



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

A Farewell to Arms

Ernest Hemingway's story of a doomed love affair between an American ambulance driver and a nurse is turned into a full-blown tearjerker by Frank Borzage. With luminous close-ups of Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes, kissing as bombs explode behind them and grand, swooping camerawork, Borzage evokes a glamour and exoticism more in keeping with old-style silent films than early talkies. The formal inventiveness, which helped the film to a Best Cinematography Oscar, is apparent throughout. At one stage, we're treated to shots of chins and ceilings as the camera takes the point of view of the patient on a stretcher. At another, the lens stands in for Cooper's mouth – and Hayes plants a wet, sloppy kiss on it. Adolphe Menjou is excellent as Cooper's world-weary, womanising boss. Cooper himself shows his customary clumsy charm as the besotted lover, and the death-bed ending is guaranteed to melt the stoniest heart.

Sight & Sound, May 1997

Ernest Hemingway – who prided himself in a certain kind of tough-talking, no-nonsense honesty – had little time for Frank Borzage's *A Farewell to Arms*, adapted from the partly autobiographical novel he'd had published a couple of years previously.

But perhaps we shouldn't set too much store by his disdain: writers are often dismissive of adaptations of their work, especially if the story in question was, as here, based on personal memories and experiences. Besides, even if one accepts that a film isn't wholly faithful to its source, it doesn't automatically follow that it's not a good film. Let's not forget that some extremely fine movies have been made from not very good books, and that many great literary works have been deemed 'unfilmable'. The quality of the one has little to do with the quality of the other; it's possible that a film and its source may both be equally good (or equally bad, for that matter), but for entirely different reasons. A book and a film are not at all the same thing, and we expect and get different things from them.

So, in assessing Borzage's *A Farewell to Arms*, considerations of whether it's faithful to, or even as good as, the source novel are not of primary concern. What counts is surely how well the film works as a film. And I for one believe it works extremely well in that regard; it's a masterpiece, as fine as anything the now underrated Borzage made.

One of the finest and most successful American directors of the late 20s and 30s, he's now largely forgotten, partly because his films are rarely shown and so difficult to see, and partly, perhaps, because his distinctive, almost mystical brand of transcendent romanticism isn't fashionable (even though many filmgoers are perfectly happy to watch more recent works of a supposedly 'spiritual' nature).

Yet it's this very quality – his profound commitment to the passionate emotional lives of his characters, so strong that he often allows love to triumph, in its own incandescent way, over poverty, despair, oppression, even death itself – that makes his films so remarkably moving, and, somewhat unexpectedly, so remarkably modern.

A Farewell to Arms is a heartrendingly brilliant example of his artistry. It has a lot going for it anyway: sexy, insolent Gary Cooper as the American serving with the Italian ambulance brigade; Helen Hayes as the sweet but surprisingly direct British nurse he falls for; Adolphe Menjou as the protagonist's meddling, intriguingly jealous friend (he repeatedly calls the Coop character 'Baby' and stays awake at nights awaiting his return).

The evocation of the war-gutted landscape is memorable; though the opening scene may now show its age through the use of models, other sequences are distinguished by a nightmarishly strange Expressionism suggestive of a highly physical, agonised brutality. Lighting, composition, camera movement and choreography of the performers contribute to a *mise-en-scène* of enormously expressive intensity.

And then there is an astonishing climactic *Liebestod*. Whereas other filmmakers, as noted earlier, have tended to use the prospect of death as a button to produce tears, pity, anxiety or whatever in the viewer, and have avoided confronting the very real finality of a human's life on earth, Borzage gets in there and grapples with it, rather as a Carl Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman or Terence Davies might do. If they come to different conclusions, that's not what concerns me here; what matters is that in acknowledging the inevitability of death, their films tend to tell the truth as they see it. In Borzage's *A Farewell to Arms*, that truth is at once as painful, as regenerative and, finally, as unfathomably mysterious as love itself.

Geoff Andrew, bfi.org.uk, 30 May 2014

A contemporary review

This picture might well have been made only yesterday. It bears hardly any trace of age. In its total effect it is vivid, thrilling and poignant. The hopelessness of it all; the futility of war; the inevitability of the catastrophe are unerringly conveyed.

