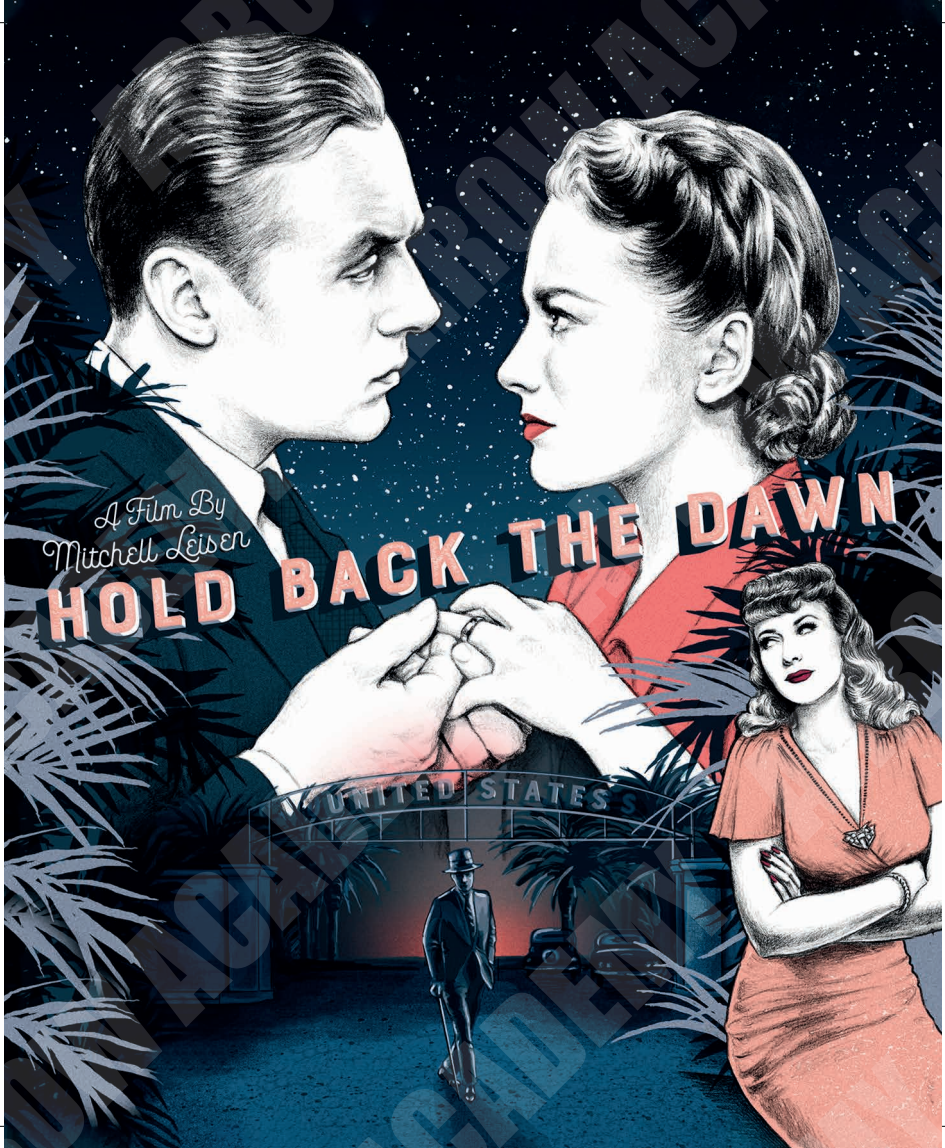


*A Film By  
Mitchell Leiser*

# HOLD BACK THE DAWN





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## CAST

**Charles Böyer** Georges Iscovescu

**Olivia de Havilland** Emmy Brown

**Paulette Goddard** Anita Dixon

**Victor Francen** Van Den Luecken

**Walter Abel** Inspector Hammock

**Curt Bois** Bonbois

**Rosemary DeCamp** Berta Kurz

**Eric Feldary** Josef Kurz

**Nestor Paiva** Fred Flores

**Eva Puig** Lupita

**Micheline Cheirel** Christine

**Madeleine Le Beau** Anni

## CREW

Directed by **Mitchell Leisen**

Produced by **Arthur Hornblow Jr.**

Written by **Charles Brackett** and **Billy Wilder**

From a Story by **Ketti Frings**

Director of Photography **Leo Tover, A.S.C.**

Music by **Victor Young**

Edited by **Doane Harrison**

Sound Recording **Harold Lewis** and **John Cope**

Art Direction **Hans Dreier** and **Robert Usher**

Gowns **Edith Head**



CHARLES BOYER  
OLIVIA DE HAVILLAND  
PAULETTE GODDARD



PRODUZIONE PARAMOUNT  
REGIA: MITCHELL LEISEN

## FRONTIERS OF THE HEART:

### Revisiting *Hold Back the Dawn*

by Farran Smith Nehme

A refugee from an “undesirable” country – one with a US immigration quota that won’t get around to him for nearly a decade – finds himself stuck in a Mexican border town with hundreds of other desperate refugees, all looking for a way in. It sounds like a feature in today’s newspaper, but we’re talking about *Hold Back the Dawn*, directed by Mitchell Leisen at Paramount in 1940, as Hitler was overrunning Europe, and released in early 1941.

Charles Boyer was cast as Georges Iscovescu, the Romanian-born drifter who washes up in a no-hope hotel called, of course, the Esperanza. Also in town is his ex-dancing partner, and old flame Anita Dixon (Paulette Goddard), now a US resident thanks to a green-card marriage with a five-foot-three jockey she divorced at the first opportunity: “Once over the border I went to a judge. I said, ‘A woman wants a man, not a radiator cap.’ Divorce granted, \$50.” Naturally this sets the wheels turning in Iscovescu’s brain. After striking out a few times, he lights on Emmy (Olivia de Havilland), a naive schoolteacher who is leading a day trip for a carload of exceptionally bratty boys. In less than 24 hours, he has a borrowed ring on Emmy’s finger. But Georges spends a little too much time with his bride, and finds the idea of betraying her much harder than he’d thought.

