WEEK 45, 2021

THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

PUBLIC DOMAIN

The man who conquered the world: Alexander the Great. "Entry of Alexander into Babylon, or The Triumph of Alexander," 1665, by Charles Le Brun. Louvre Museum.

HISTORY

How Alexander the Great Became Great, Part 1

The man who conquered the known world of his time

EVAN MANTYK

When high school teachers in schools today discuss Alexander the Great, it is a sad reality that most students will know very little. One student may offer an odd tidbit: "Wasn't Alexander the Great killed by a mosquito?" Well, the ancient Greek hero may have contracted malaria from a mosquito leading to his death, but there are other equally plausible causes of his death. More importantly, is that all the student knows about one of the greatest heroes to walk the earth?!

Alexander left a cultural legacy that would be inherited by the Romans.

Understanding Alexander the Great and, frankly, his awesomeness is understanding where we are as human beings. In his good qualities, we celebrate and aspire, and in his failures, we grow wiser and therefore spiritually richer.

Alexander the Great

I've termed Alexander the Great an ancient Greek hero, though technically he was a Macedonian, coming from that nation just north of Greece. Yet the Macedonian culture is what we generally think of as Greek culture, including speaking the Greek language, worshiping the same gods, and viewing Greeks as their compatriots in the struggle against the menacing Persians.

In the fourth century before Christ, this struggle was the defining issue of the day. Next to the relatively tiny area of Greece and Macedonia, there was the behemoth of the Persian Empire stretching from modern-day Turkey next to Europe down to Egypt in Northern Africa all the way to the Indus River in today's Pakistan. Alexander's people lived for centuries in the Persian Empire's shadow, having twice been invaded in the previous century and having twice successfully turned back the Persian invaders.

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GENERIC MAPPING TOOLS/CC BY-SA 3.0

Map of Alexander's empire and his route.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"Alexander the Great Founding Alexandria" by Placido Costanzi.

LITERATURE

‘Live Forever!’: A Look at Ray Bradbury

JEFF MINICK

He wrote story after story about space travel, but he never got a driver’s license and didn’t drive a car.

He lacked the money to go to college, but he possessed the will to get himself an education. As he later said, “I spent three days a week for ten years educating myself in the public library.”

In his stories, he predicted the invention of technologies like video surveillance, widescreen televisions, automated houses, cellphones, and EarPods, yet he was also a severe critic of our dependence on machines. Near the end of his life, he said: “We have too many cellphones. We’ve got too many internets. We have got to get rid of those machines. We have too many machines now.”

He loved books and, in his work, celebrated authors like Thomas Wolfe, Edgar Allen Poe, William Shakespeare, and Emily Dickinson, yet he also warned of a decline in reading and literacy. “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture,” he said. “Just get people to stop reading them.”

And unlike many of his literary contemporaries, he found much to love in America and Americans. “Americans are far more remarkable than we give ourselves credit for,” he once stated. “We’ve been so busy damning ourselves for years. We’ve done it all, and yet we don’t take credit for it.”


Bradbury (1959) had some of his short stories adapted for television shows, such as “Alfred Hitchcock Presents.”
PUBLIC DOMAIN

Accomplishments

Ray Bradbury (1920–2012) wrote novels, hundreds of short stories, plays, poems, screenplays, operas, and essays. Some of these became motion pictures, and some of his own stories he adapted for the television series “The Ray Bradbury Theater.” He helped develop Disney’s Epcot Center and was acquainted with many Hollywood luminaries.

For these accomplishments, Bradbury received numerous awards, including a Pulitzer Prize citation honoring his “prolific and deeply influential” achievements. Because of stories like “The Martian Chronicles,” the Apollo 15 crew named a crater on the moon Dandelion after his novel “Dandelion Wine,” and an asteroid won the name 9766 Bradbury in his honor.

Passion, Gusto, and Stability

Several factors account for Bradbury’s enormous output and popularity with readers. The first is the innocence of his imagination. By this I mean that in many ways the man never left behind his boyhood in Waukegan, Illinois. Though he moved to Los Angeles at age 14 and remained a lifelong resident of that city, it was in Waukegan that he fell in love with storytelling, with writers like the creator of Tarzan and the John Carter of Mars books, Edgar Rice Burroughs. And Bradbury developed as well the passions that appear in so many of his stories: Hollywood and the movies, dinosaurs, Buck Rogers, and Halloween. To pay homage to his boyhood and the town, he willed his extensive collection of books to the Waukegan Public Library.

In addition, Bradbury also thought—and said so many times—that writing should be fun. Back in the age of Neanderthal technology, I heard an interview on an audio cassette with Bradbury. I don’t remember the interviewer’s name—he struck me as a supercilious man—but I still remember the excitement in Bradbury’s voice when he said that if writing’s not fun, then why do it? I’d never heard a writer say that before, and it deeply impressed me. In “Zen in the Art of Writing,” Bradbury also remarks, “If you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without fun, you are only half a writer.”

Finally, despite his many adventures—his time in Ireland with director John Huston when they were filming “Moby Dick,” his visits to movie sets and science fiction and fantasy conventions, and his work with Disney World—Bradbury otherwise led a life of routine and writing. He was married for 56 years to his beloved Marguerite McClure, or Maggie, without the marital brawls that plague so many such unions.

Such stability enhances production and creativity.

An Enemy of Oppression

Today, many Americans from across the political spectrum are dismayed by political correctness and its sidekick, cancel culture.

Ray Bradbury was a longtime outspoken opponent of attempts to repress speech and block the free flow of ideas. “Fahrenheit 451,” his popular novel about a fireman in the future whose job is to burn books and thereby destroy the ideas and history of the past, was published in 1953 and remains in print today. The central theme of the novel is censorship and mind control, as may be seen in these lines: “If you don’t want a house built, hide the wood and nails. If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none.”

In the “Coda” in my copy of “Fahrenheit 451,” which is a 50th-anniversary edition, Bradbury denounces all the ways some readers have objected to his stories: not enough women, mention of God, dislike for his depictions of minorities. He writes:

> “For it is a mad world, and it will get madder if we allow the minorities, be they dwarf or giant, orangutan or dolphin, nuclear-head or water-conversationalist, pro-computerologist or Neo-Luddite, simpleton or sage, to interfere with aesthetics.”

Red, White, and Blue

We may read Bradbury and overlook just how deeply American his writing is. In “The Martian Chronicles,” for example, he tells the story of human beings leaving Earth to settle on the Red Planet. But the story also reverberates with the English, French, and others emigrating from Europe to found colonies in America. In fact, I once used this novel, which is a collection of stories, to kick off a class in American history when I was a teacher.

His exuberant coming-of-age novel, “Dandelion Wine,” inspired by his Waukegan boyhood, depicts life in the fictional town of Green Hill, Illinois, in the 1920s. Like Thornton Wilder’s play “Our Town,” Bradbury’s story may idealize American life, but the setting and the outlook of the characters—12-year-old Doug Spaulding and his family and friends—are quintessentially American.

Like many other Americans of his time, Bradbury was at heart an optimist, in love with his work and the world around him, and he often became dismayed or angry when his fellow citizens, especially the media, the academics, and other critics, forgot the greatness of this country.

In his 1998 article “The Affluence of Despair: America Through the Looking Glass,” which can be found in his collection of essays “Bradbury Speaks,” he takes to task those anti-American commentators “whose lips spew not diamonds and emeralds, but spiders, frogs, and toads; each time they open their mouths, they spoil the ecology.”

