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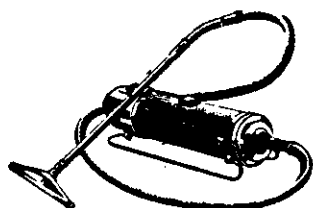
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Film Reviews, by Jno.

THE ROAD BACK

THE BEST YEARS OF
OUR LIVES (Goldwyn)

A GOOD many New Zealanders had already seen *The Best Years of Our Lives* before the film had its Wellington premiere, but it is not too late, I hope, to pay tribute to an outstanding production — one which has not only length (15,800 feet of it), and breadth (it is three stories in one), but depth as well. It is, in fact, one of those pictures Hollywood produces every once in a while which confound prejudice and restore one's faith in the ability of Americans to speak honestly, effectively, and directly on human problems.

Of its directness there can be no question. William Wyler (who will be remembered here mainly for *Mrs. Miniver*, and who himself saw service with the American armed forces) spares his audience nothing in this story of the homecoming of three American war-veterans. At times it is almost brutally direct, but if *The Best Years* is hardly a film for the young it is one to which every adult should be subjected for the good of his soul. And not once only.

While I don't think that any doubt can be cast on the director's honesty of intention, I imagine that there has already been a good deal of discussion about the way in which he has handled his material. Looked at in retrospect, the film may seem harsher and more violent in texture and pattern than was necessary. The agony was perhaps at times too prolonged, the comedy a little broader than was needed for relief, and some of the emotional crises too sudden in their development. These are all criticisms which could be made—in retrospect. But I became too involved in the story to be conscious of them at the time and I think that will have been the common experience among filmgoers.

Wyler's real achievement is that out of an American story, told primarily for Americans, he has made something which is universal in its appeal. True, the rehabilitation and readjustment of returning servicemen is a social problem in many lands outside America. There are plenty of New Zealanders who have been faced with the same crises as the Army sergeant Al (Frederic March) or the deglamourised Air Force officer Fred (Dana Andrews); there are a few who have been through—and are still going through—the misery and heartbreak of the seaman Homer Parrish (Harold Russell). But common problems don't of themselves breed mutual sympathy between the groups which share them, as a glance at the cable page of any newspaper will show. Wyler, however, compels one sympathy because he forces one to identify oneself with the characters of the story. To this end he makes use of all the routine devices of direction, and of a few others as well. I thought his handling of the soundtrack was most effective. That is, perhaps, rather an Irish way of putting it, for it was his use of silence that I found most impressive. Nothing so banal as a soundtrack soliloquy marred the film at any point. Instead, by using the unemotional

BAROMETER

Fine: "The Best Years of Our Lives"
Overcast, bright intervals: "I Met a Murderer"

eye of the camera, without benefit of any sound whatever, the audience was forced to supply the thought itself.

This device was used with telling effect in most of the critical moments of the play, and nowhere more movingly than in the presentation of Harold Russell. Russell, who was a U.S. paratrooper, had his hands blown off on D-Day. To take their place, the medical service fitted him with two pairs of metal hooks. On these the camera is focussed time and time again. Russell, whose appearance in the film is itself proof enough that here there will be no compromise with reality, has little to say and indeed needs to say little. But one of his lines runs in my head yet. Driven almost to distraction by the clumsy sympathy of acquaintances he loses his temper with some staring children. "I was wrought," he says, when he calms down. I know of no better phrase to describe my own feelings, and I'm not easily moved.

Though *The Best Years* belongs primarily to the director and to Harold Russell, the acting of the regular cast is splendid. I would not like to single out any one of them as pre-eminent, though I thought Teresa Wright played her part with singular charm. And not many men or women who have in recent years been reunited could fail to be moved by that passage which shows Frederic March's return from the war.

At no point does the dialogue rise above the level of commonplace American speech. If *Odd Man Out* was in places poetic, *The Best Years of Our Lives* is prose. But it is prose which, by its very simplicity, imprints itself upon the memory.

I MET A MURDERER

(Classic Pictures)

THOSE who are sufficiently interested in the career of James Mason to pursue him into the dark, backward and abyss of time will probably want to see this picture, which he made around about the early '30's with Pamela Kellino (now his wife). But I hope that no unsuspecting filmgoer will be deluded by the advertisements into thinking that this is the same James Mason as they saw in *Odd Man Out*. The star developed more than somewhat in the interval. Nevertheless *I Met a Murderer* is not altogether family-album stuff. On Mason's own admission it is bad in parts, but if intimations of immortality were absent I found a lot in it that I liked. Because it was made on a budget of about £3,000 *I Met a Murderer* was in large part filmed out-of-doors, without soundtrack, but I did not find this always a disadvantage. When a director cannot use sound he is forced to give all his attention to the visual image and that, surely, should be the primary aim in film-making. The final sequences of this particular picture were, I thought, particularly good when the circumstances (and the date) of production were remembered. In fact, I wondered if the last sequence of *Odd Man Out* owed anything to them.

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