

Disability History Association Podcast
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Interview with Professor David Gerber

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Caroline Lieffers: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it's my pleasure to be talking today with David Gerber, who is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Department of History at the University of Buffalo. David, thank you so much for joining me today.

David Gerber: My pleasure. Thanks for thinking to do this.

Caroline: It's my pleasure. So today we're going to be talking about the film *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which is a classic movie from 1946. It depicts the experiences of three servicemen who are readjusting to civilian life after their time in World War II. It was a popular film at the time. It won nine Academy Awards. And Professor Gerber has published two essays about this film: an article entitled, "Anger and Affability: The Rise and Representation of a Repertory of Self-Presentation Skills in a World War II Disabled Veteran" in the *Journal of Social History* back in 1993, as well as a chapter in his edited collection *Disabled Veterans in History*. So David, what is the basic plot of this film for people who haven't seen it?

David: Well, as you suggested the film is the story of three veterans who are returning from service in World War II to a kind of mythical, all-American place that in the film is called Boone City. Actually, Boone City was Cincinnati, where the filming was done. Each of the men brings with him a story, inevitably, of personal life that constitutes a framework for the individual's reintegration. Each of the men also has some reintegration challenges based on injuries sustained in the war, or a sort of preexisting psychological challenge that accompanied him into the war and is something that he has to deal with after the war. One of the men seems to have a drinking problem. He's the senior of the three veterans returning to Boone City. He was a banker before the war. He doesn't exactly show a lot of enthusiasm to returning to the work of the bank, and his drinking is recognized by his wife as a problem in his reintegration. The second of the veterans is a man who had a distinguished career as a flyer in bombing runs over Germany and comes from a proletarian background. He lives across the tracks which is, you know, a symbolic location in the movies and in American popular mythologies of class. And in the war he has a cosmopolitan international experience based on being stationed in Europe, and he returns to the life of narrow options that he had lived as a younger man during the Depression. He also has the symptoms of what we would regard as post-traumatic stress disorder that play out throughout the movie, and they're quite severe symptoms. The final veteran and the youngest of the three is a man named Homer Parrish, really just emerging from boyhood, who is the—present the most dramatic profile of each of the three. Homer has had his hands blown off in a naval encounter, in a naval battle, and he returns to Boone City with two prosthetic hooks that replace his hands. And the challenge that he faces is to reintegrate himself to the life of his family and to his relationship with a classic girl next door, Wilma, to whom he had an informal understanding that they would marry after he returned from the war.

Caroline: So obviously, there are a lot of different plots that are kind of dovetailing throughout this movie, yeah. So, before we get more into the details of casting and that sort of thing—you have written a book chapter and also an article, as we discussed, about this film. So what are some of the larger questions that drew you to this film?

David: Well, I came to the film from two directions. One of them was my interest as a social

historian in this particular period of time and the challenges of living in this particular time, and I have to say that the source of that interest in pursuing that direction was in trying to understand my parents' lives, because these were truly the best years of their lives. And the movie was situated in the middle of my parents' own, sort of, situational reality, and I guess I always, I somehow had a mentality that led me to feel that social context and history was a way to analyze the world around me. So I was fascinated by the movie as a social document for understanding the world around me. Then, years later, I rediscovered that movie in the context of my interest in disability, and that interest in disability originally took its own direction in my interest in disabled veterans of military conflict and military service. So I merged two very different sources of interest in bringing together my interest in this particular film.

Caroline: So, tell us a little bit more about how this film came to be.

David: OK. The film was made by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios and the original inspiration for the film was in Samuel Goldwyn, the head of the studio's, understanding based on an article he'd read in *Time* magazine that the post-war period would present certain challenges for the reintegration of millions and millions of men and some women who had served. They were going back to their old lives after having an intense experience, a jarring experience of service that included—but not for everyone of course—combat, but combat was the major symbol of that experience. So Goldwyn thought that it would be productive for the studio and probably very profitable if the studio could make a movie that dealt with the problems of veterans' reintegration. And to that end he commissioned a noted writer of the time named MacKinlay Kantor to do a kind of treatment that could be turned into a script or a screenplay, as they called it at the time. Kantor produced instead a novel written in Homeric blank verse. He was so taken by the classical Homeric legends of Odysseus and the veterans of the wars of antiquity that he updated that form and that kind of text for the movie that Goldwyn had in mind. This was completely impossible from Goldwyn's point of view. He was a practical sort of capitalist, kind of entrepreneur. He saw no potential in Homeric verse; he didn't know where to begin to read it [**Caroline:** Yeah]. And that was only the beginning of Goldwyn's problems with Kantor's vision.