He then points out that we have helped ruin ourselves by listening to these “confessors of our dark souls” and concludes with these words:

EYESONMILAN/SHUTTERSTOCK

Ray Bradbury’s books have been translated all over the world. Here they appear in English and Italian in a Milan shop.

> “We have condemned ourselves. Now we must save ourselves. No one else can. Shut off the set. Write your local TV news-people. Tell them to go to hell. Take a shower. Go sit on the lawn with friends.”

Good advice in 1998. Even more apropos in 2021.

A Magic Moment

When he was 12 years old, Ray Bradbury sprinted through the streets of Waukegan to a carnival, where a Mr. Electrico was performing. Here is his account of what happened that day:

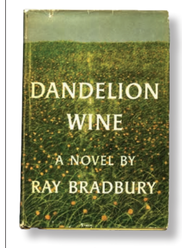
> “I ran so hard I tasted iron, and my heart exploded as I arrived at the sideshow where I stared openmouthed at Mr. Electrico. A towering hawk-nosed figure with a fiery stare that put out your eyes, he spoke in tones I felt proclaimed God’s truth. With a flourish of his black cape, he ensconced himself in a wondrous electric chair, and an assistant threw a switch and proclaimed, ‘Here go ten million volts of pure fire, ten million volts of electricity into the flesh of Mr. Electrico!’
>
> “As the current surged through his body, his white hair billowed into a bright halo, his body seemed to glow and incandescent fire danced at his fingertips. I watched mesmerized as he picked up a silver sword, leaned down and with it touched me on both shoulders, then the tip of my nose. The electricity surged through me, making my hair stand on end. He shouted, ‘Live forever!’”

The next day, Bradbury returned to the carnival, tracked down Mr. Electrico, and asked him what he’d meant by “Live forever!” They talked for several hours about deep matters—Mr. Electrico, as it turned out, was a former Presbyterian minister—and in that conversation Bradbury learned that the carnival actor was telling him that life was sacred “and must be lived to the fullest. Each day, each hour was precious.”

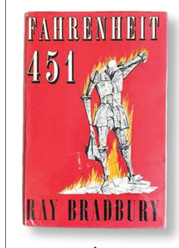
From that moment on, Bradbury began writing. Over the next many decades, he made the most of his time.

And while he himself did not live forever, Bradbury lives on in the words he left behind.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, “Amanda Bell” and “Dust on Their Wings,” and two works of nonfiction, “Learning as I Go” and “Movies Make the Man.” Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

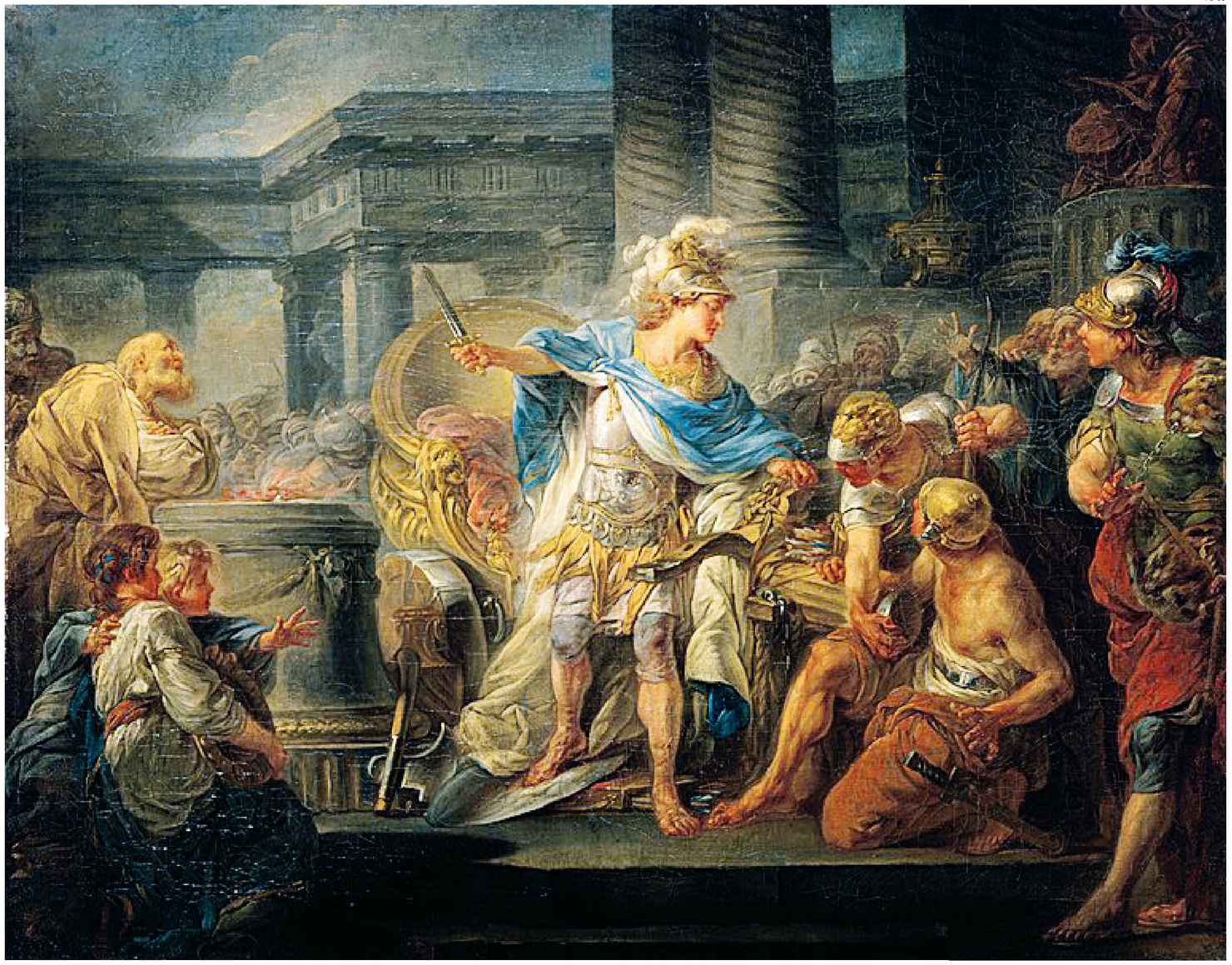


The Apollo 15 crew named a crater on the moon “Dandelion” after Ray Bradbury’s novel “Dandelion Wine.”



“Farenheit 451” is likely Bradbury’s most famous novel and was made into popular films in 1966 and 2018.

PD-US



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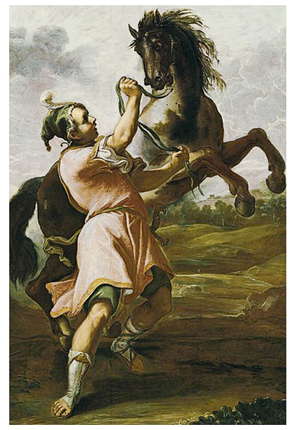
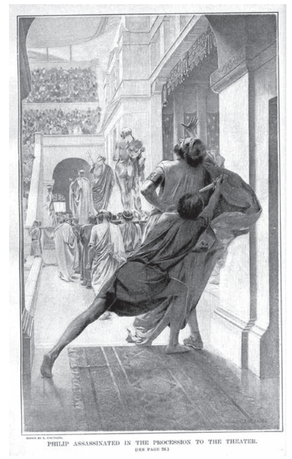


(Top) "Alexander and Bucephalus," between 1645 and 1684, by Domenico Maria Canuti. Private Collection.

