



"ONCE MORE WYLER"-PART 1

In the Alsace area of Germany, on the first of July early in the last century, future director William Wyler was born. That name may have a familiar ring, but today it's less recognized than (certainly) John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock, and perhaps even Howard Hawks and George Cukor. Both Wyler's quiet, unobtrusive style and our own inability to associate him with any single film genre or style likely contribute.

Still, when you review Wyler's filmography spanning forty-plus years, it's evident he made just as many great movies as any of the above titans. Notably, Wyler also holds the record for directing the most actors in roles that won them Oscars.

"Willi" (as he was universally known) first made it to Hollywood in the twenties, thanks to an important family connection: he was a cousin of Carl Laemmle, then-head of Universal Pictures. But young Wyler proved his own mettle quickly, working on silent classics like "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" (1923) and the original "Ben-Hur" (1925), the remake of which he'd direct over thirty years later.

In the mid-twenties, he was also first given the chance to direct, mostly "B" westerns. This seemingly routine work proved an ideal training ground, as steadily, he learned, absorbed, and shaped his own approach to film-making. This would bear fruit with the coming of sound.

What follows is my take on the best of Wyler's earlier work, done prior to World War 2.

Counsellor At Law (1933)- Perched atop his New York law offices, attorney George Simon (John Barrymore) runs a successful practice handling a dizzying array of high-profile cases. "GS," as he is known to his staff, may run with (and occasionally bilk) the rich and powerful, but he also remembers his humble roots as an immigrant, something his status-conscious wife definitely wants to downplay. When George is faced with disbarment for past misconduct, his world is turned upside-down. Set entirely in a suite of offices, Wyler's witty, head-spinning drama features the still-dashing Barrymore in a knockout role as a hotshot attorney with a formidable track record, a penchant for hard-

luck cases, and a fawning softness for his well-to-do wife, whose affection is less unconditional. As a series of mini-dramas swirl around Simon—most involving agonized clients from the old neighborhood, the vicissitudes of his lively staff, and the unrequited love of secretary Regina (Bebe Daniels)—“Counsellor” inexorably builds to a tense climax. Filled with vivid performances and directed with verve, “Counsellor at Law” is a rapid-fire drama of class and privilege, love and lucre.

The Good Fairy (1935)- Hand-picked from an orphanage to become an usherette at a big Budapest theater, naïve lass Luisa (Margaret Sullavan) has one desire: to become a vehicle of good fortune. So when randy old tycoon Konrad (Frank Morgan) professes a willingness to do anything for a date with her, she picks a random name from the phone book and asks the rich cad to outfit her new “husband” with anything he might need. The only problem is, impoverished attorney Max Sporum (Herbert Marshall) believes it was his virtue that earned him a leg up. Penned by the peerless Preston Sturges (“Sullivan’s Travels”), Wyler’s “Good Fairy” is the kind of brassy, urbane, romantic lark that Ernst Lubitsch was perfecting in the early ’30s. Sporting an irresistible good-girl charm, Sullavan never shone brighter than here, cleverly fending off Morgan’s priggish, overheated Konrad and gently falling for Marshall’s gallant, bewhiskered barrister. (Even Wyler was smitten—he married his “Fairy” as soon as the shoot ended!) Alan Hale, Reginald Owen, Eric Blore, and Cesar Romero target the funny bone in hilarious side roles, chewing up Sturges’s saucy, snappy dialogue. And so will you.

Dodsworth (1936)- Sam Dodsworth (Walter Huston), a business tycoon, decides to retire and take an extended trip to Europe with wife Fran (Ruth Chatterton). Unfortunately, Sam’s financial success has only increased Fran’s latent vanity and social-climbing tendencies. No longer distracted by his work, Sam sees his wife’s weaknesses for the first time, as she openly flirts and cavorts with European aristocracy (including an oily Paul Lukas, and young David Niven in a breakthrough role). Sam must confront the crisis in his marriage, then find a way to regain some happiness for himself. Wyler and screenwriter Sydney Howard here craft an adult, understated, perceptive romantic drama, and the film is beautifully played. Wyler wisely minimizes the soapiness inherent in the premise, leaving an honest and surprisingly moving film about love lost and re-discovered. The Oscar-nominated Huston is note-perfect, as is Chatterton and a radiant Mary Astor as the woman who enters Sam’s life at just the right moment.

