



THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES is a November, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that film.

United States 1946 black-and-white 168 minutes live action feature drama Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Producers: Samuel Goldwyn and Lester Koenig

13 of a possible 20 points

1/2 of a possible **

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: William Wyler
- 2 Editing: Daniel Mandell*
- 2 Cinematography: Gregg Toland Aerial DP: Paul Mantz*
- 2 Lighting
Special Effects: John Fulton, Harry Redmond Sr.
- 1 Screenplay: Robert Emmet Sherwood, based on the novel by Mackinlay Kantor
- 1 Music: Hugo Friedhofer Music Director: Emil Newman
Orchestrators: Sidney Cutner, Jerome Moross, Edward Powell, Leo Shuken
- 0 Art Direction: Perry Ferguson and George Jenkins
Set Decoration: Julia Heron*
Costume Design: Irene Sharaff
Makeup: Robert Stephanoff
- 2 Supervising Sound Editor: Gordon Sawyer Sound Recorder: Richard De Weese
- 1 Acting
- 1 Creativity

13 total points

Cast: Myrna Loy (Milly Stephenson), Fredric March (Al Stephenson, Milly's husband), Dana Andrews (Fred Derry), Teresa Wright* (Peggy Stephenson, daughter of Al and Milly; sister to Rob), Virginia Mayo* (Marie Derry, Fred's wife), Cathy O'Donnell* (Wilma Cameron, Homer's girlfriend),

Hoagy Carmichael (Butch Engle, Homer's uncle), Harold Russell (Homer Parrish), Gladys George (Hortense Derry, wife of Pat and mother of Fred), Roman Bohnen* (Pat Derry, husband of Hortense and father of Fred), Ray Collins (Mr. Milton, president of bank), Minna Gombell (Mrs. Parrish, mother of Homer and Luella), Walter Baldwin* (Mr. Parrish, father of Homer and Luella), Steve Cochran (Cliff, a bounder), Dorothy Adams (Mrs. Cameron, mother of Wilma), Don Beddoe (Mr. Cameron, father of Wilma), Marlene Aames (j) (Luella Parrish, kid sister to Homer), Charles Halton (Prew), Ray Teal (Mr. Mollett, store manager), Howland Chamberlain (Thorpe), Dean White (Novak), Erskine Sanford (Bullard), Michael Hall (Rob Stephenson, son of Milly and Al; brother to Peggy), Victor Cutler (Woody Merrill, Peggy's double date partner), Jimmy Ames (j)(Jackie), Al Bridge (Gus, salvage worker), Blake Edwards (Corporal at ATC Counter), Tennessee Ernie Ford (hillbilly singer), Harry Cheshire* (minister at Homer's wedding), Joyce Compton (Hat Check Girl), Bert Conway (ATC Sergeant), Claire Du Brey* (Mrs. Talburt, perfume customer), Edward Earle (Mr. Steese at the bank), Ben Erway (Lou Latham at the bank), Pat Flaherty* (Salvage Foreman), Ray Hyke (Gus the Foreman), Teddy Infuhr* (j) (brat in the store), Jackie Jackson (j) (a boy), Gene Krupa (Gene Krupa, drummer), Alyn Lockwood (Counter Girl), Chef Milani (Giuseppe), Norman Phillips Jr. (Clarence "Sticky" Merkle), Jack Rice* (Apartment Desk Clerk), others

Winner of multiple Oscars, a film that grossed more than five times its two million dollar budget, *THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES* was both a popular and critical success when first released. MGM's timing was perfect. The picture's theme of veterans struggling to successfully reenter civilian life mirrored everyday experiences of hundreds of servicemen returning from overseas deployment to a changed and economically deflating United States. Job cutbacks loomed, old positions were not readily available, fresh opportunities required training and experience most veterans lacked. Some had additional adjustment problems: lost limbs, unfaithful spouses or girlfriends, alcohol or nicotine addiction, trauma from wartime crises. Families tried to cope with personality changes they often didn't understand in an era when going to see psychiatrists or psychologists was socially stigmatized. Even transportation from city to city was difficult and time-consuming, with flights, trains, and transcontinental buses overcrowded and chaotically scheduled.

As the film opens, a former Air Corps bombardier is attempting to make some kind of connection that will carry him back to his home in Boone City. Lacking a reservation, his efforts are futile. But a ticket clerk suggests checking in at the ATC counter. Perhaps the military could offer an extemporaneous flight to B.C. This turns out to be an excellent idea, as Air Transport Command eventually offers a plane ride, albeit on a C-47 with minimal space and comfort. That suits Fred fine, though. His service time was spent in just such an aircraft.

