

William Wyler's *BEN HUR* (1959)

Of Men and Gods

Over 8,000 extras. 100,000 costumes. 1,100,000 feet (340,000 m) of film shot. 263:1 ratio of footage shot to footage used, one of the highest ratios ever for a film. 213 minutes in Technicolor. \$146 mil. box office on initial world-wide release over a \$15mil budget. 11 Academy Awards (at the top of the award-winning movies to date).

The movie that saved MGM Studios from financial disaster - William Wyler's *Ben Hur* - is the epitome of blockbuster. Even today this film is stunningly powerful not only because of the glorious rendition of the legendary times of the Roman Empire but also because of the very powerful story behind it. The script is based on the novel by Lew Wallace, an American lawyer, Union general in the American Civil War, and Governor of the New Mexico Territory. Both his novel and the 1959 film have a subtitle that reads: "A Tale of Christ". Wallace's book was called "the most influential Christian book of the nineteenth century" by The National Endowment for the Humanities (an independent federal agency of the U.S. government). Since its first publication in 1880 Gen. Wallace's book has never been out of print. Until 1939, when *Gone with the Wind* appeared, it outsold every book except the Bible. Since then it resurges from time to time at the top of the best sold books.

Ben Hur – A Tale of Christ follows the ordeal of the rich and influential Jewish aristocrat Judah Ben-Hur as he suffers the persecution of the Roman invaders of his homeland, Judea. Ben-Hur loses everything - his wealth, his freedom, his family. While his mother and sister are incarcerated, he is sold into slavery. To make things worse, the mastermind behind all these unimaginable sufferings is Ben Hur's best friend, Messala, who grew up together with him and was looked after like a son by the very family he is currently destroying.

"Hate keeps a man alive", says Roman patrician Quintus Arrius as he confronted the magnificent and untamed galley slave Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston). One could be inclined to see this line as a possible motto of the movie. Although partly true and very well worded (*si non è vero, è ben trovato*, reads a famous Italian adage – *even if it's not true, it certainly is well chosen*), the line is far from encapsulating the whole story. Ben Hur's convoluted trips and warped destiny will intersect with that of another Judean, Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary of Nazareth. These random and seldom encounters will dilute the Judean's thirst for revenge and turn it into a much more powerful one. From this perspective, Quintus Arrius' words would sound better as "*Faith keeps a man alive*". Indeed, Ben Hur survives throughout his own Golgotha mainly through an unshakable faith in his own God and destiny. Not only

he eventually prevails over all his sufferings and enemies but also ends up by re-defining himself and reaching another spiritual dimension, allegedly a superior one - the Christian faith. Looking back to the whole epic one could infer that Quintus Arrius ("Hate keeps a man alive") couldn't have been farther from the truth.

Sam Zimbalist's gigantic production of 1959 successfully covers the main aspects of the novel: love, hate, faith, and historical account. Surprisingly enough for such a blockbuster, some characters are nuanced and more complex than expected. The viciousness of the 'aggressors' – the Romans – is toned-down by the generosity of Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins) – not only a Roman, but also a leader (tribune). Stephen Boyd marvellously plays Messala-the-tormentor, hinting with subtlety that somewhere inside his darkened heart there is still a flicker of light. Boyd gives his character the appearance of a tormented soul which *gradually* turns into evil but not without a fight. His act suggests that, somehow, the Roman's humane consciousness is hopelessly drowned into a marsh of inescapable evil instincts. Before completely drowning, Messala's consciousness painfully keeps him aware of his own evilness. In the end, the glimmer of his soul dies before his body – on his death bed Messala does not repent, he does not shed tears of remorse. Tormented by excruciating physical pain, he turns into absolute evil. From this perspective, Stephen Boyd creates the most complex character of the film and was rightfully awarded a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor.

Another factor that makes William Wyler's production a memorable one is the casting. All actors are perfect matches for their respective characters. Their statures, their faces, their attitudes seem descended right from ancient frescoes or classical paintings. Charlton Heston, however, surpasses everybody in the lead role. He goes beyond mere acting or physical appearance; he identifies himself completely with the main character. So much so that, at some point, Heston *becomes* Judah Ben-Hur. This tall and impressively built Scotsman, with incredibly intense blue eyes, had already notably incarnated Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1955) but his portrayal of Ben Hur will turn him into a symbol; he became Hollywood's iconic *hero*. For two decades afterwards Heston will masterfully keep bringing to life other great names of Western History: *El Cid* (1960), John the Baptist (*The Greatest Story Ever Told*, 1965), Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1965), Marc Antony (*Julius Caesar*, 1970 and *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1972), cardinal Richelieu (*The Three Musketeers*, 1973), Sir Thomas More (*A Man For all Seasons*, 1988). Moreover and unexpectedly, in 1968, Heston will play the lead role in a Sci-Fi - Franklin J. Schaffner's unforgettable production of the *Planet of the Apes*.