(Left) With a simple thrust of his sword, Alexander the Great severed the Gordian knot and so fulfilled the oracular prophesy that whosoever untied the knot would become emperor of Asia Minor. "Alexander Cuts the Gordian Knot," circa 1767, by Jean-Simon Berthélemy. Beaux-Arts de Paris.

(Below) Pausanius assassinates King Philip II, Alexander the Great's father, during a procession into the theater, circa 1898, by Andre Castaigne.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



HERBERT BOSWANK/STATE ART COLLECTIONS, DRESDEN

"Portrait of an Older Man," circa 1435–40, by Jan van Eyck. Silverpoint and goldpoint on white prepared paper; 8 3/8 inches by 7 1/8 inches. Kupferstich-Kabinett, State Art Collections, Dresden.

HISTORY

How Alexander the Great Became Great, Part 1

The man who conquered the known world of his time

Continued from ***Page 1***

To add insult to injury, the Persians quite possibly played a supporting role in the assassination of Alexander's father, King Philip II. Thus, Alexander did the unthinkable: He took his far smaller army and—with its perfect discipline and simple yet effective fighting formation of locked shields and long spears known as the Macedonian phalanx—cut right through the Persian army in battle after battle until he was the king of world, at least as the Greeks had known the world to be.

He even went further, through the Khyber Pass in the Hindu Kush Mountains into India. He turned around only when his battered and homesick troops mutinied. Even then, he came back a different way, conquering as he went. And all of this was accomplished between the ages of 20 and 32!

Because of the success of his great undertaking, the culture of the Greek Golden Age, of Socrates's profound wisdom (which I have previously written about), exquisitely realistic sculptures, precedent-setting architecture, and tragedies and comedies that would later inspire Shakespeare were all preserved from the threat of destruction.

PD-US

"Alexander and Diogenes," between 1625 and 1630, by Gaspar de Crayer. Wallraf–Richartz Museum

Yet this enlightened, non-materialistic sentiment of Alexander seems contradicted by other stories of his tyrannical tendencies.

Alexander also founded the city of Alexandria in Egypt that, with its vast library and 40-story lighthouse, would be the intellectual and economic center of Western civilization for centuries, leaving a cultural legacy that would be inherited by the Romans in their republic and empire. All of that, in brief, is why Alexander is great.

How Did Alexander Become Great?

How exactly the man did all that is another question. The popular narratives today gives us very little in response. On the negative side of the spectrum of these popular ideas, he was an imperialistic white man oppressing others wherever he went. On the positive side he was a carefree, flamboyant youth, driven perhaps by testosterone, with an unparalleled sense of adventure.

This latter interpretation is bolstered by the fact that out of Alexander's extraordinary life emerged an incredible array of fabulous stories and legends. For instance, when he was a boy, an unruly horse was brought to his kingdom and shunned by his father. But Alexander keenly observed that the horse was literally afraid of its own shadow and could be settled by calmly turning it away from its shadow. The story goes that Alexander turned this wild beast into his faithful steed, Bucephalus, who followed him into battle after battle.

It is also said the Alexander, who was tutored by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, was so enamored with the ancient epic poems of Homer that, when first entering the Persian Empire, he chose to land at the ancient site of Troy spoken of in Homer's "Iliad" while his army landed elsewhere.

Later on, during his conquering, Alexander is said to have encountered the Gordian knot. It was an enormous knot of rope on an old chariot, and legend had it that whoever could untie it would be ruler of the world. Alexander took one look and then cut off the knot, successfully untying it, sort of, and leaving behind the phrase "cutting the Gordian knot"—meaning, solving a complicated problem with a solution that is simple and a bit rough.

There too is the story of Alexander meeting a homeless philosopher lying in the street, Diogenes, who asks Alexander to please stop blocking his sun. Alexander is inspired by Diogenes's complete disregard for earthly wealth and status, so much so that he says, "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes."

Yet this enlightened, non-materialistic sentiment of Alexander seems contradicted by other stories of his tyrannical tendencies, such as the one in which a philosopher tells Alexander that the world we live in is but one of an uncountable number of worlds, and to which Alexander begins crying because he cannot conquer them all.

Now, whether fictional or factual, all of these are splendid flourishes in the tapestry of history. However, they don't coherently or reliably tell us how Alexander became so great. On their own, they take us down that path of bizarre and pointless triviality, such that all a student can remember is one ridiculously insignificant possibility for how Alexander the Great died.

Therefore, it is instructive to turn our attention to the earliest historical source on Alexander the Great: Diodorus Siculus (90–30 B.C.), who was a Greek historian writing centuries before all other surviving sources. From Diodorus, we can reliably find those defining characteristics that truly present to us the story of Alexander the Great. Specifically these characteristics, or virtues, are what I term brotherhood, good manners, and faith. But what exactly do these terms mean? We will take a closer look next time.

Evan Mantyk is an English teacher in New York and president of the Society of Classical Poets.

EVERETT COLLECTION/SHUTTERSTOCK

Aristotle, who taught Alexander the Great, believed the practice of virtue to be the foundation of good leadership.

A US First: Flemish Master Jan van Eyck's Only Surviving Drawing Is in New York

LORRAINE FERRIER

Anyone who has seen a Jan van Eyck painting up close will be in no doubt of his brilliance at depicting every inch of detail in luminous oils. He perfected the medium. But few people would have had the opportunity to see van Eyck's draftsmanship in person.

Only one van Eyck drawing survives: "Portrait of an Older Man," in the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden, Germany.

Over 580 years old, the drawing in goldpoint and silverpoint, is the earliest study attributed to a Northern European artist. Van Eyck autographed the work, making it the only drawing universally accepted as signed by the artist. Due to the drawing's fragility, it's rarely displayed.

Remarkably, this exceptional drawing is now on U.S. soil and is on display at The Morgan Library & Museum through mid-January, as part of a special exhibition. "Van Eyck to Mondrian: 300 Years of Collecting in Dresden" celebrates the 300th anniversary of the Kupferstich-Kabinett's founding collection. All works on display are drawings; among the traditional ones are works by Lucas Cranach the Elder, Hans Holbein the Younger, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Peter Paul Rubens.

"The immediacy and intimacy of the medium [drawing] allows us to reconstruct the mark-making ... inviting us to watch over the artist's shoulder at the moment of creation," exhibition curator Austeja Mackelaite said in the press release. Mackelaite is the Morgan's Annette and Oscar de la Renta assistant curator of drawings and prints.

The Drawing

Van Eyck's study "Portrait of an Older Man" is a preparatory drawing for the painting of the same name, held by the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. This remarkable drawing allows us to see a little of how van Eyck diligently studied his subjects in preparation for painting. He paid fastidious attention to detail. "His eye was at one and the same time a microscope and a telescope," art historian Erwin Panofsky is quoted as saying.

The study somewhat demonstrates what Panofsky meant. It is a working document, full of observations necessary for van Eyck to paint a realistic portrait. He rendered the man in three-quarter view, a portrait style he pioneered, as most of his Italian peers used the profile view in portraits.

