



Bette Davis...Leslie Crosbie
 Herbert Marshall...Robert Crosbie
 James Stephenson...Howard Joyce
 Frieda Inescort...Dorothy Joyce
 Gale Sondergaard...Mrs. Hammond
 Bruce Lester...John Withers
 Elizabeth Inglis...Adele Ainsworth
 Cecil Kellaway...Prescott
 Victor Sen Yung...Ong Chi Seng
 Doris Lloyd...Mrs. Cooper
 Willie Fung...Chung Hi
 Tetsu Komai... Head Boy

Directed by William Wyler
 Play by W. Somerset Maugham
 Screenplay by Howard Koch
 Produced by Robert Lord
 Executive producers Hal B. Wallis and Jack L. Warner
 Original Music by Max Steiner
 Cinematography by Tony Gaudio
 Film Editing by George Amy and Warren Low
 Costume Design by Orry-Kelly
 Makeup Department Perc Westmore

Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actor (Stephenson), Best Leading Actress (Davis), Best B&W cinematography (Gaudio), Best Director (Wyler), Best Music, Original Score (Steiner), Best Picture (Wallis).

WILLIAM WYLER (1 July 1902, Mülhausen, Alsace, Germany [now Mulhouse, Haut-Rhin, France]—27 July 1981, Los Angeles, heart attack) directed 69 films, the last of which was *The Liberation of L.B. Jones* 1970. *Some of the others were* *Funny Girl* 1968, *The Collector* 1965, *The Children's Hour* 1961, *Ben-Hur* 1959, *Friendly Persuasion* 1956, *The Desperate Hours* 1955, *Roman Holiday* 1953, *Detective Story* 1951, *The Heiress* 1949, *The Best Years of Our Lives* 1946, *The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress* 1944 (also cinematographer), *Mrs. Miniver* 1942, *The Little Foxes* 1941, *The Westerner* 1940, *Wuthering Heights* 1939, *Jezebel* 1938, *Dodsworth* 1936, *The Square Shooter* 1927, *Kelcy Gets His Man* 1927, and *The Crook Buster* 1925. He won the Academy of Motion Pictures' Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award in 1966, the same year he was nominated Best Director for *The Collector*. He was nominated for 10 other Best Director Oscars and three Best Picture Oscars. He won Best Director for *Ben-Hur*, *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Mrs. Minever*. The American Film Institute gave him its Life Achievement Award in 1976.

HOWARD KOCH (2 December 1902, NYC—17 August 1995, Woodstock, New York, pneumonia) wrote 26 screenplays, among them *The Fox* 1967, *The War Lover* 1962, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* 1948 screenplay, *Rhapsody in Blue* 1945, *Casablanca* 1942, *Sergeant York* 1941 and *Virginia City* 1940. He shared an Oscar for *Casablanca* with Julius J. Epstein and Philip G. Epstein.

TONY GAUDIO (20 November 1883, Rome, Italy—10 August 1951, Burlingame, California) shot 146 films, among them *The Red Pony* 1949, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* 1942, *High Sierra* 1941, *'Til We Meet Again* 1940, *The Dawn Patrol* 1938, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* 1932, *Little Caesar* 1931, *Hell's Angels* 1930, *Kismet* 1920, *The Haunted Pajamas* 1917, *A Manly Man* 1911 and *Princess Nicotine; or, The Smoke Fairy* 1909. He was nominated for 6 Best Cinematography Oscars and won one—for *Anthony Adverse* 1936.

September 11, 2007 (XV:3)
 William Wyler, **THE LETTER** (1940) 90 minutes



MAX STEINER (10 May 1888, Vienna, Austria-Hungary—28 December 1971, Hollywood, congestive heart failure) is credited as musical director or for stock music on 259 films and as composer for 271, some of which are *Spencer's Mountain* 1963, *The Sins of Rachel Cade* 1961, *The FBI Story* 1959, *A Summer Place* 1959, *Marjorie Morningstar* 1958, *The Searchers* 1956, *Battle Cry* 1955, *The Caine Mutiny* 1954, *The Jazz Singer* 1952, *I Was a Communist for the FBI* 1951, *White Heat* 1949, *The Fountainhead* 1949, *Flamingo Road* 1949, *Key Largo* 1948, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* 1948, *Dark Passage* 1947, *Cloak and Dagger* 1946, *The Big Sleep* 1946, *Night and Day* 1946, *Mildred Pierce* 1945, *Arsenic and Old Lace* 1944, *Watch on the Rhine* 1943, *Casablanca* 1942, *Now, Voyager* 1942, *They Died with Their Boots On* 1941, *Sergeant York* 1941, *Santa Fe Trail* 1940, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* 1940, *Gone with the Wind* 1939, *The Dawn Patrol* 1938, *Angels with Dirty Faces* 1938, *Jezebel* 1938, *The Informer* 1935, *King Kong* 1933, and *The Bondman* 1929. He was nominated for 23 Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture and won for *Since You Went Away* 1944, *Now, Voyager* 1943 and *The Informer* 1936.

BETTE DAVIS (5 April 1908, Lowell, Massachusetts—6 October 1989, Neuilly, France, metastasized breast cancer) performed in 120 films and TV dramas, among them *Wicked Stepmother* 1989, *The Whales of August* 1987, *Death on the Nile* 1978, *The Nanny* 1965, *Hush... Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* 1964, *The Virgin Queen* 1955, *A Stolen Life* 1946, *Watch on the Rhine* 1943, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* 1942, 1941, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* 1939, *Jezebel* 1938, *Satan Met a Lady* 1936, *The Petrified Forest* 1936, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* 1932, *So Big!* 1932, and *The Bad Sister What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* 1962, *The Star* 1952, *All About Eve* 1950, *Mr. Skeffington* 1944, *Now, Voyager* 1942, *The Little Foxes* 1941, *The Letter* 1940, *Dark Victory* 1939 and *Of Human Bondage* 1934. She won for *Jezebel* 1938 and *Dangerous* 1935.

HERBERT MARSHALL (23 May 1890, London, England—22 January 1966, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California, USA. heart attack) in 90 films and major tv drama series, some of which are "77 Sunset Strip", *The List of Adrian Messenger* 1963, "Zane Grey Theater", *The Fly* 1958, "Alfred Hitchcock Presents", "Studio One", "Playhouse 90", *The Virgin Queen* 1955, *Duel in the Sun* 1946, *The Razor's Edge* 1946, *Crack-Up* 1946, *The Moon and Sixpence* 1942, *The Little Foxes* 1941, *Foreign Correspondent* 1940, *The Good Fairy* 1935, *The Letter* 1929 and *Mumsie* 1927.

JAMES STEPHENSON (14 April 1889, Selby, Yorkshire, England—29 July 1941, Pacific Palisades, California, heart attack) performed in 39 films, all between 1937 and 1941. Some of them were: *International Squadron* 1941, *South of Suez* 1940, *Calling Philo Vance* 1940, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* 1939, *Beau Geste* 1939, *The Adventures of Jane Arden* 1939, *Torchy Blane in Chinatown* 1939, *Nancy Drew—Detective* 1938, *Mr. Satan* 1938, and *The Perfect Crime* 1937.

