



US 1945

Mildred Pierce is one of the most successful films in Hollywood history. The reasons for that are arguably fourfold – the adaptation of a popular novel published a couple of years earlier, the skill

and professionalism of the cast and crew working at Warner Bros., the great ‘comeback’ of Joan Crawford who won the Best Actress Oscar for her performance in the title role and finally the unusual advertising and promotion of the film.

"Mildred Pierce"

James M. Cain was one of the writers dubbed the ‘hardboiled’ school of crime writers who provided material for what later became known as film noir in Hollywood. His three best-known novels were all made into successful Hollywood films – Double Indemnity (1944), Mildred Pierce (1945) and The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946). The novels were set in the 1930s and they presented a challenge to Hollywood’s notorious ‘Hays Code’ which was designed to apply censorship by requiring script approval of each production. Cain wrote novels which broke the rules at every turn. It required great ingenuity to adapt the novels and get script approval. Mildred Pierce set a slightly different problem to the other two novels which involved adultery and murder. In an ironic twist, the studio was forced to add a murder to the story to produce the moral resolution to the story that the Code required.

All three films were eventually seen as films noir, but again Mildred Pierce was different. Most of its narrative suggests a melodrama and what might be considered as a particular kind of melodrama, the ‘women’s picture’. During the war years in particular the audience for Hollywood films was predominantly made up of women. Women had more independence and more were earning a wage outside the home than before. They invested their leisure time in stories about women and the great stars such as Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck and Rosalind Russell. A feature of the ‘woman’s world’ in Mildred Pierce is Joan Crawford facing seemingly impossible odds as a homemaker, mother to two daughters, entrepreneur and later glamorous owner of a chain of restaurants. Not surprisingly she has need of female friends and supporters, a key element of the women’s picture. Both melodrama and the noir crime drama were ‘expressionist’ genres with strong visual styles and emotional music. In Mildred Pierce the two

are interwoven so in flashbacks the melodrama is played out in bright high key lighting but the murder narrative is in the shadows.

The team behind the look and sound of *Mildred Pierce* were some of the very best in Hollywood. Director Michael Curtiz was Warner Bros 'go to' man for its prestige productions, having made films as diverse as *Casablanca* (1942) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). Composer Max Steiner and production designer Anton Grot completed a trio of Central Europeans who knew everything about melodrama and noir and they were joined by Ernie Haller as cinematographer, one of the most respected creatives in Hollywood.

In 1943 Joan Crawford ended her long association with MGM after 18 years during which time she had made well over 60 films. She took a big drop in salary to join Warner Bros. and then spent time looking for scripts. Appearing in just one film in 1944, *Hollywood Canteen* as part of the studio's war effort, she was eager to work on *Mildred Pierce*. She recognised that it would stretch her and bring her back to a big audience. Nobody would accuse Joan of not working hard to produce her best work and she grasped the chance to be both a working single mother and later to wear the glamour – as only she could. Although the studio and Curtiz the director were not sure about Joan as an actress in this kind of melodrama, she was in fact perfect for the role. At the start of the story Mildred is married to a dull man and living in a house which is too big and expensive for his earnings. It is still during the latter stages of the Great Depression and when her husband is bought out of his real estate business, he leaves her with two children to fend for herself. Joan knew all about poverty in her childhood and about hard work. She also knew about doing everything for her children. Mildred's relationship with her older daughter Veda (played by Ann Blyth) also had resonances for Joan. Veda is a 'social climber' who thinks her mother is 'beneath her'. Joan herself had continually felt inferior during her rise to stardom because of her childhood, lack of education and feelings of social inadequacy.

Mildred Pierce was completed for exhibition by May 1945 but Jack Warner decided to delay its release because in previews the film seemed to score with men as well as women and American soldiers overseas in the Pacific would not be home until September. The film had its premiere in New York in September 1945 and went on general release from October. One advert for the film claimed Mildred was "The kind of woman every man wants, but shouldn't have!". Another showed sailors clambering off a troopship with the cry "Oh boy! home and Mildred Pierce!". Cinemas were supplied with posters which urged audiences not to reveal "What Mildred did" – the same stunt which Alfred Hitchcock later used with *Psycho*. Some people had thought Joan Crawford was getting too old when she left MGM (she was in her late thirties). It makes you wonder what MGM executives thought when the money rolled in for Warner Bros. The ads implied Mildred did many things that aren't actually in the film but nobody seemed to mind. After this film Joan Crawford was seen by all not as just a film star but a great actress.

Roy Stafford, 27/11/2025