

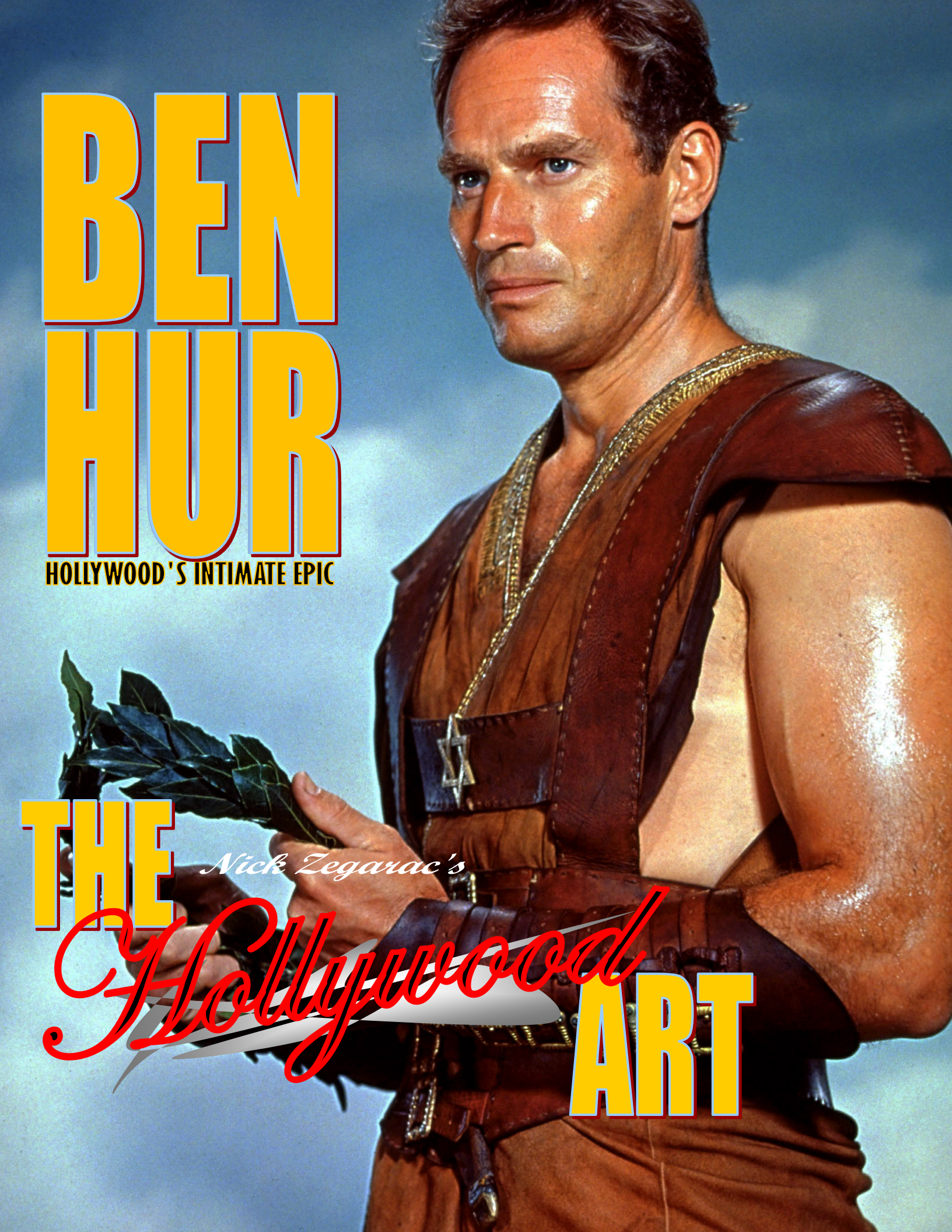
BEN HUR

HOLLYWOOD'S INTIMATE EPIC

THE

Nick Zegarac's

Hollywood
ART



METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

presents

A Tale of the Christ

by GENERAL LEW WALLACE

HOLLYWOOD'S INTIMATE EPIC

by Nick Zegarec

When it was released in 1959, the New York Times gave William Wyler's **Ben-Hur** a glowing review declaring it "by far, the most stirring of the Bible-fiction epics"; an accolade richly deserved. For **Ben-Hur** was and arguably remains an untouchable among screen classics – a huge thing, full of lusty, iconic performances and mind-boggling pageantry; the last gasp of the establishment throwing everything it had into a single project on nothing more than blind faith. And yet the film still manages to capture a human saga that arguably remains ahead of its pomp and circumstance. **Ben-Hur** will always be remembered for its chariot race – a mesmerizing feat of full-scale stunt work staged by second unit director Yakima Canutt. But it should also be noted for Robert Surtee's cinematography; its peerless score by Miklos Rosza; Edward C. Carfagno's spectacular art direction and Elizabeth Haffenden's impeccable costume design. And then, of course, there is 'the Wyler touch'.

William Wyler was already one of Hollywood's most respected and eclectic film makers by the time he agreed to helm **Ben-Hur**. While Wyler had done dramas (**The Letter**, **Mrs. Miniver**), westerns (**The Big Country**), comedies (**Roman Holiday**, **How To Steal A Million**) and, later, even a musical (**Funny Girl**) – **Ben-Hur** would be his only epic. "I wanted to see if I could do a Cecil B. DeMille picture" Wyler later mused. And yet, this towering achievement does not mimic DeMille's reverence for Biblical storytelling. In fact, in viewing **Ben-Hur** today one is consistently struck by its contemporary cadence. The scenes move, yet nothing appears rushed or drawn out. The drama is first rate and expertly played. In retrospect, time has not stood still for **Ben-Hur** so much as **Ben-Hur** has managed the coup of true artistry; that is to say, keeping up with the times.

(title page): a publicity photo of Charlton Heston in leather garb and clutching his victory garland. Wyler had been instrumental in getting Heston hired. But only two days into the shoot the director quietly pulled his star aside, saying "Chuck...you're going to have to be better than that." When Heston nervously inquired what he should do, Wyler simply shrugged his shoulders and walked away. "You want to talk about pressure!" Heston later mused. (This page: top) Reynold Brown's stunning artwork captured the breadth and scope of the production. 1962's **King of Kings** would use practically an identical design. (Right top) Heston and Steven Boyd have their exercise and their fun on a pair of Vespas on Cinecitta's back lot. Mortal enemies on film, the pair were nothing but the very best of friends on the set. (Right, middle and bottom): Father and son: Fraser Heston, seen here in a miniature of the costume Stephen Boyd wears as the Roman tribune Messala. Fraser's connection to the Bible-fiction epic went back even further than this. In 1954, he played the infant Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's **The Ten Commandments**.





(above) Tales told by Wyler – William Wyler's career spanned the entire golden age of Hollywood. (Top): preparing to shoot on the Circus Maximus for **Ben-Hur** (1959). (right): a publicity still of Bette Davis in what is arguably the most shocking opener of any woman's picture from the 1940s – Davis shoots her lover dead in the first three minutes of **The Letter** (1940) – the second of three movies Wyler directed with Davis as the star. The two had begun a notorious affair on the set of **Jezebel** (1936) with Davis winning her second Oscar for her performance in that film as the spitfire. From then on Wyler was Davis' man – both figuratively and literally. But by 1941 the on again/off again romance had frosted over for good. Wyler directed Davis for the third and last time in **The Little Foxes** that same year. She could barely stand to be in the same room as him but continued to rely on his judgment.

(Bottom left): Peter O'Toole and Audrey Hepburn as insurance investigator and daughter of a fraudulent art dealer pose with the Cellini Venus...or is it a knock off?...in Wyler's charming heist/caper **How To Steal A Million** (1966) – regarded as featherweight by Wyler's own standards. (middle): Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn seem relaxed but poised on Italy's Roman steps during the making of **Roman Holiday** (1953), Hepburn's first movie for which she won a Best Actress Oscar, playing a harried princess who escapes palace life on a lark only to fall in love with a newspaper hound out to cover her story. (right): playing footsy with Greer Garson on the set of **Mrs. Miniver** (1940); the multi-Oscar winner about a demure English housewife enduring the hardships of WWII on the homefront.

William Wyler was intrigued by the prospect of doing something new within the conventions of the Bible-fiction epic. Throughout the 1950s other award-winning directors had delved deep into antiquity; some - like Mervyn LeRoy (**Quo Vadis**) with great success – others (Howard Hawks' **The Land of the Pharaohs**), not so much. Yet the approach to resurrecting ancient civilizations was always the same; static tableaux succumbing to the elephantiasis. More often than not purists and religious scholars alike were left shaking and/or scratching their heads. For although Hollywood reveled in getting the period just right – down to the last embroidered laurel-leaf on a Caesarian robe of state – the balance of the action, the very life of the piece, was uncharacteristically absent.