WILLIAM WYLER from *World Film Directors Vol.I*. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co NY 1987. Entry by Philip Kemp.

“William” (Willy) Wyler, (July 1, 1902–July 27, 1981) American director and producer, was born in what was then Mülhausen in the German province of Elsass (Alsace), second of three sons of a prosperous Jewish family. His father, Leopold, was a Swiss citizen who starting as a traveling salesman, had built up a thriving haberdashery business. His mother, Melanie, came from the culturally distinguished Auerbach family; her uncle Berthold was a well-known novelist. Wyler attended several local schools; something of a hell-raiser, he was more than once expelled for persistent misbehavior. Despite this, his childhood was largely happy. Along with his elder brother Robert, he was taken by his mother to concerts, opera, and the theatre, as well as to the cinema, where he developed a taste for Feuillade’s *Fantômas* series. At home, the family and their friends often staged amateur theatricals.

When World War I broke out, Robert, thanks to the family’s Swiss citizenship, could be sent off to a commercial college in Lausanne safe from any risk of conscription. Willy, with his younger brother Gaston, stayed in Mülhausen and watched the city change nationality several times in rapid succession as opposing armies came and went. When the war ended, leaving Mulhouse (as it had become) and the family business relatively unscathed, Wyler was sent to join his brother at the École Supérieure de Commerce in Lausanne. He spent a year there perfecting his French, after which his father arranged an apprenticeship for him at a large clothing store in Paris. Homesick, lonely, and increasingly averse to haberdashery as a career, he stuck it out for some months—consoling himself with occasional violin

lessons at the Conservatoire—before quitting and buying a ticket home with his severance pay.

As a last resort, Wyler’s mother took him to meet her cousin, Carl Laemmle, who was over on a visit. Head of Universal Studios, which he had built up from a single Chicago nickelodeon in less than ten years. Laemmle was even by Hollywood standards a devout nepotist. (“Uncle Laemmle,” ran the current gag, “has a very large faemmle.”) He promptly offered Wyler a job in the studio’s New York office at \$25 a week—less \$5 a week to pay off his boat fare. Starting in the shipping department, Wyler was soon elevated to foreign publicity, and in 1921 talked Laemmle into transferring him to Universal City in Hollywood.

Initially his work there was scarcely more glamorous than it had been in New York, As office boy to a casting director, “I did everything: assistant prop man, helping carry film, sweeping steps. I went through the mill.” A more interesting assignment was helping to marshal the two thousand-odd extras on Universal’s current major production, the Lon Chaney *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923). During shooting he got himself promoted to assistant to the assistant director, and by 1924 had risen to assistant director in his own right—albeit only on the production-line two-reel Westerns which, like all the other studios, Universal churned out at a rate of two hundred a year.

Around the end of 1924, Wyler’s promising career received a setback: caught in a nearby poolhall when he should have been on set, he was fired. Fortunately, assistant directors were then in demand at MGM, where Fred Niblo was shooting the spectacular chariot-race sequence for *Ben-Hur* with forty-two

cameramen and needed all the assistance he could get. Wyler was hired and assigned a section of the massive crowd. “I was given a toga and a set of signals....I got my section of the crowd to stand up and cheer...or whatever was called for. There must have been thirty other assistants doing the same job.” At one point, it happened that Wyler was summoned by Niblo to receive instructions. “I looked up behind [Niblo]...and there was the man who had just fired me at Universal. He was very impressed....The next day I was hired back.”

Thanks perhaps to this spurious prestige, Universal soon allowed Wyler to direct his first film—and officially changed his first name to William, in line with the dignity of his new status. Not that *Crook Buster* (1925) was any grand assignment. Like all Universal’s two-reel Mustang Westerns, it was made on a \$2,000 budget in a week: three days to shoot and two to edit, with Saturday to cast the next week’s picture. Over the next two years, Wyler directed at least twenty-one of these quickies, learning his trade at \$60 a week. (The cameraman got \$75.) “It was all routine, but it taught you the business of movement....I did try to make pictures a little different, to invent a little something that would make them interesting....You had great leeway. If you wanted to change the script, fine....The stories were elementary...but they had to have action.”

Few of these prentice works have survived intact, but judging from contemporary reviews, Wyler provided all the requisite pace and excitement. (One of the earliest, the 1926 *Ridin’ for Love*, gives Wyler story credit—the only writing credit of his career.) The *Motion Picture News* notice for *The Lone Star* (1927) would probably serve for any one of the series: “The usual helping of rough-and-tumble fighting, riders silhouetted against a skyline, the foiling of a plot, a touch of romance...numerous narrow escapes. What more could you ask for in two reels?” At all events, the studio was satisfied. Late in 1926, while continuing to shoot two-reelers, Wyler was assigned to Universal’s new series of five-reel Blue Streak Westerns, kicking off with *Lazy Lightning* (1926). Budgets were all of \$20,000, which allowed for location work.

Wyler directed eight five-reel Westerns before at last escaping from the sagebrush with his first full-length feature. *Anybody Here Seen Kelly?* (1928) was a comedy about a French girl (Bessie Love) arriving in New York in search of her wartime sweetheart. Audaciously, Wyler shot much of the film on location, taking a concealed camera into New York streets; the producer was his brother Robert, who had joined him in Hollywood in 1925. No prints of *Kelly* are known to exist, nor of *The Shakedown* (1929), a boxing movie released in two versions: silent and “25% sound.” (Universal, like several other studios, was hedging its bets, in case the talkies proved an ephemeral gimmick.) Wyler’s earliest surviving feature is *The Love Trap* (1929), also released in two versions. A mildly risqué bedroom comedy, it starred Laura La Plante, then one of the studio’s top stars, as a flapper on the make.

As his first all-talking assignment, Wyler was handed a well-thumbed Western property. *Hell’s Heroes* (1930) taken from a novel, *The Three Godfathers*, which had already been filmed twice (once by John Ford), and would be made twice more (once, again, by John Ford). Three hardbitten outlaws on the run come across a woman alone in the desert, about to give birth. She does so and dies, leaving the three, without horses and almost out of water, to carry the infant to safety. Two of the outlaws die in the process; the third (Charles Bickford) staggers, near dead, into the township of New Jerusalem on Christmas morning, the baby in his arms. Given ample scope for sentimentality, Wyler largely avoided it, aiming

instead for a harsh realism in locations and acting that today make the film the least unwatchable of extant versions. *Hell’s Heroes* scored a hit at the box office, and Wyler was singled out by the critics as a director to watch.

The Storm (1930), a triangle drama involving two men snowbound in a wilderness cabin with Lupe Velez, did little to enhance his reputation. (Wyler always reckoned it his worst film.) He had better material with *A House Divided* (1931), even if the plot was blatantly lifted from *Desire Under the Elms*, and Walter Huston, as the tough fisherman who sees his young wife falling for his son, turned in a powerful performance. Even this early in Wyler’s career Charles Affron (*International Dictionary of Film and Filmmakers*) detected distinctive preoccupations: “The film’s premise holds particular appeal for a director who sees drama in claustrophobic interiors, the actors held in expressive tension by their shifting spatial relationship to each other, the decor, and the camera.”

