OLLI, Fall, 2023: Classic American Novels on Film and TV

“Dodsworth”, 1936, film based on play “Dodsworth,” by Sidney Howard (1934,) and the novel by Sinclair Lewis (1929), screen play by Sidney Howard; directed by William Wyler; produced by Samuel Goldwyn; photography by Rudolph Mate; edited by Daniel Mandell; music by Alfred Newman; production company: Samuel Goldwyn Productions; distributed by United Artists; release date: Sept. 23, 1936; running time: 101 minutes; box office: $1.6 million.

At the Academy Awards, Richard Day won for Best Art Direction, and the film was nominated in the following categories: Outstanding Production: Samuel Goldwyn Production; Best Director: William Wyler; Best Actor: Walter Huston; Actress in a Supporting Role: Maria Ouspenskaya; Best sound Recording: Thomas T. Moulton.

Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) was born in Sauk Center, Minnesota, and he graduated from Yale in 1907. After hack writing and a group of forgettable novels, he became famous for his novel “Main Street,” (1920), the first of five novels which are his claim to immortality: the others are “Babbitt” (1922), “Arrowsmith,” (1925), “Elmer Gantry,” (1927), and “Dodsworth,” (1929).

He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 for “Arrowsmith” but he, characteristically, refused it. He was the first American to win a Nobel Prize, in 1930, and this event caused a scandalous reaction among American literati, who thought that Theodore Dreiser should have won. In one of Lewis’ innumerable fracases, he accused Dreiser of being a thief and liar. Dreiser slapped Lewis across the face twice. On the third round, amazingly, Lewis offered to turn the other cheek.

After 1930, the quality of Lewis’ work declined into a series of fairly successful best sellers. Lewis has been praised for his depiction of the problems of working women.

About the time he wrote “Dodsworth” (1925) he was divorcing his first wife, and marrying the famous newspaper woman, Dorothy Thompson. Thompson was a renowned radio commentator from the 1930s to the 1950s. An outspoken enemy of Hitler, in 1935, she was told, on Führer’s orders, to leave German within 24 hours. When she arrived at the train station, the platform was crowded with almost all the foreign correspondents in Berlin, bearing American beauty roses for Dorothy. By 1937, Lewis’ drunken rages, and total unreliability, had exhausted Thompson’s patience. Their divorce was final in 1942. Later, Lewis became infatuated with an 18 years-old actress, named Marcella Powers. Lewis’ role was said to be paternal.

Lewis does not enjoy the critical esteem received by Fitzgerald, Falkner, or Hemingway, but he still is read with pleasure by the common reader. His novel, “Arrowsmith,” about the medical profession, and the use of vaccines, enjoyed a revival during the Covid epidemic. Also, his fantasy about fascists taking over America, “It Can’t Happen Here,” enjoyed some notoriety in 2016. The best to be said about Lewis is that one cannot imagine America in the 1920s without his books. He loved this country and at the same time he satirized our cultural failings.

The film “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” is based on a famous Scott Fitzgerald story. The film was made in 1976, and was directed by Joan Milkin Silver. Shelley Duval played Bernice, Veronica Cartwright played Marjorie, and Bud Cort was Warren.

The cast of “Dodsworth”: Walter Huston as Dodsworth; Maria Ouspenskaya as the Baroness Von Obersdorf. See following sheet for the rest of cast.