Caroline: Oh dear. So how did this, this Homeric novel, I guess we would call it, end up actually being made into this film?

David: Well, a lot had to happen. The other problem with Kantor's work—and it's specifically relevant to our understanding of disability—was that Kantor's Homer, who in his novelistic treatment was named Homer Wermels—had sustained a very bad brain injury which had paralyzed him on the left side of his body. He walked with a shuffle. His speech was deeply impaired. He had a variety of tics and his face was distorted. And Goldwyn realized that this was impossible to portray on the screen because, he assumed, of the discomfort of the audience. It was also wondered whether they could get any actor who was willing to play such a role. The screen actors of the time of course were all sort of high profile, beautiful people, and it's easy to understand from Goldwyn's point of view, who among the main actors of the time—the Clark Gables and Errol Flynns—he could have gotten to play Homer Wermels. So Goldwyn was at a crossroad in thinking about this post-war extravaganza on veterans' reintegration that he wanted to do. He rejected MacKinlay Kantor's treatment, and he began to try to imagine alternatives. One alternative was a screen biography of General Dwight David Eisenhower, who had commanded American and Allied troops in the European theater of combat. While he was entertaining that vision of a post-war movie, not exactly the reintegration movie that he had originally had in mind, he made contact with the Hollywood director William Wyler, who owed him a movie under contract, and he approached Wyler with the idea of the biography of Eisenhower and Wyler wanted no part of it. Wyler wanted to do a social realistic treatment of veterans, somewhat like what Goldwyn originally had in mind. And that was the beginning of the development of MacKinlay Kantor's—some of his basic notions

of how to proceed—into the film that became *The Best Years of our Lives*.

Caroline: Very interesting. Let's dig a little bit more into some of these questions of casting that I referred to earlier. [**David:** Yes, sure] And most intriguing and the one that you've spent the most time writing about—is the casting of the character of Homer Parrish, which is played by the actor Harold Russell. So tell us a little bit more about Harold Russell.

David: Well, I begin by saying that to call Harold Russell an actor would be a very generous portrait not only of the background he brought into being in *The Best Years of our Lives*, but his future as well, after the movie was done. Harold Russell's one major occupation prior to being in the movie was that he was a butcher in Boston, and he had almost no background in acting except for the fact that he was chosen to be in a training film that was done to help amputees and particularly hand amputees to feel comfortable with themselves and learn skills for speeding their social reintegration.

Let me talk about how it was that William Wyler, the director of the movie, came to Harold Russell. Wyler himself had been commissioned during the war to make films based on the combat experience of flyers doing bombing runs over Germany, and he'd flown with these men and he'd had a cameraman who was killed in action while filming. These were very dangerous missions; the rate of attrition of these pilots was quite high. And Wyler himself came back—although he survived the many missions he flew over Germany—he came back deafened in one ear and with a substantial amount of trauma attached to that. And some of the trauma, I believe, was the result of a brain injury that was the cause of his deafness; his balance was very much affected by the injury he sustained. When Wyler, after the war was over, thought of his prewar career in Hollywood, he felt most of what he had done, although spectacularly successful, in movies like *Jezebel* with Bette Davis, most of what he'd done was trivial—sort of middlebrow entertainments. Not trashy movies, but movies he thought lacked real substance from a social point of view. He, he called the war, as I remember, to paraphrase, either a reintroduction to reality or a painful immersion in reality. So he would, he not only would have no part making a sort of trumped up biography of Eisenhower on the screen, he wanted to do a socially realistic film. And he seized on the basic ideas that Kantor put forward about the three vets returning with a variety of problems, and in two cases injuries sustained in the war—one psychological and in the case of Homer Parrish one physical—and he started to develop ideas for developing these characters.

