Classic film takes honest look at capitalism

By Oliver Spivey

Carrie (1952) is the sleppiest title in director William Wyler’s distinctive catalog. Wyler was at home doing just about any type of film and he didn’t back away from controversial material: marital disintegration in Dodsworth (1936), lesbianism in The Children’s Hour (1961), post-war disillusionment in The Best Years of Our Lives (1946) and even homo-erotic undertones in Ben-Hur (1959).

His prestige as an award-winning director of award-winning casts and crews allowed him a lot of control over not only directorial decisions, but also over scripts and screenwriters (even though Samuel Goldwyn forced him to tack on the sappy “ghost lovers” ending for 1939’s Wuthering Heights). Wyler, based on Theodore Dreiser’s naturalist novel Sister Carrie, may have been too better a pill for 1952 audiences to swallow considering its severely honest look at American culture circa 1900. In the ’50s, any movie questioning the American way of life was immediately suspect. You might be a communist if...

The film may have been overly depressing for an American public that yearned for more romantic escapism, it was not Wyler’s most popular movie for sure. Wyler gave them something more to their liking the following year with the much cherished Roman Holiday. Literary purists may not like the way scenes are shuffled and truncated in Carrie, but the final film still retains—though somewhat muted—Dreiser’s interest in the inescapable psycho-sexual drives that motivate human actions and his underlying critique of American consumerism.

The lovely Jennifer Jones is fine as Carrie, the country girl sent off by her parents to live with her sister in a bustling Chicago. We see how exhausting life for the lower class—particularly if you’re the females of the lower class—must have been. Carrie slaves away for lit- erally pennies in a shoe factory and is fired on the spot for getting her finger caught in the sewing machine.

Edgar Albert (from TV’s “Green Acres”) plays the cowly cad, Charlie Drouet. Through gifts and sweet talk he worms his way into the naive Carrie’s life, eventually moving her into his apartment. It’s obvious Charlie has no love for Carrie; she is simply another commodity that can be had for a price, not unlike the products he sells as a traveling salesman.

Oliver as the ill-fated Hurstwood delivers a wonderfully modulated performance, perhaps his best in any American film. When he decides to abandon it all for Carrie, we can’t help siding with his recklessness.

But his decisions to steal $10,000, abandon his controlling wife and abandon with Drouet’s Carrie to New York lead him to one of the most pitiful downfalls ever captured on film.

After being forced to give back what was left of the money stolen from his boss, the once dapper and managerial Hurstwood takes a descent into the dregs of society he scours the streets looking for any signs of possible work; his formerly elegant attire is reduced to tatters, and worst of all, the young Carrie is becoming rest- less and losing faith in the man who once promised her everything.

Much of Hurstwood’s tragedy is due to the con- tenant lies he tells Carrie to smooth over the rough reality of their life. Can we really blame the youthful Carrie for her eventual decision to leave the older Hurstwood? The pensive Hurstwood wish- es to recapture the romance of youth that’s now absent in his middle age, while Carrie still has her whole life ahead of her.

Dreiser’s original crit- icism of capitalism is implied through the establish- ment of the principal characters in the film. Drouet, as a middle-class salaried, flaunts materialist values and sees new clothes and fancy dinners as the way to possess Carrie (treated essentially like a pricey prostitute), the upper-class Hurstwood’s plummet into poverty can be seen as reflecting the unstable nature of a market society, and Carrie, embodying the working class, faces discrimination and ill- treatment in the capital- ist’s factories.

Wyler spreads some intriguing motifs throughout the film, such as hav- ing characters stand on or under stairways denoting the ups-and-downs of economic success. He uses the image and sound of trains, symbols of tran- sient American enterprise, at the start of the first, sec- ond and third acts of the film to signify a personal change about to take place in the lives of the charac- ters.

Carrie is an outstand- ing film all around. It’s a chance to see Oliver in one of his most affecting and understated roles, a chance to hear the great David Rakin’s potently wishful score and a chance to watch it all come together under the sea- soned direction of one of Hollywood’s most cele- brated directors. What more could a movie lover want?