In goldpoint and silverpoint, he conveyed the inner warmth of the unknown man, as he gazes into the middle distance, with a slight smile on his lips.

On the left side of the drawing, van Eyck wrote detailed notes describing the specific details, tones, and colors of the face, such as "the apple of the eye, around the pupil" is "dark yellowish, and in its circumference, close to the white, bluish."

Van Eyck knew his optics as evidenced in his paintings. But here in this study, just using gold- and silverpoint, he managed to convey how the light hit the man's face, without any use of color.

The chance to see this fragile drawing in America is perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The Morgan Library & Museum exhibition "Van Eyck to Mondrian: 300 Years of Collecting in Dresden," runs until Jan. 23, 2022. To find out more, visit TheMorgan.org

MUSIC

Is Your Piano in Tune?

The noble craft of piano tuning

MICHAEL KUREK

STEVEN FRAME/SHUTTERSTOCK

In the past, pianos were a cherished item in the home.

A little more than a generation ago, in the days of classic TV, comic books, and ping-pong tables, it was still fairly common for a kid's weekly regimen to include a piano lesson with a private teacher. That required their homes to have a piano. Inexpensive electronic keyboards did not find their way into toy departments and common usage until the 1980s, when the first Casio was invented, and even then many homes still proudly displayed an acoustic upright piano as their nicest, well-polished piece of furniture.

At that time, the number of new pianos sold each year in America was roughly halfway between the peak of over 360,000 sold in 1909 and around 50,000 sold in 2007. However, that does not include private sales of used pianos, which presumably could be even greater in number.

It is impossible to know how many acoustic pianos are sitting untouched in homes today, gathering dust, or out of tune. I like to think, though, that many of those noble instruments retain their pride of place in living rooms and are still lovingly played by those kids, now grown, or by their own progeny.

Enter the Piano Tuner

A regularly played piano in good working condition needs to be tuned at least once a year to hold its tuning. If a piano sits for 10 years without being tuned, it will not hold its pitch for long after it is finally tuned. However, after a few more tunings done more frequently, it can begin to hold its pitch again. And that is where the piano tuner comes in.

Piano tuners are now, more correctly, called "piano technicians," because they are qualified to do more than just tune. They can, for example, get nonworking keys working again, and adjust the felt hammers as well as the harshness or brightness of the tone.

Depending on the piano, the bottom octave or two of bass notes has only one thick string per piano key, while in the middle register there can be two thinner strings for each pitch, and then three even thinner strings for each pitch in the higher octaves. The main reason for having more of the thinner strings on the higher pitches is that they are not as loud, so it takes more of them to match the volume of the lower, thicker strings played with the same touch.

Every string must be individually tuned. Where there are three strings for the same piano key, they need to match each other not only perfectly in pitch but also in tone, and this requires a keen ear.

I paid $85 for the most recent basic tuning of my piano, which was not far out of tune. It took under an hour, but in some places you can expect to pay from $100 to $120, and you will pay even more if any repairs or adjustments to key action are needed.

To ensure quality, it is important to hire a tuner who is officially registered with the Piano Technicians Guild, based in Kansas City, Kansas. The guild require tuners to pass a series of rigorous tests, both on paper and under live observation, in order to be certified. The medieval word "guild" implies, rightly in this case, a voluntary and self-regulated association of true artisans who take pride in their noble craft.

From the time I was a small child, I was always fascinated to watch our family's piano tuner remove various wood panels to expose the mysterious inner workings of the instrument. He then very methodically moved his tools from one string to another. At last, he rewarded my patience by demonstrating his work with a ragtime piece by Scott Joplin or a popular classic like "Stardust," fully decorated with flamboyant arpeggios.

Back then, tuners often used only tuning forks to test the pitches, or even perfect-pitch perception. Now, although they still use their ears a great deal, most also have electronic tuning devices or even phone apps to indicate the precise frequency (pitch) of the strings.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL KUREK

Nashville piano technician Kenny Wallace tuning the author's piano with an electronic tuning device.

According to the guild's website, the basic skills of tuning can be learned in 50 to 100 hours, usually over two to six months, but truly mastering those skills can take up to two years. A good set of the exotic-looking tools of their trade can typically cost $1,000.

A full-time freelance piano technician can earn from $50,000 to over $100,000 per year. In university music departments, there are also many full-time positions with benefits, having so many pianos in constant need of maintenance.

According to the guild, tuners are in short supply now, so it is not a bad profession to consider, whether full time or part time, for industrious young pianists who may not quite earn a living wage by performing.

Piano tuners are in short supply now, so it is not a bad profession to consider.

A Former Career Specialty of the Visually Impaired

Piano tuning was once a hallowed and traditional profession of blind and partially sighted persons. They still have, as their professional organization, the ABPT, Association of Blind Piano Tuners, internationally based in the U.K. That tradition, however, appears to be a dying one, as that training and the number of visually impaired students pursuing it has dramatically decreased.

I had the opportunity to interview Judy Denning, a retired member of the music faculty of the Tennessee School for the Blind (TSB), which offered training in this skill until 1985. According to Denning:

"Piano tuning was a part of the TSB curriculum from approximately 1870 until 1985. It was discontinued then, simply because the man who had taught it for decades became ill, and by then no one else could be found to teach it. However, at that time, electronic keyboards had become very popular, anyway, so it might not have been considered as good a job market for the blind as it had been previously. During its viable years, several hundred students were involved in that program, and many became piano tuners, as it was considered a good job for blind people. Only boys were involved in that training."

Mark Newman, a still-working, blind piano tuner referred to me by Denning, confirmed by phone that there are few like him remaining. He received his training from 1983 to 1985 at the E.H. Gentry School in Talladega, Alabama. For many years, accompanied to each home by a driver, he tuned over 500 pianos a year, and he still tunes one or two a week.

Without sight, he never employed an electronic tuner, and he emphasized that the ear should still be a sighted tuner's main tool. "You have to tune the higher end of the keyboard just a tiny bit higher than what the electronic tuning devices tell you, and listen with an experienced ear to the sound, in order for the instrument to really sound bright and good."

Presumably, as long as a demand for great piano music played on great acoustic pianos remains, including grand pianos in concert halls, people will be needed who know how to tune and maintain them. In the digital age, it remains an old-world craft requiring skills that a machine cannot replicate. Thus, it may be said that behind every great artist of piano playing stands, unseen, another artist: the piano tuner.

American composer Michael Kurek is the composer of the Billboard No. 1 classical album "The Sea Knows." The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit MichaelKurek.com

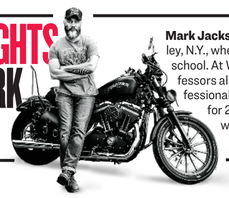
ARIADNA DE RAADT/SHUTTERSTOCK

Piano strings vary in thickness, depending on the pitch of the note.

GABRIEL DESTARAC/SHUTTERSTOCK

A neglected piano can begin to hold its pitch again, if tuned more often.

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Lady Diana, Great Britain's Candle in the Wind

MARK JACKSON

ALL PHOTOS BY CLAIRE TIMMONS/NEON/TOPIC STUDIOS UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

(L–R) Princess Diana (Kristen Stewart) and her children: Prince William (Jack Nielen) and Prince Harry (Freddie Spry).