He worked with a man named Robert Sherwood who was a speechwriter for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and was, became a close friend of Roosevelt's, and Sherwood was very sensitive to the issue of disability because he was one of the rather few people, other than close family and other close friends, with whom Roosevelt had discussed his own paralysis, which resulted from his contracting polio in the early 1920s. So Wyler and Sherwood came together to try and imagine a different kind of narrative than Kantor had put forward—not completely different in the case of Al, the senior veteran, or Fred, the PTSD pilot, but certainly in regard to Homer Parrish. They rejected the name Homer Wermels because they felt that its suggested something that was sort of disgusting and a name that was not euphonious, so they chose the good sort of WASP name Parrish instead. Wyler happened to see the training film in which Harold Russell was the main figure and it was at that point that Harold Russell began to be folded into the project that became *The Best Years of our Lives*. Wyler liked the screen presence of Russell. He didn't mind that Russell had no acting experience; he preferred that. And he believed that it was in the interest of the realism that he aspired to in the film to cast a person without any acting experience, but one who had sustained a serious injury during the war. I might add that Russell's injury was not the result of combat but the result of an accident while doing demolitions training at a military base, I believe it was in North Carolina.

Caroline: Hmm, but in the film they instead sort of make it a more, if you will, heroic kind of story of him losing his hands in combat, right?

David: Absolutely. The story of a demolitions accident during a training session or in training school would not have had the same power that making Russell a combat veteran had. [**Caroline:** Of course.] Russell always felt—although he certainly didn't brood about his injury—he always felt that it was a source of irony and sort of, sort of stupid that of all of the ways he could have sustained this serious injury, that the least heroic and perhaps the least captivating for the imagination was checking a fuse that wasn't exploding and then exploded while he was fussing with it.

Caroline: Right, right. Well, let's build on this a bit. So you've argued throughout your writing on this film that Russell and Parrish were actually quite different in real life—in many ways the only thing that they shared was the disability, right? [**David:** Yes] So tell me a little bit more about their different qualities, if you will.

David: Absolutely. That is the nub of the writing that I did in one of the articles, “Anger and Affability.” In the film Homer Parrish has approximately two hours and fifteen minutes of difficulty placing himself in a position to reassume his pre-war plans, fit himself back into his family, and resume his unspoken—the unspoken assumption he shared with Wilma that after he returned from the war that they would marry. Wilma again was the classic girl next door of Hollywood romance. Those two hours and fifteen minutes in which he finds it so difficult to relate to the people around him and to Wilma constitute the major tension in the development of his character. Homer has great difficulty in the film dealing with the problems he believes that his injury would take into his marriage, and although the production code made it impossible to spell out exactly what the sexual nature of these problems were, they become apparent in coded ways throughout the film. He is unable to embrace Wilma when he's reunited with her after, in his first appearance at his parents' house. When she comes from next door to see him, she's thrilled to see him and he can't embrace her. He—and then there are other hints of his inability to conceive of himself playing the standard masculine role in their relationship. Would she accept him with his, in his impaired status? Would they be able to have a sexual relationship? Was she pitying him—pitying him rather than truly desirous of him and in love with him? So it takes him two hours and fifteen minutes to resolve these problems in the movie, and then there's a resolution which is one of the most captivating emotional moments in the history, I believe of film, American film.

Harold Russell didn't have these particular problems. He struggled with himself for several months when he was in Walter Reed Army Hospital being fitted for prosthetic hooks. But he was of a sort of character and personality that led him to not only accept himself, but to realize that there were opportunities in his situation. Opportunities to conquer the shyness that he'd had as a young butcher, that manifested itself particularly in his relationships with women. Opportunities to project a personality that he, that lay buried in his character. Opportunities to take center stage in his relationships with people. The hooks for Russell increasingly represented a series of unexpected opportunities to prevail in relationships in ways that it hadn't in the past. In regard to the contrast between Homer and Russell, I think one of the most interesting contrasts is that Russell enjoyed a more adventuresome sexual relationship from the confines of Walter Reed than he had had prior to being injured. He didn't have the sexual tensions that the character he played had, so that was one of the things I concentrated on heavily in the first of the articles, “Anger and Affability.”

Caroline: Absolutely. So you, you referred to this very, sort of, high-intensity emotional scene where Homer finally is able to resolve these tensions. Tell us about what happens in the movie.

