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BIGGER THAN LIFE, U.S.A., 1956

Cert: X. *dist:* 20th Century-Fox. *p.c.:* 20th Century-Fox.
p: James Mason. *d:* Nicholas Ray. *sc:* Cyril Hume and Richard Maibaum, based on a *New Yorker* article by Berton Roueche.
ph: Joe MacDonald. CinemaScope. *col:* Eastman Colour.
ed: Louis Loeffler. *a.d.:* Lyle R. Wheeler, Jack Martin Smith.
m: David Raksin. *sd:* W. D. Flick, Harry M. Leonard. *l.p.:* James Mason (*Ed Avery*), Barbara Rush (*Lou*), Walter Matthau (*Wally*), Robert Simon (*Dr. Norton*), Christopher Olsen (*Richie Avery*), Roland Winters (*Dr. Rurie*), Rusty Lane (*La Perle*), Rachel Stephens (*Nurse*), Kipp Hamilton (*Pat Wade*). \$553 ½ 95 mins.

Ed Avery, a small-town highschool teacher, suffers from crippling attacks of pain. He is sent to hospital for observation and warned that the disease (a form of arthritis) will kill him within a year unless it can be kept in check by cortisone treatment. Cortisone is a dangerous drug, however, in that it may affect his mental balance. Avery returns home to Lou, his wife, and Richie, his small son, and is able to go back to work. Moods of exaltation and extravagance alternate with periods of acute depression. To fight these he becomes increasingly dependent on the drug, and he is reduced to forging doctors' prescriptions to keep up his supply. Meanwhile, his mental state rapidly deteriorates. He devises grandiose schemes for revolutionising the educational system; he tells Lou that he has "outgrown" her and intends to leave her; he mercilessly bullies his son. Finally, Avery catches Richie attempting to steal and destroy the cortisone tablets. The boy, he tells Lou, will grow up as a criminal—it is his duty to kill first Richie, then Lou and then himself. But they are rescued by a family friend, Wally Gibbs, who overpowers Avery after a fight. He is taken to hospital in a coma: when he recovers consciousness, it is clear that he has also regained his sanity.

Bigger than Life is based on an account of an actual case as published in *The New Yorker*, and comparisons between the original and the Hollywood version are unusually revealing. The early sequences legitimately dramatise actual incidents: there are some shrewdly observed scenes—quarrels between husband and wife, a visit to a dress shop which begins as a cheerful family excursion and ends in an atmosphere of fear and tension—and the film is not unpersuasive in building up its picture of a man of essential intelligence slowly retreating into his private world of fantasy. The final section of the film, however, breaks entirely with the original. It may be that cortisone has brought on states of homicidal mania, but *Bigger than Life* is unable plausibly to suggest this. Its climax is not only savage in content, but handled with a melodramatic over-emphasis which makes it slightly repellent: the father, armed with a bible and a pair of scissors, pursues his son; the fight between the two men is vicious and prolonged, and conducted to the accompaniment of fairground music blaring from a television set. This retreat into sensationalism seems notably out of place in a film of this sort, whose subject essentially requires a responsible approach. Nicholas Ray's handling of the material is very assured, and in some of the quieter scenes tensely effective. James Mason, who also produced the film, plays with showy intensity. A more convincing performance, though, comes from Barbara Rush as Avery's wife.

Suitability: A.

P.H.