

The Best Years of Our Lives

By Gabriel Miller

"The Best Years of Our Lives" originated in a recommendation from producer Samuel Goldwyn's wife that he read a "Time" magazine article entitled "The Way Home" (1944), about Marines who were having difficulty readjusting to life after returning home from the war. Goldwyn hired novelist MacKinlay Kantor, who had flown missions as a correspondent with the Eighth Air Force and the Royal Air Force (and would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1955 for his Civil War novel "Andersonville"), to use that article as the basis for a fictional adaptation of approximately 100 pages. Inexplicably, Kantor turned in a novel in verse that ran closer to 300 pages. Goldwyn could barely follow it, and he wanted to shelve the project but was talked into letting Kantor work on a treatment.

William Wyler, his star director, returned to Goldwyn Studios in 1946, having been honorably discharged from the Air Force as a colonel, also receiving the Legion of Merit Award. Wyler's feelings about his life and profession had changed: "The war had been an escape into reality ... Only relationships with people who might be dead tomorrow were important." Wyler still owed Goldwyn one more film, and the producer wanted him to make "The Bishop's Wife" with David Niven. But Wyler was looking for something more serious and with a social edge. Attracted by Kantor's treatment and despite Goldwyn's objections, he insisted on taking on what was then called "Glory for Me." He brought Kantor's material to three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Robert Sherwood, who had also fought in the war, being wounded in both legs at Amiens, and had also served as a speechwriter for President Roosevelt, as Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy, and as Special Assistant to the Secretary of War. Sherwood shared with Wyler and Goldwyn an abiding affection and admiration for FDR, and he agreed with Wyler that "Glory for Me" was worth pursuing. Together, they convinced Goldwyn to proceed with the project.

All the major and even the minor characters were already in Kantor's book and script. As in the released film, Kantor's story revolves around three soldiers recently discharged from the service, who return to their Midwestern hometown--Boone City, which was modeled on Cincinnati but named after the Boone River in Iowa, near where Kantor grew up. The central character is Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), an Air Force bombardier, formerly a soda jerk in a drugstore, who had married Marie, a woman he barely knew before being shipped overseas. Al Stephenson (Fredric March) is a middle-aged man who was an infantry sergeant; he returns to his wife Milly (Myrna Loy) and two grown children and to his job as an assistant vice-president at a bank. The third character is

Homer Wermels (Harold Russell), a seaman, who has long been engaged to the girl next door. He returns from the war a spastic, unable to control his movements.

Sherwood and Wyler made some significant changes that added more complexity and dramatic force to the story. In Kantor's version, Fred catches Marie in an affair as soon as he gets home and demands a divorce, whereas Sherwood's script has Fred trying to pick up the pieces of his life with Marie but soon discovering that they

were never really in love. In the meantime, he meets Al's daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright), and a relationship begins to blossom. Sherwood knew that he would have to amplify Peggy's role in the story so that "Fred could meet the girl, lose the girl, then get the girl." He also used the bar owned by Homer's uncle Butch (Hoagy Carmichael) as a central location where many of the story's dramatic events take place.

Wyler's most significant change was to the character of Homer Wermels, now renamed Homer Parrish. Realizing that no actor, no matter how great, could convincingly represent Homer's disability, he had even considered cutting



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

Homer out of the story. Then, at a war bond rally, Wyler saw a documentary, "Diary of a Sergeant," which told the story of Harold Russell, a sergeant in the paratroopers, who had lost both hands when a dynamite charge exploded prematurely during maneuvers. The film chronicled Russell's rehabilitation as he learned to master the prosthetic hooks that replaced his hands. Wyler decided to hire Russell to play Homer as an amputee.

Throughout his career, Wyler remained committed to realism, an aesthetic demanding that the arc of his characters' stories not follow the dramatic reversal of fortune that might be expected of movie heroes. Kantor has Al Stephenson quit his job at the bank, but Wyler felt that most veterans would not have that option, and so the film has Al remain at the bank, declaring to the president that he will fight for more liberal loan policies for veterans. Wyler also eliminates the story of Homer's descent into alcoholism. And in one of the film's most moving scenes, Wyler's Homer takes Wilma to his bedroom one night and shows her how difficult it is for him to undress. The scene is directed with such restraint and tenderness that it was not flagged as a violation of the film industry's prudish production code.

Fred's story also reflects Sherwood's and Wyler's shared commitment to detail. They wanted this character's experience to stress that returning veterans needed to be realistic about their employment options, and not expect preferential treatment. When Fred decides to take a job as a laborer in the construction business, the implication is that his fortunes will grow with the burgeoning industry.

The film's devotion to realism extended to the shooting of some scenes in documentary style. The aerial photography seen from the plane bringing the soldiers home at the outset is one such scene, as are the montage of street scenes of Boone City as viewed from the taxicab that delivers them to their doors. Contrary to studio policy of designing interiors as much larger than usual (to accommodate the cameras), here they were made smaller to accentuate the everyday qualities of the characters' lives. The stars were told to dress in clothes that looked lived-in: no one seems glamorous in this film.

Wyler's signature style was "deep focus," in which the foreground, background, and middle ground of a shot are brought into sharp focus simultaneously. The technique enabled the director to present a multi-layered scene in a single take without resorting to editing, and it allowed him to probe for deeper psychological complexity. Wyler utilized this style most effectively in the famous "Chopsticks" scene (in which Homer and his uncle play a piano duet in the foreground as other characters interact in the back-

ground) and in the scene of Homer and Wilma's wedding at the end of the film, wherein Wyler's shots foreground the joy of the marriage while also encompassing in the background the evolving relationships of Al and Milly and of Peggy. Their presence reminds us that the elder Stephensons are entering a rough phase due to Al's drinking and his unhappiness at work, while Peggy and Fred (who stands nearby as Homer's best man) will declare their love in this final sequence as well.

The film was a great triumph for Wyler and for Goldwyn, who won his only Academy Award for producing it. It also earned Wyler his second Oscar for Best Director – his first was for "Mrs. Miniver," a film that urged America to enter the war, whereas "Best Years" explored its darker aftermath, thus effectively bookending the earlier film. "Best Years" deals not only with the traumas faced by returning soldiers, but also with the sadness the country felt over the death of Roosevelt and the growing labor unrest as the soldiers returned home. The film also touches on the devastation wrought by the atomic bomb and the reality that the war's end had not brought real peace abroad, since the alliance with Russia had unraveled even before Roosevelt's death. Wyler even deals with the sleek new consumerism enveloping America, as Bullard's Drugstore has been transformed into a mecca of toys, cosmetics, and perfumes. As Al remarks to Milly, "Last year it was kill the Japs; now it's make money."

Despite winning seven Academy Awards, "Best Years" (along with a variety of other political activities) brought Wyler to the notice of HUAC, which named it, among roughly a dozen other films, as containing communist propaganda. In order to escape the political pressure of the period, Wyler thereafter spent a year in Italy, part of which he spent making the comedy "Roman Holiday," which ironically featured a screenplay by Dalton Trumbo, one of the Hollywood Ten (whose name did not appear on the screen), but which won an Oscar nonetheless. The war and the experience with HUAC colored Wyler's later films, in many of which he would look back both at his country's past and at his own. His most profound later work reflected an increasingly darker view of human possibility in a blighted American social landscape.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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