David: Well, briefly, although there's two hours and fifteen-minute foregrounding for this particular scene, Homer is in his parents' kitchen late in the evening having a snack, and Wilma, again, lives

next door, and she sees the light in the kitchen. She may have seen Homer walk into the house; he'd been, he'd been out, and she goes and visits him in the kitchen while he's having a snack. And she says to him, Homer, I don't know if you're aware of it or not, but my parents want me to leave Boone City. They want me to go live with my aunt in another town. They believe it is, you know, the unspoken assumption, that Wilma has to disconnect herself from Homer and any thoughts of spending her life with him, because this is not what he wants, and she needs to exit herself for the sake of her own emotions, from contact with him. Homer responds to this by saying, well, if that's what you want to do then you ought to do it. She said, it's not what I want to do—what I want to do is in effect to resume the life that we had planned with one another. He says to her at that point, well, Wilma, you don't know what it's like. You don't know what it's like for me to live with these hooks, and do you want me to show you?

And then in a very daring passage for the movie, that helps to cement its claims to social realism—and remember we're talking about 1946 now—Wilma, Homer ascends the stairs up to his bedroom and Wilma is, comes behind him. And the idea is he's going to show her what his bedtime ritual is, and see if she is the equal of dealing with not only that ritual but the larger problem of their relationship as a married couple and all of the other, you know, potential intricacies of their life that are presented by his injury.

She follows him up to the bedroom; the music is very tense. The filming is filled with shadows and dark spots, and you have a feeling of expectancy and also a slight feeling of dis-ease, like something terrible might happen. Anyway, Homer takes, they go into the bedroom and Homer takes off his hooks and we see his stumps revealed—Harold Russell's stumps revealed for the first time. And he says to her, this is where I am as helpless, or as dependent, I should say, as dependent as a baby, and I'm lucky that I have stumps that help me out—some of the fellows lost their arms above their elbows. But basically after I take off my hooks I'm as dependent as a baby.

This was not at all true of Harold Russell. One of the things about his rehabilitation was that the first thing they taught him at Walter Reed was to get the hooks on and off by himself. You know, that that was absolutely, that's absolutely common sense. Anyway he tells her he's as dependent as a baby, and he gets into bed, and she gives him a passionate kiss and tucks him in very maternally. And you know at this point that their fate is sealed. He says to her, then you don't mind? And she said, you know, absolutely, in effect I don't mind. She then gives him this kiss, she tucks him in, she leaves the bedroom and closes the door such, in such a way that she's aware that it's helpful for him to have the door partly open at night, right, which is a nice sort of little symbol of Wilma's ability to imagine what it's like to be Homer.

The last scene in this sequence is Homer in bed on his pillow with tears in his eyes. He's been, you know, sort of, a very masculine character in his denial of his feelings for Wilma and the hurtfulness of his inability to resolve this situation for two hours and fifteen minutes. And now his emotions are shown. He has tears in his eyes and that's the end of the sequence, and you know that their situation has been resolved. And indeed in the last sequence of the movie we have Homer and Wilma getting married in the living room of Homer's parents.

Caroline: Hmm, so that sort of stoicism, that wall emotionally that he has up for the first, as you said, two hours and fifteen minutes of the movie is finally broken down and he is able to have this happy marriage celebration.

David: Yes, and this also helps to resolve the problems of the second of the two veterans, Fred Derry, the proletarian distinguished pilot. Because he's had his struggles throughout the movie as well, and in part they relate to his inability to find work worthy of where he thinks of himself as a person, who was, you know, the head of big bomber, had many combat missions over Germany, but

comes back, works at a, behind the soda counter, counter in a, in a pharmacy, a big pharmacy—pharmacies used to have soda fountains and lunch counters. The last sequence of the film is the resolution of Fred's problems as well, which I could talk about somewhat if we had the time.

Caroline: Sure.

David: Well, Fred returns to a marriage that was hastily contracted during the war, before the war I should say. The woman that he is married to loves him so long as he wears his uniform with all his medals. [**Caroline:** Right.] But when she discovers that Fred goes back to the soda fountain to work as what was then called a soda jerk, she begins to lose respect for him. Meanwhile Fred has met the daughter of the first of the veterans, Al Stephenson, the banker with a sort of propensity for drinking too much. And Fred and Al's daughter Peggy have fallen in love. But the problem is that Fred is of course married. Peggy is very sensitive to Fred's needs. One of the reasons is that the first night that Fred is back—when he returns with Homer and Al, Marie, Fred's wife, is not at home. She works in a nightclub. And so Fred sleeps set Al's house in Peggy's room, and Peggy sleeps on the sofa. During the night Fred has dreams of combat and intense flashbacks, and that is the beginning of Peggy's realization—and note all of these women play maternal, intensely maternal roles as well, as well as being love interests. That's the beginning of Peggy's feelings that Fred needs and requires emotional support, and Peggy learns that he's not getting these things from his marriage. She's in a hopeless position because she loves him, but he's married and her parents will—or, particularly her father Al, will not abide her having contact with him as long as he's married. Eventually that marriage collapses—the weight of its own impossibility, with Marie's lack of respect for Fred and her, in effect, dating while they're still married and living together. So Fred's problem is resolved in the love that he has with, with Peggy, and it's at Homer's wedding that Peggy and Fred are united and sew their own destinies together.

