ReFocus

The Films of William Wyler

EDITED BY
JOHN M. PRICE

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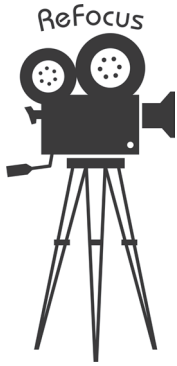

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Introduction: William Wyler—Chariot Races and Flower Shows

John M. Price

> He was an ace professional, a perfectionist. Were he alive in full spade today, we'd have rather better films than we actually have now.[1]
>
> Every aspect of his films, he took great care over, probably at the expense of promoting his own name. It's extraordinary that his films are so famous, and so celebrated, more so than William Wyler, the name.[2]

A broad range of experience and the skills to handle diverse situations is usually thought to be an asset. However, it seems that William Wyler's mastery of a wide variety of film genres is precisely what caused him to be devalued by many film scholars. Indeed, the current status of and the problem with Wyler is summed up by Jan Herman, "Today, despite his extraordinary accomplishments, Wyler is hidden from view."[3] A similar assessment would lead columnist David B. Green, in 2015, to christen Wyler, "the most famous director you never heard of."[4] Wyler often proclaimed his desire to attempt every type of film. When asked why he accepted the project of the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur*, he replied: "I said it would be intriguing to see if I could make a Cecil B. DeMille picture."[5] The venue was not important to Wyler. The challenge for him was to tell a story in the clearest and most understandable way for the audience, regardless of the material. This diversity, however, worked against recognition as an auteur, for when he did agree to helm *Ben-Hur*, the auteurists declared it a blatantly crass attempt at simply making money.[6] Wyler did nothing to assuage them; he stated quite openly, "I thought this picture gonna make a lots of money, and maybe I'll get some of it."[7] A more serious reason for Wyler shepherding this project was given by producer Sam Zimbalist who "wanted Wyler to give . . . the picture what it needed—body, depth, intimacy—the sophisticated treatment for which

Wyler's work was prized."[8] So, despite those who may see Wyler as only a gifted craftsman and not a true artist, Zimbalist's desire for Wyler's hand was the recognition of the director's most valued skill—breathing life into characters and examining the complexities of human relationships.

In terms of Wyler's diversity, André Bazin admits that "there is no consistent motif in the work of Wyler."[9] However, Bazin does not see this as a stumbling block to Wyler appreciation: "I do not think that it is more difficult to recognize the signature of Wyler in just a few shots than it is to recognize the signatures of Ford, Fritz Lang, or Hitchcock."[10] Undoubtedly, Wyler detractors will point out that, unlike the cinematic auteurs previously mentioned, Wyler did not focus upon a certain theme and explore it over and over to examine all its possibilities (e.g. suspense and Hitchcock). Bazin sees the Wyler signature as something different than specific genres in specific settings exploring specific themes. "There is an evident fondness," Bazin says of Wyler, "for psychological scenarios set against social backgrounds . . . his work as a whole leaves us with the piercing and rigorous impression of a psychological analysis."[11] Wyler's talents as a filmmaker fall into three distinct capabilities: the ability to adapt material from the stage or literature to the screen and do so with cinematic vitality, the use of camera movement and staging-in-depth to create a type of screen "realism," and last, but perhaps most important, the gift of collaboration. Such collaborations were often contentious, but these amalgams generated some of the most awarded films of all time. Further analysis reveals that Wyler's collaborations also have three distinct strains: with producers, namely Samuel Goldwyn; with technological artists, like Gregg Toland; and with a wide range of performers.