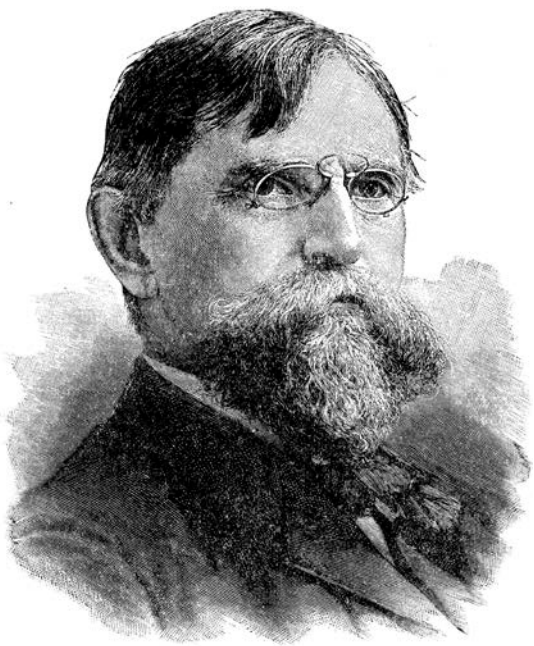
(Above left): Titans three: Wyler poses with Billy Wilder and Audrey Hepburn on the set of **Sabrina** 1954. Just a year earlier Hepburn had been an unknown quantity in Hollywood. After her breakout performance in Wyler's **Roman Holiday** she regarded Wyler as her champion. "He made me a star!" (middle): Wyler poses with his all-star cast that included from left; Alfonso Bedoya, Charles Bickford, Jean Simmons, Charlton Heston, Carol Baker, Burl Ives, Chuck Connors and Gregory Peck on the set of **The Big Country** (1958) a grand western saga that brought Chuck to Wyler's attention and vice versa. (right): all smiles in Rome with Heston in his racing garb and Wyler clutching his panama hat and a cigarette. (right): The exodus from Egypt in Cecil B. DeMille's **The Ten Commandments** (1954). DeMille's epic is a feast for the eyes. Wyler's **Ben-Hur** would prove essential nourishment for the heart. (bottom): Heston's Moses prepares to part the Red Sea – the most commonly resurrected sequence when retrospectives of DeMille's career are shown. (bottom): Barbra Streisand in Wyler's only musical – **Funny Girl** (1966) for which, like Hepburn, she won an Oscar the first time out.



This is particularly true of DeMille's **The Ten Commandments** (1956); a stoic and stylized recreation. While no one would suggest that **The Ten Commandments** isn't impressive film-making – and certainly no claim to the contrary is made herein - its characters articulate in grand gestures, unable to break free of their pseudo-Shakespearean dialect, much too theatrical to be believed as anything except fictional characters of pretend.

In contrast, Wyler's **Ben-Hur** is unfettered by such rigidities; its characterizations reverting back to earthy flesh and blood men and women, whose lusts and suffering are genuine and heart-felt. The dialogue in Karl Tunberg's screenplay is 'of the moment' while retaining an ever so slight air of courtly grace. For example; Sheik Ilderim (Hugh Griffith) does not ask Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) 'how was dinner' but rather "Was the meal not to your liking?" Such cleverness may seem unimportant at a glance, but it is deliberate and impactful to our enjoyment of the film as a whole as much as it is unobtrusive in an understated way.





(Top left): Lew Wallace began writing **Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ** as a war epic but increasingly found himself drawn to the religious aspects of the story instead. (Top middle): Ramon Novarro, 1925's **Ben-Hur** bedecked in his victory wreath and striking a dramatic pose. (Top right): Ditto for co-star Francis X. Bushman – a brutish and fairly muscular Messala. (Right): Charlton Heston and Ramon Novarro pose together at the 1959 Hollywood premiere of **Ben-Hur** where reporters were mostly impressed by Novarro's 'youthful appearance'. The almost forgotten silent star had barely nine years left to live. For on Oct. 30th, 1968 his body was discovered in a gruesome scene: strangled and with a phallic piece of stone statuary – a gift given to Novarro by the late Rudolph Valentino - inserted into his rectum; the victim of a pair of gay hustlers.

(Right middle): Wyler on the set with Heston, an unidentified executive from Cinicitta, Stephen Boyd, producer Sam Zimbalist and the lovely Haya Harareet, cast in the film as the slave girl, Esther. (Bottom): cameraman Robert Surtees; a perfectionist with a keen eye for capturing Ben-Hur's visual splendor.



Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ is based on Gen. Lew Wallace's novel first published in 1880. However, the title is rather deceiving. The book is not about the Christ; but the thorny path of a Jewish nobleman sold into slavery who must endure and seek his revenge against the one-time boyhood friend now turned his enemy; the Roman tribune Messala (played in 1925 by the flamboyant Francis X. Bushman and with a superior venom by Stephen Boyd in the 1959 remake). Wallace's book became a runaway best seller. Save the Bible – no other publication of its day was more widely read. But the book's popularity also came with an unexpected price – fame. **Ben-Hur** became the pop-u-tainment of its generation. People staged chariot races at their county fairs and touring companies offered 'recreations' of various scenes that played to sellout crowds. Naturally, the movies just had to have their go at **Ben-Hur** too.

So, after several years of decidedly low grade B-budget efforts made by independent producers, in 1925 the newly formed Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios suddenly found themselves helming the biggest movie spectacle ever made until that time; a crazy quilt of lavish absurdities gone way over budget in Rome. Amid the turmoil VP in Charge of Production, Irving





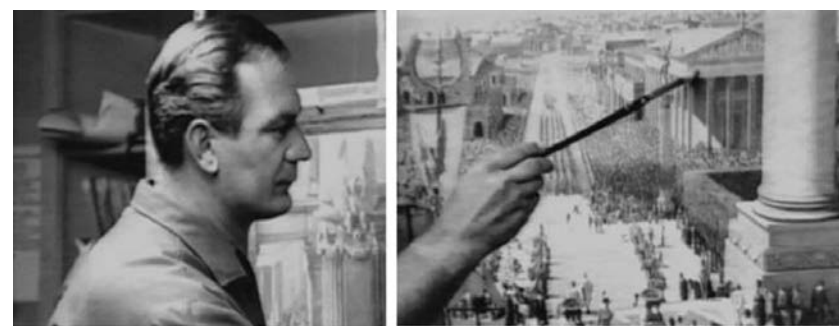
gone way over budget in Rome. Amid this turmoil VP in Charge of Production Irving Thalberg scrapped the existing footage, recast the film's star with Spanish matinee idol Ramon Novarro and hired Fred Niblo to direct. Thalberg also elected to recall the entire production back to Culver City in California where he could keep a watchful eye on its mounting expenditures. Judah's ultimate 'conversion' to Christianity became the pronounced central focus of the 1925 silent version, equally famous for its exhilarating chariot race. Nearly 40,000 extras, paid a dollar a day plus lunch, took their seats in the Circus Maximus to cheer Judah Ben-Hur onto victory.

(Top left): Wyler at work and at play – in the Warner commissary with Bette Davis in between takes on **Jezebel** 1936. Wyler and Davis were having an affair then. (left): Wyler with costars Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine on the set of **The Children's Hour** (1961); a remake of Wyler's own '**These Three**' based on the play by Lillian Hellman.

(Top middle and right): Wyler enjoying the fruits of his labors, coddling his Golden Globe for **Ben-Hur** with co-star Haya Harareet and proudly posing with his Best Director Oscar for the same. Wyler's Oscar for **Ben-Hur** was his third as Best Director; his previous wins for **Mrs. Miniver** (1942) and **The Best Years of Our Lives** (1946).

(Left middle): Wyler and Hepburn backstage on the set of **How To Steal A Million** (1966). Wyler mucking around with a motor scooter at an Army airfield between takes on the set of **The Best Years of Our Lives** – a far more somber movie than this still would suggest.

(Bottom): superior craftsmen. Wyler chats with director David Lean on the **Ben-Hur** Circus Maximus set. Wyler doesn't seem to be able to contain his jubilation. Lean, however, seems panged at best. Perhaps, in listening intently to Wyler's comments about making the film Lean is already anticipating the hardships he'll have to endure on the set of **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962).



The silent **Ben-Hur** was a smash – reissued several times until the dawn of sound put a period to the public’s fascination with silent movies in 1929. Throughout the Second World War, MGM – the purveyors of grand entertainment – infrequently announced in the trades they would be remaking **Ben-Hur** and another silent Roman epic, **Quo Vadis** for the talkies. But the war years were very lean, with restrictions imposed on building materials; thus precluding any movie adaptations of either property, the rights to which they already owned. As early as 1952, MGM announced a remake of **Ben-Hur** in the works with Stewart Granger or Robert Taylor strongly being considered for the lead. This leak was followed by another - *two years later* – this time announcing **Ben-Hur** as a Cinemascope production.



(Top): a spectacular matte painting by the incomparable Matthew Yurich, extending the tile mosaic colonnade built at Cinecittà with its real Roman centurions marching in the foreground. (left): Yurich, hard at work putting the finishing touches on his painting. A Fine Arts graduate who migrated into film work as a special effects artist, Yurich began doing unaccredited mattes for **Forbidden Planet** (1956) and **North by Northwest** (1959) before plying his craft to **Ben-Hur**. He would eventually win an Oscar for his seamless paintings in the sci-fi classic **Logan’s Run** (1976).



(middle): Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins) and Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) arrive in imperial Rome to meet the divine Caesar. This triumphant entrance is faintly reminiscent of the arrival of Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) in Mervyn LeRoy’s **Quo Vadis** (1951); itself a masterpiece of matte paintings.



(middle and bottom): the concrete and the imaginary – two views of the Circus Maximus – under construction in Cinecittà’s backlot and (bottom) completed by Yurich’s impressive matte work. Only the lower levels of this massive pantheon were built full scale. Note in the bottom picture how Yurich’s matte has both hidden the realities of Rome circa 1959 and remade the background by added in a more authentic craggy moor with towering cityscape befitting the film’s A.D. antiquity.



