

Ben-Hur Review by B. Crowther. 19/11/1959

Ben-Hur (1959)

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The Screen: 'Ben-Hur,' a Blockbuster; M-G-M Spectacle Opens at the Loew's State Film
Is Called Most Stirring of Its Type

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

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WITHIN the expansive format of the so-called "blockbuster" spectacle film, which generally provokes a sublimation of sensibility to action and pageantry, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and William Wyler have managed to engineer a remarkably intelligent and engrossing human drama in their new production of "Ben-Hur."

Without for one moment neglecting the tempting opportunities for thundering scenes of massive movement and mob excitement that are abundantly contained in the famous novel of Gen. Lew Wallace, upon which this picture is based, Mr. Wyler and his money-free producers have smartly and effectively laid stress on the powerful and meaningful personal conflicts that are strong in this old heroic tale.

As a consequence, their mammoth color movie, which opened at Loew's State last night, is by far the most stirring and respectable of the Bible-fiction pictures ever made.

This is not too surprising, when one considers that the drama in "Ben-Hur" has a peculiar relationship and relevance to political and social trends in the modern day. Its story of a prince of Judea who sets himself and the interests of his people against the subjugation and tyranny of the Roman master race, with all sorts of terrible consequences to himself and his family, is a story that has been repeated in grim and shameful contexts in our age. And where the parallels might be vague in the novel, which was first published, after all, away back in 1880, they could be made clearer in the film.

Significantly, they have been, both in Karl Tunberg's excellent screen play and in Mr. Wyler's largely personal and close-to direction design. For, without stint, the interest is now focused on the character of Judah, son of Hur, and his emotional and spiritual development under the heavy shadows of tyranny, injustice and hate. And his final emergence from these oppressions imposed and aggravated by a slave state is achieved through his observation of the example and teachings of Jesus.

This pertinent theme of the story is appropriately and grippingly conveyed in some of the most forceful personal conflicts ever played in costume on the giant screen. Where the excitement of the picture may appear to be in the great scenes, such as those of the ancient sea battle in which Ben-Hur is involved as a galley slave or those of his final contention with Messala, the Roman tribune, in a mammoth chariot race, the area of fullest engrossment is the scenes of people meeting face to face—Ben-Hur verbally clashing with Messala, a Roman soldier suddenly looking upon Jesus.

Here is where the artistic quality and taste of Mr. Wyler have prevailed to make this a rich and glowing drama that far transcends the bounds of spectacle. His big scenes are brilliant and dramatic—that is unquestionable. There has seldom been anything in movies to compare with this picture's chariot race. It is a stunning complex of mighty setting, thrilling action by horses and men, panoramic observation and overwhelming dramatic use of sound.

But the scenes that truly reach you and convey the profound ideas are those that establish the sincerity and credibility of characters. Ben-Hur's encounters with his mother and his sister, who later become lepers during the time of their oppression, or his passing meetings with Jesus (who is, tactfully, never viewed in full face) are dignified and true. Likewise, the enactment of the Crucifixion is impressively personal, strong and real. It is not done in an aura of gauzy reverence but has the nature of a dark political deed.

For the performance of his characters, Mr. Wyler has a cast that impressively delivers the qualities essential to their roles. Charlton Heston is excellent as Ben-Hur—strong, aggressive, proud and warm—and Stephen Boyd plays his nemesis, Messala, with those same qualities, inverted ideologically.

Jack Hawkins as the Roman admiral who fatefully makes Ben-Hur his foster son, Haya Harareet as the Jewish maiden who tenderly falls in love with him, Hugh Griffith as the sheik who puts him into the chariot race and Sam Jaffe as his loyal agent—these also stand out in a very large cast.

Much more could be said in praise of the technical quality of this film, which vastly surpasses the silent version of the same story released back in 1926. Space does not permit it. Otherwise this review would run too long, which is the one thing this picture does distressingly. Three hours and thirty-two minutes of it, not counting intermission, is simply too much of a good thing. The stimulated soul may be willing but the tormented flesh is weak.

The Cast

BEN-HUR, screen play by Karl Tunberg, from the novel by Gen, Lew Wallace; directed by William Wyler; produced by Sam Zimbalist for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. At Loew's State Theatre, Broadway and Forty-fifth Street. Running time: 212 minutes.

Judah Ben-Hur Charlton Heston

Quintus Arrius Jack Hawkins

Messala Stephen Boyd

Esther Haya Harareet

Sheik Ilderim Hugh Griffith

Miriam Martha Scott

Simonides Sam Jaffe

Tirzah Cathy O'Donnell

Balthasar Finlay Currie

Pilate Frank Thring

Drusus Terence Longden
Sextus Andre Morell
Flavia Marina Berti
Emperor Tiberius George Relph
Malluch Adi Berber
Amrah Stella Vitelleschi
Mary Jose Greci
Joseph Laurence Payne
Jesus Claude Heater