Wyler felt that the genre should dictate the style. Therefore, in Wyler's opinion, a style of direction must be malleable in the face of each specific film.[12] The result is that those who have denied Wyler status among an elevated echelon of filmmakers have described his style as "styleless." If such an epithet is meant to suggest that Wyler's style is not intrusive, then Wyler would agree:

> The camera is a marvelous instrument [but] you have to use it with discipline . . . A director should not try to attract attention to himself [and] away from the actors and away from the story. He should attract attention to himself by making great films, great performances . . . Don't detract from the story or the actors. That's what the people have come to see. They did not come to see what you can do with a camera.[13]

This declaration should not be seen, however, as just Wyler's cinematic ethos. It is, in fact, the very definition of classic Hollywood's so-called "invisible style." This artistic propensity for self-effacement is of course a misnomer. Any film technique is only "invisible" by comparison with other techniques and by the

smoothness of its execution. A camera movement may be less intrusive than a violent edit point, but both are highly manipulative. While Wyler's style emphasizes *mise en scène* over montage, the former and the latter are both constructs. The classic Hollywood style is not "invisible" nor is Wyler's style "styleless." Due to his beginnings in action-packed Westerns, Wyler developed early on a fondness for moving the camera, but this proclivity would also become wedded to an affinity for staging-in-depth and later deep focus. This volume of the *ReFocus* series intends to explore the many facets of the Wyler canon which comprise this style.

Whatever opinion one holds of the Wyler style, there is no denying that his formula for filmmaking yielded phenomenal success, not only at the box office but also in accumulated awards. Wyler's three Academy Awards for Best Director[14]—*Mrs. Miniver* (1942), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and *Ben-Hur* (1959)—are second only to John Ford's four wins for director. Wyler was also nominated for Best Director an additional nine times and three times as a producer.[15] He was also nominated for Best Director by the Directors Guild of America seven times and winning once for *Ben-Hur*.[16] Perhaps even more telling than his own awards are the myriad of acting Oscars that Wyler had helped his stars to achieve. No other film director has ever shepherded more actors and actress to Oscar-winning performances than Wyler—thirty-six nominations and fourteen wins, both in leading and supporting roles. Life-long friend, writer–director–actor John Huston[17] said that Wyler had "a genius for getting the truth out of an actor."[18] The list of his award-winning performers[19] bears witness not only to the wide range of genres that he mastered, but also to a proficiency with woman's stories and characters' psychology that few of his contemporaries possessed, and perhaps most significantly a dedication to collaborative craftsmanship and a belief that cinematic technique is there to forefront performance and enhance the story.

Of the all the influences on Wyler's style, no doubt one of the most formative was his immigrant experience. William Wyler was born Willy Wyler (the William would be added later in America) on July 1, 1902, in the province of Alsace-Lorraine, today part of France but then, and since France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, part of the recently unified Germany. Thus, at the time of Wyler's birth, his hometown was not known as Mulhouse, but Mülhausen. His mother, Melanie, was German, born in Stuttgart, and his father, Leopold, Swiss, and although his family and their town spoke German, Wyler's mother insisted that her family all spoke French as well. The family was Jewish and Wyler's mother, even before the advent of National-Socialism, felt that Germany had a long-standing history of antisemitism. Alsace found itself contested for and changing hands several times early in the First World War and young Willy was a first-hand witness to the ravages of war. Indeed, the Wylers had to take refuge in the cellar several times. Young Wyler was never a strong student, and showed little talent or desire to succeed at the family haberdashery business. Even when he was later sent to work in Paris, his strengths remained hidden and his mother

did not know what to do with him. Fate took a hand, however, in the person of Wyler's uncle, Carl Laemmle. Laemmle was one of the founding owners of Universal Pictures, and he suggested that the family allow the young William, now eighteen, to immigrate to the United States and work for him in the movies. So Wyler moved to America in 1920 and began a career in the film industry, and after one year in New York with Universal's publicity office, he moved on to Hollywood, at age nineteen.

As his uncle's life would attest, Wyler was not unique as an immigrant filmmaker. The influx of European filmmakers had a decided influence on early Hollywood and the classic era. Yet, Wyler's specific experience may explain at least one thematic continuity in his films. While Wyler certainly valued his new homeland—he became a US citizen in 1928—his films are not full of the overly optimistic Americanism and belief in the individual and community to overcome oppression of big government and big business that characterized the films of another immigrant director, Frank Capra. Wyler's films were not visually demonstrative like German Expressionism nor concerned with exoticism like Josef von Sternberg. His films were not as dark as Erich von Stroheim nor as cynically humorous as Billy Wilder (a director whose name is often confused with Wyler). The territorial turmoil that Wyler saw, in the First World War, seems to have fostered films that deal with the individual struggling in circumstances that seem beyond their ability to handle. In addition, Wyler's "fascination with America and things American" but seen through "European sophistication and temperament," and executed with a visual style which appears at times detached, "suggest[s] the point of view of an interested, sympathetic outsider."[20] For Wyler, his insight into his adopted country bestows a viewpoint very different from a native-born perspective. Gregory Peck would describe Wyler as having European sensibilities but also a hundred percent American.[21] Wyler's characters are almost exclusively Americans, and, while his explorations of the human condition surely have universal application, they are uniquely set in and derived from American society. Even *Dodsworth* (1936), set largely outside of the United States, views European culture and society through the eyes of an American.