Here's "Spencer" in a nutshell: It's a tour de force portrayal of a few days in the sad later life of Diana Frances Spencer, later known as Princess Diana of Wales (born July 1, 1961, in Sandringham, Norfolk, England—died August 31, 1997, in Paris, France) prior to her tragic car-accident death. Virtuoso acting compliments of Kristen Stewart.

Stewart, having risen to fame via the substantively lightweight but culturally impactful "Twilight" vampire movie series, has been dogged to this day as having minimal acting chops.

If you belong to this camp of nonbelievers, you might, if for no other reason, want to consider viewing "Spencer" to see why it is that Stewart continues to be a world-dominating movie star. One does not simply walk into Mordor or Hollywood. One cannot not have talent and skill and walk the rarified ramparts of the world's premiere filmmaking castle, which, like it or not, is still Hollywood, for as long as she has.

Another reason to see the movie is to see how the other half lives—the other half being, of course, the British Royals. And a third reason would be to get an understanding of how one can be surrounded by untold riches; mansions and castles; a personal, mobile 5-star restaurant; a personal, mobile, constantly cutting-edge, upscale wardrobe; a huge family; a family history like no other; two healthy children; fame, no—beyond fame—prominence on the world stage; peerless security, that is, phalanxes of bodyguards (not to mention the entire British army); physical beauty; and the adoration of the entire world—in other words, the absolute pinnacle of what humans think should definitely, definitely, definitely provide happiness—and still be unbelievably miserable.

'Spencer': A Long Way From 'Elizabeth'

There's not much plot. "Spencer" is not a classic, full-life-spectrum biopic, choosing instead to get inside its subject's head and emotions by focusing on one specific moment in time—namely, a trio of days that are supposed to be a joyful, royal family Christmas gathering at Sandringham Castle, which is the traditional, private home of Queen Elizabeth II. At this time in 1987, Diana was contemplating divorcing Prince Charles (Jack Farthing) for his rumored marital infidelities with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall (Emma Darwall-Smith).

Kristen Stewart's performance is greater than the film itself.

'Spencer'

Director:
Pablo Larraín

Starring:
Kristen Stewart, Sean Harris, Timothy Spall, Jack Farthing, Jack Nielen, Freddie Spry, Stella Gonet, Sally Hawkins

Running Time:
1 hour, 51 minutes

MPAA Rating:
R

Release Date:
Nov. 5, 2021

★★★½☆

NEON/TOPIC STUDIOS

The movie poster for "Spencer" bespeaks of royal misery.

"Spencer" is also a view inside the gilded cage of the British royal institution that favors above all, a painstaking hewing to tradition, regardless of whether certain aspects have not only become outdated but also out-and-out ridiculous with the passing of time.

For example, there's a Windsor tradition started by some or other King Charles, long deceased, where Christmas holiday guests must be physically weighed before entering the family chambers, on an archaic set of scales. And reweighed again on the way out. Why? If a poundage gain due to feasting is noted, it is, er, scientific proof that the guest enjoyed him- or herself.

Such an inane procedure, kept as it is, in pristine, museum condition, could in and of itself point to problems within the current ruling class, but that's a different article. But now you have the requisite perspective on the free-spirited Diana's mindset in this utterly stultifying, claustrophobic setting. She's a small bird in a small gilded cage, hung inside the giant gilded cage of the lavish grounds, cavernous rooms, and numerous stiff-upper-lipped relatives populating the Sandringham estate.

She's Always Late

Hating deeply, as mentioned, the confines and strict royal regimen, Diana passive-aggressively gets herself hopelessly lost driving in her Porsche 911 convertible in the British countryside, instead of showing up for the royal dinner on time. She happens to come across a field with an ancient scarecrow that she herself put up as a child near her childhood home in Norfolk, which is situated close to Sandringham. It's still wearing her father's faded red coat. She must have that coat, and she hobbles off across the tilled field, in high heels, to fetch it.

This is the first of many instances of keeping the royal family and the queen waiting. "Spencer" is essentially a litany of instances of Diana acting out and rebelling against being constantly told what to wear, when to show up for every event, being driven up a wall, and trying to hide her bulimic binging and purging.

She rips a string of priceless pearls off her neck because Charles gave his mistress, Camilla, the exact same present, and she's even made to partake in Sunday church service with Camilla sitting a few pews away.

Diana can only really let her hair down around her sons, princes William (Jack Nielen) and Harry (Freddie Spry), and her royal dresser and confidante Maggie (Sally Hawkins, the lead actress in the Oscar-winning "The Shape of Water"), with whom she shares her emotional reality and deepest concerns. Royal chef Darren (Sean Harris), who rules the kitchen like a symphony orchestra conductor, also occasionally lends a sympathetic ear. And the former British military man assigned to follow her about and gently chide her, Maj. Alistair Gregory (Timothy Spall), tries diplomatically to impart his hard-won knowledge of how to sacrifice for queen and country.

And That's Basically It

Stewart is brilliant in the role, all soulful-eyed, tense-jawed, and wielding the posh Queen's English flawlessly. It's an edgy performance—edgy as in someone on the edge of a nervous breakdown—high-strung and brittle, and it puts us in Diana's head throughout. Princess Di even starts imagining the long dead, beheaded-by-King-Henry-the-Eighth Ann Boleyn, following Di around in period costume, attempting to warn her about what happens to wives in the House of Windsor who don't toe the line.

Stewart's performance is greater than the film itself, and its centerpiece, but there's fascination to be found in Diana's eye view of the yawning royal rooms, the oil paintings of the ancestors, the cornucopia of painstakingly created delectable foods proffered all day long to the family (and largely wasted), and the massive acreage kept specifically for the breeding of pheasants for the royal pheasant shooting. Many of the birds are shotgun-blasted and left to die. In fact, the movie's opening shot is a dead-pheasant-in-the-middle-of-the-road's eye view of the royal motorcade arriving at the castle. For me it was a stark case of, I've seen the Royals' job, and I don't want it.

Having written, prior to this review, about "Elizabeth" (British Queen Elizabeth I's reign), I find it interesting to see the progression from world-changing, cutting-edge British history and a queen who made a difference, to a time when the monarchy is more-or-less mothballed, mummified, and museum-like. Britain's current Queen Elizabeth II is Elizabeth I's first cousin, approximately 14 times removed. It's a perfect example of how "the more things change, the more they stay the same," in terms of the pomp and circumstance and family dysfunction.

Director Pablo Larraín, perhaps in homage to Kristen Stewart's vampire movie beginnings, treats Diana's story as somewhat of a horror story. The score often sounds like it could have been done for a vampire movie. Such sounds are contrasted with Diana's (Stewart's) beauty and the unimaginable luxury and privilege surrounding the Windsors, none of whom appear to enjoy any of it in the slightest.

"Spencer" certainly provides a context for better understanding the recent tribulations of Prince Andrew (Niklas Kohrt), who is briefly glimpsed in the film. That said, it also provides much food for thought, knowing, as we do, what happened to Diana shortly after leaving Charles.

It seems fitting to end with Elton John's lyric from his song "Candle in the Wind," which was originally about Marilyn Monroe, but which he transposed for Diana:

Goodbye England's rose
May you ever grow in our hearts
You were the grace that placed itself
Where lives were torn apart
Goodbye England's rose
From a country lost without your soul
Who'll miss the wings of your compassion
More than you'll ever know

Kristen Stewart portrays Diana as a bird in a gilded cage.