Producer Sam Zimbalist continued to pitch the project – seemingly when no one else showed even the slightest interest. MGM had, in fact, spent quite lavishly on a remake of **Quo Vadis** in 1951 – shot entirely in Rome. Although successful, it was hardly the blockbuster the studio had hoped. Undaunted, Zimbalist hired screenwriter Karl Tunberg, pressing MGM to engage Sidney Franklin to direct. Another story appeared in the spring of 1954; **Ben-Hur** was all set to begin shooting in Rome or Spain with Marlon Brando as its star. By 1955, Zimbalist estimated **Ben-Hur** would cost a cool \$7 million to make – perhaps in Israel or Egypt. The film would be shot in MGM’s newly christened Camera 65 widescreen process. But bad timing once again wreaked havoc on these tentative plans. For in 1957 MGM had debuted Camera 65 (a precursor to modern day Panavision) on **Raintree County** – their homegrown homage to the land of cavaliers and cotton fields justly celebrated in David O. Selznick’s **Gone With The Wind** (1939).



(Top: a lobby card for Klaw and Erlanger’s monumental stage production of **Ben-Hur** 1882. (Middle): Michelangelo’s famed Sistine Chapel painting of God creating Adam served as background for the 1959 film’s main title sequence. Bottom: one of many paintings made in pre-production on the 1925 MGM film, this one depicting Ramon Novarro in white Greco robes racing his chariot on to victory.



(Above): Rome loves her warriors. (left): Stephen Boyd as the contemptible Roman tribune, Messala. Asked by Sextus how one fights an idea, Messala replies “...with another idea.” Regrettably, Messala will revert to the strength of the sword to make his point. Born William Millar in Belfast, Boyd began acting in London and conquered Hollywood after his breakout performance as a spy working for the Germans in **The Man Who Wasn't There** (1956). His repertoire included 60 films before he tragically died of a heart attack on June 2, 1977. He was only 45 years old.

(right): Jack Hawkins as the tyrannical commander, Quintus Arrius. Arrius' first encounter with Judah as one of his galley slave rowers is less than promising. “You're eyes are full of hate,” he tells Judah, “That's good. Hate keeps a man alive.” However, after being rescued by Judah and discovering that, despite the loss of his ship, his forces have accomplished another victory at sea, Arrius comes to regard Judah as the son he never had – his own having died some years before. Hawkins began acting at the age of 12. The first husband of Jessica Tandy, in life Hawkins was an emotional man quite unlike the austere diplomats he frequently played. He made his first movie in 1930 and his last in 1973, the same year that he died at the age of 62. He was a favorite of director David Lean who cast him in pivotal roles in both **The Bridge on the River Kwai** (1957) and **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962).

MGM had acquired the rights to **GWTW** from Selznick in an outright purchase in 1952 and had reaped monumental rewards by reissuing the film in theaters. But **Raintree County** – a movie that held the dubious distinction of being the most expensive ever produced in America – was an abysmal and extremely costly flop. Worse, MGM by the mid-1950s was badly hemorrhaging money and talent from a lack of stable executive management. Following a bitter spat with Loewe's Incorporated President Nicholas Schenk, L.B. Mayer was unceremoniously sacked in 1950. Without Mayer's guiding principles the studio had already begun to founder, although just how badly would not become evident to either exhibitors or audiences for at least another decade. By then MGM's daily operations had fallen to Dore Schary – a former RKO screenwriter turned exec who lacked the good judgment to recognize that his kind of grittier 'message' pictures were completely out of sync with the all-star glamor for which MGM was justly famous. It was a blessing in disguise. For the new management after Schary – desperate to resurrect the studio to its former glory and fiscal solvency – decided to gamble on Zimbalist and a remake of **Ben-Hur**.

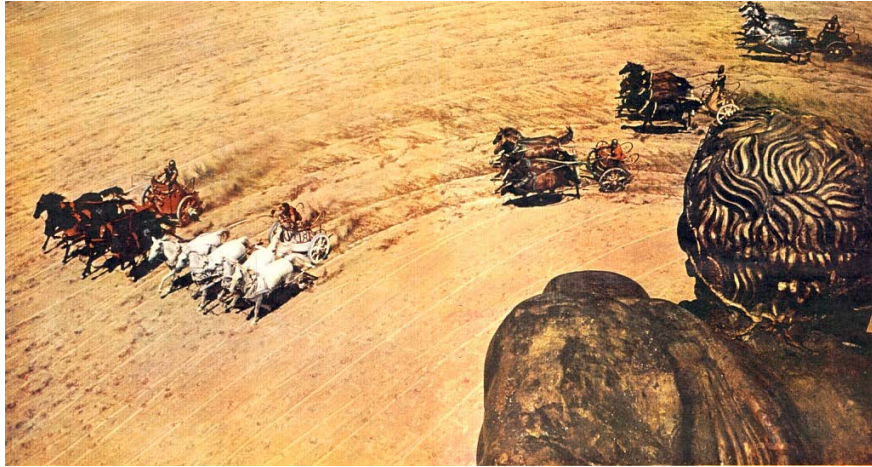


Publicity – a necessary part of the film-making process. (above): Heston and Harareet strike a seductive pose. This glamor shot is deceptive, since, in the film Esther and Judah never consummate their love but rather spend the bulk of the story bitterly torn apart. (top): Wyler flashes a Cheshire grin as producer Sam Zimbalist shakes Heston and Stephen Boyd's hands. Presumably, the race has already taken place? (Bottom left): Kirk Douglas makes an impromptu visit to the set, embracing Wyler around the neck and flanked by an enthusiastic Heston and Jack Hawkins. (Bottom right): Heston and Harareet look on, resting between takes on the valley of the leper's set.

For this remake William Wyler greatly tempered Judah's conversion to Christianity, choosing instead to concentrate on the troubled alliance between Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) and Messala (Stephen Boyd). In this respect, **Ben-Hur** is immeasurably blessed by 'the Wyler touch' – the director's uncanny knack for extracting tender poignancy from the personal rather than the awe-inspiring. Obviously, **Ben-Hur** has plenty of both; from its opening 'star of Bethlehem/birth of Christ' sequences, right on through to its thrilling sea battle and exhilarating showdown of racing chariots inside the Circus Maximus, Wyler's remake remains a mighty accomplishment.

But the scenes sandwiched between these eye-popping moments of pageantry; of Judah confronting Messala and discovering that his mother and sister have become lepers; Judah's liberation from the slave galley after his cruel captain, Quintus Arrias (Jack Hawkins) comes to regard him as a son; Judah's return home to find Esther (Haya Harareet), the slave girl whom he liberated so that she could marry, still waiting his return – these are moments arguably even more satisfying because they extol the strength of humanity at its finest. The proof is in the film, and also in its record-breaking 11 Oscar wins – including Best Actor, Director and Best Picture; a tally unmatched until James Cameron's **Titanic** (1997). However, it is important to note that most of **Titanic**'s Oscars were for technical merit in categories that did not exist in 1959.

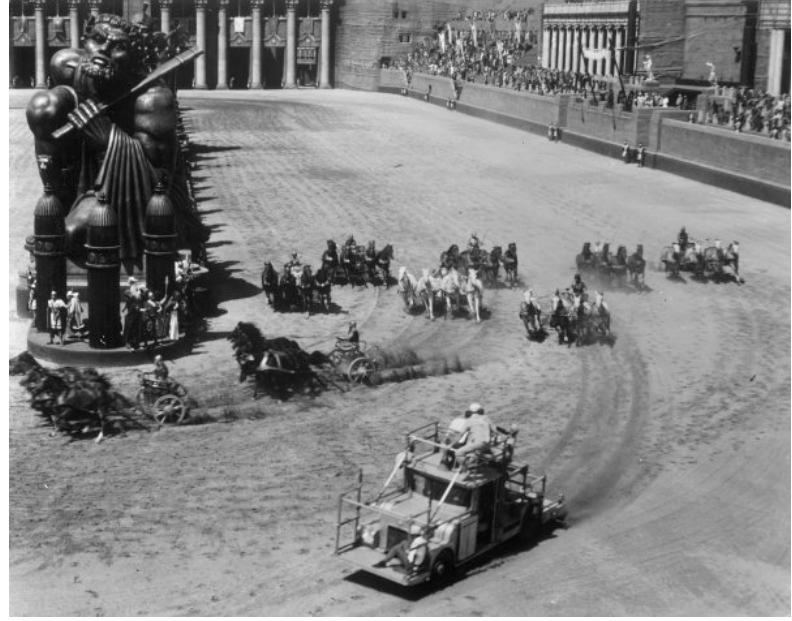
Our story concerns Judah Ben-Hur (Heston) – a Jewish prince reunited with his boyhood friend, Messala (Boyd) after a period of some years. Messala has just been made a Roman Tribune of the province of Judiah. In the interim Judah has assumed that their boyhood friendship has remained untarnished. At first their reunion bears out Judah's loyalties. But Messala's mind has been turned – or rather poisoned - by his education in Rome and his military service. While Judah is dedicated to peace Messala has developed a thirst for conquest. He therefore expects Judah should betray his own people for the sake of their friendship and to satisfy his inquiries for the Roman provisional government. But this Judah categorically refuses to do.