Dialogue credit on *A House Divided* went to Huston’s son John; he and Wyler became close friends and, once the film was complete, tried to interest the studio in several hard-hitting socially relevant scenarios. Warners might have bought them but not Universal. John Huston took off in disgust for Europe, and Wyler was assigned two routine programmers: *Tom Brown of Culver* (young rebel makes good at military academy) and *Her First Mate*, a Slim Summerville-ZaSu Pitts comedy.



Counsellor at Law (1933) is generally held to mark the end of Wyler’s apprenticeship. The first of his many adaptations of Broadway hits, it was also his first film to touch (albeit very cautiously) on a “serious” theme—in this case anti-Semitism, a subject generally taboo within the Jewish-run studios. The hero of Elmer Rice’s play, a fast-talking lawyer named George Simon, had been played on stage by Paul Muni, making his breakthrough to stardom; but Muni, not wanting to be typecast as a Jewish actor, turned down the film role, which went instead to Barrymore. Against all expectations, Barrymore gave an impressive if flamboyant performance, seen by many critics as his best in the sound era. Wyler, in line with his later practice, refused to “open up” the play with superfluous outdoor sequences, filming entirely within the tight confines of Simon’s law offices. *Counsellor at Law* received enthusiastic reviews, though Barrymore, rather than Wyler, inevitably gained most of the attention.

The film also initiated another Wyler tradition—his reputation as an implacable perfectionist. One scene involving Barrymore was said to have run to fifty-six takes; the legend of “ninety-take Wyler” was in the making.

Counsellor at Law was highly successful, breaking box-office records in its first week’s run at Radio City Music Hall.

Nonetheless Wyler was growing increasingly dissatisfied at Universal; he was earning \$1,000 a week but getting few of the assignments he wanted. *Glamour* hardly improved matters—a rapidly romantic weepie, based on a short story by Edna Ferber. If *The Good Fairy* (1935), adapted from a Molnár play, was less inane, it was thanks largely to Preston Sturges, who rewrote the text almost entirely, populating Molnár’s flimsy Viennese world with Sturgesian eccentrics named Schlapkohl or Ginglebusher. The lead role, of a naive orphan who innocently disrupts the lives of all around her, was taken by Margaret Sullavan. Then at the start of her brief, temperamental career. She and Wyler clashed incessantly. “We were constantly fighting, over the interpretation of her part, over everything.... She had a mind of her own and so did I.” Midway through shooting, in an attempt to make peace, Wyler invited his star out to dinner. A few days later, on November 24, 1934, they were married.

Sullavan had recently been divorced from her first husband, Henry Fonda, from whom she had separated amicably after two months. Her marriage to Wyler lasted slightly longer. “We had about a year and a half together—lots of fights, lots of good times,” Wyler recalled. “It was fighting, making up, and fighting again.” They were divorced in March 1936.

In the meantime, Wyler quit Universal, which was heading towards bankruptcy. Freelancing, he was offered a picture by Jesse L. Lasky at Fix: *The Gay Deception* (1935), a trivial light comedy. Despite its well-worn Cinderella plot (stenographer posing as grand lady meets prince posing as bellhop), the film was well-received, and attracted the attention of the most formidable of the independent producers, Sam Goldwyn, who offered Wyler a contract.

The films which Wyler made during his “Goldwyn years”—not all of them made for Goldwyn—raised him to the summit of his profession. In many ways the two men were ideally suited. Goldwyn consistently aspired, not always successfully, to produce high-quality prestige pictures. Wyler, with his cultured European background and meticulous technique, could be counted on to make them for him. Not that they always agreed; they often vehemently did not. “To give Sam his due,” Wyler later remarked, “let me say that with all his faults, he was no scrawny little fast-buck producer.... Do it over again,” he’d say, as if money didn’t matter.... I could practically cast any star in any role, again regardless of cost. Which doesn’t mean we didn’t fight, but we fought for what we both thought was right.”

Wyler’s first film for Goldwyn united him with two other significant figures in his career: Gregg Toland, and Lillian Hellman. In Toland, Wyler found a cinematographer who could make his own creative contribution, not simply follow instructions. “You didn’t tell Gregg what lens to use, you told him what mood you were after.... We would discuss a picture from beginning to end, its overall ‘feel’ and then the style of each sequence. Toland was an artist.” They worked together on six films, during which Toland was developing and perfecting his technique of deep-focus photography; this in turn allowed Wyler to explore the complex pictorial compositions and long, unbroken takes that became his preferred style of filmmaking.

Lillian Hellman, who scripted three of Wyler’s most successful pictures, had just had her first Broadway hit, *The Children’s Hour*. Since it concerned lesbianism, the play was generally held to be totally unfilmable, and Goldwyn caused great hilarity by paying \$50,000 for the rights—the more so since the Hays Office stipulated that no film version, however expurgated,

could use the play’s title, or even mention it as a source. Hellman, undeterred, maintained that it could still make an acceptable movie, since her subject was not lesbianism, but the destructive power of a malicious lie. It was her script, under the nonspecific title of *These Three*, that Goldwyn presented to Wyler as his first assignment.

In *The Children’s Hour* two women, Martha and Karen, set up a girls’ boarding school with the help of Karen’s boyfriend Joe. An evil pupil, Mary Tilford, suggests to her grandmother that the two teachers are lovers; the rumor spreads and the school is forced to close. Martha admits that she does harbor sexual feelings for Karen, and kills herself. For the movie Hellman, with prudent economy, simply switched the triangle around; instead of Martha and Joe both loving Karen, Martha (Miriam Hopkins) and Karen (Merle Oberon) both love Joe (Joel McCrea), and the scandal becomes one of non-marital sex—if not a *ménage à trois*—on the school premises.

These Three (1936) represents the first mature statement of Wyler’s central concern: the psychological relationship between characters, expressed through framing, composition, and the considered selection of camera angles. “A recurrent Wyler image,” noted Neil Sinyard (*Arts Lab Programme* October 1981), “is that of a frozen confrontation: people.... separated by ideology or social position daring each other to strike.” Or as Wyler put it: “I believe that the emotion and conflict between people in a drawing room can be as exciting as a gun battle, and possibly more exciting.”

Despite its compromises and clumsily tacked-on happy ending—which Wyler detested—*These Three* was widely acclaimed. Graham Greene, reviewing it for *The Spectator*, wrote that he had “seldom been so moved by any fictional film,” singling out Bonita Granville’s chilling portrayal of the malign schoolgirl: “Never before has childhood been represented so convincingly on the screen.... This character raises the film from the anecdotal, however, ingenious and moving the anecdote; it has enough truth and intensity to stand for the whole of the dark side of childhood.” Several aspects of the film—though not Granville’s performance—now look dated, but *These Three* remains, in John Baxter’s words, “one of Wyler’s most integrated and formally perfect films.”

