April 27, 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

**William Wyler: Two films from the 30’s**

**“THESE THREE”**


With Miriam Hopkins, Marle Oberon, Joel McCrea, Alma Kruger, Catherine Doucet, Bonita Granville, Marcia Mae Jones, Carmenita Johnson, Mary Louise Cooper, Mary Ann Durkin, Margaret Hamilton, Walter Brennan, Alan Bridge, Frank Mcclure.

Wyler’s association with Goldwyn from the mid-30’s onward marked him as “prestige director,” and brought him some of his biggest plums — “The Little Foxes,” “The Children’s Hour,” and “Dodsworth,” around 1939. But it also turned him into an increasingly glossy, impersonal perfectionist, and only a few of his later films — “The Westerner” perhaps, and “The Letter” — really retained the vigour and filmic sense of his less “important” but far more interesting earlier films. Films like “These Three” were Goldwyn films rather than Wyler films, and when he finally reached the exalted producer-director status, his films became even more mechanically precise and filmmically less interesting. A good case in point is his own recent remake of “The Children’s Hour.” Longer, slower, it made great whoop-to-do in its advertising about how mature it was, and how it could now speak openly of a lesbian theme that had been obliterated in the earlier version. But soft-peddled or not, and with its limitations, “These Three” is still better cinema, and better drama, than its overblown remake.

The basic flaws in “These Three” are those of writer Hellman, who moves her figures immovably and often illogically to a predetermined end. One just cannot believe in some of the characters or motivations, and not believing, how can one really care? How often one would like to grab instead of looking — or on stage — and call on a real horse, and reduce the action into the course it would normally take.

But I suppose one has no more right to interfere with Miss Hellman than one has with the almost equal illogic of W.C. Fields. “These Three” starts very slowly, although the opening “padding” has a relaxed feeling to it, a kind of lull before Miss Hellman’s unavoidable storm. The basic premise doesn’t develop until the mid-way point, but actually is no “weaker” than the theme that couldn’t be touched until the movies “grew up” (1).** In the late 30’s, though admittedly it is still a little on “nonsense” level, its remarkable and directed performance by original version is always superior to the remake, in some cases (Bonita Granville’s performance for example) quite spectacularly so. Alfred Newman’s haunting theme music was re-worked by him in the 40’s for “The Razor’s Edge,” with little or no basic change.

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**“TOM BROWN OF CULVER”** (Universal, 1932) Directed by William Wyler. Camera: Charles Stumar; screenplay by George Green and Tom Buckingham; additional dialogue, Clarence Harrold. 10 reels.


Wyler’s economical, free-wheeling and un-perfectionist film-making at Universal in the early thirties ("Counsellor at Law," "Hell’s Heroes," "A House Divided," etc.) probably represents his best period in terms of pure direction. One of the best of the Military Academy films, and with much wider range and appeal than most of its breed, "Tom Brown of Culver" is a fine example of Wyler building a great deal out of very little. The plot is slim and not markedly eventful, but in Wyler’s hands it is fast-paced, dramatic, and surprisingly moving at times. Thanks to sharp editing, good camera composition and frequent utilisation of the moving camera, a rather staid story is kept constantly and interestingly on the move. Like "These Three" it was remade (though not by Wyler) and in a much better film than its sequel, "Spirit of Culver" which starred Jackie Cooper, Freddie Bartholomees and Tim Holt. Itself still a pretty good little film, it ran a reel longer than this version, and added a melioristic motor-cycle chase through a storm for its climax. Its basic inferiority however was in the scenery-chewing playing of Henry Hull; B.B. Warner’s quieter performance here is infinitely more poignet. Warner, who acts with his sensitive hands almost as much as with his face, adds real power and depth to this Wyler film. Incidentally, there seems to be almost a conspiracy to keep poor Wyler’s first bit role, off the screen! In the background in many scenes, he seems always to be just off-screen or behind someone else’s head. However, he does manage to get one good scene — with dialogue — midway through the film. The print has seen better days and is a little ragged here and there, but on the whole is quite acceptable, and certainly complete.

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W.K.Everson