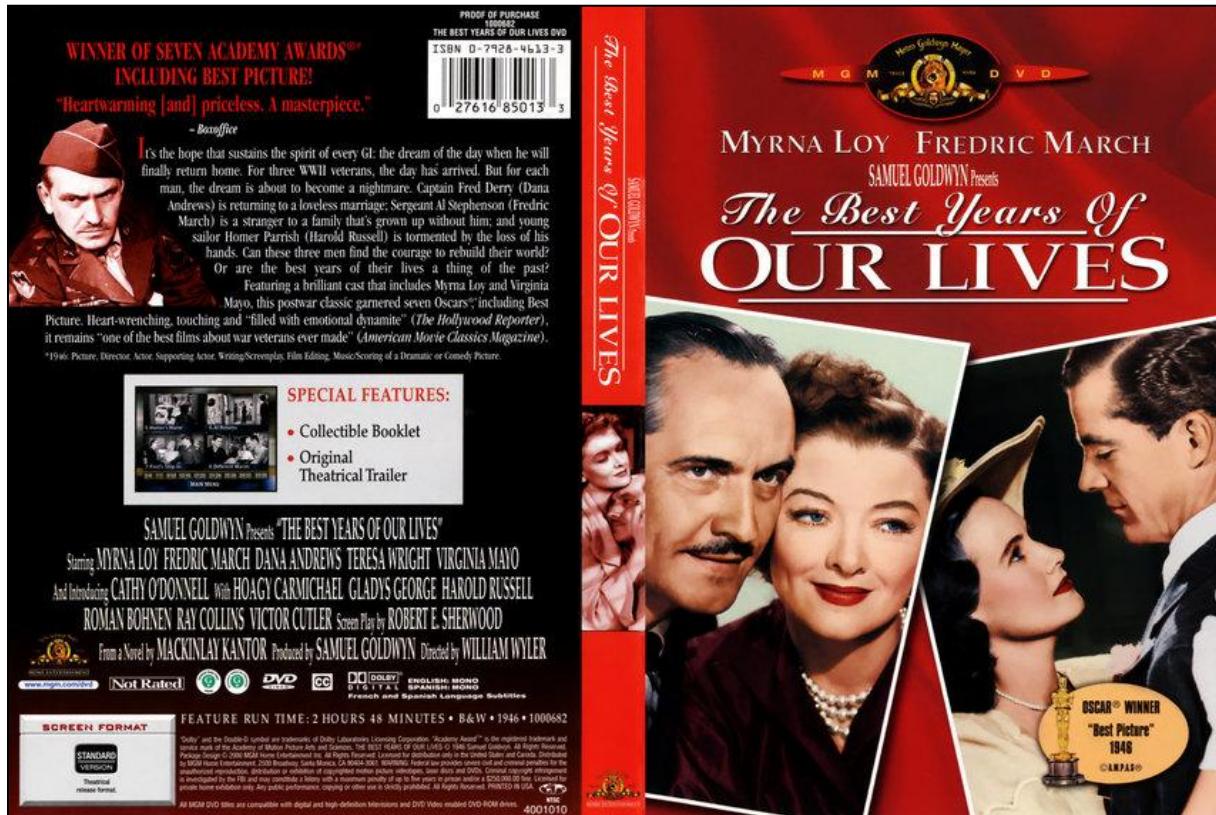


Review #48 : *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946)

Myrna Loy, Fredric March and Dana Andrews

TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IELMoOcSKf8>



SYNOPSIS

Three military veterans have just returned to their hometown of Boone City, somewhere in the Midwest, and each in his own way is dreading his approaching reunion. William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) was the first film to win eight Academy Awards (best picture, best actor March, best supporting actor Russell, best director, screenplay, editing and score plus honorary award Russell) and was second only to *Gone with the Wind* at the U.S. box office. Seen more than six decades later, it feels surprisingly modern : lean, direct, honest about issues that Hollywood then studiously avoided. After the war years of patriotism and heroism in the movies, this was a sobering look at the **problems veterans faced** when they returned home.