It’s a tried-and-true Hollywood formula, the hardened opportunist changed by the love of a good woman, but in the hands of Leisen & co. it became a classic romantic film, winning excellent reviews, finishing high for the year’s box office, and gaining six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and a Best Actress nod for Olivia de Havilland. *Hold Back the Dawn* remains beautiful and moving, tender in the way it shows Emmy’s giddy sense of first love, highly sympathetic to the town’s other exiles, and leavened with enough cynical wit from screenwriters Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder to keep things from becoming too sentimental. And, despite the concessions required by the censorship rules then in place, the film carries a pointed political sting to this day.

At that time, as in our own, refugees were beating on the door to the US and finding it shut tight. Billy Wilder knew how that felt. Austrian-born Wilder arrived in the US in 1934 on a one-way ticket from Paris to Los Angeles, with a temporary visa connected to his writing a screenplay for Columbia called *Pam-Pam*. He wrote it, the movie never got made, and when his six-month allotment expired, Wilder who was Jewish and had no desire to return to an increasingly terrifying Europe, found himself forced to cool his heels in the border town of Mexicali. Paris it was not. As Wilder told it, he jumped the vast line of Austrian and German applicants by dint of describing his plans to write movies to a sympathetic consular official. "Write some good ones," said the official, and stamped the visa.

But Wilder wasn't the only one with a personal connection to the material. The original story was by a writer named Ketti Frings. Born Katherine Hartley, she had fallen in love with Kurt Frings, a German-born former lightweight boxing champ. He was also the nephew of Joseph Frings, a German Catholic bishop (later cardinal) and a fierce critic of the Nazis, which was no doubt a key factor in Kurt's desire to emigrate. Hartley and Frings met in France where he was working as a ski instructor in 1937. They married the following year, but Frings was unable to obtain a visa, and for a while Ketti had to commute to her Hollywood job from their residence in Tijuana, Mexico. Ketti knew a good story when she saw one; her distinguished career eventually included novels, screenplays, and in 1958 a Pulitzer for her theatrical adaptation of *Look Homeward, Angel*. And the story that resulted from Ketti Frings's marital predicament, "Memo to a Movie Producer," was eventually sold to Paramount for \$5,000. She expanded it into a novel, *Hold Back the Dawn*, that was published before the movie came out and sold well.

