

Counsellor-at-Law

“Counsellor-at-Law” (1932) was a triumph for its star—John Barrymore—and a breakthrough film for its director—William Wyler. Even at a distance of more than 80 years, it holds up extremely well.

Based on a hit play of the same name by Elmer Rice, the film is physically very confined: it all takes place on one elaborate, Art-Deco set representing an up-scale Manhattan law firm. Yet, far from seeming stage bound, the movie whistles along, abetted by a terrific script, supple camera work, and a breezy pace.

Rice himself rewrote the screenplay, and he makes it zing. The film’s hero is a hustling, up-from-the-slums Jewish lawyer, George Simon (Barrymore). He’s made it big but has never lost sight of his humble roots. Simon adores his socialite wife, Cora (Doris Kenyon) who ignores him and thinks him below her station yet depends considerably on his super-loyal private secretary Remy (Bebe Daniels), who has a soft spot for the boss (in the photo below, the three principals are shown). His day swirls around the lives of the lowly (like his sweet mother Lena, played by Clara Langster), the colorful (several typical New York characters) and the high-toned, like his wife’s suave “friend” Roy Darwin (Melvyn Douglas).

The decisions and dilemmas of the lawyer’s life are very effectively rendered, and drama is introduced when he is confronted with a legal scandal of yars past. Dialogue is quicksilver



fast, demanding that the audience pay much more attention than is necessary for most current films. One must stay alert and stick with it as the film chronicles a crisis in this one lawyer’s life.

Veteran film critic Pauline Kael captured the film’s solid qualities. She considered it a good example of the “well-made play of the period”: i.e., “energetic, naive, melodramatic, good-hearted, and full of gold-diggers, social climbers, and dedicated radicals.” It “preserved the

theatrical style of the time.”

Some movie commentators think that Barrymore’s career peaked in silent films, when he was more a handsome swashbuckler than an actor. His sound career ended early (he died from drink and other causes in 1942 at 60), but the early 1930’s offered him decent roles in elaborate MGM productions like “Rasputin” and “Grand Hotel.” In “Counsellor-at-Law,” he dominates scenes as he did in few other of his movies, showing the verve he could display when the camera didn’t simply concentrate on his legendary Great Profile.

Barrymore eventually acted out his own self-destruction right on the screen. As early as the star-studded “Dinner at Eight” (also released in 1933), he played a parody of himself as an

aging ham actor and a posturing drunk heading for a flashy suicide. In one of his last films, he directly mocked his own legend in “The Great Profile” (1940).

Before he fell into total dissipation, Barrymore displayed a sharp tongue. He said once that he “liked to be introduced as America’s foremost actor; it saves me the necessity of further effort.” On the stage, he could be caustic—he once threw a fish at a coughing audience, yelling “busy yourselves with that, you damned walruses!” When a student once asked him if, in his view, Ophelia ever slept with Hamlet, he replied, after much thought...”Only in the Chicago company...”

This movie was the first important film by director William Wyler, one of Hollywood’s most legendary craftsmen. Wyler, a Swiss born in the Alsace, got into the movie business in Hollywood before he was 20 and ended up fashioning many stellar films over a 45-year career. It was during this film—he was just over 30--that Wyler’s reputation as an implacable perfectionist was made; one scene with Barrymore was said to need 56 takes—leading to the legend of “Ninety-take Wyler.”

Wyler made many memorable films, including three stand-outs with Bette Davis: “Jezebel,” “The Letter,” and “The Little Foxes.” He directed one of the most famous war-at-home movies, “Mrs. Miniver” (1942) and probably the most famous after-the-war movie, “The Best Years of Our Lives” (1946). And he went on to make many other well-known films—“Roman Holiday,” “Friendly Persuasion,” “Ben Hur,” and “Funny Girl”—before retiring in 1972.

(The film is not rated, though the dialogue is frisky, and it runs a fleet 82 minutes.)