Wyler's early days in Hollywood, and the very nature of the business at that time, would serve to create the craftsmanship that is at the core of his style. Starting at the lowest level of moviemaking acquainted him with all aspects of production, helping him to develop a variety of skills, and he quickly became a third assistant director and then second assistant director. In fact, in a career harbinger, Wyler served as an assistant on the 1925 silent version of *Ben-Hur*. It was also in 1925, at the age of twenty-three, that Wyler got his first chance to direct. It was a two-reeler, running approximately twenty-four minutes, entitled *The Crook Buster* and was part of a group of Westerns called the Mustang series. He would go on to direct twenty-one such "shorts" for Universal in this series. Wyler himself would later describe this filmmaking situation as "a

training school for directors . . . even girls . . . or any young fellow who showed he was eager, ambitious, and wanted to get . . . to direct."[22] Wyler would direct one of these Westerns every week, each with a total budget of $2,000. The rate at which Hollywood "cranked out" these two-reelers—hundreds of them each year—as well as their rudimentary narratives, fostered an emphasis on developing techniques that were subservient to and enhancing of the story.

In 1926, six months after *The Crook Buster*, Wyler graduated to directing his first five-reeler, *Lazy Lightning*. As a five-reeler, *Lazy Lightning* is considered Wyler's first feature-length movie. He would do six of these as part of Universal's Blue Streak series of Westerns. After the Blue Streak series, Wyler did not wait long to expand his type of movies. His next three projects, all now considered to be lost films, did include two more Westerns, *Desert Dust* (1927) and *Thunder Riders* (1928), but the third, *Anybody Here Seen Kelly?* (1928), was his first non-Western, his first comedy, and his first film with a running length greater than an hour. It was also a film for which he was allowed to shoot largely on location in New York City. This gave the film an almost documentary appearance, and no doubt gave birth to the characterization of "Wyler realism."

Wyler's next film, *The Shakedown* (1929), was a "part-talkie," in that it was produced in both silent and sound versions. *The Shakedown* was once considered lost, but was found and restored in 1998. Wyler would then return to comedy with *The Love Trap* (1929), a film which also straddled the silent and sound eras in that it was silent except for the last few scenes. In the opinion of Michael Anderegg, it is *The Love Trap* that demonstrates Wyler's "growing maturity and self-confidence," as the young director "transition[s] from outdoor adventure to domestic intrigue with remarkable ease."[23] In *The Love Trap*, Wyler presents us with a female lead character who is more than a match for the male characters, "exposes sexual hypocrisy, [and] takes control of her life."[24] The deft handling of such a strong heroine would prove great practice for his later collaborations with Bette Davis and the development of her screen characters.

It would be the advent of sound, however, that would allow Wyler to further develop his style and advance his sense of realism. *Hell's Heroes* (1929) was not only Wyler's first "all-talkie," but was also Universal's first all-sound film. The film was shot outdoors on location—clearly an opportunity for Wyler to enhance realism. Furthermore, the story was told through the eyes of the "bad guys," which made it an unorthodox Western. This was an early and portending example of what would become one of Wyler's defining characteristics—the ability to take a familiar situation and look at it from a different, and often unique, perspective. As *Sunday Times* film critic, Stephen Armstrong, would put it, "Wyler would take standard tropes, and give them a subtle twist, to make them unusual."[25]