Unsurprisingly, Ketti Frings hadn't portrayed the character based on her husband as a lying con artist, and the couple were extremely displeased at how Iscovescu turned out, with Kurt Frings threatening to sue Brackett and Wilder at one point. The suit never materialised, and Frings was admitted to the US in 1940, after taking his case to Congress (a route that Wilder biographer Ed Sikov notes wasn't uncommon at the time, so desperate were people to be admitted). Kurt Frings became a top Hollywood agent, with a client roster that eventually included none other than Olivia de Havilland.

Romanian-born Georges Iscovescu (Charles Boyer) has no such governmental workaround available to him. The movie opens with him striding into a movie studio and desperately offering a story pitch to a director named Dwight Saxon, played by Leisen himself, for the bargain price of \$500. (In a nice inside-reference, Leisen is shown on the Paramount set directing Veronica Lake and Brian Donlevy in *I Wanted Wings* [1941].) "My papers give my occupation as a dancer, which is correct, in a general way," he says as the flashback begins. To a savvy American (or any would-be immigrant) in 1941 this was also an alert. The

quotas were small, and made even smaller by a clause in the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924: Officials could refuse admittance to anyone likely to be a "public charge." Iscovescu is, as plainly as could be under the Production Code, a gigolo, and a potential public charge if ever there was one.

Even as played by Charles Boyer, he of the tender eyes and chocolate-ganache voice, Iscovescu is one cold article. The unnamed border town he's stuck in has become so full of would-be immigrants that no hotel rooms are available — until a refugee hangs himself in one at the Esperanza, and Iscovescu pounces without a second thought. Leisen's camera emphasises the cramped boredom of the town, having Boyer cross and re-cross certain parts of the set. The border checkpoint is marked by a fence ("it might as well be a hundred feet high," fumes Georges), palm trees and a massive "UNITED STATES" over the gate; the interior is seen only in glimpses. At first, glum, sardonic Georges comes to life only when in the company of fellow gold-digger Anita.

Paulette Goddard, born on Long Island and American down to her lacquered toenails, gives not the slightest impression of being any kind of foreigner. But Anita is such a delightful presence in the movie it scarcely matters; scheming to take her rich sucker to the cleaners while she keeps a weather eye on Boyer. In contrast to de Havilland, whose dialogue as Emmy is achingly sincere, Brackett and Wilder give Anita nothing but firecrackers: "Your door was unlocked. I just dropped in to borrow a cup of sugar." Goddard's best work outside of her Chaplin films often involved a scene where she gets to tell another character the facts of life, as in *The Women* (1939). Here it's when Anita tells Emmy the truth







about Georges: "I know what you're thinking – this woman's a tramp, and she's in love with him. Well, I *am* a tramp, and I *am* in love with him." Anita's essentially an amoral person, but what sells the scene is the sympathy that flickers across her face when she sees how deeply Emmy is hurt.

Exquisitely pretty de Havilland, who got the role on loan-out from a highly reluctant Jack Warner, was perhaps an odd choice for a schoolteacher who's reached her mid-twenties and remained a virgin. But the script suggests Emmy is sheltered more than anything, a good Catholic girl (she and Boyer have a lovely scene in a Mexican church) who has dreamt of romance and is uncommonly vulnerable to anyone offering it. Leisen, who like George Cukor was known as a great director of actresses, gives de Havilland several breathtaking close-ups that suggest Emmy's awakening sexual desires (even as Georges, whose own awakening involves his heart, tries ruses to keep her innocent). De Havilland's performance as Emmy remained one of her favorites. The heartbreaking scene where she gives Georges back his ring – telling him, "... I come from a small town. We don't have any of those fine hotels. We eat at the drugstore. But, we leave a tip just the same," – is one of the best in her long and legendary career.

And like everyone else in *Hold Back the Dawn*, Emmy isn't a saint, as Brackett and Wilder show by giving her the film's most searing line. US sentiment about immigration in 1941 was decidedly, even virulently "con"; polls showed most Americans wanted the refugees kept out. Brackett and Wilder allude to that as Emmy rhapsodises to Georges about the promise of America: "You see, it's like, um – like a lake. Clear and fresh and it'll never get stagnant while new streams are flowing in." "Well," says Georges, "your people are building pretty high dams to stop those streams." "Just to keep out the scum, Georges," replies Emmy.