Scenes from the back of a chariot (top left): Heston racing his whites down the home stretch (top right) an aerial shot with Judah and Messala neck in neck (bottom left) barely making the hairpin turn while being squeezed by Messala's blacks, (bottom right): Messala, having lost ground, more determined than ever to catch up.

When a tile accidentally falls from the house of Hur, injuring the newly appointed Roman governor, Messala seizes the opportunity to make an example of Judah and his family to assert his authority in the province. He imprisons Judah's mother Miriam (Martha Scott) and sister, Tierza (Cathy O'Donnell) in the Citadel where they contract leprosy. He exiles Judah to a life of slavery aboard one of the Roman galleys from which it is presumed he will never return. On his fateful trek through the desert Judah collapses from heat exhaustion and is given water by the Christ. Meanwhile, Judah's faithful servant Simonides (Sam Jaffe) rushes to his defense along with his daughter, Esther (Haya Harareet), whom Judah has set free from her bond to the house of Hur. Regrettably, Messala's revenge knows no boundaries. He imprisons Simonides, leaving Esther to fend for herself in the abandoned ruins.

Judah's slave galley is presided over by a harsh commander, Quintus Arrias (Jack Hawkins). After an epic sea battle destroys Arrias' vessel, Judah saves the tyrant aboard a makeshift raft and prevents him from taking his own life in disgrace. Sometime later the raft is recovered by another Roman galley. Arrias is informed that although his ship was lost, the battle has been won. He returns to Rome the Emperor's champion but with Judah at his side, petitioning the senate for the right to adopt Judah as his son. This permission granted; Judah is made a true citizen of Rome. Yet his heart is still bent on revenge. Judah confronts Messala to learn what has become of his mother and sister. Messala's inquiry reveals that Miriam and Tierza have become lepers.



(top left): another breathtaking aerial shot. (top right): the harrowing work done behind the scenes; Wyler and camera man Robert Surtees racing ahead of the charioteers in their reinforced truck with an MGM Camera 65 mounted to its bumper. (left): a chariot of a different kind. Charlton Heston strikes a pose with his carriage whip in Paris to promote the **Ben-Hur's** European debut. (below): Heston listens intently to direction from second unit director Yakima Canutt. *"Yak' made the race and Willie did the film,"* Heston would later muse.

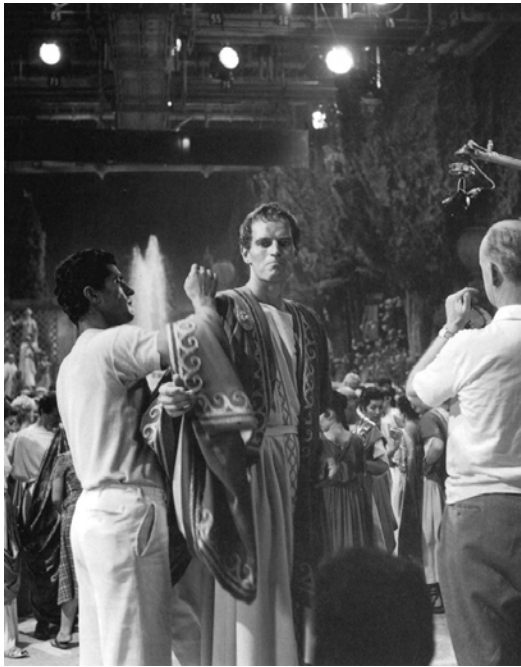


Indeed: Canutt's career dated all the way back to 1911 when he was a rodeo star. In 1932, Yak and then rising western star John Wayne pioneered a new technique for staging more realistic fight sequences safely. Yak's son doubled for Heston during the chariot race, but only for two of the more dangerous stunts. Otherwise, Heston and Stephen Boyd did the work themselves. Yak was proud of Heston's commitment. The actor literally spent hours training his team around the Circus concourse. Still apprehensive about his abilities to handle four horses once the actual race began, Heston approached Wyler with his concerns. *"Chuck,"* the director reportedly told his star, *"Just make sure you stay in the chariot...I guarantee you're gonna win the damn race!"*

(bottom): Heston with wife Lydia and son, Fraser, newly arrived in Rome. Heston and Lydia Clarke met while in college. She was studying live theater and he did nude modeling for figure drawing classes. After graduation the two were married, a union rare by Hollywood standards in that it lasted 65 years until Heston's death in 2008. Lydia followed Chuck a scant four months later into that great beyond. Here, the family is very much experiencing happier times. Young Fraser in particular looks as though he just can't wait to get to the set.



To cover up his crime against them Messala has Miriam and Tierza exiled from the Citadel. On their way to the valley of the lepers the pair returns to the house of Hur where Esther learns of their predicament. Miriam makes Esther swear that she will not tell Judah what has become of them. Thus, when Judah vows to Esther that he will not rest until learning the truth, she lies to him that Miriam and Tierza are dead, hoping that in doing so she will free his mind from its tortured grief. Instead, Judah begins his downward spiral into hatred. While travelling abroad, he is befriended by Balthasar (Findlay Currie) – one of the three wise men in search of the adult Christ – and Sheik Ilderim (Hugh Griffith), a fiery Arab training his team of white stallions to race in the Circus Maximus.



(Left): Charlton Heston is attended over a last minute costume detail in the indoor set housing Quintus Arrius' 'outdoor' gardens. As a gesture of goodwill the producers sent out engraved invitations to Rome's real aristocracy to partake in this sequence where Arrius reveals to all that he has decided to adopt Judah as his son – a great honor indeed, but one Judah reluctantly accepts, knowing that he must return to Rome and defeat Messala in the Circus Maximus. After the race and Messala's death Judah gives the newly appointed governor Pontius Pilot (Frank Thring) Arrius' ring – the symbol of his adoption, telling Pilot *"Return this to Arrius...I honor him too much to wear it."* As for the aristocracy...they came and how, adding a patina of truth to this celebratory gathering. (Center): Heston poses with Marina Berti for publicity photos from this sequence. Berti had first gained prominence in Italy in 1941 and had made a stunning America debut in **Quo Vadis** (1951) in a substantial role as the love slave of court advisor Petronius (Leo Genn). In **Ben-Hur** she is barely glimpsed – presumably as a love interest, though never explained - and in a non-speaking part, her subsequent movie roles depriving us all of her earthy vitality and sultry good looks. (Right): Berti as she appeared in **Quo Vadis** as the ever-devoted Eunice.

Judah and Balthasar accept the Sheik's hospitality and invitation to dine at his camp where Ilderim suggests to Judah that both their purposes might best be served if Judah agrees to be his charioteer against Messala. Judah accepts. But Balthasar cautions that there are many paths to God – revenge not being one of them. Judah and Messala race to the death inside the Circus. Despite employing every underhanded trick to secure his own victory Messala's chariot is destroyed during a perilous hairpin turn and Messala is trampled to death beneath the hooves of an advancing chariot's team. Before he dies Messala tells Judah that Miriam and Tierza are disfigured exiles residing in the valley of the lepers; thereby ensuring that Judah's hate for him will endure after his death. Against Esther's strenuous objections Judah seeks out his mother and sister. Having already experienced a religious conversion through the word of God, Esther implores Judah to take Miriam and Tierza to the city to see Christ. Regrettably, they are too late. The new governor, Pontius Pilate (Frank Thring) has decreed that Jesus be crucified. Judah and his family arrive just as Christ is being paraded through the streets bearing the weight of his cross and a crown of thorns in abject humiliation.

Judah recognizes Jesus as the man who gave him water in the desert and, after Jesus falters on the road Judah attempts to reciprocate this act of kindness, only to be forcibly removed by a Roman Centurion. Esther, Miriam and Tierza begin their arduous trip home. But Judah follows the procession to the mount where he witnesses the crucifixion with Balthasar. On the road home a violent storm breaks out, forcing Esther, Miriam and Tierza to seek refuge inside a cave. As thunder and lightning tear apart the sky, mother and daughter experience a miraculous restoration of their flesh. Drained of all bitterness, Judah returns home to Esther where he learns of their cure. The film ends with a shepherd leading his flock past the hill where Christ's body once clung to the cross.

Ben-Hur is an all-encompassing spectacle, brimming with raw human emotion that continues to haunt and enthrall. This is an epic whose heart beats more profoundly beneath its surface sheen. The depth of the human tragedy and its penultimate triumph fully saturate and satisfy our expectations for a good story, even as the gargantuan sets and colorful costumes dwarf all of our expectations for visual grandeur. **Ben-Hur** was shot in MGM Camera 65 – the most expansive of the widescreen processes, and it is saying much of William Wyler's direction that he fills the screen, not only with the resplendency of Robert



(Top): Frank Thring as Pontius Pilate crowns Judah the *'one true God'* of the people – for the time being at least. Judah's victory is hollow, however. For in a few moments he will be told that his mother and sister are not dead but actually doomed to a lifetime of leprosy.