In 1933, Wyler made *Counsellor at Law*, his first adaptation of a play to the screen, a talent that he would come to perfect throughout his career, and challenge him to find various ways to "open up" a stage presentation.[26] Wyler felt

that "opening up" a play too much could destroy the vitality of the original story, but just recording a stage production was not the answer either. Wyler's solution was to hold a high regard for the source material without the restrictive yardstick of pure textual fidelity. This approach, whether adapting a novel or play, prevented his films from becoming static or monotonous. Anderegg, in praising Wyler's handling of theatrical material, opined, "that an unmoving camera focused on an actor's face can be as 'cinematic' as a cavalry charge."[27]

The entirety of *Counsellor at Law* takes place, as the title suggests, solely in the offices of a law firm. The cramped shooting space no doubt appealed to Wyler's love of realism, but also required that he develop more innovative ways to work in camera movement, and to continue to exploit long takes, which allow the actors to perform longer without cuts. Wyler's masterful control of the rapid-fire dialogue also adds to the film's verisimilitude. This film was also the first time that Wyler worked with a major Hollywood star, John Barrymore, and the accompanying ego. Often seen as one of Barrymore's better screen performances, Wyler extracts from him that character complexity which became Wyler's signature. Despite great difficulties (Barrymore's drinking), this would lay the groundwork for his later collaborations with some of the biggest name performers in Hollywood. Collaborations that, as stated previously, were more successful than any other director–actor relationships.

Although Wyler's teamwork with performers is the most famous aspect of his style, troublesome work relationships were not isolated to actors. One of the stormiest professional relationships of Wyler's career was with one of his bosses, the independent movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn. Wyler, despite having been given his first opportunity at Universal, had gone about as far as he could with the studio. Wyler's uncle had handed most of the decision-making responsibilities to his son Carl Jr., a producer who was incredibly tight with a dollar. In 1935, Wyler would make his last film for Universal, *The Good Fairy*, and it would be followed by *The Gay Deception* (1935), his only film for Fox. Then Wyler would embark on a new contract with Goldwyn. Despite their many disputes, their collaboration would unarguably produce some the finest films in both men's canons: *These Three* (1936), *Dodsworth* (1936), *Dead End* (1937), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), *The Westerner* (1940), *The Little Foxes* (1941), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Goldwyn would also bring in Wyler to replace Howard Hawks on *Come and Get It* (1936)—a film that Wyler would disavow authorship of, saying that it was another director's film. When Goldwyn told Wyler that he was taking over for Hawks, Wyler initially refused. Goldwyn became enraged and threatened that he would see that Wyler never worked in Hollywood again. Wyler would relent and finish the picture, mostly because he knew that Goldwyn had the power to do just that.[28]

One of the many disagreements between Wyler and Goldwyn was the subject of realism. *Dead End*,[29] another stage adaptation,[30] is a story that contrasts wealthy city-dwellers with the slum life around them. Wyler had wanted to film

this story on location for maximum reality. Goldwyn said "no" and built an elaborate set on a sound stage. When Wyler would "dirty up" the set to add more realism, Goldwyn would come in and demand it be cleaned up. It was clear that the difficulties between Wyler and Goldwyn stemmed from the fact that they were too much alike—both perfectionists who were certain that their way was the right way. Throughout their relationship, the debate among filmgoers was whether the quality of their motion pictures was due to the "Goldwyn touch" or the "Wyler touch." Goldwyn seemed to answer this when he once uttered to a reporter, "I made *Wuthering Heights.* Wyler only directed it."[31] There certainly is no denying that Goldwyn offered Wyler the chance to get away from Universal that he had sought, and the ability to tackle more prestigious projects, all with a producer who, unlike Laemmle Jr., was not afraid to spend money, if he were convinced it would equal high quality. However, it should also be pointed out that Wyler was the only director to ever win Goldwyn an Oscar for Best Picture.[32]