In its approach to the characters holed up in the Esperanza, *Hold Back the Dawn* is political without seeming political at all, showing an array of European immigrant types, all benevolent souls save Iscovescu and Anita, all of them meant to strike the audience as good potential American citizens. This film marks the American film debuts of French actors Victor Francen, Micheline Cheirel and Madeleine LeBeau. Francen plays Professor Van Den Lueken, perhaps Jewish and a scientific genius of some sort, waiting for his position at a college; LeBeau and Cheirel play his pretty and loving daughters. Bonbois (Curt Bois) is a French hairdresser; years later in an interview, asked about *Hold Back the Dawn*'s political implications, Mitchell Leisen denied there were any, saying that, for example, "I don't think the hairdresser was particularly worthy" of entry. But still, Bonbois is lovable, never more so than when he gets good news about his ancestry. Most sympathetic of all is pregnant Berta Kurz (Rosemary DeCamp), German (and also possibly Jewish), and married to a husband who is ill with tuberculosis and therefore inadmissible. She is nevertheless hellbent on

having her child become an American citizen, and how she works to achieve that remains one of the best plot twists in any 1940s movie.

The making of *Hold Back the Dawn* also resulted in one of Billy Wilder's favorite anecdotes, told and re-told time and again. In brief, Wilder and Brackett had written a scene where Georges, alone in his room and at his lowest ebb, repeatedly stops a cockroach with his walking stick and asks to see its papers. Boyer refused to do the scene and director Leisen sided with Boyer. Whereupon Wilder, who was still working on the script with Brackett, claims to have fumed to his writing partner, "If that son-of-a-bitch don't talk to a cockroach, he don't talk to nobody," or words to that effect. And so, as Wilder always wound up the story, they threw the third act to Olivia de Havilland. One problem with this anecdote is the fact that Charles Brackett's recently published diaries mention Boyer's refusal to do the scene, and that they threatened not to finish the screenplay, but describes no such third-act scheme. Another is that it is Emmy who all but disappears from the final 15 minutes of the film, not Georges. (It's also likely, according to film scholar Thomas Doherty, that head Hollywood censor Joseph Breen would have strongly objected to the scene, for the all-purpose reason of "vulgarity" as well as the distinct possibility of offending Mexico.)

Wilder's fury over the incident unquestionably contributed to his determination to direct his own films, which is surely a reason to thank Boyer and Leisen, although Wilder evidently held a grudge against both to the day he died. But despite Leisen's *lèse-majesté* with regard to the cockroach scene, *Hold Back the Dawn* remains one of the director's best – and Leisen was an excellent director. The high quality of his work here, as well as in other films such as *Remember the Night* (1940), *Hands Across the Table* (1935), *Easy Living* (1937), and *Midnight* (1939), is increasingly recognised by critics and other filmmakers, such as Mark Rappaport. "*Hold Back the Dawn*, an unlikely tale of redemption, of gigolos and gold diggers conniving their way across the American border from Mexico, would have been unpalatably depressing under Wilder's direction," argues Rappaport.

Leisen himself, in summing up his approach to *Hold Back the Dawn*, also gave insight into the unique quality of his directing, and the appeal of the movie. "Nobody's all good, or all bad, not in my movies at least," he told biographer David Chierichetti. "There's a little bad in the best of us, and a little good in the worst of us." There could be no better description of those drifting in and out of the Hotel Esperanza.

*Farran Smith Nehme has been writing about classic film on her blog, Self-Styled Siren, since 2005. She is also a freelance movie reviewer for the New York Post, and her writing has appeared in The New York Times, Barron's Magazine, The Baffler, and many other publications.*







## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Hold Back the Dawn* has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono audio. A safety duplicate 35mm negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a Arriscan at NBC Universal. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The original mono mix was remastered from the optical negatives at Deluxe Audio Services, Hollywood. All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

R3Store Studios  
 Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Nathan Leaman-Hill, Rich Watson, Jenny Collins

Deluxe Audio  
 Jordan Perry

NBC-Universal  
 Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**  
 Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
 Technical Producer **James White**  
 QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**  
 Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**  
 Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**  
 Artwork **Jennifer Dionisio**  
 Design **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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