulation of

these words to a bare minimum, Davis lends them force and meaning, to some extent stripping them of their ornamental quality and forcing her audience to consider them not ironically or as hyperbole but as something that contains an inherent and everyday truth. This enables the audience to take the final line of *Now, Voyager* at face value, as Charlotte's fundamental belief that, at the end of the day, one usually has to settle for something less than one's greatest desire but that, in so doing, true happiness and contentment can be achieved. Whereas Kozloff argues that the rhetorical style of melodramatic dialogue is typically matched by an overblown performance style, the final moments of *Now, Voyager* reveal that this is not always the case. They demonstrate, in fact, that there are crucial instances where performers of melodrama and melodramatic dialogue must adopt an antithetical performance style if they are to convey the truth of their lines and reveal their characters' true feelings, achieving sincerity.

Sarah Kozloff writes that "We must recognise . . . that the inflated rhetoric of melodrama is wedded to a particular performance style—the use of gesture" (240). As one of the finest exponents of film melodrama, Bette Davis could well be thought of as a performer whose excessive physical gestures found a perfect match in the elaborate, overblown, and excessive dialogue of melodrama. But again, this is contradicted by the final scene of *Now, Voyager*, which contains few elaborate, dramatic gestures. It is true that such gestures can be found, most notably when Davis raises her hand to her forehead after having exclaimed "Some man who'll make me happy?" But this is an isolated and exceptional instance. Bette Davis does use her body and movement throughout much of this scene, creating an elaborate series of movements as she advances, hesitates, advances again, and retreats from Jerry. She also adds a pronounced jolt to her head when she describes her feelings of being "shut out" of Jerry's life. Similarly, she produces a rather emphatic motion when, near the start of the scene, her hands reach out and grab the back of the armchair to support herself as she recovers from the initial shock

of Jerry's announcement that he will take his daughter home with him. However, it would be an exaggeration to describe these gestures as inflated or over the top. With the exception of the hand raised to forehead, these gestures are actually rather subtle and naturalistic, the kinds of action anyone might perform involuntarily and unconsciously during an intensely emotional situation.

Rather than support the notion that melodramatic dialogue is necessarily wedded to melodramatic gestures, the final scene of *Now, Voyager* actually reveals that an effective and satisfying melodramatic performance can consist of instances where the dialogue's overelaboration is reduced or diffused by the absence of movement and gesture. In this way, the melodramatic text can be rendered with sincerity and be made meaningful for audiences. The melodramatic actor on screen may well need to embody some lines with his or her physical gestures and bodily movements. Sometimes it may be enough to use a facial expression, at other times just to add the right amount of tension to the voice. But there are places in film melodrama where an actor must strip the words of their excess in order to make them real, relevant to an audience, and also moving. Bette Davis's artful and controlled performance at the end of *Now, Voyager* reveals that even the most conventional of melodramatic devices—such as a grand rhetorical, metaphorical line of dialogue—can be transformed into a very personal expression of belief and feeling. Produced in this way, even the most sententious line of melodramatic dialogue can seem true to an audience.

Having examined in detail Bette Davis's performance at the end of *Now, Voyager*, it is clear that the actress was making very little use of heightened or elaborated gestures and expressions. There is little evidence here of histrionic poses and movements drawn from earlier dramatic forms such as pantomime, dumb show, and tableaux. Instead, Davis draws upon a set of subtle vocal and breathing methods that enable her to vary not just the pitch, speed, and volume of her words, but also their stress

and projection. Hers was a very distinctive technique involving breaks and cracks in her voice, audible intakes of breath, the flinging of words away from herself or directly at her costar, the elongation of small critical words, and the use of her last breath to add force without adding energy or projection. Deciding upon when to deploy this range of acting methods (and how to accompany them with bodily movement and facial expression) required careful planning, detailed script analysis, and a sophisticated understanding of characterization. This required the actress to take critical decisions, such as how to move when speaking (if at all) and where to direct her gaze. Much could hang on a detail, such as whether or not to swallow before speaking, when to pause during a line, in which pause to breathe, and, crucially, how much breath to take. Breathtaking performances result from such decisions. Breathtaking performances are those that astound an audience and make it accept what they see and hear in spite of obvious contrivances of plot and dialogue. Yet breathtaking performances seldom just happen. On the contrary, they result from considerable work, planning, and preparation, and they require care, control, and intelligence to orchestrate the minutiae of bodily and vocal techniques so that an audience is captivated, even spellbound.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Bette Davis worked to this principle and her work made her one of Hollywood's finest and most critically acclaimed actors. The winner of an Academy Award for her performance in *Jezebel*, she was nominated for the Best Actress award four years in succession from 1939 to 1942 and received rave reviews from critics for her restrained, intelligent, sensitive, and emotionally charged performances. There is no doubt that Davis's level of success as an actress at this point in her career was the product of sheer hard work and intelligence. From 1938 to 1942, Davis starred in fourteen films, consistently producing fine performances in films such as *Dark Victory* (1939), *The Old Maid* (1939), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), *The Letter* (1940), *The Little Foxes* (1941), and *In*

This Our Life (1942). Given the level of thought, preparation, planning, and rehearsal each of these roles demanded of Davis, her work during this period deserved to be praised by the critics. It was, by anyone's standard, a magnificent achievement. Sustaining quality performances at this level of output required not only strenuous efforts on her part but also the necessary support, help, and guidance from collaborators: most notably directors, acting coaches, and dialogue directors. Without their input and assistance, star actors such as Bette Davis could never have sustained the quality of their work at a rate of three or more films a year.

Acting coaches and dialogue directors played a crucial role in helping film stars produce award-winning performances while working within an industrial mode of production. Film historians have so far paid little attention to their work and their contribution to filmmaking in the studio era. Yet it is precisely a better understanding of the role of acting coaches and dialogue directors that will truly shed light on how a performance such as Davis's in *Now, Voyager* developed from the script to the screen. The transformation of the words of a script into sound and movement was not only a complex but also a collaborative process. It had to be, if the result was to take an audience's breath away. Thus, while Davis deserves much credit for the sheer brilliance of her performances in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it would be naïve and unfair to assume that she deserves all of it. To perform in that way, at that level, and under those circumstances, Davis was indebted to her colleagues: a company of technicians, creatives, and coaches whom she relied upon to help her produce a remarkably subtle and original body of work. It is all too easy to be captivated by Davis in a film such as *Now, Voyager*, and just as easy to overlook the contributions of the individuals who worked behind the cameras, helping to develop her performance. While Bette Davis, her costars, and her directors have been able to publish accounts of their work, working methods, and opinions, the accounts of acting coaches and dialogue directors have rarely been recorded.

This makes it harder for film historians to fully comprehend the collaborative nature of screen acting and to accurately assess, appreciate, and reflect on the different contributions made by such personnel. However, if film history is to acquire a comprehensive and accurate understanding of screen performances, scholars need to investigate the processes of screen acting. This should involve investigating the roles of a range of professionals rather than just the star performer on the screen. Scholars need to take more account of those who played major parts in assisting actors throughout the planning, preparing, rehearsing, and executing of their performances. Relatively little is known and documented about the labor of the invisible army of coworkers who were directly involved in developing performances. But until their work is revealed, the processes of Hollywood screen acting in the studio era will remain obscure. And so, while Bette Davis deserves credit for the magnificence of her performance in *Now, Voyager*, this should not be allowed to obscure the contributions of the coworkers who made it possible for her to win awards and accolades for her original, complex, and breath-taking performances.

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