Wyler's first film for Goldwyn, *These Three*, would also be his first collaboration with cinematographer Gregg Toland, a working relationship that would codify the visual look of a Wyler film. Toland shot six of the seven films Wyler directed for Goldwyn (seven of eight if you include *Come and Get It*), and one of them, *Wuthering Heights*, resulted in Toland's only Academy Award. Needless to say, Toland is best known for his work on *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), but it should be noted that five of Wyler–Toland's collaborations (six including *Come and Get It*) occurred before Toland worked on *Kane*. Furthermore, *Kane* is often credited with techniques that Wyler and Toland had already exploited. Moreover, Wyler had displayed his love for staging-in-depth and expressive camera angles long before teaming up with Toland. This is evidenced by this shot from *The Shakedown* (Figure I.1), which shows Wyler staging deep shots even in his silent film days. What Toland added to Wyler's concept of shot composition was the ability to employ deep focus which, by keeping all planes within the frame in focus, allowed Wyler to "have action and reaction in the same shot, without having to cut back and forth from individual cuts of the characters,"[33] as superbly demonstrated by these shots from *Wuthering Heights* (Figure I.2), *The Little Foxes* (Figure I.3), and from *The Children's Hour* (1961)[34] (Figure I.4). While most often employed by Wyler to see two characters' emotions at the same time, it could also be used to show a character's reaction to the introduction of a significant object without cutting to each in turn (Figure I.5). The sense in which Wyler and Toland's technique is an example of realism is that, by having different action take place on the screen simultaneously, the spectator, making their own choices as to what to look at, becomes the editor of the scene.[35] This vision selection, of course, mimics the way in which we view the world. This visual realism would support the wide range of Wyler stories, which Ian Nathan, contributing editor for Empire magazine, describes as, "Real people in real kinds of worlds."[36]

Figure I.1 Early Wyler staging-in-depth (*The Shakedown*, 1929)

Figure I.2 Deep focus dialogue (*Wuthering Heights*, 1939)

Figure I.3 Deep focus dialogue (*The Little Foxes*, 1941)

Figure I.4 Deep focus dialogue (*The Children's Hour*, 1961)

Figure I.5 Deep focus demonstrating character's reaction to significant object (*The Little Foxes*, 1941)

Much less tranquil than Wyler's collaboration with Toland, and more famous as well, was his highly successful teamwork with performers. During Wyler's contract with Goldwyn, he was loaned out to Warner Bros. for *Jezebel* (1938). This would be the first of three times that he would work with Bette Davis. Their relationship would generate three great performances, one Academy Award for Best Actress, and an equally as tempestuous personal love affair. When Davis won her second Oscar for *Jezebel* (1938), she said, "He made my performance . . . It was all Wyler."[37] Even forty years later, at the American Film Institute's ceremony for Davis's lifetime achievement award, she still credited Wyler's direction of her performance in that film as not only making her a better actress, but also catapulting her to the status of superstar.[38]

However, Davis also acknowledged that Wyler was "an amazingly inarticulate man."[39] This characterization would be backed up by Charlton Heston, who said that during the filming of *Ben-Hur*, Wyler's direction amounted to, "You gotta be better."[40] Barbara Streisand would observe that "he couldn't tell you how to do it differently; he would just tell you to do it again."[41] He may not have been able to convey to his stars what he wanted from them, but Wyler always said, "I'll know it when I see it."[42] The confrontations between performers and Wyler was

due to his unrelenting perfectionism and his inability to express what he wanted from an actor. Despite this inarticulation, his on-set repetitions would always yield outstanding results, but it also led to his reputation as "forty-take Willy." Davis related that once after endless takes, which she felt had no distinctions, she decided to look at the dailies, and not only was there clear, but subtle differences between the takes, but that the take Wyler had proclaimed the best was in fact the best.[43] The perfectionist that was Wyler was the result of a strong eye for detail—nothing escaped his scrutiny. His style was stern and uncompromising, taciturn and reluctant to praise.[44] Davis would describe Wyler's style as "charming and treacherous,"[45] a "combination of sympathy and strength."[46]

Davis recalls that Wyler was always saying that he was not running an acting school. Laurence Olivier, whose strong stage background would lead him to, in response to Wyler's criticism during the filming of *Wuthering Heights*, describe cinema as an "anemic little medium."[47] Years later, however, Olivier would credit Wyler with making him into a screen actor, and he would even work with Wyler again on *Carrie* (1952). Perhaps, Wyler had indeed been running a school for actors. In addition to Wyler's berating of Olivier, he once made Audrey Hepburn cry during her first film performance. Greer Garson, because of Wyler's reputation, did not want at first to do *Mrs. Miniver*. The story is that she sent Wyler a velvet glove and a note that said, "to use on Miss Garson."[48] Despite her hesitations at working with Wyler, she would win an Oscar under his direction. The strangest relationship, however, was the warlike conditions on the set of *The Good Fairy* (1935) between Wyler and leading lady Margaret Sullavan. Such was their on-set animosity that all were shocked when Wyler and Sullavan married. Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, the marriage would last only two years.