Sinclair Lewis’s biographer, Mark Schorer, described him as one of the worst important writers in modern American literature—which may be why *Dodsworth* (1936), almost uniquely among films drawn from “classic” novels, is generally reckoned to be an improvement on the original. Sidney Howard scripted the film from his own stage adaptation, making good many of the novel’s deficiencies in structure and characterization. From Walter Huston (who had created the role on stage) as the middle-aged American businessman whose marriage disintegrates during a European vacation, and from Mary Astor as the liberated younger woman he meets, Wyler elicited outstanding performances. Ruth Chatterton, as Sam Dodsworth’s pretentious wife Fran, proved less tractable; despite all Wyler’s efforts, she insisted on “playing Fran like a heavy,” caricaturing an already stereotyped role.

Reviews of *Dodsworth* were excellent, and the film was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including one for Wyler’s direction, though only the art director, Richard Day, won an Oscar. Box-office response was only respectable; unglamorized accounts of the problems of middle age evidently lacked mass appeal. Still, Goldwyn had hired Wyler for prestige, not profit, and was far from dissatisfied. He was less pleased with another of his stable, Howard Hawks, who had dared to rewrite part of the film he was shooting: *Come and Get It* (1936), an adaptation of an Edna Ferber novel. Reprimanded, Hawks walked off the picture, and Wyler was

summoned to take over. When he refused, Goldwyn furiously threatened him with legal action. “At the end I had to do it. I don’t think it helped much.” The film was finally released with joint directorial credit, and flopped. “The trouble with directors,” grumbled Goldwyn, “is they bite the hand that lays the golden egg.”

Part of Wyler’s appeal for Goldwyn, Albert Lavalley suggested (in Peary and Shatzkin’s *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*), was that “his famed perfectionism was often spent on small touches, never on the major alteration of a play nor on a strong interpretation that would suggest a personal *auteur* like Lubitsch....The many small touches were fused into a personal style, though of a very detached sort.” Similarly Karl Reisz (*Sequence* 13 1951) commented that by this stage in his career Wyler had “evolved a consistent technical approach, without having established for himself a recognizable creative personality.” This detachment, this sense of meticulous craftsmanship overriding any personal attitude, may explain why, though Wyler’s films are often revived, none of them has yet become a cult movie—not even those featuring cult actors like Bogart, who stole Wyler’s next picture, *Dead End* (1937).

Sidney Kingsley’s long-running Broadway hit leaned toward social realism: gangsters, hookers, and juvenile hooligans interacting in a slummy East River cul-de-sac, on to which backs a high-priced apartment building inhabited by the snooty rich. Wyler wanted to shoot the film version on location in New York but was vetoed by Goldwyn, who liked to have his directors on the West Coast where he could keep tabs on them. So Richard Day devised a huge, elaborate set, around which Toland’s camera prowled and craned, exploring every angle, peering into sleazy tenements and sidling past carefully grouped garbage cans. (Goldwyn, visiting the set, complained that it looked dirty; Wyler patiently explained that slums usually did.)

Snarling his way towards de as Bette Davis, who for some years had been raising hell on the Burbank lot in her demand for better material, and in 1936 as Baby Face Martin, local boy made bad, Bogart gave his best performance so far....

Wyler was by now recognized as one of Hollywood’s foremost directors, notably skilled in his handling of actors—and as such was specifically requested by Warners to handle one of their major problems. This whad even jumped her contract and fled to London pursued by Jack Warner frantically waving injunctions. Davis lost the subsequent court case, but the studio, acting generous, not only paid her costs but made serious efforts to provide her with better roles and directors. Hence the loan of Wyler, for whom they paid \$3,500 a week—Wyler’s regular \$2,500, plus \$1,000 a week to Goldwyn.

The vehicle chosen for the Davis-Wyler teaming was *Jezebel* (1938), a steamy melodrama set in the ante-bellum Deep South—partly a consolation prize for Davis having missed out on *Gone With the Wind* and partly a crafty bid to preempt Selznick’s much-publicized blockbuster. As Julie Marsden, the spoiled and headstrong Southern belle who comes through a yellow fever epidemic, Davis was ideally cast, and Wyler succeeded like no director before or since in toning down her mannerisms and drawing from her a performance of concentrated power that transcended the novellish script. (The film was adapted from a play by Owen Davis; one of the scriptwriters was John Huston, back in harness after his European *Wanderjahre*.) Wyler was eager to film in color but Warners turned him down. He nonetheless contrived to give an impression of color—most notably in the

famous ball scene where Julie scandalizes New Orleans society by defiantly wearing a scarlet dress in place of the customary white.

Henry Fonda, playing Julie’s fiancé, made a valiant attempt at a Southern accent, and George Brent was less stolid than usual as a rival admirer. Other actors hardly mattered, though; it was Davis’ film, as her Best Actress Oscar confirmed. Despite their later disputes, Davis always gave Wyler full credit for her achievement in *Jezebel*. “It was all Wyler,” she wrote in her 1962 autobiography. “I had known all the horrors of no direction and bad direction. I now knew what a great director was and what he could mean to an actress. I will always be grateful to him for his toughness and his genius.”

Wyler’s notorious toughness was not invariably so appreciated by those actors who experienced it—though most would concede that he got results. “Willy’s goading approach, if you can take it, works,” Charlton Heston once commented, quoting Anthony Perkins likening a Wyler shoot to a Turkish bath: “You darn near drown but you come out smelling like a rose.” Unlike Curtiz or Sternberg, Wyler never abused his actors; but some of them found his relentless pushing towards an often unspecified perfection almost equally intolerable. “For God’s sake, man, what do you *want*?” Laurence Olivier exploded, after the twentieth quiet, merciless “Again, please.” Wyler smiled sadly and murmured: “I want you to be better.”

Wyler’s preference for long, complex takes added to the burden on his casts. His own attitude was that “whatever extra trouble was needed to make a scene right, or better, was worth it...I’m not vicious, but I am demanding. I don’t give a damn about people’s comfort, because I drive myself the same way.” The director believed he was wholly responsible for performance quality: “There is no such thing as good direction with bad performance. I don’t care what you do with the camera. When there is bad performance by anybody, at that moment the direction is not good.” Hence the Jekyll-and-Hyde aspects noted by David Niven: “Kind, fun, and cozy at all other times, the moment his bottom touched down in his director’s chair he became a fiend.”...Huston observed: “I doubt he likes actors very much. He doesn’t empathize with them—they irritate him on the set...but invariably, they come off well. The only answer I have is that his taste is impeccable and every actor knows it.”



“They may hate me on the set, but they will love me at the premiere,” Wyler remarked; his films picked up thirty-two Oscar nominations for acting and fourteen winners—an unequaled record. Not all actors agreed it was worth it, however. Ruth Chatterton, who at one point slapped his face and locked herself in her dressing-room, described Wyler as “the meanest, worst little man I

ever worked with,” and Sylvia Sidney claimed he was her main reason for abandoning movies in favor of the stage,

In October 1938 Wyler married for the second time. His bride was Margaret Talliochet, an actress from Texas (though her family, like Wyler’s hailed originally from Switzerland). It was a long and happy marriage, lasting until Wyler’s death. They had five children, one of whom died in infancy.

