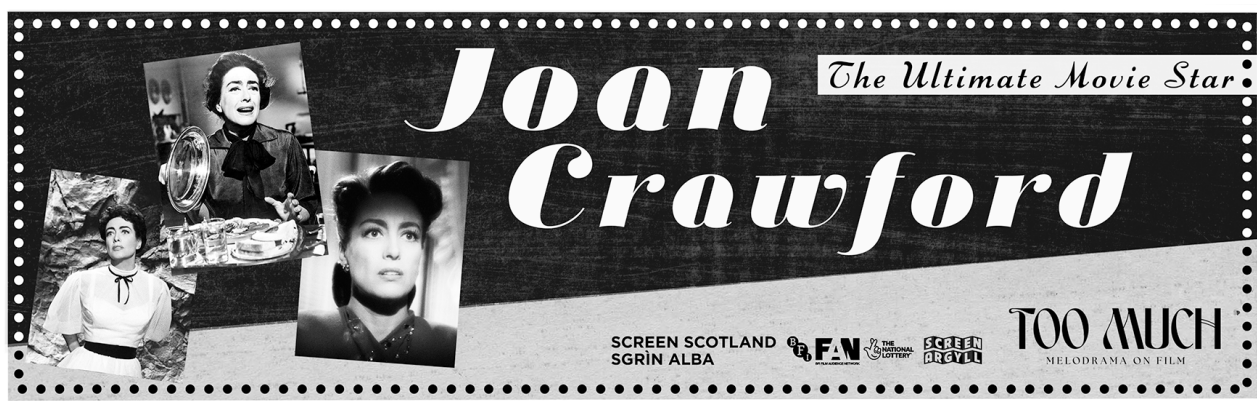




WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?

US 1962, directed by Robert Aldrich and adapted by Lukas Heller from the novel by Henry Farrell.

This is an extraordinary film. It is very difficult to categorise and it may well be that audiences think about it differently depending on their age and their knowledge of Hollywood history. Here are two of the biggest stars of the so called 'Golden Age of Hollywood' in the 1930s and 1940s doing something very different to anything they'd done before. Joan Crawford and Bette Davis belonged to a small group of women who dominated the industry and pleased the fans during the darkest days of the depression and war when women bought most of the cinema tickets. Here we see them stripped of the glamour that boosted their appeal and instead cast in a film placed alongside other black and white titles like *The House on Haunted Hill* (US 1959) from William Castle and *Psycho* (US 1960) from Alfred Hitchcock. The success of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* started a cycle of horror films featuring older female stars and shot in black and white (when major titles were switching to colour). Included in the cycle was a second adaptation of a Henry Farrell story, *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (US 1964) again directed by Aldrich and starring Bette Davis but this time with Olivia de Havilland.

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? presents a riveting story about two characters but it also offers us the chance to learn something about how Hollywood and America itself changed during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The story about its making and how it played to audiences is perhaps as interesting as what happened to Baby Jane and her older sister Blanche. Perhaps the biggest surprise for audiences today is that the two women who star in the film were younger than we might imagine. Joan Crawford was 58 and Bette Davis 54 when the film was released. Crawford as Blanche Hudson is confined to a wheelchair following an accident and Davis is dressed and made up to resemble a grotesque version of the child star she had been in 1917 when the film's story begins with her performance as 'Baby Jane'. In those early days 'Baby Jane' was the star but eventually her older sister Blanche would eclipse her as a star and forty years later they are living together and supported by Blanche's savings. Jane is resentful still of the change in fortune and she has the benefit of mobility. It's a great premise for a dramatic story.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the idea to make the film can be traced back to Joan Crawford's experience working with Aldrich on his 1956 film *Autumn Leaves*. She said she would like to star alongside Davis and she pressed Aldrich to buy the rights to the novel by Farrell. Crawford's role in the film allows her to appear in her best light despite the constraint of the wheelchair. By contrast, Davis went for the outlandish costumes and make-up as the aged 'Baby' Jane and it was her performance that saw her nominated for an Oscar as Best Actress. The story of the making of the film is a 'meta narrative' which many have seen as informing the drama of the film itself. Crawford and Davis had been rivals in the 1930s and 1940s and particularly when Crawford left MGM in 1941 and joined Warner Bros, the studio which held Davis' contract for many years. Crawford won her Oscar for her leading role in *Mildred Pierce* in 1946 when Davis felt trapped in roles that weren't to her taste. But Davis bounced back with another Oscar nomination for her role in *All About Eve* in 1951 (she had already won two Oscars).

How real was the enmity between Davis and Crawford? You may have seen the TV mini-series *Feud* (US 2017) which covers the 'making of' *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and the battles on set and off between the two actors. You may also be aware that Joan Crawford was presented as a 'real life' abuser of her adopted daughter Christina in the book and 1981 film *Mommie Dearest* in which she is played by Faye Dunaway. It's difficult not to allow these two narratives to influence how you read the 1962 film. It's also important to take on board that in 1962 Hollywood was changing fundamentally. The major studios were no longer in control over the actions of their contracted stars. Although Warner Bros. actually released the film, the funding for *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, came from Seven Arts, an independent which actually bought control of Warner Bros. in 1966. At this point stars whose public image had previously been carefully managed by their studio were able to use television and 'live appearances' as a means of directly meeting their public. Bette Davis supported her role as Baby Jane vigorously around the time of the film's release whereas Joan Crawford was more restrained and concerned to maintain her role as a director of Pepsi-Cola after the death of her husband Alfred Steele in 1959 when he was President of the company.

Although Joan Crawford and Bette Davis were both stars in the Hollywood, they were celebrated by audiences and fans in different ways. Crawford was perhaps the epitome of glamorous female star with a seemingly genuine interest in her fans who reciprocated. Davis was seen much more as a 'star actor' celebrated for her performances. This distinction seems to underpin the relationship between Blanche and Jane in the 1962 film. The film is perhaps best seen as a melodrama about the relationship between two stars but it has since been celebrated as a psychological thriller, a gothic horror film or a 'camp classic' as audiences have changed. What does it mean to you?

Roy Stafford 24/10/2025