It's less appealing to two fellow passengers: ex-sailor Homer Parrish, and infantryman Al Stephenson, whose exploits were on land. Still, quite a few hours pass before the ad hoc trio arrives at its destination. Once grounded, the three men share a cab which drops Homer off at the Parrish house, where he gets a tentative welcoming from friends and relatives who are more than a little uncertain what to say about hooks he must use in place of amputated hands. Fred exits at his parental bungalow. He's more eager to reacquaint himself with a lively wife than to discuss at length his European sojourn with mom and dad. News that Marie has moved out and is working at a nightclub and bar is upsetting to the flyer, who

insists upon leaving immediately to track her down. With only sketchy details to guide him, a missing spouse search yields no quick recovery.

Last to depart the taxi is Al, who steps off into an entranceway leading to what appears to be a large and lavish hotel. After an aggravating skirmish with the front desk receptionist, Al barges onto an elevator and rides upstairs to a familiar suite of apartments. First to greet him at the door are his two children: Peggy and Rob. The former was probably still a college student when he left for combat duty. Younger Rob still attends high school. Al barely recognizes the latter, who has grown considerably in his absence.

Rotating back and forth between Homer and Al, the picture then acquaints us with their respective families and discomforts. Homer is plagued by help he neither requires nor desires. How can he reject it without hurting the feelings of volunteers? A different set of obstacles confront Al, who finds communication with the rest of his family quite evasive. His son is more interested in radiation poisoning than war souvenirs, wife Milly cannot bear to spoil his homecoming by informing him of ration shortages, daughter Peggy's secure outside job at a hospital is disconcerting and even a bit disheartening. His own employment status is currently in limbo. For the moment, the Stephenson family's chief breadwinner will be a female. What a blow to male ego.

Confronted with scanty liquid refreshment available at home, Al resolves to take the two female members of his household out for dining, drinks, and entertainment. It soon becomes apparent he is a lush, unable to stop himself from making a circuit of night clubs and cafes, to the considerable disgust of his permissive companions. Fortunately for him, Peggy is driving and sober. At one of the stops on his rounds, Al encounters Fred, still seeking Mrs. Derry. A reunion is held. The quartet then continue their celebration together. Fred and Al become progressively drunker. When closing time is finally called at Butch's place, their final stop, it's obvious the two women will need to steer both men to suitable lodging. Further complication arises when Fred proves too drunk to even ring properly to get the door to his lodging house opened. So Peggy and Milly dump him in the back seat of the Stephenson car with Al and convey both drunks back to the hotel where the women live.

A series of pixilated episodes follow, something quite common as a form of amusement to American audiences of the Hollywood production era. By the time Fred leaves the next morning, an emotional bond has formed between himself and Peggy, not very promising considering the former is already married.

Back at the Parrish property, Homer continues to reject ministrations offers from Wilma. He and his dad have mutually uncomfortable encounters, with son reluctantly enlisting the aid of father in getting ready for bed. Worse, the amputee gets the notion that sister Luella is spying on him and laughing behind his back at her brother's clumsiness. The girl's horror of his mechanical hands is impossible to disguise. They fascinate her, much like the mammoth boots of Frankenstein would. Homer tires of Luella's cluster of equally curious peers watching him whenever he steps outside the Parrish house. In exasperation, he yells at the children about their voyeuristic behavior while smashing panes of the Parrish garage with his metal appendages. Only when at his uncle's establishment does the troubled seafarer find some measure of relaxed companionship.

Peggy motors Fred back to his domicile on the way to her job at the hospital. She sticks around long enough to observe him obtain entry after several false starts. After she departs, Fred finds his way to the proper door, knocks robustly, and rouses a slumbering Marie. Though initially antagonized by an

unanticipated intrusion on her needed nap, she quickly warms to her visitor as recognition radiates across her face. During a prolonged embrace, Marie rhapsodizes about her mate's chestful of medals and bars. She is more in love with the uniform than its wearer.

Time passes. Al is promoted to loan officer at his old place of employment, a bank. He continues to tittle. In addition, he decides on his own initiative to forego normal collateral stipulations on an approved outlay to a fellow vet. This brings him into conflict with his supervisor and the bank president, both of whom are inclined to follow conservative fiduciary policies. Visions of America's future differ sharply, with viewers left to decide the merits of the case for themselves.

Fred sneers at an offer to return to his old employer. But after a lengthy independent scouring of community job openings, he's forced to eat crow and accept the harsh reality of working under the direction of a youth he once labored beside as an equal. Pay is minimal. That's an annoyance which increasingly irritates Marie, who can do better herself in her old positions. Haughty Fred forbids her to take them up again. Cash subsequently becomes ever scarcer in the Derry house, leading to home cooking by Chef Fred and elimination of outings to local restaurants. Trouble is brewing on the domestic front. Fred's encounter with an inquisitive Peggy at the store where he works then further strains both marital and friendly relations.