Princess Diana (Kristen Stewart, L) and Angela (Laura Benson), one of the royal dressers.

A completely lost Princess Diana (Kristen Stewart) flabbergasts the locals by showing up with no bodyguards and asking for directions.

AMERICAN TREASURES

Vaudeville
Family Friendly Entertainment

STEPHEN OLES

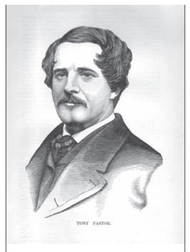
What do Houdini, Bob Hope, and Don the Talking Dog have in common? They all started out in vaudeville.

What was vaudeville? The word is French for a kind of comic song, but in North America it came to mean theatrical presentations of unrelated acts—singers, comics, dancers, magicians—and it dominated our popular culture for half a century, roughly 1880–1930.

Today, with every kind of music and show available instantly at the touch of a button, it's easy to forget that for all of human history, until about 1900, all entertainment was live. In the Middle Ages, for example, people found good music in church or went to a beer hall to hear a wandering minstrel. By the 19th century, owning a piano was both a status symbol and a way to make your own kind of music at home, with family and friends. A "musical evening" might feature a daughter on the piano, a son on violin, a cousin crooning Irish ballads, and an aunt warbling operetta.

But where, before 1900, could Americans find entertainment outside of the home? There were fairs, traveling circuses, and baffingly popular blackface minstrel shows serving up songs, jokes, and dancing.

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES



(Above) Tony Pastor, an American actor and theater manager, bought the 14th Street Theatre in 1881, which became known as Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth Street Theatre. He made vaudeville respectable and popular family entertainment.

(Right) Vaudeville, offering family entertainment, was the variety show of its day, with dancers, clowns, trapeze artists, costumed dogs, singers, and magicians, among many other acts. An 1894 promotional poster for the Sandow Trocadero Vaudevilles. U.S. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

COURTESY OF ELIZABETH/CLASSICACTRESSES

(Left) Singer Judy Garland (first R) began her career as Frances Gumm in vaudeville as part of The Gumm Sisters. In this circa 1930 promotional photo, she appears with her sisters.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

In the West, "medicine shows" drew crowds with music, fortunetelling, musclemen, and other attractions to sell "miracle elixirs" said to cure every affliction. (Disappointed customers coined a name for these products: snake oil!)

Variety

In cities and towns, saloons discovered that comedians and dancing girls brought in customers who stayed longer and drank more. These shows, called "variety" because they consisted of miscellaneous acts, pleased their rowdy, all-male audiences with vulgar songs and crude humor. Gambling and brawling abounded in the so-called concert saloons. No decent woman would be caught dead in such a place.

By the 1870s, theaters were offering variety and a former circus clown, Tony Pastor, had a thought. Variety, he realized, by playing only to men in drinking establishments, was missing half its potential audience. Could cleaner entertainment in a more wholesome setting attract ladies as well, maybe even children?

In 1881, Pastor began his experiment by moving his New York theater uptown, from the disreputable Bowery to Union Square. He laid down new rules: no drinking, no smoking, and no vulgarity on or off the stage. His biggest discovery was Helen Leonard, a pretty young singer from Iowa. Renamed Lillian Russell, she became the most famous woman in the country. As Charles Stein notes in his "American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries," decades later, she recalled:

"Everything in Pastor's was fresh and new. The seats were priced at a dollar and a half—the same as those in theaters which had drama or comic opera as their attractions. … Tony Pastor's Theatre set a standard that was unique and drew as many women as men. Every act was scrupulously clean and free from any suggestiveness."

Birth of Vaudeville

To distinguish his shows from variety, Pastor gave them a classy foreign name, "vaudeville," and they were a smash. Other promoters jumped in. After much dickering, merging, and backstabbing, they formed theater chains across the country.

Called "circuits," these chains offered performers steady work, as they moved from town to town. Successful managers like B.F. Keith and Edward Albee (grandfather of the playwright) were soon rivaled by others like Alexander Pantages, whose name still graces theaters in Minneapolis and Hollywood, and Marcus Loew, whose circuit eventually became AMC-Loews-Cineplex.

By the turn of the last century, vaudeville was so popular that many families, lured by the constantly changing bills, went two, three, or more times a week. It was television before television. At vaudeville's peak, according to S.D. Trav in "No Applause—Just Throw Money," Brooklyn, New York, alone boasted 53 vaudeville theaters. And Stein writes that nationwide there were more than a thousand. Performers came largely from working-class and immigrant families. Irish, Jewish, and Black Americans found opportunities in vaudeville denied them elsewhere.

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Bob Hope (R) began his career as a dancer in vaudeville. Here he is, circa 1921, with his partner Lloyd Durbin.

To distinguish his shows from 'variety,' theater owner Tony Pastor gave them a classy foreign name, 'vaudeville.'

Competition was fierce, not only between managers to sign the best talent but also between performers to outdo their rivals. Skill levels rose sharply, along with salaries. In variety, a singer was lucky to get $40 a week. Trav says that, in vaudeville, Lillian Russell earned $3,000 (in today's money, $80,000) a week!

The more skills you had, the more chances, so vaudevillians—whatever their particular act—learned to sing, dance, and do comedy. Many of the last century's biggest stars began in vaudeville doing something entirely different from what later made them famous. The Marx Brothers started out as a singing group. W.C. Fields was a juggler, Bob Hope a dancer, Jack Benny a violinist, and James Cagney a song-and-dance man. Cagney said later, "Everything I know I learned in vaudeville."

Vaudevillians worked hard, crisscrossing the country, cranking out as many as six shows a day. The constant touring was a grind. Hotel rooms were shabby or unheated. Performers stole from one another. Managers sacked them without warning, cheated them, or fined them for telling a racy joke or running over their time slot. Audiences could be bored, hostile, or both. George M. Cohan said, "The only thing I'm proud of about vaudeville is that I got out of it."

3 Surprising Stars

Frances Gumm made her stage debut at age 2, singing "Jingle Bells." Her mother, determined to make her daughters vaudeville stars, dragged them from theater to theater. In Los Angeles, she wangled an audition for the Gumm Sisters at MGM, but the studio bosses wanted only the little one, Frances. They changed her name to Judy Garland.

Archie Leach was an acrobat with a British troupe that came to America. Mae West spotted him outside the window of her studio office and made him her leading man for two films. That was the beginning of Hollywood legend Cary Grant.

Frederick Austerlitz and his sister Adele were dancers from Omaha, Nebraska. They did well on the Orpheum circuit and even better on Broadway until Adele, the star of the act, left show business to marry an English lord. Her brother despaired: What would he do now? His Hollywood screen test was a disaster. The report read: "Can't sing. Can't act. Balding. Can dance a little." He soon proved the naysayers wrong, however, as Fred Astaire.

The Legacy

By the 1920s, vaudeville was losing its biggest stars to Broadway and Hollywood. Films, initially shorts shown between vaudeville acts, became longer and better, until becoming the main attraction. Vaudeville venues, one after another, became movie theaters. By 1932 when New York's Palace Theatre, the crown jewel of vaudeville, switched to movies only, it was the end of an era.