The film is a wonderful piece of social realism of a particular Hollywood type. It's been sort of honest about Fred's stress disorder. He has terrible nightmares. It's been honest about some of the problems that Homer has had with reintegration into his family and his feelings, the crisis of his masculinity. It's been honest about Fred's inability to get, get work like so many other veterans. But in the end this social realism dissolves into the resolution of melodrama. You know, the couples are reunited, the heterosexual sort of hegemony of relationships, and is cemented and strengthened at the end of the movie. And everybody, you presume, is going to go their way happy in conformity to, you know, the world as it is—the middle class—the world of middle class respectability as it is.

Caroline: Well, and what's really interesting about this movie is—from my perspective—they allow the men to be these really complicated, in many ways troubled characters. But the women in this movie, with the exception maybe of Fred's wife—the women are by and large like completely perfect, almost flawless characters. I mean, Peggy has been working as a nurse in a hospital so she has experience, but she also has innocence, and she always says and does the right thing. Same with Wilma, and Al's wife is very patient, right?

David: Milly.

Caroline: Milly, yeah. So what is this saying about the pressures and expectations on women in this period?

David: Well, that's a wonderful question and it really is central to how it was that on the official level, social service agencies, psychiatric and psychological service professionals, the medical professionals, and the United States military itself all projected their ideas about how the veterans would be most efficiently reintegrated into the world, and that was that their wives, girlfriends, and mothers would be the agents, patiently and supportively, of, one of the agents—and a principal

agent—of their peaceful reintegration into the, into civilian life.

The advice literature published by the military and by social service agencies all highlighted the complex roles that women would have to play in furthering this resolution to the problems of reintegration. A woman like Peggy had to be both maternal on the one hand, and sexual on the other hand. She had to be willing to give love in the sort of standard couple-oriented way, but she also had to understand in a very maternal way the problems that someone like Fred had because of his psychological injury during the war. The same thing for the young character of Wilma. Both of these women seem to walk right out of the advice literature at the time. [Caroline laughs] Now the thing is, I believe none of them had the time—the real Wilmas and the real Peggys and the real Millys, Al's wife—they had no time to read this literature. But they were the products of the hegemony of this kind of, you know, heteronormative, respectable middle-class culture of the time. These women knew their roles; they probably didn't have to be reminded of them—their whole lives had been spent preparing for them. By the way, the advice literature sort of redoubled its directions in regard to women's roles, in regard to the disabled veterans, because the women were not only the agents of, you know, restoring the domestic order, but they were made to feel that it was important for them to be helpful in getting the man to accept himself by building up his masculine identity and making his, making his injuries less central to who he was as the result of rebuilding his masculine identity.

Caroline: That's very interesting. So maybe we could pick up on that a little bit more. **[David: Sure]** We've talked about some of the messages that this film is sending about disability. But are there others that we haven't mentioned that you think are part of the mix?

David: Well, yes there are. On one deep level that I'd like to mention—I think many of the people who will hear this podcast are aware of the Mitchell and Snyder famous hypothesis about ...

Caroline: Narrative prosthesis.

David: Narrative prosthesis, that's right. And I think the way in which, for our audience, the hooks that Harold Russell brings to playing the part of Homer, the way the hooks are framed, the ever-present symbolism of the, of the—the hooks, a symbol of injury, sometimes a symbol of menace, is a fascinating example of the multi-level uses of disability as a symbol in furthering narrative. And Wyler and his advisers in making the film were well aware of this, and they were aware of it to the extent that they made the hooks central enough that the—the other actors involved, particularly the male actors involved, felt that in the scenes that they shared with Harold Russell that the hooks were so central that they were overwhelming their own, their ability to play their own roles. They wanted Wyler to back off in making, in centralizing the hooks as a feature in scene after scene. So that's, that's an underlying sort of symbolic as it were trope in the movie that I think people interested in disability would pay special, should pay special attention to.