Wyler once said, "Mediocrity in films is the direct result of playing it safe . . . A picture without an idea is a picture without vitality."[49] Fittingly, as Wyler's career progressed, there is an increasingly clearer "message" in his works. With *Dead End*, for example, Wyler was thrilled to learn that his gritty realism had instigated serious legislation for urban renewal. However, in a Wyler film, social significance is not always tied to a social issue. Many times, the social statement is simple observation of the human condition, and, more specifically, how the individual struggles against what seems to be overwhelming conditions. Wyler's aim was to present these relationships with considerable compassion. Wyler was certainly able to achieve this with *These Three*.

These Three was based on Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour*. This play dealt with the story of a rich, brattish schoolgirl who ruins the lives of her two schoolmistresses by accusing them of being lesbians. Both Goldwyn and Wyler knew that such a topic would not make it past the censors of that day, so the title was changed to *These Three* and the rumor the child starts

is a more conventional, heterosexual, triangular love affair between the two ladies and the fiancé of one of them. Surprisingly, Hellman had no problem with this change, as her work on the screenplay attests, because she felt the play had never been about prejudice against homosexuals, but the destructive, wildfire-like force that a malicious lie can be. Wyler would have a chance to revisit Hellman's original narrative when, twenty-five years later, he directed his own remake, this time keeping the original title, *The Children's Hour*. The restoration of the lesbian aspect may well be simply the result of an increasing societal acceptance of the topic and not an increasing boldness on the part of Wyler toward difficult issues, but whichever it was, as Herman would say of Wyler, he "managed to combine poetic truthfulness with social awareness," and do so with mass appeal.[50] In fact, by 1939, it was said of Wyler that

> His films steadily grow in stature: 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 . . . [and] reveal[s] his increasing social awareness, sharper sensitivity and penetration into character, and conscious effort at organic unity.[51]

Wyler had definitely achieved his major goal in leaving Universal: he was now making prestigious pictures.

In addition to mastering successful adaptations of plays, Wyler would tackle an adaptation of the Sinclair Lewis novel, *Dodsworth*. As a performer's director, Wyler would be reunited on this film with Walter Huston, whom he had directed back in one of his earliest sound efforts, *A House Divided* (1931). In both films, Huston's performance is multi-layered, and for *Dodsworth*, he would be nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor. This was also Wyler's first nomination for Best Director. *Dodsworth* was a serious, and at the time, uniquely penetrating examination of marital struggles, and in an example of art reflecting real life, during this film, Wyler would begin to divorce his first wife Margaret Sullavan. Two years later, he would marry his second wife Margaret Tallichet. He would have five children with "Talli" and remain married to her until his death.

After again successfully bringing page to screen, this time with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Wyler returned to his origins with his first Western since *Hell's Heroes*, *The Westerner*. Wyler would again utilize gritty realism, only now to give his old genre a new perspective—a deglamorized West. An example of this is seen in one of the most realistic fight scenes in any Western. *The Westerner* was also the first time Wyler worked with Gary Cooper, but it was the supporting performance by Walter Brennan that took home the Oscar for this film. This film also features another example of a reoccurring theme for Wyler, the troublesome nature of male friendships.

In 1940, Wyler would also work again with Davis in *The Letter* (an adaptation of a Somerset Maugham novel), and the following year, work with her for the third and last time in *The Little Foxes* (another adaptation of a Hellman play). During these films, Wyler's reputation was continually enhanced: "not only is [he] a proficient filmmaker but . . . [he] has an eye for characterization and human relationships."[52] It is interesting, for example, that in *The Good Fairy*, Wyler "was roundly chastised for overindulging in closeups . . . but his prodigal use of the same device in *Wuthering Heights* four years later was accepted without a murmur."[53] Despite Toland's augmentation of deep focus to Wyler's *mise en scène*, Wyler knew when and when not to make use of it. Case in point is the famous scene (Figure I.6) in *The Little Foxes* where Davis's character sits unassisting her husband, whose heart is failing. He crawls up the stairs in the background, out of focus. Davis, in the foreground, is in sharp focus. Wyler, through Toland, could have had both actions in focus, but he knew that the essence of the scene was in Davis's face.