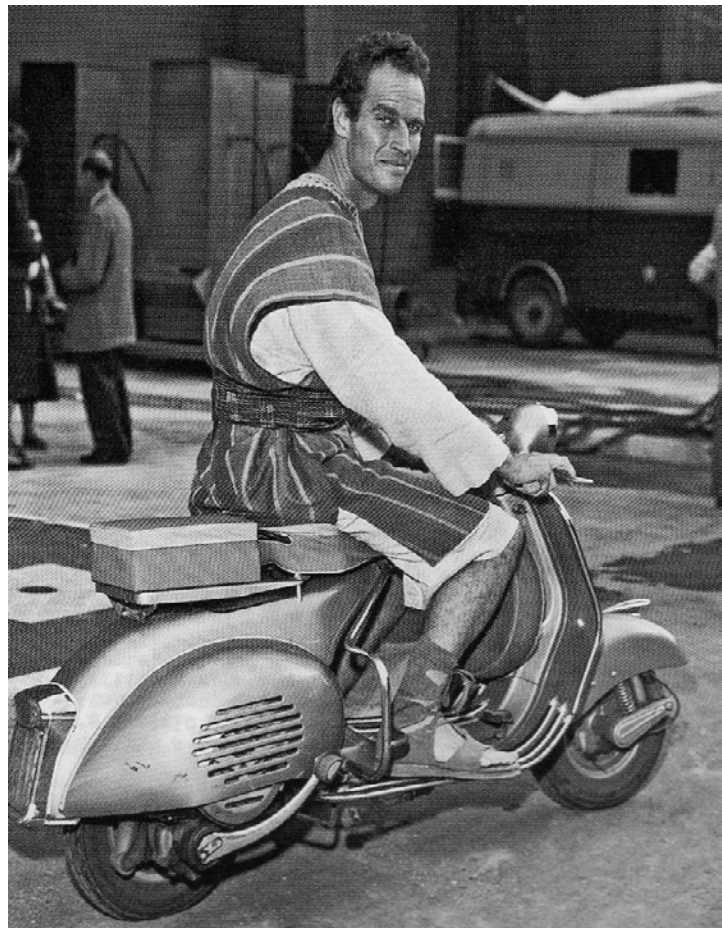
(right): The front façade to Cinecittà Studios in Rome; a movie studio built by Benito Mussolini to help spread Axis propaganda prior to WWII. The Allies bombed it during the war and for a few years thereafter it became a camp for displaced persons. The studio hosted the likes of Italian neo-realists like Fellini, Zeffirelli and Bertolucci and rented out its facilities to outside production companies. But by 1980 the once thriving studio was on the brink of bankruptcy. The Italian government privatized it. In 2007 a fire destroyed approximately 32,000 sq ft. of Cinecittà's famous back lot. While the Ben-Hur sets survived, those used in HBO's miniseries Rome were not quite so lucky.



(bottom): Charlton Heston's favorite mode of transportation for getting around the set? Why, a Vespa of course.

Surtee's lush cinematography, but also manages to frame his characters in interesting ways that heighten the intimacy of the narrative.

Released at a particularly precarious period in MGM's history, **Ben-Hur**'s overwhelming financial and critical success managed to stave off the specter of financial ruin for the studio. More than that, it reinstated MGM's reputation within the industry as purveyors of cinematic excellence – an reputation that had infrequently waffled throughout the 1950s. In the many lean years yet to follow, **Ben-Hur** would remain a benchmark for the studio to look back on with considerable pride. Today, **Ben-Hur** still ranks among the 'top ten' all-time greatest movies ever made. The accolade is well deserved. Arguably, the film ushered in a new earthy approach to making big screen epics – one later given even more magnificent flourish by David Lean's **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962). And **Ben-Hur**'s success ensured that more valiant attempts would continue to be made throughout the 1960s. But **Ben-Hur** stands in a class apart from the rest. It is a testament to William Wyler, Charlton Heston and the





blind faith of a crumbling studio system whose commitment to integrity and making 'good pictures' far surpassed any fear facing that uncertain future.

Weighing in at a whopping \$15 million dollars and clocking out at almost three and a half hours, **Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ** (1959) was the most expensive motion picture ever made in Hollywood to date; a spectacle and the movie's definitive response to television's encroachment popularity. Charlton Heston once mused, "If *Ben-Hur* hadn't been a hit, that (meaning MGM studios) would have all been a parking lot." There is much truth to this statement. For in 1952, misperceiving the alliance between studios and their nationally owned theater chains to be a monopoly barring the independent producer his chance to enter the film-making industry, the U.S. government forced all studios to divest themselves of their franchises, and in the end, their roster of home-grown talents – both in front of and behind the camera. That MGM was the last studio to comply with this edict – known as the Consent Decrees - speaks to the studio's reluctance to shed its communal atmosphere and close-knit artistic community (all under contract until the mid-1950s). But long before Charlton Heston and William Wyler dazzled audiences in that 'most honored motion picture of all time' a very different sort of valor had emerged to tell the tale.

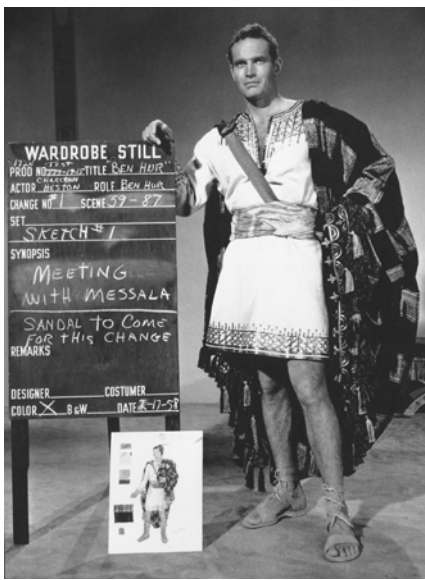
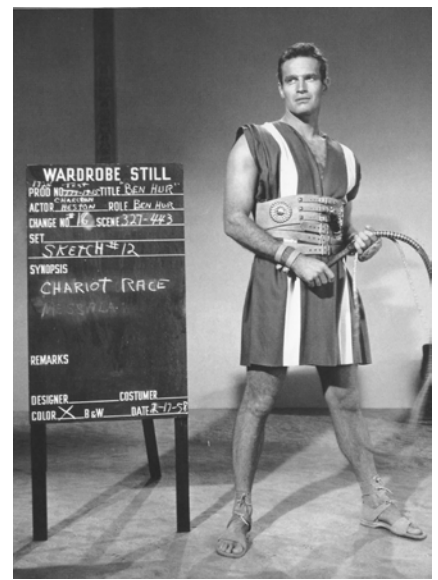
BEN-HUR – a tale of its author

General Lew Wallace's novel represents something of a religious irony – for the tale of a Judean prince besought by tragedy and driven to revenge, culminating with his conversion to Christianity, has very little to do with the Biblically documented life and times of Jesus Christ. In fact, Wallace - a civil war hero, lawyer, former Governor of New Mexico and Indiana State Senator - had not begun his literary career with an imbued passion or religious fervor in 1876. However, Wallace was forced to reconsider the novel's premise when stirred by a chance meeting with 'the great agnostic' – Robert G. Ingersoll. It would be another 5 years before his book **Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ** was published on Nov. 12, 1880 by Harper & Brothers, and another two years after that until its sales took off.





In 1882, Broadway producers Mark Klaw and Abraham Erlanger approached Wallace with an offer to transform **Ben-Hur** into a theatrical enterprise. They had not been the first to recognize the novel's potential as a stage spectacular. But Wallace's newly invested piety translated into a sincere commitment to not allowing Christ to be bastardized by the lowly profession of stage acting. Together with Wallace, Klaw and Erlanger finally decided that the Son of God should only be represented on stage by a shaft of white light. With Wallace's blessing the producers set about mounting a \$75,000 super production complete with moving cycloramas, motorized waves for the sea battle, live horses and no less than five racing chariots perched upon elaborate treadmills for the big finale.



(previous page: Fraser Heston gets a few tips on how to be a centurion from Jack Hawkins, and (bottom) Chuck, Stephen Boyd and William Wyler look on as the Circus Maximus begins to fill with spectators. A technician is hosing down the red dust in the background so that the charioteers won't raise any dust. (This page, top): the lusty Sheik Ilderim (Hugh Griffith) arrives inside the Roman bathhouse to coax Messala into a challenge race with the prospect of a king's ransom. Messala will not live to collect it. (left): Charlton Heston endures various costume tests; his look in all but the one at bottom left either imperious or bored – it's hard to tell.



(left): Charlton Heston welcomes TV and radio host Ed Sullivan to the Circus Maximus. Sullivan began his career as a sports newspaper reporter. But in 1941 CBS hired him for an hour-long broadcast 'The Toast of the Town' which gradually morphed into 'The Ed Sullivan Show' – an all-star variety review where most of the big names and up and comers came to present themselves to the mass public for the very first time in their respective careers. A nod from Sullivan could spell stardom in those days – a scowl, the end of an all-too-brief and once promising career. Sullivan was beloved by audiences who tuned in every Sunday to catch his show. But he was generally feared by those who wanted to make a name for themselves.





(above): The House of Hur in better times. Judah, his sister Tirzah (Cathy O'Donnell) and mother, Miriam (Martha Scott) welcomes their devoted trading merchant, Simonides (Sam Jaffe) and his daughter Esther (Haya Harareet) after a long journey. Simonides asked permission from Judah to buy his daughter's bond because he wishes her to marry. But Judah, already infatuated with her, release Esther from her duties to the house as his wedding present. (right): after Judah's imprisonment for an accidental tile coming loose from his roof and striking the governor, Simonides and Esther rush to Messala to beg for Judah's release. "You know him Tribune," Simonides exclaims. "Better than you," Messala coldly replies. "Then you know Judah Ben-Hur could not have done this." For his troubles Simonides is imprisoned and made a cripple – released into Esther's care several years later.