For his role in *Ben-Hur* Charlton Heston was awarded the Oscar for Best Actor.

William Wyler's 1959 production was not the first attempt to bring Gen Wallace's enormously popular novel to the silver screen. In 1925, MGM had produced a silent epic on the same subject. With an enormous budget of almost \$4 million and featuring Ramon Novarro in the title role, the movie became *the* blockbuster of the silent era after Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. *Ben-Hur* – the silent version – was a remarkable endeavour. Some scenes were so well done that the 1959 production copied them almost frame by frame (for example, the famous chariot race scene). So why attempt another production after 24 years? First, because in more than two decades, the technical advancements were remarkable - sound (stereo), colour (Technicolour), and wide screen (Panavision) being the most prominent. Second, because the 1950s saw an overabundance of religious-Christian movies, some good, most of them mediocre and sub-mediocre. The Western world, recently emerged from a devastating world war, was still overtly Christian and the act of praying was still a public duty. As usual, Hollywood Studios was dutifully following the general trend. Let us take a look to *some* of the major productions with Christian-related subjects of that period: *David and Bathsheba* (1951), *Quo vadis* (1951), *The Miracle of Our lady of Fatima* (1952), *I Confess* (1953), *Martin Luther* (1953), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1955), *The Silver Chalice* (1955), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Big Fisherman* (1959), *The Story of Ruth* (1960), *Francis of Assisi* (1961), *King of Kings* (1961), *Barabbas* (1961), etc. All in all, between 1950 and 1970 there were almost 30 American productions on Christian-related subjects, not to count notable foreign ones (Italian, French and Spanish). Amongst those, *Ben-Hur* rises to another class. While clearly stating from the very beginning its strong ties with the "greatest story ever told", the film introduces us into the Christian spirituality with subtlety and grace. As the matter of fact, *Ben Hur* turns to be most and foremost a human drama, a historical fresco, an epic, even an action movie, and only then a religious story. Although clearly subtitled "A Tale of Christ", the said tale unfolds in the background only occasionally intersecting with the main story. True, the very few junctions between the life of Jesus Christ and that of Judah Ben Hur happen at crucial moments; moments which will define the destiny of the main character and re-define his spirituality.

One could not speak about *Ben Hur* without mentioning the famous chariot race sequence. The race is the climax of the action in this production and is still very impressive to watch today. The set built for this scene was the largest ever at that time. For more than a year one thousand workmen dug and carved the famous oval out of a rock quarry in Italy. Over 250 miles (400 km) of metal tubing were used to erect the grandstands. More than 36,000 tons of sand was brought in from beaches on the Mediterranean to cover the track. Most of the elements of the *circus* were historically accurate. The four statues which dominate the sequence were 30 feet (9.1 m) high. A chariot track identical in size was

constructed next to the set and used to train the horses and lay out camera shots. Planning the chariot race took almost a year to complete. Seventy-eight horses were imported from Southern Italy (Sicily) and former Yugoslavia. They were intensively trained to pull the *quadriga* (the Roman four horses drawn chariot). Heston took daily three-hour lessons in chariot driving after he arrived in Rome. He was outfitted with special contact lenses to prevent the grit kicked up during the race from injuring his eyes. Among the Italian local actors who portrayed charioteers was a former bodyguard for King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy. All these tremendous efforts led to a 20 minutes sequence which, although a close imitation of that of the 1925 silent, became the staple mark of William Wyler's film. It is still breathtaking today, in the time of *Star Wars* and *The Fast and the Furious*.

Ben Hur remains to date the most awarded film in the history of Oscars – 11 Academy Awards. Its achievement is still unsurpassed. It was matched only in 1998 (almost forty years later) by *Titanic* and in 2003 by the third installment of *Lord of the Rings - Return of the King*. Besides the Academy Awards, *Ben Hur* also grabbed the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture and Best Director.

The scope and breath of this production are enormous. From its technical achievements to its profound spiritual message, *Ben Hur* remains a milestone in the history of filmmaking. It brings to light the best and the worst in humanity. It proclaims the triumph of life over death, of spirit over matter, of love over hatred, of generosity over petty greed, of freedom over slavery. *Ben Hur* is humanity at its best and at its worst at the same time. It also breathes spirituality as it should always be – unobtrusive but powerful, inoffensive but compelling, enlightening but not dogmatic. Before being all-powerful earthly institutions, all religions should remember that the power of words based on personal example is overwhelming; it wiped out empires and threw scores of gods into oblivion.

For what chances could have had the world's all-mighty SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus / The Senate and People of Rome) in front of a humble man who just spread around words like: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Luke 6 :31), "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." (John 8 :7), « Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you » (Luke 6 :27-28) or "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" ? (John 14 :6)?

And who was swiftly executed for them.

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