

The Best Years of His Life

A biography of the movie director William Wyler.

A TALENT FOR TROUBLE

The Life of Hollywood's Most Acclaimed Director, William Wyler.

By Jan Herman.

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By Diane Jacobs

NO tortured Orson Welles or Erich von Stroheim, William Wyler (1902-81) died rich and famous in a large house filled with trophies. He had little animus toward Hollywood. Indeed, for all his fabled quarrels with the studio head Samuel Goldwyn, Wyler preferred Goldwyn's frank commercialism to the estheticism of the French New Wave directors, whom he considered bores. And he was not content with even his best movies — "Dodsworth," "Wuthering Heights," "The Letter," "The Best Years of Our Lives" — unless they made money.

Wyler's 45-year career spanned almost half the history of cinema. His subjects ranged from cowboys to Fanny Brice, his genres from film noir to spectacle. Construing Wyler's entrepreneurship as bad faith and his breadth as cynicism, most American critics have argued that he was not an *auteur*. But if an *auteur* is a masterly film maker with a personal view of his art, then an *auteur* Wyler certainly was. And if you look closely — at Herbert Marshall in "The Letter" when he finally perceives his wife's perfidy, for instance, or at the family's pained welcome for the handless Harold Russell in "The Best Years of Our Lives" — there is even a Wyler "touch."

Until now, however, there has been no major Wyler biography. So it is satisfying to come upon Jan Herman's thorough, loving study, "A Talent for Trouble."

Mr. Herman, a cultural journalist, begins his story with Wyler's origins at the turn of the century in Alsace, then part of Germany. His mother was poetic and lively, his father a stolid clothing merchant. Wyler, the second of three sons, was a perpetual daredevil. He balanced on the railings above the bear pits at the zoo in his hometown of Mulhouse as he later would race his motorcycle through the Universal sound stage in Los Angeles. Though aimless and an execrable student, he had the fortune to be a cousin of the president of Universal Studios in America, "Uncle" Carl Laemmle (so called because of his penchant for hiring distant European relatives). On a 1920 trip to Switzerland, Laemmle agreed to interview Wyler. "So you're your mother's sorrow," Laemmle said to the sheepish 18-year-old. Then he hired him on the spot.

By 1922, Wyler had managed only to work his way up from Universal's mail room in New York to errand boy in the Los Angeles office. But he was beginning to nurse ambitions, and would soon be an assistant director on one- and two-reel silent westerns, and then a director. Next he moved on to five-reelers and in 1930 directed his first bona fide sound feature, "Hell's Heroes"; he had found his vocation.

"A Talent for Trouble" gives a leisurely account of Wyler's rise through Universal and, after 1936, his work at Samuel Goldwyn's studio and elsewhere. It is particularly adept at evoking Wyler's early life off the set. When he first arrived in Los Angeles, Wyler rode the trolley, played

craps, stole milk after he had gambled away his paycheck, befriended other émigrés and turned up uninvited at glamorous Hollywood parties. This emerging career is viewed in the context of a growing industry. We hear of the Fatty Arbuckle affair, of Irving Thalberg's climb to power, of Erich von Stroheim's notorious antics on his sets.

Like von Stroheim, Wyler maddened producers with his long shoots and multiple takes. Other complaints were that though warm and congenial off the set, he was harsh with his actors and rigid about wielding power. All this was true, but he was also a shrewd collaborator.

Typical of this was how he worked on his 1940 film "The Letter." Based on a Somerset Maugham story, "The Letter" is set in Malaysia, where the English wife (Bette Davis) of a plantation manager (Herbert Marshall) becomes embroiled in an affair and murders her lover; she pleads self-defense, but the truth comes out.

On the set, Mr. Herman explains, Wyler was apparently happy to accept contributions from everyone. The cinematographer, Tony Gaudio, helped him map out the film's striking opening pan toward the murderess. The screenwriter, Howard Koch, came up with the recurring motif of the full moon. And Davis herself had no shortage of ideas about her cunning but victimized character. Wyler incorporated many of Davis's suggestions, yet on one issue they could not agree. Davis argued that it would be cruel if she looked Marshall in the eye during the scene where she confesses that she doesn't love him; Wyler insisted that it would diminish the impact if she did not.

Wyler was so obdurate that Davis stomped off the set, and he refused to cajole her back. He simply waited until she returned and shot what

he wanted. Davis, after all, was just an actress. (With Goldwyn, on the other hand, Wyler was often the one to back down. In "Wuthering Heights," for example, Wyler had to swallow Goldwyn's tacked-on happy ending — shot by someone else — and see Kathy and Heathcliff gambol blissfully in the afterlife.)

WYLER'S relationship with Davis was more than a professional one at the time. They had begun an affair during the making of "Jezebel" (1938), and Hollywood legend has it that shortly before beginning "The Letter," Wyler wrote Davis a real letter threatening that if she didn't agree to marry him by the following Wednesday, he'd marry somebody else. Reportedly, Davis left the letter unread until that Wednesday, then opened it and burst into tears. Mr. Herman definitively refutes this story. He also writes convincingly of Wyler's unusually happy marriage to Margaret Tallichet, of his inspired collaboration with the cinematographer Gregg Toland and of his more cantankerous, though no less fruitful, relationship with Samuel Goldwyn.

In the 1950's Wyler gently advised his more reckless film maker friend Preston Sturges to ingratiate himself with Hollywood, for the alternative was to stop making movies. Mr. Herman, who dwells on Wyler's fearlessness, might have written more about this other side of the man — his caution, pragmatism and generosity to friends. One also wishes for a fuller critique of the movies themselves and a less dogged film-by-film account of how Wyler made them. Still, what "A Talent for Trouble" lacks in literary values it makes up for in reliable judgments and comprehensiveness. Mr. Herman's exhaustive research has paid off in a volume that will reward not only scholars but fans as well. □

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