Caroline: That's a really great point. It's actually something I hadn't really thought about until you mentioned it, but Wyler does use a lot of low camera angles. And he'll often put the camera, you know, on a table or something like that, and so you really get a sense that the hooks are right front and center in the frame, and you can't not look at them.

David: Well, Wyler was fascinated by Russell's rehabilitation and he wanted, he wanted to foreground the things that Russell had been taught in order to make people comfortable with the hooks, that was part of Russell's rehabilitation. So Russell was able to take a matchbook out of his pocket and light his own cigarettes and light a cigarette for people around him. And he did that with great facility. Russell was also able to sign his name with great flourishes and with no problems whatsoever using the, the hooks. Russell was, as part of his rehabilitation at Walter Reed, taught

various kinds of quips that he could use to make people comfortable. And when he, in one scene where he's signing his name, I believe he might have been endorsing a cheque, he's at Al's bank, he says to Al, "I can sign anything but a bill," right. [Caroline laughs] He's making people comfortable with himself. Wyler loved this because of its cinematic, its great cinematic potential. He loved it to the extent as I said that the other actors felt that the hooks sometimes overwhelmed the scenes that they were in. So there were negotiating this while they were filming the, while they were making the film.

Caroline: So there's a sense, in a way, that disability is an individual problem that people have to work to fix. Like Homer has to be affable and make people comfortable with him, you know, he has to get over his self-consciousness about his disability and his romantic relationship. But at the same time there's also this expectation that society has to do the work of integration as well. And I think we see that most, most strongly in the female characters. Would you agree with that assessment?

David: Absolutely, absolutely, and I think it's, it's absolutely essential to understanding the general social history of that time and its relationship to disability that the burden of helping these men, each of the three men in the film, falls on women performing the gender roles of the heteronormative middle class white respectable culture. [Caroline: Yeah] Absolutely. The film is a really important document for understanding the culture of gender in the mid-twentieth century.

Caroline: Well, absolutely, and I mean, I know you chose the word "burden" because that's absolutely the way the film depicts it, right. This is a project of conformity, a project of getting back into sort of normality, but it's very different from the kind of disability rights that we know and think about today. So can you tell me more about, kind of, what this film did for the disability community? Did people in the disability community comment on it? What was its sort of political conversation in this period?

David: Well I'd say that the answer to your question is that the movie did not a great deal for people with disabilities who came at their disabilities in civilian life, whether they were born with them or the result of industrial accidents or another kind of accident or an illness. It's at this point that it's important to reference why disabled veterans as disabled people are different. Disability in most societies throughout time has been, has destined people to a lower status. And that's not only true in Western societies; it's true in many cultures across the world. Disabled veterans on the other hand have been in many societies and cultures lauded for their disabilities because these disabilities are sustained in service to state and society, and we see the symbolic presence of that lauding in the medals that disabled veterans receive for combat and service. We see it in parades when they march in, or wheel in formation together, and again, have a lot of sustained applause on Veterans Day. And we see it also in the very liberal provisioning of social benefits that disabled veterans and veterans in general have. To that extent I think the movie spread sympathy and understanding for veterans with disabilities and veterans in general and their reintegration struggles, but whether this spread over into the improving the lives of civilians with disabilities—I'd say is, you know, a real open question because the civilians with disabilities did not share the status of sustaining disability and impairment in service to state and society. This has been a source of separation between the military disabled if you will in the civilian disabled throughout time and in many western societies where there has been generous provisioning for veterans, for people who leave the service with disability or illness. Their lives are inevitably separated from—in terms of being lauded by society and gifted by society, in a way that society has been much less generous with people I call the civilian disabled.

Caroline: Hmm, that's a really important point. Let's get into this question about being, if you will, lauded by society through the critical and public reaction to this movie. It's very much a movie of that moment, right? And we've heard—I mentioned in the introduction—that the film won nine

Oscars. Tell us a bit more about how the public and critics reacted to this.