William Young rewrote Wallace's words for the stage and the play opened with direction by Joseph Brooks. **Ben-Hur** debuted at the Broadway Theater in New York City on November 29, 1899 where it was an unqualified smash hit. Klaw and Erlanger's investment would payout handsomely with a record-breaking attendance of over 20 million and a gross of nearly \$10,000,000 over the next twenty years. At the dawn of a new century – General Wallace could reflect proudly on the fact that he had created one of the most visceral, stirring and sincere literary adaptations loosely derived from Biblical texts; a novel that, to present day, has never been out of print or circulation.

WILLIAM WYLER

– A TALE OF THE MAN

At the time of his death, director William Wyler's reputation as an American filmmaker was on par with another contemporary, John Ford. Indeed, the superficial parallels between Ford and Wyler's careers in retrospect seem uncanny. Ford was honored with four Academy Awards; Wyler – three. Ford was the first recipient of the American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award; Wyler – its' fourth. Yet, what has so often been overlooked in any critical analyses of the films of William Wyler is the director's diversification in themes and genres. Perhaps **Ben-Hur** (1959) is William Wyler's signature piece. Certainly, it remains the one most closely associated with his name in the present day. But Wyler's gifts for storytelling were so vastly superior to almost any of his rivals – then or now – that in retrospect it has become all too easy to



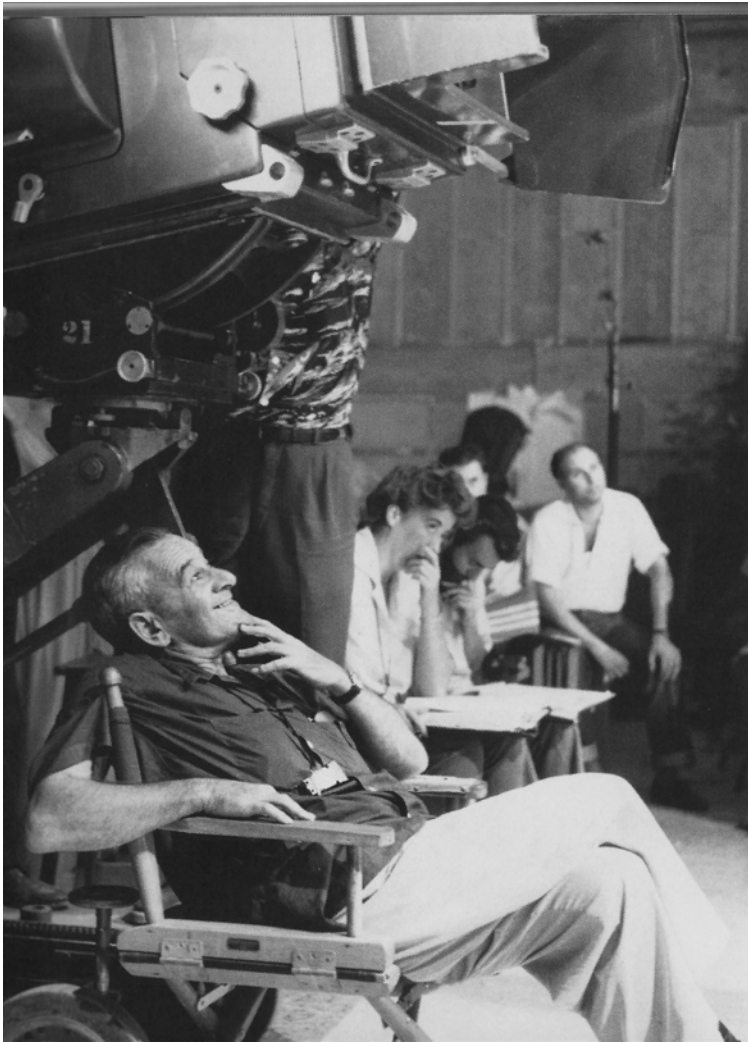
discharge them as par for the course of his accepted canon of work; that level of brilliance accepted and, in fact, expected by audiences.

Wilhelm Weiller was born on July 1, 1902 in Mulhausen Alsace. Although accredited as an assistant director on 1925's **Ben-Hur**, it would be another 33 years before these influences would so completely envelope the director in a colossal undertaking of his own. Prior to his enlistment on 1925's **Ben-Hur** Wyler's formative years in Hollywood had been spent working as an errand boy for his mother's cousin, Carle Lemmle Sr. at Universal Studios. His directorial debut, the two-reel western **Crook Buster** (1925) was followed by five years of servitude inside Universal's B unit. But in 1929, Wyler made the costly **Hell's Heroes** (1930), proving that he could handle an A-list production that was both commercially and critically successful. Wyler left Universal in the mid-1930s, partly because the Lemmle family had been forced to decamp, but also because the product the studio was producing at that time was not up to the level of quality Wyler sought to achieve for himself.

Making the move to Samuel Goldwyn Productions, Wyler was quickly disillusioned by *'the Goldwyn touch'* which was tantamount to being bullied into submission, having his every decision scrutinized, and ultimately much of his own work recut before, during and after shooting without his input or consent. The ending of Wyler's **Wuthering Heights** (1939) as example, that depicts the ghostly deities of Heathcliff (Lawrence Olivier) and Cathy Linton (Merle Oberon) departing for their heavenly bliss along the craggy moors was neither conceived nor shot by Wyler, but rather inserted into the film after he had already approved his own final cut. The first of the Wyler-Goldwyn collaborations; **These Three** (1936), Lillian Hellman's lesbian-themed play, exacerbated this strain between producer and director.

(right): composer Miklós Rózsa who gave **Ben-Hur** its epic sound and augmented many an exemplary – and a few substandard – movies with enduring melodies. Rózsa was born in Budapest, and avidly studied both the viola and piano. By age 8 he was already composing and performing in public. He studied in Leipzig, emerging with a deep respect for the German musical tradition. But he came to film composition second best, hoping to establish himself as an impresario and conductor of a grand symphony orchestra. Rózsa did in fact compose symphonic arrangements that he later played in a concert hall. But the movies kept him busy and distracted. *"I often wonder what I might have accomplished if I only had the luxury of time,"* he once mused, as though he somehow regarded both his talents and his efforts as subservient to the medium of film. Gene Kelly presents Rosza with his Oscar for **Ben-Hur** – his third and final win for film composition.





However, Wyler's next venture; Sinclair Lewis' **Dodsworth** (1936), the poignantly paced depiction of a sad and disintegrating marriage, was both personally and professionally rewarding. The film received Best Director and Best Picture Oscar nominations; the first of seven consecutive years Wyler earned these accolades, culminating with his win in each category for **Mrs. Miniver** in 1942. Throughout the 1930s and early forties, William Wyler's professional reputation and stature continued to grow. His scraps with Samuel Goldwyn, that might have otherwise terminated his chances for future employment, instead paved the way for his being loaned out to other studios. In collaboration with Gregg Toland, Wyler pioneered the use of deep-focus cinematography. He eased temperamental actress,

Bette Davis through three of her most demanding assignments; including two at Warner Brothers - the Oscar-winning **Jezebel** (1938) and Oscar nominated, **The Letter** (1940). He exercised what appeared to be an effortless filmmaking prowess in the gritty social melodrama, **Dead End** (1937) and revealed his passion for strong literary adaptations with **Wuthering Heights** (1939).

Undeniably, Wyler's most prolific works from this period serve as bookends to World War II: the patriotic weepy, **Mrs. Miniver** (1942) and bittersweet epitaph to those years of conflict: **The Best Years of Our Lives** (1946). The interim between these was interrupted by Wyler's own service record and the now classic documentary '**The Memphis Belle.**' **Mrs. Miniver** proved so rousing and idyllic in its representation of a lost way of life for the English that Prime Minister Winston Churchill sited it as being more effective at gaining America's commitment to the war effort than a fleet of destroyers. Yet, in retrospect it is perhaps **The Best Years of Our Lives** that remains Wyler's supreme war-time melodrama. A powerfully emotive and darkly brooding examination of the awkward re-assimilation facing veterans **The Best Years of Our Lives** effectively tapped into the anxieties of going home; the apprehensions of men whose identities have been misshapen, or perhaps even misplaced as near forgotten relics in their own time.

As the years wore on William Wyler continued to expand his repertoire; running a gamut from frothy romantic comedies (**Roman Holiday** 1953) to pensive melodramas (**The Little Foxes** 1941) and from sprawling westerns (**The Big Country** 1958) to gritty crime thrillers (**The Desperate Hours** 1955). Today, film makers like Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford are





(Above): Nothing would give Sheik Ilderim more pleasure than to see Messala defeated in the Circus Maximus, “...and at the hand of a Jew!” Hugh Griffith was a brilliant character actor, urged to make his career in banking by his parents but gaining entrance into the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts instead. These plans were suspended for six years, in service to his country in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Griffith saw action in Burma during WWII. In 1946 he resumed his acting career taking leading roles on both sides of the Atlantic. Films infrequently beckoned until the mid-1950s. His Best Supporting Actor Oscar win for **Ben-Hur** opened doors that regrettably Griffith was all too easily able to close, thanks in part to his growing and chronic alcoholism. He appeared to good effect in **Tom Jones** and **How To Steal A Million**, but by the end of the 1960s his career was over. He shifted gears into character parts on television in the 1970s and died of a heart attack in London in 1980.



revered as auteurs within the studio system. But Hitchcock arguably made the same movie over and over again – the wrong man thriller – while Ford’s forte arguably remains chiefly anchored to the milieu of the Hollywood western. While one may argue – and rightly so – that both Ford and Hitchcock are peerless masters in their element – by comparison William Wyler’s screen achievements never settled on any one particular genre or even theme for that matter but rather, he excelled at creating movie art in all of them. Inadvertently, the breadth and scope of his art has denied William Wyler his rightful moniker as an auteur par excellence. Perhaps his career is a little harder to quantify by this measurable standardization, but Wyler’s movies remain an irrefutable testament against conformity in art.