How these entanglements are finally unknotted is predictable. What will hold the attention of audiences is fine acting by Teresa Wright, as the masochistically inclined Peggy, and a number of supporting cast members who seem far cosier in their roles than do the two leads. Particularly notable are Teddy Infuhr as a spoiled monster who wreaks havoc in sale aisles at Fred's store, Claire Du Brey as unconcerned mother of that child vandal, more attentive to a perfume purchase than to her offspring's destructiveness, and Walter Baldwin as slow-moving Mr. Parrish, Homer's helpful but aged father, whose close observation of his boy alienates him. Cathy O'Donnell plays a charmingly solicitous and loyal neighbor to Homer, who hopes to win his affection forever. She engages in a reserved, subdued struggle against his unwillingness to become dependent upon her, with both parties fumbling to find verbal expressions for their real feelings. There's delightfully misdirected officiousness in Jack Rice's performance as a hotel receptionist dead set on preventing Al's entry. Pat Flaherty's blunt, caustic salvage foreman brings realism to the otherwise somewhat fantastic immersion of loser Fred in the junk business. Lastly, Harry Cheshire's hushed ministerial tones at the Parrish-Cameron wedding lends gravity and sincerity to the sacred ritual.

William Wyler's customary detailed direction fails to elicit much in the way of dramatic credibility from the two leads. March is somewhat miscast as an irresponsible, intoxicated party animal. Neither he nor Wyler can bring much depth to the character. Robert Sherwood's usual incisiveness also contributes to this shortcoming, dwelling too heavily on Al's drinking habits and not enough on the qualities that led him to a stable vocational status at the bank. Myrna Loy is similarly saddled with a personality at odds with her own, relegated to subservient housewife and nursemaid to an inebriate. She makes the character believable, but nothing more. There are no clues in the writing to guide her in assembling a fuller personality. Director Wyler didn't seem able to come up with any special suggestions, either, about how to humanize a heavily stereotyped in-house mother.

Though much acclaimed, Hugo Friedhofer's music is inconsistently supportive of the film. At times it follows a course of reserved, introspective empathy with these unexceptional personalities and their predicaments. Sometimes, though, it erupts into gratingly loud, coarse displays which underline action

with oppressively heavy emphasis. This Jekyll and Hyde alternation might be engagingly appropriate for a horror film. But here it cheapens drama into sporadic drop-offs into soap opera.

More deserving of accolades are lucid lighting which makes each scene vital and every furnishing distinct.

Gordon Sawyer and Richard De Weese provide sound across a wide range of volumes. It's both audible and properly inflected. Sound mixing is appropriate in all combinations.

Probably what keeps this lengthy 168-minute epic afloat and fascinating is judicious editing by Daniel Mandell. His work, in tandem with Gregg Toland's cinematography, is especially rewarding in scenes with discarded military planes at the airport. These offset a number of patently artificial landscapes which are simply painted backdrops on sound stages. The art department redeems itself, to some extent, with Julia Heron's interior decors. Varying from claustrophobic clutter in Fred and Marie's cheap, increasingly neglected apartment to the swank luxury of the Stephenson's upscale digs, there is always plenty to attract and reward the eye. Pay special attention to the overstuffed store sale set, which becomes first a playground for a boy intent on leaving no display nearby intact and then a background into which an anonymous leftist sympathizer is sent sprawling by a patriotically defensive Fred.

Among the multitude of awards the film has received are the following:
Oscars for Best Picture, Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Russell again), Best Film Editing, Best Sound Recording, Best Director, and Best Music;
two Golden Globes awards, one for Best Motion Picture Drama and an honorary one for Harold Russell for Best Non-Professional Acting;
a 1948 BAFTA Award from Britain for Best Film From Any Source;
a Cinema Writers Circle Award from Spain in 1948 as Best Foreign Film;
a Best Director award from the 1948 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival;
citation for Best Director and a placement in the annual Top Ten Films List of 1946 from the National Board of Review;
induction into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress;
two awards from the New York Film Critics Circle in 1946 for Best Film and Best Director
induction in 2007 into the Online Film & Television Association's Film Hall of Fame

Overall the picture is more interesting as a visual souvenir of a bygone era than as classic drama for the ages. The dvd release offers only one extra, the original theatrical trailer. Watch THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES to catch actresses Cathy O'Donnell and Teresa Wright in their primes and to see Paul Mantz's exceptional aerial photography. Enjoy, too, its subtle sound recording. Recommended for teens and adults, as preteens would have little understanding of topics and problems presented.