But the legacy lived on. Vaudeville was an unbeatable training ground; its graduates became the 20th century's most beloved entertainers. Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Ginger Rogers, Milton Berle, Will Rogers, Mickey Rooney, Julie Andrews, Sammy Davis Jr., Burns & Allen, Laurel & Hardy, … the list is endless.

The eclectic spirit of vaudeville survived in Las Vegas and on TV, especially in variety shows like those of Ed Sullivan and Carol Burnett. Today, as we channel surf or click around YouTube, we create our own "mixed bills," not so different from the ones Americans enjoyed together over a century ago, in vaudeville.

Stephen Oles has worked as an inner city school teacher, a writer, actor, singer, and a playwright. His plays have been performed in London, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Long Beach, Calif. He lives in Seattle and is currently working on his second novel.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

American singer and actress Lillian Russell circa 1905. U.S. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

GOLDEN AGE FILMS

A Horrifying Code Film: 1941's 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'

TIFFANY BRANNAN

Halloween has now passed, and with it many horror film screenings. Although this movie genre began in the late 19th century, the term "horror" wasn't actually applied to motion pictures until the 1930s, when Universal Pictures' profitable streak of monster movies firmly established American horror films. Then in 1934, the Motion Picture Production Code sent Frankenstein, Dracula, and their fiendish friends back to their coffins.

While the 1934 Code, or rather the Production Code Administration's (PCA) enforcement of the Code, didn't ban horror films, it slowed down their output by insisting that violence be minimal and evil be punished. As a result, most ensuing horror films were subtle. Violence could be implied, but the lurid raciness in earlier horror stories was removed from Code remakes and sequels.

One unfortunate exception is "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" from 1941, starring Spencer Tracy. MGM's take on this 1886 Gothic novella was at least the 12th English-language film adaption of the story, following the John Barrymore (1920) and Fredric March (1931) versions. It was, however, the first Code version.

One would expect the 1941 Code film to be a restrained, tame telling of the tale, trading the horrific elements of earlier versions for a more cerebral approach. Instead, it's a shocking film that was, in some ways, more suggestive than its predecessors.

Why was such a film approved by the PCA? The answer is a fascinating story in itself.

Doctor Jekyll in 1941

When British physician Dr. Henry "Harry" Jekyll (Tracy) encounters a worker (Barton MacLane) who was shocked into insane depravity by an accident, Jekyll is inspired to pursue his theory that man's two natures—good and evil—are separable. When he rashly describes his experiments at a dinner party, his future father-in-law (Donald Crisp) is disturbed by his ideas.

Although deeply in love with Beatrix (Lana Turner), Jekyll is reluctant to give up his experiments. Walking home that night, he and his friend Dr. Lanyon (Ian Hunter) rescue lovely barmaid Ivy Peterson (Ingrid Bergman) from a violent suitor. Jekyll helps Ivy to her flat, nearly forgetting his engagement during their flirtation; his momentary temptation makes him resolve to complete his experiment.

Jekyll creates a successful formula, which turns him into a menacing embodiment of evil, Edward Hyde. When Beatrix's father takes her on a trip, away from the increasingly unconventional Jekyll, the frustrated scientist visits Ivy as the lustful Hyde. He proceeds to get Ivy fired and instead abusively supports her himself, secretly maintaining a dual life. However, when Beatrix returns, Jekyll realizes that Mr. Hyde is difficult to destroy.

The Remaking

Common elements of this story used in stage and screen adaptions originated in early movies, not from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." For instance, there were no female characters in the book; Thomas Russell Sullivan's successful stage version from 1887 created Jekyll's fiancée. The Barrymore film first added a looser woman as Hyde's companion. Beginning with Sullivan's play, many adaptations have painted Dr. Jekyll as more thoroughly "good" when the story begins, heightening the contrast with Mr. Hyde.

Instead of doing a new take on the novella, MGM decided to buy the 1931 script's rights, trying to re-create the Oscar winner's success. This is a shame since so many different approaches could have been attempted.

One of the 1941 film's only contributions was the popular pronunciation of Dr. Jekyll's name as rhyming with "heckle." According to the author, this is incorrect, since he stated, "'Let the name be pronounced as though it spelt 'jee-kill'; not 'jek-ill.'"

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Spencer Tracy as Mr. Hyde in an unsavory relationship with Ingrid Bergman as Ivy, in this MGM lobby card for "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

Although Spencer Tracy is widely considered miscast as Jekyll and Hyde (and was considered as such even by himself), he fit Stevenson's description of Dr. Jekyll better than most interpreters of the part. The 41-year-old Tracy was more like the book's description of Jekyll as a "large, well-made, smooth-faced man of 50 with something of a slyish cast" than the younger, handsomer actors who have played the part.

Tracy hoped to explore the story's deeper philosophical meaning, such as the dual nature in everyone. Instead of a typical horror or science fiction movie about a scientist who unleashes a monster, Tracy wanted to tackle a more realistic story of a doctor performing violent crimes in a strange neighborhood after taking alcohol or drugs. Instead of using makeup and prosthetics, he wanted to rely on facial expressions for the transformation.

The only substantial change was Jekyll's motivation for experimenting: He hopes to cure a madman but takes the formula himself when said lunatic dies, instead of, as in the book, planning from the start to sample the drug himself.

Unsealed Horror

Although called horror films, neither the 1931 nor 1941 film features substantial violence. The two murders in each occur offscreen. The most frightening element in each is Mr. Hyde's appearance, although Spencer Tracy's is not terribly scary.

The most horrifying thing about the 1941 film is its unrestrained suggestiveness. Overall, the 1931 film is raunchier, with more risqué dialogue and indecent female costumes approaching upper nudity. Such content was standard in Pre-Code (1930–1934) films. However, similar content was shocking 10 years later, since the Code had forbidden salaciousness. Although there is less immodesty in the latter film, the suggestive dialogue, while less blatant, is more lurid in its veiled obscenity.

The most horrifying thing about the 1941 film is its unrestrained suggestiveness.

The main Code change was that Ivy is a barmaid instead of a prostitute, but she is still very flirtatious and undeniably loose. Her first meeting with Jekyll is one of the most simmering scenes in a Code film.

In addition, Tracy's Hyde lost the primitive, Neanderthal appearance of March's Hyde, just looking like a scarier version of the actor, which added a deeper depravity to the character. The 1931 Hyde looks more like an animal than a man, so his bestial behavior is expected. The '41 Hyde just looks like a man, albeit a rough one, so his inhuman, wicked behavior is even more shocking and repulsive. The climax in the '41 version is the Freudian hallucination sequences during the transformations, where the sadomasochistic imagery seems psychedelic.

How did this film manage to get away with murder? It took advantage of the PCA's weak spot: Geoffrey Shurlock. Joseph Breen had headed the organization from its formation until his retirement in 1954. However, during these 20 years, there was a yearlong breach, from 1941 to 1942; let's call it the "Non-Code Era."

On June 17, 1941, Joe Breen started working at RKO, leaving his assistant, Shurlock, to unofficially head the PCA. By the time Breen returned to the PCA in 1942, countless "Non-Code" films had been passed by the weakened PCA, reflecting Pre-Code standards or eerily foreshadowing the post-Breen era, when Shurlock would take over permanently. The PCA file for "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" confirms that Geoffrey Shurlock worked on it; although production began months before Breen's departure, Shurlock had been taking more authority in preparation for his absence.