In theory Wyler was legally obliged to direct any picture Goldwyn assigned him. In practice, he often refused assignments, was duly suspended, and would unconcernedly take off to go skiing or traveling in Europe. Goldwyn could have fired him, but Wyler was too valuable as asset; besides, “somehow all the scripts I turned down were enormous failures.” One film he did want to make, and talked Goldwyn into, was *Wuthering Heights* (1939)....

Wyler’s respectable, conventionalized translation of Emily Brontë’s passionate vision, filmed on studio-built moors planted with four-foot California heather, reduces *Wuthering Heights*, David Thomson felt, to the level of “a novel by Edna Ferber, slow, earnest and clotted,” taming the demonic relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy into a readily comprehensible pattern of class-envy. ...To Wyler’s annoyance, Goldwyn insisted on adding a sentimental coda, described by Richard Mallet as “that angel-choir business while the shades of Cathy and Heathcliff walk away toward the horizon in the Chaplin manner.”

Toland’s was the sole Oscar won by *Wuthering Heights*. The film was nominated for six more (including one for Wyler), but that year *Gone With the Wind* scooped most of the awards. However, Wyler’s status as one of the industry’s top directors was now unquestioned. “His films grow steadily in stature,” wrote Lewis Jacobs in *The Rise of the American Film*, published in 1939; “his content becomes deeper, his execution more thoughtful, his problems more vital and relevant. Purposefulness lifts his films higher and higher out of the ordinary.” Later critics have singled out Jacobs’ weighty commendation as indicating just where Wyler went wrong. In *Film Comment* (Fall 1970) Gary Carey asserted: “His films are most enjoyable when they aim only at being stylish entertainments. Too many of his later films become pompously inflated as they rise higher and higher in their quest for purposefulness.”

For the first time in ten years, Wyler returned for his next film to the genre in which he had learned his trade—not that his quickie Westerns, all slam-bang action and stereotypes, had much in common with *The Westerner* (1940). Virtually an anti-Western, the film was a conversational duel, pitting Gary Cooper’s wandering cowhand against Walter Brennan’s monomaniac Judge Roy Bean....

Warners, pleased with Wyler’s work on *Jezebel*, invited him back for another Davis picture. *The Letter* (1940), in Gary Carey’s opinion, “is Wyler’s best film; in it Davis gives her finest performance.” Other writers have concurred, often citing the opening sequence. From a view of the full moon the camera pans down to a silent rubber plantation and tracks past huts full of drowsy workers to the porch of a bungalow. A shot rings out; a white cockatoo erupts into flight; and a man stumbles out onto the veranda, followed by a woman who fires five more times into his huddled body. The camera continues to track in, ending on a close-up of the woman’s face as she stares up at the moon, her expression fixed and emotionless.

The picture was adapted by Howard Koch from Somerset Maugham’s play (already filmed once before, with Jeanne Eagels) about the wife of a British planter in Malaya who murders her lover

out of jealousy, then claims he tried to rape her. Thereafter she coolly and contemptuously manipulates the men around her—her husband, her lawyer, the district officer—lying her way towards an inevitable acquittal. Davis superbly conveys the suppressed sensuality beneath a primly respectable facade, her whole performance (as Louis Gianetti noted) “a triumph of nuance and understatement, perhaps the most subtle of her career—a far cry from the bravura effulgence she was noted for.”

Wyler filmed in exceptionally long takes, building the tension of the extended conversation scenes where Davis holds center-frame amid deferential men—who could nonetheless, at a single slip, become her jailers and executioners. Michael A. Anderegg, in his monograph on the director, writes that “assisted by Tony Gaudio’s low-key photography, Wyler creates a pattern of light and shadow both reminiscent of German Expressionism and anticipatory of the visual style associated with *film noir*.” If, as Karel Reisz suggested “the social life ...is more Boston than Singapore,” it makes little difference; surface realism is not Wyler’s aim. The film’s only serious blemish is its ludicrous, Production-Code ending—which Wyler deplored—wherein Davis is stabbed by her victim’s vengeful Eurasian wife, upon which two policemen materialize from nowhere to ensure that this murder, too, meets with due retribution.

By way of a return match, Davis was now loaned to Goldwyn, to be directed by Wyler in their third and last film together. *The Little Foxes* (1941) was taken from another Hellman play, perhaps her best. Set in the South at the turn of the century, it presented an acid study of a repellent, infinitely rapacious family—illustrating, at least in Hellman’s intention, how America’s devotion to materialism soured and distorted all other human impulses.

...It was over the portrayal of Regina that the rapport between Wyler and Davis broke down, paralleling to some extent—though on a far higher professional level—Wyler’s clash with Ruth Chatterton. Davis insisted on playing Regina as a thoroughgoing monster, seething with barely concealed malice. Wyler “wanted her to play it much lighter. This woman was supposed not just to be evil, but to have great charm, humor, and sex.”...Both *The Letter* and *The Little Foxes* gathered a stack of nominations, but no Oscars. Wyler finally hit the jackpot with his next film, for which—another tribute to his reputation—he had been requested on loan from MGM.

Of all the numerous Hollywood movies made between 1940 and 1945 in support of America’s various allies, *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) remains the most famous. Dated, sentimental, hopelessly over-idealized in its depiction of a phony rose-garden England, the film still intermittently exerts surprising emotional impact. As propaganda, it was hugely successful, and much admired by no less an authority than Joseph Goebbels....Roosevelt was so taken with the sermon that he had it reprinted on leaflets to be dropped over German-occupied territory. The film earned Wyler his first director’s Oscar—plus five more, including Best Picture. By the time the awards were presented, Wyler was himself in England and in uniform. As soon as *Mrs. Miniver* was finished, he had offered his services to the US armed forces, and was commissioned a major in the Air Force. (He had become an American citizen in 1928.)



Having turned down an invitation from Laurence Olivier to direct his projected film of *Henry V*, Wyler started work on the first of his two wartime documentaries. *Memphis Belle* (1944) concentrates on the twenty-fifth and final bombing mission over Germany of a B-17 Flying Fortress. Filming on grainy 16mm Kodachrome stock, Wyler flew several missions to get the shots he wanted, frequently acting as his own cameraman in an unheated, unpressurized plane at 25,000 feet. The resultant film, furnished with a spare, lyrical commentary by Lester Koenig, is reckoned one of the finest American combat documentaries of the war. Karel Reisz saw in it “a spontaneous, unaffected realism which is to be found nowhere else in ...[Wyler’s] work.” Wyler’s second combat film, *Thunderbolt*, aimed to do for the P-47 fighter what *Memphis Belle* had done for the B-17 but failed to echo the earlier film’s sense of involvement. Completed in 1945, *Thunderbolt* was not released until 1947, and then aroused little interest. While shooting its final scenes over Italy, Wyler sustained damage to his aural nerve and permanently lost the hearing of his right ear.