David: Well, there were always inevitably critics who took the most outstanding products of the Hollywood system—and I say outstanding in terms of the work that went into them, the imagination, the technical skill—and yet found them wanting and evasive and, and found the resolution of the difficulties of the characters to be too easy and a cowardly evasion of the difficulties of real life. So some of the critics, while they understood the movie was extremely well made from a technical point of view, extremely well directed and the performances were often outstanding, said that the too-easy resolution of the three stories was the typical kind of Hollywood evasion. For all that, Hollywood stuck by, you know, its own criteria, as you could see by the awarding of all of these Oscars, including an Oscar given to—two Oscars given to Harold Russell as the Best Supporting Actor and for service to American society and to the film industry. So Hollywood loved the movie, and I think in terms of its box office appeal, so did the public. This was not a flop, and this is a movie whose presence in our popular culture continues to be felt, among the occasions on Veterans Day every year where it's prominently showed on TCM as, in tribute to the history of disabled veterans and Hollywood's engagement by them. And it still continues to captivate audiences after all this time. I've shown it to students and they can't believe its power. They're also confused because of the cultural differences today. But the movie continues—the three stories of the veterans—continues to have a kind of power this many years later so one can easily imagine the power it had with audiences in 1946.

Caroline: Absolutely, absolutely. So was this movie the only one of its kind at this time? Would this have been really shocking and new for audiences? Or were there other movies that also were dealing with themes of disability and reintegration in this period?

David: Yes, there were other—a handful of other movies that dealt with specifically with disability and reintegration. And there were other movies that were about veterans' integration in general, movies like *Laura*, where the chief detective played by Dana Andrews—who's also in *The Best Years of Our Lives*—is a man with military experience who returns from the war and is confused by the society he encounters after the intensity of his military experience. The movies about disabled veterans—there are a handful of movies. One is about the rehabilitation of blinded veterans. There's another movie in which the character has lost his legs in combat. These movies point to the same difficulties of rehabilitation, but none of these other movies, the handful of other movies has the power of *Best Years of Our Lives* because *Best Years of Our Lives* was a, brought together in a kind of perfect combination, a skilled director, working with a skilled writer in Robert Sherwood, working with all of the resources of a major studio, and working with first-rate Hollywood talent, and then the discovery of Harold Russell. So while there are other movies—and there are—you know, do the same themes, *Best Years* I think stands out as the prototype of what Hollywood wanted to say in making these movies about the rehabilitation and reintegration of disabled veterans.

Caroline: Yeah absolutely. I mean, I watched this movie in preparation for this podcast obviously, and I was a little nervous to be honest because it's two hours and fifty minutes, and I thought, oh my goodness this is going to drag, but you're absolutely right—that the pacing and the quality of the filmmaking and the quality of the script and the acting are excellent. And although I think it has to be read as a historical document because there are things about it that don't necessarily play well in a twenty-first-century mindset with twenty-first-century politics and twenty-first-century concepts of disability rights, the story—

David: Not to mention of gender.

Caroline: Oh gosh, yes, absolutely yeah—the story is truly compelling, and I would say that as a

historical document it's absolutely worth watching if only to appreciate what the culture around disability was in this particular moment.

David: Well, I think that there are many people probably who return to these old movies as I do and feel that they are voyeurs on the life of their parents or grandparents or great-grandparents. That there's something deeply personal about what they're seeing, and that they somehow have an emotional relationship to the characters as if we were observing family in the act of living. So I think, you know, this is one reason why the, the politics of gender and disability aside, the movie continues to move us. Some people from the standpoint of the present politics of gender and disability would say being moved is being manipulated, and that being moved in the ways that the film moves us is really insidious because of the distance we've had to come to liberate ourselves from the culture of the mid-twentieth century. And there certainly is something to be said for that perspective. But on the other hand it's important to know where we've come from, as well as to go beyond it

Caroline: That's really well put. Thank you very much.

David: Thank you.

Caroline: Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about? Any questions we didn't get around to addressing?

David: No, I think we've done a good job in the hour that we've had of at least dealing with the highlights of the film. The film is a cinematic marvel in the way that it was produced. And I'm hoping that the people who see the film after listening to this podcast can watch it with a kind of expert's eye to see the, the beauty and grace and technical excellence with which it was filmed, not the least of it is the decoding of the framing of disability. I think there is a tremendous education to be had in watching the film with the kind of preparation that study would bring to it. It decodes the world that we've emerged out of.

Caroline: I think you've just done a nice job of articulating some of the many reasons that you, and I, and I hope our audience out there find disability history so fascinating, so thank you for that.

David: Yes indeed. Thank you.

Caroline: Well thank you very much for your time. Thank you for joining me today. It was really a pleasure.

David: It's been a pleasure for me as well. Thank you.

Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time! Bye bye!

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