The movie centres on the stories of the three men. Al Stephenson (**Fredric March**), in his 40s, was an infantryman and is now returning to his family and the bank where he worked. Fred Derry (**Dana Andrews**) was a crew member on a bomber. Homer Parrish (**Harold Russell**) was a Navy man who lost both hands and now uses steel hooks. "*They sure trained that kid how to use those hooks*", Fred tells Al, as they watch Homer walk slowly from their taxi to his front door. But Al says : "*They couldn't train him to put his arms around his girl, or to stroke her hair.*"

When he left for the war, Homer had an understanding with Wilma (**Cathy O'Donnell**), the girl next door, but now he fears how she will react to his artificial hands. The other men have fears, too. Fred, raised in a shack by the tracks and working as a drugstore soda jerk when he enlisted, quickly married the sexy Marie (**Virginia Mayo**), who has stopped writing him. Al has been married for 20 years to Milly (**Myrna Loy**), and has a son Rob (**Michael Hall**) and a daughter Peggy (**Teresa Wright**). They welcome him home with love and hugs, but he doesn't feel right ; his children have changed, his life has changed, and after Rob goes to bed he suddenly remembers Butch's bar and suggests his wife and daughter join him for a celebration.



The other two men also turn up at Butch's. Homer couldn't take the exaggerated kindness and suppressed grief he thought he sensed from his parents and Wilma. Fred didn't find anyone at home at Marie's apartment. The three men get plastered together, with Al's wife looking on with superhuman understanding. That's the night Fred and Peggy have their first conversation, and begin to fall in love...

REVIEW

The movie's screenplay, by Robert Sherwood, moves confidently among the **problems faced by the three men without being a fevered docudrama**. It becomes clear to Fred that Marie is a party girl who isn't interested in life on his drugstore paycheck of \$32.50. Homer coldly tries to force away Wilma because he doesn't want her pity. Al gets a promotion at the bank, and is in charge of giving loans under the G.I. Bill, but rebels when he's asked to trust an applicant's collateral more than his character. Al turns to drink, and has a half-sloshed, half-heroic moment when he speaks his mind at a company dinner.

The film makes no effort to paint these men as extraordinary. Their lives, their characters, their prospects are all more or less average, and Wyler doesn't pump in superfluous drama. That's why the movie is so effective, and maybe why it doesn't seem as dated as some 1946 dramas. But Wyler employed remarkable visuals to make some of his points. He was working with the great cinematographer Gregg Toland, known for his deep-focus photography on such films as *Citizen Kane*, and often Wyler uses **deep-focus instead of cutting**, so that the meaning of a scene can reveal itself to us, instead of being pounded down with close-ups. Consider a scene in Butch's where Homer proudly shows how Butch (Hoagy Carmichael) has taught him to play piano with his hooks. Al and Fred look on, and then Fred walks to a phone booth in the far background to make a crucial call. The camera doesn't move, but our eyes follow Fred's movement to the booth, and we focus on a decision he is making.

One of the movie's most famous sequences involves Fred deciding to leave town in search of work, and going to the airport. While waiting for his military transport flight, he wanders into a **vast graveyard of mothballed warplanes**. This scene is **heartbreaking** ! Once Fred flew these planes, and now they, and their pilots, are no longer needed. The payoff of the scene is **deeply ironic**.

And consider the film's extended closing scene, when Homer and Wilma get married. Fred and Peggy are among the guests. Earlier they have told each that they are in love, and Peggy vowed to her parents she would break up Fred's mistaken and miserable marriage. But Al warned Fred away from his daughter – one reason he was leaving town, even though the tawdry Marie is filing for divorce.

Wyler shows the entire marriage ceremony, all the way through, starting with Carmichael playing the wedding march, and the lovers exchanging vows. There are two parallel lines of suspense. One involves the marriage itself, and whether Homer's hooks can slip a ring on Wilma's finger. The other involves Fred and Peggy on opposite sides of the same room, their eyes locked as they hear the wedding vows being pronounced. Deep focus allows Wyler to show both of these events at once, and his framing draws our eyes to the back of the shot, where Teresa Wright, never prettier or more vulnerable, doesn't move a muscle.