On his return to Hollywood, Wyler was invited by Frank Capra to join him, together with George Stevens and producer Sam Briskin, in a newly formed independent company, Liberty Films. Wyler was excited by the idea, one of several attempts during the restless postwar years to free filmmakers from the tyranny of the studios. Before he could start work for Liberty, though, he still owed Goldwyn one last movie.

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946), Neil Sinyard wrote, “stands as a monument to Wyler’s meticulous working methods as well as to the nobility and love he imparts to material to which, with his own war experiences, he felt he could bring a particular authentic knowledge.”...

Breaking with Hollywood convention, Wyler had his male actors wear no makeup, and the women no more than they would wear in their daily lives....[Myrna] Loy had initially been reluctant to take the role [of the wife of returning soldier Frederic March]. “I hear Wyler’s a sadist,” she told Goldwyn. “No, no,” responded Goldwyn, leaping to the defense of his star director; “he’s just a very mean fellow.”

At the Academy Awards, *Best Years* outdid even *Mrs. Miniver*, taking seven Oscars, including Best Picture and Wyler’s second as Best Director....James Agee, though disliking the plot’s “timidity,” commended Wyler for “a style of great purity, directness and warmth, about as cleanly devoid of mannerism, haste, superfluous motion, aesthetic or emotional overreaching as any I know....Wyler has always seemed to me an exceedingly sincere and good director; now he seems one of the great ones.”...

Best Years was Wyler’s last film with Toland, who died in 1948, aged only forty-four. It was also the end of his association with Goldwyn. However, Liberty Films was already in financial trouble, and before Wyler could even take up a project the company was forced to sell out to Paramount. Under the terms of the deal, each of the three directors was supposed to make five films for the studio, continuing to act as their own producers; of the three, only Wyler actually completed his quota.

His first film for Paramount, *The Heiress* (1949) was undertaken at the suggestion of its star, Olivia de Havilland. ...To follow *The Heiress*, Wyler again called in Ruth and Augustus Goetz [who had done the screenplay of the James novel *Washington Park* for *The Heiress*] to adopt a period classic—Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. This time the results were far less fortunate—mainly for reasons having little to do with the film itself. Wyler, whose views were staunchly liberal, loathed McCarthyism and was one of

the founders and most outspoken members of the antiHUAC Committee for the First Amendment. His war record and his eminence within the industry protected him from direct attack, but one at least of his films sustained serious damage. *Carrie* (1952) “Sister was dropped, lest people think it was about a nun—was shot in 1950 but not released until two years later, heavily cut and restructured....” Someone decided it was unAmerican to show poverty,” Wyler remarked drily—and demanded cuts....It did, however, enshrine one outstanding performance: Laurence Olivier’s Hurstwood, in Richard Winnington’s opinion “the best acting of his career.” Many others have concurred.

While *Carrie* was still in dispute, Wyler directed another film in only five weeks—a quickie by his standards, *Detective Story*. ...

Not since his pre-Goldwyn days, in 1935, had Wyler directed a comedy, and *Roman Holiday* (1953) with its contrived, fairy-tale plot, evokes unmistakable echoes of Capra or Lubitsch....Wyler’s last movie for Paramount was again taken from a Broadway play. *The Desperate Hours* (1955) revisits a favorite situation in the films of the paranoid 1950s: a complacent, middle-class household is invaded by a gang of ruthless crooks, who hold the family for ransom. The gang leader was played by Humphrey Bogart. Haggard and visibly ill in his penultimate role, and Frederic March brought a neurotic edginess to the part of the father....

Having discharged his obligations to Paramount, Wyler spent the rest of his career as an independent director, moving from one studio to another and acting as his own producer. For Allied Artists he took up a project mooted by Capra at Liberty Films, *Friendly Persuasion* (1956)....

Wyler returned to the problem of nonviolence in a violent society for his last and most ambitious Western, *The Big Country* (1958), described by Philip French as a “United Nations hymn to peaceful coexistence.”...

In 1957, for the second time in his career, he was called in by MGM. Things had changed a lot. In 1941 Metro had been the most prestigious and financially successful of the Hollywood studios. Sixteen years later, the studio was asking him to rescue it from imminent bankruptcy with a major hit. In the 1950s, that could only mean a biblical epic. The studio was putting its collective shirt on a remake of *Ben-Hur*—the silent screen’s most stupendous epic, on which Wyler had worked thirty years before—this time complete with wide screen, Technicolor, and a budget of \$10 million.

Initially reluctant, Wyler let himself be persuaded by the challenge, just to “see if I know how to make a picture like his.” filming at Cinecittà outside Rome took the best part of a year and the budget rose to \$15 million. Of that, a sizeable proportion went on the climactic chariot-race (directed by Andrew Marton and Yakima Canutt) in which the Hebrew prince Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) finally defeats the enemy, the Roman Messala (Stephen Boyd), who had once consigned him to the galleys. Fortunately for MGM, the gamble paid off. *Ben-Hur* stacked up an unprecedented eleven Oscars (including Wyler’s third) and broke box-office records all over the world. Takings were seemingly unharmed by predominantly lukewarm reviews pointing out that, apart from two big action set-pieces (the chariot race and an earlier sea battle), most of the film’s 219 minutes were insufferably ponderous. For Dwight Macdonald even “the big spectacular moments...failed because Wyler doesn’t know how to handle crowds nor how to get a culminating rhythm by cutting.”

“*Cahiers du Cinéma* never forgave me for directing *Ben-Hur*,” Wyler wryly observed. Critical standards were shifting; the

Hollywood directors now feted in Paris were the genre specialists, the mavericks and the quirky individualists: Ford, Welles, Mann, Nicholas Ray. Wyler's seamless professionalism was hopelessly out of fashion, and even his Goldwyn-period films were being reappraised and downgraded. In *Film Culture* (Spring 1963) Andrew Sarris laid down the *auteurist* line: "Wyler's career is a cipher as far as personal direction is concerned....It would seem that ...[his] admirers have long mistaken a lack of feeling for emotional restraint."

The bowdlerization of Hellman's *The Children's Hour* into *These Three* had always irked Wyler, and in 1961 he took advantage of eased taboos to remake the film, with its lesbian theme restored, under Hellman's original title. As the two teachers he cast Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine, thus (in Neil Sinyard's view) "letting in wit, perception, subtle shading, and producing performances from them that are not simply accomplished but awe-inspiring." Most reviewers were far less favorable, finding the film dull and dated. Several suggested that most contemporary American parents were too sophisticated to care if their daughters' teachers were lesbian or not. Jean-Pierre Melville disagreed, however: "To anyone who knows the American middle classes of Philadelphia and Boston, the film's a masterpiece."

In 1963, Wyler and his wife visited Russia at the invitation of the Union of Cinema Workers. They were warmly received everywhere, and Wyler was treated with great deference—especially for having directed *Roman Holiday*, a smash hit in the USSR. On his return, 20th Century-Fox offered him his first musical, *The Sound of Music*, Wyler accepted, though without great enthusiasm, and was scouting locations in Austria when a far more interesting—if less lucrative—project came up: a script taken from John Fowles' first novel, *The Collector*. Since *Ben-Hur* had made Wyler financially independent for life, he was able to quit the musical without hesitation; Robert Wise took over.

