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Dartmouth Film Society

THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES (1946)

Milly Stephenson	Myran Loy	Mrs. Parrish	Minna Gombell
Al Stephenson	Frederic March	Mr. Parrish	Walter Baldwin
Fred Derry	Dana Andrews	Mrs. Cameron	Dorothy Adams
Peggy Stephenson	Teresa Wright	Mr. Cameron	Don Beddoe
Marie Derry	Virginia Mayo	Woody	Victor Cutler
Wilma Cameron	Cathy O'Donnell	Bullard	Erskine Sanford
Butch Engel	Hoagy Carmichael	Luella Parrish	Marlene Aames
Homer Parrish	Harold Russell	Rob Stephenson	Michael Hall
Hortense Derry	Gladys George	Prew	Charles Halton
Pat Derry	Roman Bohnen	Mr. Mollett	Ray Teal
Mr. Milton	Ray Collins	Thorpe	Howland Chamberlin
Cliff	Steve Cochran	Novak	Dean White

Screenplay by Robert E. Sherwood adapted from the novel Glory for Me by MacKinlay Kantor. Photographed by Gregg Toland. Costumes by Sharaff. Art direction by Perry Ferguson and George Jenkins. Set decorations by Julia Heron. Sound by Richard Deweese. Music composed by Hugo Friedhofer, conducted by Emil Newman. Produced by Samuel Goldwyn and released through RKO Radio Pictures.

Directed by WILLIAM WYLER

There has rarely been a film so highly praised on its release as Samuel Goldwyn's production, THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES. Coming at the end of the war, it dealt with the problems of returning veterans in a manner which brought joy to the critics, audiences and theatre owners. Unfortunately, films which are praised in this manner when they appear often show their weaknesses when revived. And there are several schools of thought on this film.

Richard Griffith, in his excellent monograph prepared for the Goldwyn retrospective given at the Museum of Modern Art some years ago, maintains that it is one of the greatest films of all time. On the other extreme, the prominent critic Pauline Kael described it to this writer as "simply nauseating." Certainly there is no general agreement today on the film's value, and our viewers will have contradictory opinions on its worth. But however one takes it, BEST YEARS is a monumental example of Hollywood at its most worthy, if not at its successful best.

The story goes that Mr. Goldwyn read a story in Time about returning Marines, sometime in 1944. The idea hit him that this might make a good film and telephoned the author MacKinlay Kantor to write a scenario. Instead of an outline, Mr. Kantor delivered a 100 page poem in blank verse. Mr. Goldwyn's reaction is not recorded, but when he had sent the author back to work, he engaged his favorite director, William Wyler, and hired the famous playwright Robert E. Sherwood to prepare the screenplay. The end result was a script so different from the original Kantor version that it was subsequently published as a novel in its own right.

Mr. Goldwyn was at the peak of his powers in 1946, and was able to assemble a formidable line-up of talent. His cameraman was Gregg Toland, who had earlier done CITIZEN KANE, one of the landmarks of movie photography. A dozen big stars were under Goldwyn contract or option, and they were all put in the package. Unlike most films, a great deal of rehearsal was held before anything was shot; the entire production crew was reported to have been drawn from World War II veterans on Mr. Goldwyn's orders.

The end result was a big picture in every sense of the word. It was enormously long, two hours and forty minutes in its completed form, an unheard of length for a film not based on a well-known book. It took 100 days to shoot (three weeks is an average schedule), and the total cost was legendary. It was both praised in Congress as a monument to the American way of life and damned as insidious propaganda in the same halls.

After the dreary war years, Hollywood hailed it as a return to the good old days of the super production; nothing of quite this size had crossed the screen since GONE

WITH THE WIND. The mass circulation critics praised the film to the skies, although their editors would hardly have let them do anything else.

But the great film critic James Agee had problems with it when reviewing it in The Nation. In fact he had so much trouble making up his mind that he reviewed it for two successive weeks. It was one of his most interesting pieces and is reprinted in Agee On Film, available in paperback. While he praised the slickness of the script and its construction, he was not pleased with what the film had to say, and ended by writing, "It would be possible, I don't doubt, to call the whole picture just one long pious piece of deceit and self-deceit, embarrassed by hot flashes of talent, conscience, truthfulness and dignity."

Viewed in 1965, the film is of interest more as a piece of slick sociology than as great movie art. It set a dangerous precedent in the revival of the "blockbuster" film, filled with famous names, costing millions of dollars, although this trend was not to become clear until some years after. The story is interesting, but not as powerful as it was in 1946, and the film is very dated.

Yet there are moments which still pack a punch. The casting of Harold Russell, a veteran who lost both hands in a training accident, was most fortunate, and his scenes would seem to be the best remembered by those who saw the film when it was originally released. This character was not in the original story, but was written in after Goldwyn and Wyler had seen him in a documentary called THE DIARY OF A SERGEANT.

The career of French-born director William Wyler goes back to 1926, and he was long associated with Goldwyn. Although his films were lavishly praised when released, they receive scant critical attention today. One of the reasons was that he was extremely dependent on his cameraman, Gregg Toland, and when this artist died, Wyler's films slipped in quality, suggesting that Toland had probably taken over more than a few of the functions of a director. Certainly such pompous horrors as THE BIG COUNTRY (1958) and BEN HUR (1959) do not suggest the hand of a great director.

THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES is a film which should be seen by anyone who is interested in motion pictures, for it is an important landmark in the history of the movement. But our praise in 1965 must be much more restrained than that of the critics nineteen years ago.

David Hull

On Wednesday, April 7, Walter Wanger '15 will introduce a screening of GABRIEL OVER THE WHITE HOUSE, which he produced. Mr. Wanger selected this as his personal favorite of the many films he has made during a career which has stretched from the silents to CLEOPATRA. There will be one showing only, at 8:30 p. m.