(left): Scottish-born Finlay Currie began acting on the stage and in movies in 1943, gaining prominence as Abel Magwitch in David Lean's **Great Expectations** (1946). With his mellifluous voice and grand gesturing he was a natural in Hollywood epics; playing Simon called Peter in 1951's **Quo Vadis**, Robert Taylor’s brittle father in **Ivanhoe** (1952) and Balthazar, one of the three Magi in search of the Christ in **Ben-Hur**. His last big scale epic was Samuel Bronston’s **The Fall of the Roman Empire** (1964) as an aged, wise senator.



Later in life, Currie was contented to confine himself to bit roles on television. He became a respected antiques dealer, specializing in coins and precious metals.



BEN-HUR: THE RACE BEGINS

The 1925 version of **Ben-Hur** had been a troubled project largely inherited by MGM. Produced by J.J. Cohn and directed by Fred Niblo in Rome, its production was eventually moved back to Culver City by the newly amalgamated management. A colossal undertaking buffeted by costly delays – most generating grand spectacle readily apparent in the final cut – **Ben-Hur** became a box office sensation, although at a then unheard of cost of \$4 million it took several reissues for the movie to break even. MGM had spared no expense, employing over 3000 extras, investing in the costly 2-strip Technicolor process and even going so far as to construct full-size Roman war ships for the sea battle. Even if the film proved a gargantuan undertaking – and it was - in 1925 MGM was on the upswing – a film empire in the making. Such prestige afforded single pictures bolstered the studio's stature within the industry.

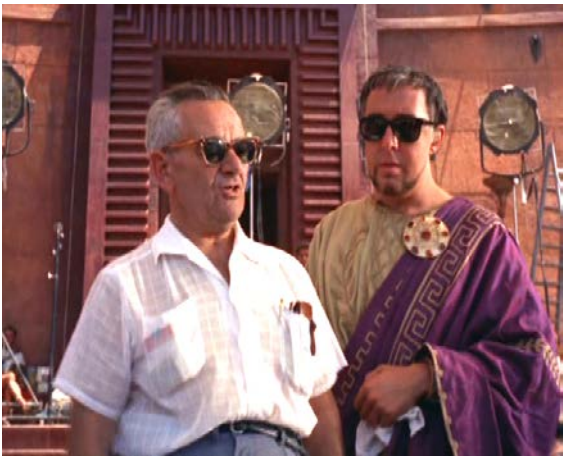


Fast forward to 1958; MGM and the rest of Hollywood are in a state of sustained chaos. Most of the founding moguls, including L.B. Mayer have been ousted from power. Television has cut theater attendance by nearly half, while production costs have skyrocketed in direct proportion to the downturn in badly needed profits. The star system is a thing of the past. Talent is now contracted on a picture by picture basis. By all accounts, the golden era is fast approaching extinction. It was into this artistic malaise that two great happenings occurred within a few short years apart. The first was MGM's gamble on a mammoth remake of **Quo Vadis** (1951), director Mervyn LeRoy's very lucrative, Class 'A' super-colossus shot entirely in Rome. But the second was 20th Century-Fox's debut of Cinemascope with another Bible-fiction epic – **The Robe** (1953). The critical and financial success of both movies, coupled with every studio's mad scramble to incorporate the new anamorphic aspect ratio into their own mainstream productions by the mid-decade had propelled producer Sam Zimbalist's interests in remaking **Ben-Hur** for the postwar generation.



(right): Francis X. Bushman challenges Ramon Novarro in the 1925 silent version of **Ben-Hur**. (middle): Charlton Heston and Haya Harareet take a spirited walk through the streets of Judiah in between takes. Born in Haifa, Harareet's career was as brief as it was memorable. She remains best known for her performance as the devoted slave girl, Esther in **Ben-Hur** (1959), retiring from movies in 1964. (bottom): Messala attempts to whip Judah during the race in the Circus Maximus. This scene is a carbon copy of the one shot for the 1925 version.





(top): Wyler and Frank Thring, who played the brutal Pontius Pilot, discuss a scene on the Circus outdoor set, both looking very dapper but decidedly out of period in their sunglasses. (above): workmen carry supplies up the scaffolding of the Circus set, one of the largest ever built for a movie. (right): second unit director Yakima Canutt in a 1942 photo. Yak's career as a stunt coordinator was impressive to say the least, working both in front of and behind the camera on 186 movies between 1915 and 1974.

(right): a gorgeous Kodachrome of Haya Harareet. (below): Charlton Heston looking beleaguered but unbeaten as 'forty-one'; his ascribed number as just another galley slave aboard Quintus Arrius' battle ship. Bottom: two views of the Circus Maximus under construction. In the first, Charlton Heston can be seen riding a horse. In the latter, animal wranglers take their camels for a bit of exercise. The camels do not appear in this scene, but do feature as background on the set of Sheik Ilderim's camp.



Zimbalist had been a cutter on the 1925 **Ben-Hur**. Like William Wyler he came to the subject well-versed. In choosing Wyler to direct Zimbalist made a fortuitous decision that all but guaranteed the film would have a poignant intimacy at its core. William Wyler's great gift to the American cinema had always been his ability to humanize a good story and make it live on the screen. As it had done in 1925, Rome would play host to the elephantine production once again. Cinecitta Studios became ground zero to 125 American cast and crew; the hub of all activity so vast that it dwarfed even the monumental pedigree of Oscar-winning art director Edward Carfagno's previous efforts on **Quo Vadis**. Most of these 300 sets were constructed from wood and stucco masquerading as brick, mortar and cement. The city of Jerusalem alone covered ten square city blocks, consuming more than 40,000 cubic feet of lumber, 250 miles of metal tubing and over 1 million pounds of plaster. Although these sets were massive in scale, matte paintings were later used to enhance their grandeur even further.



The set that gave Carfagno particular satisfaction was Arius's garden terrace – a lavish marble and granite paradise, complete with staging area and fully functional fountains. To add an air of authenticity, during the party sequence where Arius adopts Judah as his son the company invited distinguished dignitaries from the Italian aristocracy to attend in full costume. The allure of such an undertaking proved too good to pass up and generated a palpable party atmosphere on the set. Rarely did Carfagno's meticulous attention to detail lapse, except the time he placed a ripe tomato for a flash of color on Judah's dinner table, only to be abruptly advised by one of his own historians that the tomato had not yet been invented in the history of cross pollination.



During the making of the 1925 **Ben-Hur**, the full scale sea battle had posed a genuine risk to health and safety of both cast and crew – particularly during one harrowing instance when a full-size galley caught fire in the Mediterranean, sending panicked extras diving into the sea. For the 1959 version, the sea battle was almost entirely restaged using miniatures inside a man-made tank, allowing for strictly controlled conditions. For the interiors of the great ships, 600 extras were employed as oars men. While all this manic activity continued behind the





(Above): Charlton Heston proudly displays his Best Actor Oscar in the press room after the telecast. In his acceptance speech Heston paid tribute to producer Sam Zimbalist "who gave more than any of us". Zimbalist died of a massive heart attack in the midst of shooting. (top middle): Chuck and Lydia at the Hollywood premiere of **Ben-Hur**. Asked to provide a clue into the longevity of their marriage in 1983, Heston jokingly replied, "The essential ingredient in a successful marriage is a superb husband." Heston was less glib in a 2002 interview, admitting "Above all, I'm proud of my family ... my wife Lydia, the queen of my heart, my children, Fraser and Holly, and my beloved grandchildren, Jack, Ridley and Charlie."

Indeed, the Heston's 65 year marriage is one of the most enduring in Hollywood. In his autobiography, Heston explained, "By my last weeks on campus, I was preoccupied with getting Lydia into bed or married to me. She rejected both options with adamant resolve. Desperately, I fell back on the ploy soldiers have used for centuries. "You realize you may never see me again. We must have something to carry in our hearts! It may be years, it may be never!" It was a heart-breaking performance, not least because I meant it, but it never dented her resolve...While my falling in love with Lydia almost instantly makes complete sense to me, I've never understood what drew her to me. Her generosity of spirit, is my guess, though Lydia has never been very forthcoming on the question. When I pressed her on this subject once, she smiled and said, 'Words, Charlie ... words. I loved the way you talked about things -- paintings, horses, trees.'"

(top right): Special Effects wizard Arnold Gillespie proudly holds up his Oscar for Ben-Hur. Gillespie had first attained prominence for his spectacular SFX on MGM's **The Wizard of Oz** (1939). (right): the paparazzi doing what they do best at **Ben-Hur**'s world premiere. Peter Roberts title card for his 'News of the Day' report says it all. (bottom): Haya Harareet revels in the attention the Italian press has begun to lavish on the film.



scenes one key element seemed to be stagnated almost from the start – the development of an adequate script.