As on most films that Shurlock regulated, he requested in early PCA letters to filmmakers that this movie's less than moral content be removed. However, the filmmakers, knowing Shurlock was in charge, ignored most of the warnings. Neither did Shurlock enforce his authority. The filmmakers disrespect of Shurlock is evidenced by how many cuts he requested before issuing a Seal. (When a movie was properly self-regulated during production, few or no post-production edits were necessary.)

Most notably, cuts were ordered in the hallucination sequence. But even then the film was only lightly trimmed; most of the disturbing imagery was left intact.

If Joseph Breen had overseen this film, it could have been very different.

A Missed Opportunity

It's unfortunate that MGM decided to just remake the Pre-Code version of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." If it had committed to making a truly Code-compliant version of this story, the filmmakers could have found new, subtle facets and made a unique masterpiece. After all, when one is adapting a story for the 12th time, one ought to bring something new to it.

Because of the rigid insistence on a strict remake, the excellent cast was not fully utilized. The very American Spencer Tracy would have flourished if they had updated the story to 20th-century America. Ivy's characterization could have been revised to make her a decent girl, who is abused and corrupted by Mr. Hyde. As many good Code films show, mature topics like addiction, abuse, and promiscuity can be included in decent movies if handled properly.

Although the film was profitable, it is remembered as a failure because of its horrible critical reception. Critics were particularly rough on Spencer Tracy's performance. As fan magazine "Hollywood" pointed out:

"In the ten years that have elapsed since Fredric March won his Academy Award, … movie-goers have become too sophisticated for the sort of medical hocus-pocus on which the Stevenson story is based. Too many 'Frankensteins' and bogey-men have stalked across the screen in the interim for 'Mr. Hyde' to be a convincing monster. While Spencer Tracy does a grand job in his dual role, his 'Mr. Hyde' is inclined to be more humorous than terrifying."

Contraindicative though it seems, the 1941 "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" was behind the times. If truly modern and sophisticated, it would have opted for the relatively new standards for decency and depicted a nuanced story about a scientist who goes too far in his quest for advanced discoveries, becoming a slave to addiction. Instead of exploring a social problem with moral implications, this movie was doomed to failure because it was a "Non-Code" film. The results are truly horrifying.

Tiffany Brannan is a 20-year-old opera singer, Hollywood history/vintage beauty copywriter, film reviewer, fashion historian, travel writer, and ballet writer. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

The poster for the 1941 film version of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" showed Spencer Tracy as Dr. Jekyll, and the two women in the Jekyll's life portrayed by Ingrid Bergman (L) and Lana Turner.

ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

Actress Ingrid Bergman in a publicity still for the film.

REWIND, REVIEW AND RE-RATE

Honoring Vets: The Uneasy Yet Moving Transition to Civilian Life

IAN KANE

The Golden Age of Hollywood can rightly claim a wide array of excellent action-oriented World War II films, such as 1945's "They Were Expendable" and 1957's "The Bridge on the River Kwai." Indeed, war movies contributed greatly to making American cinema the most influential and copied style of film production the world over.

However magnificent those films are—indelibly etched into the annals of world-class filmmaking—few from Old Hollywood explore what it was like for World War II veterans to return home after all the action subsided.

Perhaps the most outstanding film on this subject is 1946's "The Best Years of Our Lives," directed by William Wyler. Although Wyler did direct 1942's excellent "Mrs. Miniver," he was not particularly known for his World War II films. But certainly his wide body of work—outside of wartime action—gave him an edge at portraying the domestic aftermath of the war.

This film, then, is not just about military men returning home from overseas, but also about how they and their families adjust to that ofttimes bumpy transition. On their way back to the fictional Midwest town of Boone City, three men—U.S. Army Air Force Bomber Capt. Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), Army infantryman Sgt. Al Stephenson (Fredric March), and Navy Petty Officer Homer Parrish (Harold Russell) —meet. The trio come from vastly different backgrounds, and the film follows each as they attempt to reintegrate back into civilian life.

The opening scenes are incredibly touching as the three men catch a flight, then a taxi together, to be dropped off at their respective homes.

Homer is the first to be dropped off at home, and since he's lost his hands in a ship's fire, he wears prostheses with hooks at the ends. Although his family comes out to greet him lovingly, he tenses up, thinking that everyone merely pities him.

Al is dropped off next at his luxury lodgings, and his wife Milly (Myrna Loy), daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright), and young son have a smoother reunion—at least at first.

And finally, Fred arrives at his parents' home to find that his wife, Marie (Virginia Mayo), has moved out. The newlyweds had lived with his parents when he left. She hasn't been in contact lately, although they know she's become a showgirl.

Later that day, all three men end up at a local bar. Fred is stressed because he can't locate his wife, Al wants a night on the town with his wife and daughter, and Homer wants to get away from his family whom he believes see him differently because of his disability.

When Fred and Al get drunk, Milly and Peggy transport the two to the Stephenson home for them to recover, and it is then that we see the first signs of serious trouble: In his sleep, Fred howls and screams about a wartime buddy dying. In a lovely scene, Peggy protectively calms him down and wipes sweat from his face.

The next morning, as Peggy fixes Fred breakfast, it's clear that they are attracted to one another. Al awakens later and is so hungover that he ends up showering in his pajamas. Milly, although sensing that drinking has become an issue for Al, supports him as seamlessly as she can in order to facilitate his return to civilian life.

Al reclaims his bank job and even gets promoted to VP of loans. Although he seems to adjust well, his normally sound judgment seems off to his superiors, such as when he offers a no-collateral loan to a fellow veteran.

Meanwhile, Fred becomes increasingly frustrated because his wartime heroics don't count for much in the job sector. After looking all over town, he ends up with his humble pre-war job as a soda jerk. His wannabe jet-set wife, Marie, is indifferent to his shell-shock (PTSD) nightmares and isn't happy with his job prospects.

And finally, Homer seems to be slipping farther and farther away from both his family and doting fiancée (Cathy O'Donnell). Although they're thrilled to have him home, Homer can't adjust to his handicap.

RKO RADIO PICTURES

"The Best Years of Our Lives" charts the return of three servicemen to civilian life. (L–R) Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), and Al Stephenson (Fredric March).

I was thoroughly enthralled and immersed in these men's lives.

'The Best Years of Our Lives'

Director:
William Wyler

Starring:
Myrna Loy, Dana Andrews, Fredric March, Harold Russell, Teresa Wright, Virginia Mayo

Running Time:
2 hours, 50 minutes

Not Rated

Release Date:
Nov. 21, 1946

★★★★★

Compelling Stories and Effortless Acting

By the midpoint of this nearly three-hour movie, I was thoroughly enthralled and immersed in these men's lives, and couldn't wait to see what happened next. It was also nice to see the nurturing women (other than Fred's wife) caring for their mates—sticking by them through challenging times instead of cutting and running, which seems all too common nowadays.

Another impressive aspect is how effortless and believable the acting is. Whether it be the way Fred and Peggy stare at each other like forbidden fruits, or Al and Milly's reaffirmation of their vows, everything is top-notch. Fortunately, "The Best Years of Our Lives" was deservedly appreciated, achieving Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor for March, and Best Supporting Actor for Russell, who by the way was a real-life double amputee whose hands had been blown off in a Navy accident.

Ian Kane is an U.S. Army veteran, author, filmmaker, and actor. He is dedicated to the development and production of innovative, thought-provoking, character-driven films and books of the highest quality. To learn more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com