The Best Years of Our Lives doesn't use verbal or technical pyrotechnics. It trusts entirely in the strength of its story. One of the sources of its power is the performance by Harold Russell, the handless veteran. Producer Samuel Goldwyn was actually criticized at the time for his harsh use of Russell, but look at the heartbreaking scene where Homer invites Wilma up to his bedroom to show her what is involved in getting ready for bed. He thinks maybe then she'll understand why he doesn't think he can marry her...

Russell was an **untrained actor, but utterly sincere**. He says: "*This is when I know I'm helpless. My hands are down there on the bed. I can't put them on again without calling to somebody for help. I can't smoke a cigarette or read a book. If that door should blow shut, I can't open it and get out of this room. I'm as dependent as a baby that doesn't know how to get anything except to cry for it.*" We know Russell is speaking for himself, and the emotional power is overwhelming. O'Donnell's response is pitch-perfect.

Russell won an honorary Oscar, "for bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans through his appearance." Although he was actually nominated for best supporting actor, the Academy board voted the special award because they thought he didn't have a chance of winning. They were wrong. He won the Oscar, the only time an actor has been given two Oscars for the same role.

As long as we have wars and returning veterans, some of them wounded, *The Best Years of Our Lives* will not be dated. It is seldom that there comes a motion picture which can be **wholly and enthusiastically endorsed** not only as superlative entertainment but as food for **quiet and humanizing thought**. Through its depth of analysis about veterans as well as contemporary American life, this film does a great deal more than the average. It gives off a warm **glow of affection for everyday**, with down-to-earth characters.

These are some fancy recommendations to be tossing boldly forth about a film which runs close to three hours (!) and covers a lot of humanity in that time. But this one is plainly a labour not only of **understanding but of love** from three men who put their hearts into it — and from several **women who gave it their best work**. William Wyler was surely drawing upon the wells of his richest talent and experience with men of the Air Forces during the war.

The Best Years of Our Lives catches the drama of veterans returning home from war as no film — or novel that we've yet heard of — has managed to do. It fully reflects the **delicate tensions, the deep anxieties and the gnawing despairs** that surely have been experienced by most such fellows who have been through the same routine. It visions the **overflowing humours and the curious pathos** of such returns, and it honestly and sensitively images the **terrible loneliness of the man** who has been hurt — hurt not only physically but in the recesses of his **self-esteem**...

Not alone in such accurate little touches as the first words of the sergeant's joyful wife when he arrives home unexpectedly : "*I look terrible !*" or the uncontrollable sob of the sailor's mother when she first sees her son's mechanical hands is this picture irresistibly affecting and eloquent of truth. It is in its deeper understanding of the **mutual embarrassment between the veteran and his well-intentioned loved ones** that the film throws its real dramatic power.

Especially in the **readjustments** of the sailor who uses prosthetic hooks and of the airman who faces deflation from bombardier to soda-jerker is the drama intense. The middle-aged sergeant finds adjustment fairly simple, with a wife, two grown-up kids and a good job, but the younger and more disrupted fellows are the ones who really get it in the teeth. In working out their solutions Mr. Sherwood and Mr. Wyler have achieved some of the most beautiful and **inspiring demonstrations of human fortitude** that we have had in films.

It is wholly impossible — and unnecessary — to single out any one of the performers for special mention. **Fredric March** is magnificent as the sergeant who breaks the ice with his family. His humour is sweeping yet subtle, his irony is keen and he is altogether genuine. Dana Andrews is likewise incisive as the Air Forces captain who goes through a gruelling mill. As the wife of the sergeant, **Myrna Loy** is charmingly reticent and **Teresa Wright** gives a lovely, quiet performance as their daughter who falls in love with the airman. **Virginia Mayo** is brassy and brutal as the latter's two-timing wife and young Cathy O'Donnell plays the sailor's fiancée tenderly. Everyone gives a best performance in this film ! +++