The direction is admirable. It has restraint, purpose, and sympathy. The acting is outstandingly good. Gary Cooper has never, before or since, given a better performance. He conveys with his slightly diffident manner a great capacity for suffering, half revealed and half unexpressed, and the bewilderment resentment and despair of the ordinary man caught up in a tragedy beyond his comprehension. Helen Hayes is almost equally good. She brings a gay courage and a wistful charm to her part, and it is a pleasure to listen to her voice. The camera-work is imaginative and interesting, and the war scenes are most effectively staged.

Monthly Film Bulletin, July 1938

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Directed by: Frank Borzage

Production Company: Paramount Productions

Production by: Frank Borzage

Screen Play by: Benjamin Glazer, Oliver H.P. Garrett

From the novel by: Ernest Hemingway

Photographed by: Charles Lang

uncredited

Associate Producer: Benjamin F. Glazer

Business Manager: Daniel Keefe

Assistant to Benjamin Glazer: Jean Negulesco

Assistant Directors: Lew Borzage, Arthur Jacobson, Charles Griffin

Script Clerk: Grace Dubray

Casting Director: Fred Datig

Camera Operator: Robert Pittack

Assistant Camera: Clifford Shirpser

Stills: Sherman Clark

Transparencies: Farciot Edouart

Film Editors: Otho Lovering, George Nicholls Jr

Art Director: Roland Anderson

Props: Joe Thompson, Clem Jones

Costumes: Travis Banton

Wardrobe: Ed Gross

Music: Ralph Rainger, John Leipold, Bernard Kaun,

Paul Marquardt, Herman Hand, W. Franke Harling

Sound Recordist: Harold Lewis

Technical Adviser on War Sequences: Charles Griffin

Technical Adviser Hospital Sequences: Dr A. Jardini

Transportation/Props: Joe Robbins

General Press Agent: Robert M. Gillham

Cast

Helen Hayes (*Catherine Barkley*)

Gary Cooper (*Lieutenant Frederic Henry*)

Adolphe Menjou (*Captain Rinaldi*)

Mary Phillips (*Helen Ferguson*)

Jack La Rue (*the priest*)

Blanche Friderici (*head nurse*)

Mary Forbes (*Miss Van Campen*)

Gilbert Emery (*British major*)

uncredited

Henry Armetta (*Bonello*)

Peggy Cunningham (*Molly*)

Doris Lloyd (*nurse*)

George Humbert (*Piani*)

Agostino Borgato (*Giulio, the porter*)

Paul Porcasi (*Harry, the headwaiter*)

Herman Bing (*post office clerk*)

Alice Adair (*café girl*)

Fred Malatesta (*Manera*)

Thomas Ricketts (*Count Greffi*)

Robert Cauterio (*Gordoni*)

Gino Corrado

USA 1932©

90 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

A Farewell to Arms

Sun 1 May 12:00; Mon 16 May 18:15; Tue 24 May 20:50

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Mon 2 May 12:20; Mon 30 May 18:20

Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)

Tue 3 May 14:30; Sat 7 May 15:00; Sat 21 May 11:10; Wed 25 May 18:00

The River

Wed 4 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large; Sun 15 May 15:10

El Sur (The South)

Thu 5 May 14:30; Mon 16 May 18:10

Daughters of the Dust

Fri 6 May 20:50; Fri 20 May 14:40; Thu 26 May 20:40

Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawaat)

Sat 7 May 18:10; Thu 12 May 20:50

Still Walking (Aruitemo aruitemo)

Sun 8 May 15:15; Wed 11 May 17:50 + intro by Dr Alexander Jacoby, Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies; Mon 23 May 20:45

The Long Day Closes

Mon 9 May 18:30; Sun 22 May 12:30; Thu 26 May 20:50

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)

Tue 10 May 20:50; Thu 19 May 18:10; Wed 25 May 20:50; Fri 27 May 18:20

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Fri 13 May 20:45; Tue 17 May 20:50; Sat 28 May 18:15

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sat 14 May 14:45; Wed 18 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large

The Miracle Worker

Tue 17 May 14:30; Sun 29 May 11:20

The Incredible Shrinking Man

Thu 19 May 14:30; Tue 31 May 18:20

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