Dead End (1937)- Disguised by plastic surgery, wanted gangster

Baby Face Martin (Humphrey Bogart) returns to his old neighborhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side to look up his mother and former girlfriend. Living in the slum are Martin's old pal Dave (Joel McCrea), an out-of-work architect courting a wealthy neighbor, and Drina (Sylvia Sidney), an impoverished, hard-working beauty raising kid brother Tommy (Billy Halop). When Martin starts teaching a local gang (the Dead End Kids) some professional tricks, Dave intervenes, hoping to keep Tommy square with the law. Scripted by playwright Lillian Hellman, Wyler's gritty, compelling fable of tenement life in the 1930s was touted in its day as a hard-hitting social drama about class tensions and the origins of crime. Bogart, in one of his early impressive turns, is a ringer as the rotten Martin, though a key scene with his disapproving mother shows his vulnerable side. McCrea and Sidney carry their weight as the moral heart of Wyler's mean streets, and teen actor Halop plays gang leader Tommy with lots of heart.

I cannot overlook one of the director's finest works, **1939's "Wuthering Heights"**, just because (incomprehensibly) it is currently unavailable on DVD (beware the Korean imports!). Wyler's adaptation of Emily Bronte's novel remains one our great tear-jerkers, and made a star (in America) out of Laurence Olivier, whose then wife, Vivien Leigh, was simultaneously shooting a little feature called "Gone With The Wind". David Niven, who had third billing behind Olivier and the stunning Merle Oberon (as Cathy), relates in his memoir, "The Moon's a Balloon", why the director was known as "Once More Wyler": He would habitually insist on endless re-takes, often while reading a newspaper, which drove actors mad. On "Heights", Olivier finally complained he'd tried a certain scene a hundred different ways, and needed more direction on how to play it. From behind the paper came the quiet but steady reply: "Just do it...better."

I close with three top Bette Davis movies which Wyler helmed over a three year period.

Jezebel (1938)- Julie Marsden (Davis) is a willful New Orleans belle engaged to banker Preston Dillard (Henry Fonda) in the antebellum South. Needy and manipulative, soon enough Julie manages to drive Pres away. He later returns with a wife, which foils Julie's plans for a reconciliation. After finding new ways to cause mischief among the menfolk, Julie seizes one final chance to redeem herself. "Jezebel" was often considered Davis's consolation prize for not landing the part of Scarlett O'Hara. Inevitably compared to "GWTW", this romantic drama stands on its own, thanks to Wyler's expert hand and his camera's loving attention to Warners' biggest female star. Davis, who nabbed

her second Best Actress Oscar for this, is on fire and looks glorious, while Fonda is suitably restrained as Pres. Don't miss that famous scene at the ball.

The Letter (1940)- When Leslie Crosbie (Davis), mistress of a rubber plantation in Malaysia, shoots and kills a male friend who pops in and makes advances, trusting husband Robert (Herbert Marshall) wants to protect his shaken bride as best he can. But close friend and lawyer Howard Joyce (James Stephenson) is suspicious of Leslie's story, owing to the existence of an incriminating letter held by the victim's Eurasian widow (Gale Sondergaard). Adapted from a story by Somerset Maugham, "The Letter" is a taut, captivating film, evoking a dark, sultry atmosphere that complements all the scandalous intrigue and subterfuge. Bette is tops as the lovely lady we love to hate, and Sondergaard's wordless turn as the wronged woman nearly steals the show.

The Little Foxes (1941)- Married to wealthy husband Horace (the gentlemanly, long-suffering Marshall once again), Regina Giddens (Davis) and her leech-like brothers steal from him to invest in a cotton mill while the poor man recuperates from heart problems. When Horace returns and discovers the theft, Regina must cover her tracks, and inevitably becomes the victim of her own consuming greed. Adapted from Lillian Hellman's Broadway smash (which starred Tallulah Bankhead), this third and final collaboration between Wyler and Davis, again playing a viper in petticoats, is a caustic, chilling mood piece set in the turn-of-the-century South. Davis was never so wicked, playing Regina to the icy hilt. A fabulous cast and authentic 1900s detail bring Hellman's loathsome characters to vivid life. (Is this what they mean by Southern hospitality?)

Next time: William Wyler's most notable films from 1942 forward.