From the beginning, Wyler and Zimbalist had expressed their grave concerns to MGM; that, of the forty odd scripts submitted for consideration, even the one written by Karl Tunberg - chosen as the basis for the film - was in serious need of revision. At the quiet behest of Zimbalist, friend and author Gore Vidal was hired to rehabilitate Tunberg's dialogue. It was Vidal, for example, who reconceived the platonic boyhood relationship between Judah Ben-Hur and the Roman tribune, Messala as a 'lover's quarrel' – so coined to faintly hint of a homosexual undertone responsible for their embittered divide later on. The Production Code – a largely self-governed body of censorship - did not permit overt references to homosexuality – hence, Vidal's notations relied on long gazes between the two actors and a somewhat effete playful banter that quickly degenerated into hurt feelings after Messala believes he has been spurned.

Near the end of all this rewriting, blacklisted screenwriter Christopher Fry was quietly put on the payroll by Zimbalist. Fry's great contribution altered the contemporary strain of dialogue to suit the period, but never in a way so that social exchanges between characters became theatrical. Unfortunately for Fry, MGM balked at affording him any screen credit. Throughout





(Above): The Loew's State Theater in New York hosts **Ben-Hur's** premiere to sellout crowds. Inside its lobby costars Charlton Heston and Steven Boyd seem genuinely amused by the **Ben-Hur** board game, surrounded by a myriad of promotional tie-ins in a media blitz marketing campaign for all things Roman. The game, designed by Carabande's Jean de Poel, involved two to six players moving their game pieces with war game styled rulers after playing cards from their hand. The 'movement cards' could either be drawn from a standard or high-risk deck.

the shoot Wyler made repeated attempts to reinstate a credit for Fry into the film but to no avail. On the eve of the Academy Awards Fry could perhaps breathe a smug sign of relief that, regardless of his formidable contributions, Tunberg did not receive the Oscar either. The award went to Neil Paterson instead for **Room at the Top**.

BEN-WHO? – CASTING ISSUES AND GETTING UNDERWAY

"It's eighty percent script and twenty percent you get great actors. There's nothing else to it." – William Wyler

In retrospect, the most astonishing aspect of **Ben-Hur's** preproduction is how close audiences came to never seeing Charlton Heston play the title role. Despite Heston's formidable handling of Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's **The Ten Commandments** (1956), MGM initially sought Paul Newman as their lead. Newman had by this time proven himself a formidable powerhouse at the box office. He had followed his breakout in **Somebody Up There Likes Me** (1956) with powerful performances in **Cat on A Hot Tin Roof** (1958) and **The Long Hot Summer** (1958). However, prior to any of these successes, Newman had made the disastrous **The Silver Chalice** (1954) – looking very ill at ease in his Roman toga. When approached with the prospect of donning similar garb for **Ben-Hur** Newman flatly refused, saying, *"Never again will I act a movie in a cocktail dress!"*

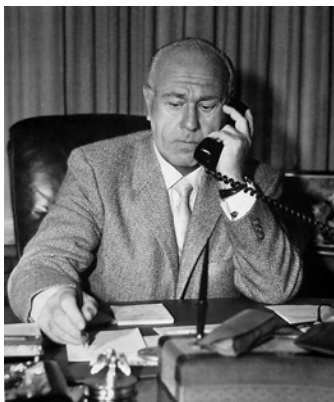
Second tier choices for the plum role were Marlon Brando, Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster and Rock Hudson. In some cases, the actors simply turned down the part. In other instances they were unavailable due to prior commitments at the time when **Ben-Hur** was scheduled to begin its lengthy shoot in Rome. In an unprecedented move MGM conducted an open cal





wading through an army of svelte Italian strongmen whose formidable girth and muscularity paled to their deplorable mastery of the English language. Finally, it was William Wyler who suggested Charlton Heston for the lead. Heston and Wyler had just completed **The Big Country** (1958) – a sprawling western. Heston and Wyler had worked well together. Moreover, Heston had shown he could wear sack cloth and sandals and still appear as at the height of his masculinity in DeMille's **The Ten Commandments** (1954).

It was roughly at this juncture in the film's preproduction that Sam Zimbalist suffered a fatal heart attack. MGM rushed in J.J. Cohn whose easygoing nature bode well with Wyler's congenial showmanship. The two got on famously. In keeping with the times, one aspect of the script that remained a concern for Wyler was its religious connotations. Expert consultants and specialists were employed from the Vatican, as well as the Protestant and Jewish faiths to ensure the utmost sensitivity to all religions. In reshaping Judah's conversion to Christianity, Wyler also took considerable care in the representation of the Christ figure – shooting actor Claude Heater, who portrayed Jesus, only from the back and never with any spoken words of dialogue. To convey Christ's genuineness, Wyler relied solely on Miklos Rozsa's evocative compositions.



Hungarian born, Rozsa had been a child protégée who began studying composition at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1926. After settling in London England in 1935, Rozsa met fellow Hungarian, Alexander Korda who commissioned him for **Knight Without Armor** (1937). While composing for **The Thief of Bagdad** (1940) Rosza moved to California, foregrounding his unobtrusive style for a series of B-grade film noirs. By the mid-1940s Rozsa was writing scores for A-list movies like *Edward My Son* and *The Great Gatsby* (both made in 1949). By the early 1950s he was one of Hollywood's 'go-to' composers, responsible for such memorable underscoring on **The Asphalt Jungle** (1950), **Quo Vadis** (1951) and **Ivanhoe** (1952). "I often wondered what I could do (on a film score) if I had the time," Rosza once mused, presumably because he always felt rushed to make his contributions. On **Ben-Hur** Rozsa created one of the richest, most deeply haunting and profoundly grand compositions ever recorded for film. The first fifteen minutes in particular, the 'star of Bethlehem' with its ethereal choral mass yields to a bombastic and slightly garish pomp and circumstance for the 'main title' – contrasting the sacred with the profanity of authoritarian rule.



(Left top and bottom): two portraits of Heston in his Judian robe of state. (Middle left): Haya Harareet graciously accepts roses from producer Sam Zimbalist. (Middle right): Sol Siegel was **Ben-Hur's** unaccredited executive producer. A money-man with a penchant for wheeling and dealing, Siegel's credits included **Panic in the Streets** (1950), **Gentlemen Prefer Blondes** (1953), **Three Coins in the Fountain** and **There's No Business Like Show Business** (both in 1954) and **High Society** (1956).

As the day neared for the shooting of the climactic chariot race second unit director Yakima Canutt and Charlton Heston rehearsed a team of horses around the massive Circus Maximus set Edward Carfagno had built on the back lots at Cinecitta. While both Heston and Stephen Boyd (Messala) did a fair amount of the driving during the execution of this sequence, the more ambitious stunts were left in the capable hands of Canutt's son; stuntman Joe Canutt. Despite endless planning and rehearsals, two accidents occurred during the shoot. The first involved Joe whose failure to slow his team around a hairpin turn literally tossed the stunt man into the air for a few harrowing moments. Shaken and bruised, but with cameras still rolling, the 'accidental' stunt remains in the finished film, seamlessly married to a close up of Charlton Heston crawling back inside to safety. The second casualty during the chariot race was one of MGM's massive Camera 65 widescreen cameras. Worth a whopping \$100,000 and stationed at the edge of another hairpin turn, the camera was trampled under the hooves of galloping horses when several charioteers lost control of their steeds.

CODA

Upon its release Time Magazine simply gushed, describing **Ben-Hur** as *"the biggest and best of Hollywood's super-spectacles"* while Variety's Ronald Holloway declared, *"A majestic achievement, representing a superb blending of the motion picture arts by master craftsmen."* Accolades aside, **Ben-Hur** went on to sweep the 1959 Academy Awards with 11 wins, earning Wyler a statuette for Best Director. To be certain Wyler's Roman saga is quite unlike the others that came before it, or for that matter, any that have tried to follow the film's success since. From end to end **Ben-Hur** teams with life.

Wyler once said *"story dictates technique"* - but this is an oversimplification of *'the Wyler touch.'* For when one considers the director's films in totum and **Ben-Hur** in particular Wyler's knack for contrasting the intimate against large scale backdrops becomes the defining feature running through all of his storytelling prowess. **Ben-Hur** is arguably the perfect example of this; its' poignant family saga never dragging the spectacle into the narrative confines of a parlor melodrama, yet keeping perfect checks and balances against the grandiosity. *"I like to do stories that have a personal appeal,"* Wyler admitted.

In the last decade of his career, William Wyler showed little signs of slowing down. He remade *'These Three'* under its original title as **The Children's Hour** (1961), explored bigotry in **The Collector** (1965), returned to the romantic comedy with the modestly successful mod-60s classic **How To Steal A Million** (1966) and had his final mega hit with Barbara Streisand's debut, **Funny Girl** (1968). His last film, **The Liberation of L.B. Jones** (1970), was a minor flop. Although Wyler dreamed of making more movies, ill health precluded him from ever assuming the directorial reigns again. Content to spend the rest of his life vacationing with his family abroad, William Wyler died on July 27, 1981 at his home in Beverly Hills. He is arguably best remembered today for **Ben-Hur** – the intimate epic: but this is but one of many immortal classics in a canon unlikely to be surpassed by any contemporary film maker.