The Collector (1965) found Wyler back in form. "The direction's unrelentingly obsessive attention to detail and decor, the unobtrusively modern camerawork and the complex performances...make *The Collector* his most consistently engrossing picture since *The Letter* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*" wrote Jean-Pierre Coursodon. Andrew Sarris, usually no great fan of Wyler, said it was "the most erotic movie ever to come out past the Production Code and I urge all my friends to rush off and see it." The film is a perverse duet: a repressed, butterfly-collecting clerk (Terence Stamp) becomes obsessed with a lovely art student (Samantha Eggar). Coming unexpectedly into money, he kidnaps her and keeps her in the cellar of a remote mansion. Wyler concentrates on building up the claustrophobic tension between his protagonists, trapping them in framed shots that emphasize both their physical proximity and the hopeless mental gulf dividing them. *The Collector* took no Oscars—losing out, ironically, to *Sound of Music*—but both Stamp and Eggar won Best Acting Awards at Cannes.

How To Steal a Million (1966) was a comedy vehicle for Audrey Hepburn and Peter O'Toole—a frothy Parisian caper involving stolen art forgeries, so slight as to make *Roman Holiday* look like neorealism. To follow, Wyler made his delayed debut as a musical director with *Funny Girl* (1968), a movie version of the stage show that had propelled Barbra Streisand to stardom. A brash, highly fictionalized account of the life of the Jewish vaudeville star Fanny Brice, it marked, in John Baxter's opinion, "the nadir of Wyler's creativity." Despite critical disapproval, though, *Funny Girl* triumphed at the box office and won Streisand an Oscar.

By contrast, Wyler's final movie was a complete flop. *The Liberation of L. B. Jones* (1970), the first of a projected five-picture deal with Columbia, tackled the currently fashionable subject of racism with a bitter tale about a black undertaker in a Tennessee town who refuses to condone his wife's affair with a white cop and gets killed for his temerity. The tone of the film is unrelentingly pessimistic. Hatred breeds hatred, violence breeds violence, the law if bigoted and corrupt. Wyler refuses to end on a facile note of hope or reconciliation, which may explain the film's lack of box-office success....More recently Neil Sinyard described the film as "a grim riposte to Hollywood's usual righteousness over the race issue...a remarkably uncompromising and uncomfortable summation" of Wyler's career.

A further film for Columbia, *Forty Carats*, a romantic comedy, was in pre-production when Wyler decided that, at seventy, he had had enough, and asked to be released from his contract. "Making a picture is just too goddam much work....It takes a helluva lot out of me. I did it for over forty years. Now, unless something really excites me...." Nothing did, though he continued to read scripts that were sent him.

William Wyler presents a classic example of the director dethroned by the shifting of cinematic fashion, damned for those very qualities for which he once was praised. His restraint can be seen as frigidity, good taste as complacency, seriousness as pomposity, technical accomplishment and clarity as bland dullness....David Thomson, citing Orson Welles' not wholly complimentary description of Wyler as "a brilliant producer," stated that "Wyler has no cinematic personality, no abiding thematic interests and no proper grasp of camera language....[His] films are put together like budgets: neatness and balance stand in for insight."

His alleged lack of clear thematic preoccupations has often been adduced as the ultimate proof of Wyler's failure to achieve *auteur* status. Against this, Neil Sinyard argued that Wyler's work does "exhibit certain patterns which challenged the idea of impersonality. It was the vision of a man centrally interested in action in character rather character in action...particularly attentive to social divisions between rich and poor, men and women, the complacent and the envious, divisions which gathered to a characteristic confrontation in which the grievances were dramatically played out....The vision tended to bitterness and tragedy. The scenes one particularly remembers in Wyler...are those which dwell painfully on moments of acute social embarrassments or the small cuts of domestic cruelty which gradually destroy a marriage and diminish a person's soul."

Wyler himself readily disclaimed any aspiration to *auteurship*. "I have been accused of having no style—which is actually true, simply because I have chosen to film so many different types of subject," he remarked, insisting that a director had no business imposing his personality or opinions between the subject and the audience. "A director should not try to attract attention to himself by making great films, great performances....I never thought of doing something where people say, 'Oh, that's Wyler.'"

Of recent years, there have been signs that Wyler's reputation may be recovering a little. Andrew Sarris, revising his earlier "harsh judgment," conceded that Wyler had "demonstrated time and again that the movies of a good craftsman are infinitely preferable to those of a bad artist." Within the industry, at any rate, his status was never in doubt. In 1976, to crown his thirty-four Oscars, countless nominations, and numerous other awards, American and foreign, Wyler received the American Film

Institute's annual Life Achievement Award. Presenting it, George Stevens Jr. Praised him for having "made films of lasting value with a frequency virtually unmatched by his contemporaries....It has been said of Wyler that he shortened the distance between the eye and the mind."

William Wyler's *The Letter*. Laurence Russell. Fcourt.

<http://www.culturecourt.com/F/Noir/Letter>.

In a film with many great scenes, this [with murderous Davis and the lawyer] is one of the best. While Davis never was a beauty, there's a dangerous vibe in her performance as Leslie Crosbie. As John Huston, who also directed her says—"There's something elemental about Bette—a demon within her which threatens to break out and eat everybody, beginning with their ears."

...While many people exalt Welles' cinematic opening in *Citizen Kane* (1941), the tracking shot that Wyler uses to establish setting and mood at the start of *The Letter* (1940) deserves attention. The sequence culminates with the shooting of Hammond and that first vision of a woman possessed. It's outstanding, as are the geometrics of light and shadow that characterize this film as something beyond mere melodrama. *The Letter* starts as a masterpiece, ends as a masterpiece—something rare in the translation of literature into film.

"Bette Davis: Marked Woman" from *Matinee Idylls Reflections on the Movies*. Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1999.

No actress more boldly flaunted her mannerisms than Bette Davis, or earned more gratitude for doing so. For we sensed that her style reflected an authentically seething substance. And that is precisely what the movies in which she made her first, indelible mark needed. "Women's pictures" was the patronizing term for them, it being their business to encourage the female audience to bleary contemplation of the seemingly infinite ways in which their sex could be victimized....

Her pictures all ran on her energy and stand the test of time because of the tensile strength, that inimitable electroplating of heedlessness and vulnerability, her soul's chemistry provided them....

It was *Jezebel* in 1938 that announced her new status to the world. For it, Wallis brought in William Wyler to direct, and his fussy, time- and budget-consuming ways drove the producer almost as crazy as they did Jack Warner. But Wyler was to become Davis' lover and, more important, the only truly first-class director she collaborated with more than once. The picture also drove David O. Selznick crazy, for he saw her character—a New Orleans belle, maddened by love and determined to rebel against the gentilities of high society—as a direct competitor to *Gone With the Wind*'s Scarlett O'Hara. Indeed, he darkly suspected that Warner was trying to undercut him by rushing *Jezebel* out while Selznick was still in production on his all-consuming venture.