The Little Foxes can be seen as a great dividing point between two distinct halves of Wyler's career. As war in Europe raged on, many felt that Wyler's next film, *Mrs. Miniver*, was his attempt to inch the United States from its isolationism. Wyler himself considered the film to be a call-to-arms. The story of a supposedly average British family and their struggles to survive

Figure I.6 Staging-in-depth without deep focus as to direct attention to one part of frame over another (*The Little Foxes*, 1941)

the Nazi blitz, which must have reminded Wyler of his own wartime experiences as a child in Alsace, was more fortunate than such films as *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941).[54] Unlike other films accused of war-mongering propaganda, *Mrs. Miniver* was released in the summer of 1942, well after Pearl Harbor. However, during the pre-production of *Mrs. Miniver*, there certainly were concerns as to whether or not it would be seen as pushing the United States into the war and therefore a violation of the Neutrality Act. Being Jewish, Wyler was naturally concerned with Nazi aggression, but he, like many studio executives, had to be careful not to be seen as advancing a strictly Jewish cause. Despite these fears, *Mrs. Miniver*, as Neil Norman characterizes it, "etched its way into the hearts of the public."[55]

Mrs. Miniver was to win Wyler his first Academy Award for Best Director. However, he would not be present to accept it; he had joined the US Army Air Corps. During the war, he would fly on bombers, including during combat, and make two documentary films for the military to show the public, *The Memphis Belle* and *Thunderbolt*. Four other directors, Ford, Capra, John Huston, and George Stevens would also leave Hollywood to lend their filmmaking skills to the war effort. While all these men were greatly affected by their close interaction with combat and its aftermath, and certainly their work after the war was significantly altered, Wyler was also physically injured. The noise in the aircrafts had caused him to go deaf. Wyler was certain this would end his career. How could he direct if he could not hear? Toland came to the rescue and rigged up for Wyler a special sound device that would allow him to hear dialogue. Wyler did eventually regain partial hearing in one ear, but this experience as a wounded war veteran was to prompt what many would consider his greatest film ever, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). This powerful story of the struggles of returning veterans to assimilate back into their homelives would be Wyler's last film with both Goldwyn and Toland and would win Wyler his second Oscar for directing.[56] In 1945, fellow director, Frank Capra, had started a production company for independent directors and producers called Liberty Films and Wyler signed on. While Liberty would prove unsuccessful, only producing two films, independent production was the inevitable wave of the future, and on Wyler's next seven films, beginning with *The Heiress*, he would be producer as well as director.[57]

Despite the triumph of the human spirit which *The Best Years of Our Lives* displays, there is no mistaking the fact that, after the war, Wyler's films were darker, not necessarily more pessimistic, but certainly his characters were enduring ever greater seemingly insurmountable situations. In addition, an element of ambiguity had been introduced to his films. In 1949, Olivia de Havilland won an Academy Award for Best Actress in *The Heiress* (yet another stage to screen adaptation), but her character leaves the audience, at the end of the film, with some doubt as to whether she has triumphed or not. Increasingly

dark, some have described *Detective Story* (1951) and *The Desperate Hours* (1955) as Wyler's foray into the genre of film noir, but this label is extremely debatable. They do both deal with crime, but so does *Dead End*. In terms of characters, Kirk Douglas in *Detective Story* possesses some of the attributes of the film noir "hero," but neither film has what could be called a femme fatale. In the end, these two films may again demonstrate Wyler's propensity for altering recognizable scenarios, or, as Norman puts it, Wyler was "being an innovator in a genre that is already established."[58]

This period of his career, however, was not without its lighter and brighter moments as well. Wyler's exceedingly popular romantic comedy, *Roman Holiday* (1953), was not only the screen debut of Audrey Hepburn, but her performance was also the fourth time that Wyler directed his leading lady to an Oscar for Best Actress. In 1956, Wyler would make his first color film, *Friendly Persuasion*. In 1958, he would make his first widescreen effort, *The Big Country*. The adjustment to the 2.35:1 screen aspect ratio was not a small hindrance to Wyler's trademark composition.

