The Best Years of Our Lives


Director: William Wyler

Screenplay: Robert E Sherwood, from the blank verse novella, “Glory for Me,” by MacKinlay Kantor

Wars, no matter when they are fought or which weapons are employed, share many common characteristics. One is that the cheapest currency is human life. Another is that even the winners pay a toll. And a third is that many soldiers, upon returning home, must engage in a struggle nearly as great as the one they fought on the battlefield. The homecoming, while generally regarded as a joyful occasion, is not without its down side - something that is often ignored by the media and the populace. Soldiers have to re-integrate themselves into a suddenly strange lifestyle, re-acquaint themselves with their families, and
attempt to put the horrors of war behind them. In recent years, numerous films have followed the struggles of Vietnam vets after their return to this country, often with major stars playing the roles (Sylvester Stallone in the *Rambo* series, Tom Cruise in *Born on the Fourth of July*, and Bruce Willis in *In Country*, to name a few). But there is an older movie with a kinder, gentler (but no less clear-eyed) perspective on these issues - the critically lauded, Oscar winning *The Best Years of Our Lives*. When the film was released in 1946, circumstances were far different from what they are today. The bloodiest war of the century had just ended with the Japanese and Nazis vanquished. The atomic bomb had been unleashed, stirring the first sparks of worry about the potential of a nuclear holocaust (fifteen years later, those sparks would be fanned into flames during the Cuban Missile Crisis). And the survivors were coming home - some with physical scars such as amputated arms or legs, and some appearing hale and healthy while forever changed in their minds. They all returned with the same basic dream of putting the war behind them and getting back to life as usual, but the reality was different. For those whose primary skill was wielding a weapon, employment opportunities were scarce. Wives and children had become strangers. Marriages, sometimes started on an impulse before the man went overseas, foundered. And women, who entered the working force while the men were away, had discovered a new, liberating independence. *The Best Years of Our Lives* takes all of these factors (and others) into account. And, even though the film's social relevance has diminished (it has been a quarter of a century since the last influx of war veterans), its dramatic power and impact have not lessened.

The story centers on three World War II veterans who are returning to their home town of Boone City after spending several years in the Pacific Theater. The oldest of them, a forty-ish man named Al Stephenson (Fredric March), is an infantry soldier. The youngest, Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), a Navy man, lost both hands and now wears cleverly-designed metal hooks. Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), the third member of the trio, is a frequently decorated Air Force captain who commanded bombing missions. While Homer's injuries are the only visible ones, each of the men carries his own psychological burdens.

One-by-one, we meet the families. Homer, who still lives with his parents, is greeted with mixed joy and chagrin. While his mother and father are elated to see him, there are moments of awkwardness when they spy his lost hands. His fiancée, Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell), is equally glad to see him, but she displays no dismay at his handicap. Nevertheless, Homer, feeling inadequate, does not return her embrace, and his face shows signs of inner torment.

Al comes home to a house full of laughter and jubilation. His wife, Milly (Myrna Loy); daughter, Peggy (Teresa Wright); and son, Pat (Michael Hall), are all there to welcome him. But Al is restless and uncomfortable, and he decides to go out for a night on the town. After his son has gone to bed, he brings Milly and Peggy with him, and they make a round of Boone City's night clubs and bars. In the last one, they encounter Fred, who has been unable to locate his wife, Marie (Virginia Mayo). Homer, who needed to get out of the house, is also there, leading to an impromptu reunion of Boone City's three returning heroes. And, while everyone else dances and carouses, Fred and Peggy start a conversation that will eventually lead to romance.

Although the first hour of *The Best Years of Our Lives* centers on Al, the remainder focuses primarily on Fred. Homer's story is interspersed throughout. The early scenes with Al are effective in illustrating the vague sense of disquiet experienced by returning soldiers. Al has difficulty accepting that his surroundings aren't part of a dream, yet, somehow, the reality doesn't live up to the idealized mental image he had constructed during his three year absence. His children have grown, there's a distance between him and his wife (despite her attempts to bridge it), and he has little taste for everyday work. "Last year it was kill Japs," he remarks. "This year, it's make money." Fred and Homer are experiencing similar difficulties. Homer cannot get close to anyone; he senses their
uncertainty about how to handle his disability, and it causes him to retreat into a bitter shell. Meanwhile, Fred is learning that his wife, whom he married only a few days before shipping out, is distressingly superficial. Her first loves are money and the high life; Fred is acceptable as a husband only as long as he can provide those things, but the only job he can get is a menial one at a local drug store. Plus, he cannot deny his growing feelings for Peggy.