It would not have been out of character for Jack Warner to try something like that. And everyone was aware that Davis, surely the most logical choice for Scarlett, had been passed over for the role, possibly, she would later say, because she and George Cukor, *GWTW*'s original director, had clashed many years ago when they were both working in a provincial stock company; more likely because Selznick's famous international search for a fresh face to

play Scarlett could scarcely end with the engagement of such a familiar one.

Her disappointment in this matter rankled Davis for the rest of her life—justifiably so. She was robbed of a role in the faux epic and ultimate woman's picture that somehow serenely sails on, resisting all change in critical fashion, popular taste, and historical perspective. On the other hand, *Jezebel* is a much better movie—darker, nuttier, much more tightly wound. Moreover, it brought Davis her second Oscar and forever established her feverish screen character. Partly by accident, partly by design, it offered a shrewd reading and projection of her essential nature.

For the next decade, the years when she became a dominant movie presence, she would be the victim of many a dire or miserable circumstance. But she would never be required openly to acknowledge her victim's status. The women she played would be—because they refused to heed the conventions and cautions that bind more sensible, less headstrong folk—the authors of their own misery. And we were encouraged to tremble in the dark on their behalf, our minds shouting silent warnings to them.

But all the logic of the Freudian age (just now beginning to be broadcast in the popular arts) and the actress's own firm belief in what *she* was doing, dictated that these ladies be the last to comprehend the full consequences of what they were doing to themselves. As a rule their troubles came home to them precisely because they refused to be the passive playthings of standard morality and social rules. Boldly they grasped at romantic fulfillment. Bravely they accepted the consequences of that boldness.

The price could be colorful but redeemable humiliation, as it was in *Jezebel*, or a narrowly avoided murder conviction (*The Letter*); madness (*Juarez*); or, indeed, a death penalty (bitterly ironic in *Dark Victory*, thoroughly deserved in *Beyond the Forest*, in which for King Vidor, she uttered her signature line, "What a dump"). Sometimes, to be sure, she settled moral accounts through long suffering (*The Old Maid*). Occasionally, to our delight, she got off scot-free (*The Little Foxes*) or received the unexpected benison of a happy ending (*Now, Voyager*). But her usual fate was melodramatic or at best melancholic, and she always embraced it without murmur of pain or protest, her fierce spirit unbowed, the core of her being intact. So deep, finally, was our faith in her spunk, her inner resources, that Bette Davis, alone of all actresses, could make spinsterhood seem like a bearable conclusion for a movie—or a life.

That was her glory. She refused to yield her essence under pressure. "High-spirited" (popular fiction's genteel synonym for neurotic) she entered the little world any movie is. "High-spirited" she departed it. This was no small gift to the women in her audience. Symbolically she claimed for them the right to yield to their own impulses (which movie males had always enjoyed), to live by their own standards (which movie males had usually dictated). It was no small gift to the rest of us either. For her



conviction, her wit, her capacity for self-revelation constantly redeemed improbably tall tales and emotions for believable humanity.

It was no small gift, at last, for herself. Her insistent assertion of her singular reality on the screen, her refusal to project some democratic or corporate version of it was the habit that insured her against gentility's later enfeebling insinuations. And against self-pity or our pity when the great days passed she found herself with a leftover persona to employ in generally unworthy vehicles. Precisely because her ego proved to be as shatterproof in age as it had been in youth, she compelled attention even when the picture did not. And occasionally she was able to bestow upon us the rambunctious rage for attention (and the heartbreaking insecurity) of *All About Eve*, or the close-to-the-bone pathos of *The Star*, the unjustly neglected 1952 film in which she played a self-destructing movie star, or the cracked grandeur of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* in which amidst the Grand Guignol she manages somehow to touch us with the accumulated madness of thwarted ambition. These were privileged moments she bought for us long ago, paid for with the sound, glowing coin of her youth, and which, any time we want to, we can bring out of the trunk—that is to say, the videotape box—where they are stored, to remind the grandchildren what star acting in all its crazy glory used to be. (1987)

from forthcoming *Davis: The Artistry of Bette Davis*. Peter McNally. McFarland & Co., Inc. Jefferson N.C., 2008

“The Letter” A Tale of a Liar”

“Davis gives what is very likely the best study of female sexual hypocrisy in film history.” —Pauline Kael

The climactic scene of the film occurs between Robert and Leslie at the celebratory party at the Joyces' where they've been guests.

Robert has learned of Leslie's love for Hammond, and the cost of retrieving the incriminatory letter, which he reads, in Joyce's presence.

FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Sept 18 Preston Sturges, **The Miracle of Morgan's Creek** 1944

Sept 25 Misoguchi, **Sansho the Baliff/Sanshō Dayū** 1954

Oct 2 Jean-Pierre Melville, **Army of Shadows/L'Armée des ombres** 1969

Oct 9 Akira Kurosawa **Ikiru** 1952

Oct 16 Jiří Menzel **Closely Watched Trains** 1966

He returns later in the party to their bedroom. He is not sober. He finds Leslie crocheting, but she has been unable to continue, so is just sitting in a chair. She actually challenges Robert by saying, “There's no way you could forgive me.” Teary-eyed, she looks at Robert. He replies, “If you love a person, you can forgive them anything. What about you? Do you love me?”

Leslie goes to his arms, on her knees in front of him. “Yes, I do. No,” she replies, then cries out, “I can't, I can't” looks straight into his eyes and reveals, “I still love the man I killed,” eyes frightened and teary.

Davis knew this was the killer blow to Robert. She fought William Wyler's direction, saying a woman couldn't possibly look at a man directly into his eyes and reveal that statement, but she acquiesced to his direction for this powerful moment. When revealing the truth, Leslie could be cruel, and as she said earlier—evil. He whole body crumples as Robert leaves the room.

The play rightfully ended here, two people caught in a web of lies, doomed to be together. But Hollywood in 1940 had a code. Leslie had to be punished (as if their situation weren't punishment enough!). Before the evening is over, Leslie will again submit to the other woman. She walks out into the treacherous moonlit terrace where Mrs. Hammond and a man are waiting to take revenge. She is indeed murdered, by her female equal....

Davis used, not only her face, her eyes, but her whole body to express Leslie's torment and determination. ...Davis kept the whole movie brilliantly tense, in fact, even erotic with sexual tension. Her adultery seems understandable, given the stick her husband seems to be. It is only with his forgiveness and her confession that we see what a really good person he is and what a woman of manipulation, full of intrigue, an evil woman she is, the personification of the colonial imperialist, who rapes Asians of their resources.

This is the movie to view if one wishes to see the degree to which Davis could use her acting skills to submerge a character within her being, to capture a character in all her facets. As with all great star acting, Davis is Davis, but you'll never see another Davis movie with this person inside.

Oct 23 Buñuel **That Obscure Object of Desire** 1977

Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972

Nov 6 Charles Burnett **Killer of Sheep** 1977

Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987

Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989

Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002

Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 1992

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

...for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us

....for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/search.html>

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