> Accustomed as he was to employing the screen as an area of three dimensional space, with height, depth, and width, he found himself in the late 1950s trying to deal with a screen image that seemed to eliminate everything except width.[59]

Wyler's typically tight narratives and tight shot composition would need to be adapted, or even jettisoned, in the realm of a widescreen epic. How successfully he did this in *The Big Country* is debatable, but there would be no questioning the success of his next colossal production. *Ben-Hur* generated, among its many awards, Wyler's third statue for directing and would hold the record for most Academy Awards until 1997 and then it was only tied. Furthermore, the box-office success of this unfamiliar genre for Wyler would also help MGM to avoid bankruptcy.

In his last five motion pictures, Wyler would end one with a suicide, *The Children's Hour*; deal with a man so obsessed with a woman that he abducts her in *The Collector* (1965); and attempt to combine suspense with racial comment in his last film *The Liberation of L.B. Jones* (1970). *The Collector*, the most anomalous and darkest of all his films, was a return to the more confined visuality of early films like *The Storm* and *Counsellor at Law*, especially after the wide-openness of *The Big Country* and *Ben-Hur*. Despite these rather heavy ventures, Wyler still mixed in, among these darker films, a heist comedy, *How to Steal a Million* (1966), his first comedy since *The Gay Deception* in 1935, and a musical *Funny Girl* (1968). Wyler, up to the very end of his career, was obviously still trying to make as many different types of movies as he could.

One would think that Wyler's military service would have proved his dedication to his country beyond any question, but he would, as would many members of Hollywood, experience strong challenges to his patriotism after the war. Wyler's history with blacklisting seems paradoxical. On one hand, he, John Huston, and other Hollywood personages formed the Committee for the First Amendment, which went to testify before Congress, but when suggestions of "guilt by association" began to attach themselves to Wyler, he wrote a memo making it clear that he was not a Communist nor would he work with any. This proclamation, and the fact that his brother Robert worked on the rewrite of *Friendly Persuasion*, tainted his efforts to not give screen credit to the original, and blacklisted, screenwriter. Still, it must be pointed out that Wyler did make an open declaration that, in his opinion, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was not only destroying creativity in Hollywood but inflicting their concept of Americanism on others.[60] As for Wyler's concept of Americanism, Herman observes that Wyler's films combined "a compassionate honesty and a dramatic intensity in their vision of American life."[61] Wyler's Americanness, however, goes far beyond just his topics, settings, and themes. Bazin states,

> Wyler wants only to allow him [the viewer] . . . to see everything [and] . . . make choices . . . This is an act of loyalty toward the viewer, a pledge of dramatic honesty . . . Wyler aims at being liberal and democratic, like the consciences both of American viewers and of characters.[62]

Bazin's comment asserts that the Wyler style of filmmaking is the very embodiment of what it means to be an American.

During his retirement, Wyler was given the Life Achievement Award by the American Film Institute in 1976. Upon accepting this honor, he told the audience that he had not stopped making films—his wife, Talli, and he travelled greatly and he always took his home camera with him. He took that bit of information as an opportunity to address the issue that had always dogged him and still does to this day. "By no longer being burdened with great and famous cinematographers . . . by doing everything myself, I have at last become the complete and genuine auteur," and while acknowledging that during his career, he had not been an auteur, nonetheless, he was "one of the few directors who can pronounce the word correctly."[63] William Wyler died in 1981 at the age of seventy-nine; his legacy, a career in cinema that spanned over forty-five years and included, depending on whose list you look at, thirty-seven feature films.

In identifying Wyler's legacy, Stephen Armstrong would describe him as quite simply a pioneer in storytelling.[64] Herman says: "His pictures not only resonate with poetry and humor, they offer psychological maturity and sophisticated treatment of character more typical of literature than movies."[65]