The Best Years of Our Lives is a meticulously framed film filled with deep focus shots (by legendary cinematographer Gregg Toland, whose credits include Citizen Kane) and long takes. The director, William Wyler, one of the most respected filmmakers of his era, was known around Hollywood as "90 take Wyler" because of his reputation as a perfectionist. His dedication to capturing top performances and using the best angles is much in evidence throughout The Best Years of Our Lives, which features a series of sterling shots. Wyler won his second of three Best Director Oscars for this film (the other two were for Mrs. Miniver and Ben Hur).

Wyler wasn't the only Academy Award recipient for The Best Years of Our Lives. Nominated for eight Oscars, it took home seven. In addition to Wyler's trophy, citations were given to Frederic March (Best Actor), Samuel Goldwyn (Best Picture, beating out It's a Wonderful Life), Hugo Friedhofer (Best Score), Robert E. Sherwood (Best Writing), Daniel Mandell (Best Film Editing), and Harold Russell (Best Supporting Actor). Russell also earned a special award for "bringing hope and courage to fellow veterans," making him the only actor ever to win two Oscars for one role. The movie also captured top honors at the British Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, and the New York Film Critics Circle Awards. Beloved by critics and the public alike, The Best Years of Our Lives not only received rave reviews but became the biggest box office success since Gone with the Wind.

In the acting department, there isn't a weak performance. Veteran actor Frederic March gives a solid turn as a man struggling to put his life back together and re-connect with his beloved wife and children. Dana Andrews, with his matinee good looks, presents a credible and likable Fred. Playing the third of the returning soldiers is Harold Russell, a real-life double amputee World War II veteran. Russell, who had a virtually non-existent acting career after The Best Years of Our Lives, does credible work here (certainly far better than one might expect from someone with his background), and, in the scene where he confronts his fear that his girlfriend can no longer love him because of his disability, his performance is heartbreaking.

The women in the film have smaller, but
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DIRECTOR – WILLIAM WYLER
1902 - 1981

no less important, roles. Myrna Loy, who is best known for playing Nora Charles in *The Thin Man* movie series, was one of the top female box office draws of her era (which explains why she received top billing). Here, she is strong, solid, and reliable, and plays Milly with just the right dose of sardonic wit (observe her reaction to her husband's drunken binge on his first night back). Teresa Wright is appealing as Peggy, but her role isn’t especially demanding. Virginia Mayo, best known for her work in comedies, shows her ability to perform admirably in a serious role. Her Marie isn’t a nice girl, but there’s more to her than the selfish gold-digger we initially see.

Perhaps the most memorable segment occurs early in the film when the characters, together in a taxi, enter Boone City for the first time in years. Wyler captures the mixed emotions inherent in the return - the nervousness and anticipation, the anxiety and excitement. The characters note the little things that have changed (Homer's cousin, Butch, has a new neon sign outside his bar) and those that have remained constant (the same men are out on the golf course, just like nothing happened). We feel the flood of conflicting emotions along with the characters, because their experience is one that everyone who has come home after an absence can relate to.

*The Best Years of Our Lives* runs almost three hours, but it doesn’t seem nearly that long. The film is so involving that there’s no temptation to glance at a watch, nor a need to get a snack or take a bathroom break. In fact, when it’s over, there’s almost a sense of disappointment that there aren’t a few scenes left hiding on the other side of the closing credits. The feeling of warmth and satisfaction that accompanies the conclusion is the hallmark of a great drama - a distinction that anyone who has seen *The Best Years of Our Lives* will apply to this landmark production.

Bank clerk, butterfly collector and loner Freddie Clegg (Terence Stamp) views art student Miranda Grey (Samatha Eggar) as the next addition to his collection. Although many subsequent films have utilised similar plotlines, often adding violence or gore, the power of *The Collector* rests with its two central performances. Stamp’s portrayal of the obsessive Clegg is masterful, winning him Best Actor and Eggar gained Best Actress award at Cannes in 1965. Based on the novel by John Fowles this is a tense, beautifully crafted and acted thriller.

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