



2009 PARAMOUNT SUMMER FILM SERIES

BEN-HUR

(1959) COLOR 212 MINUTES

Director: William Wyler, Andrew Marton (Chariot race sequence only).
Screenplay: Karl Tunberg from the novel by Lew Wallace. Cinematography:
Robert Surtees. Editor: Ralph E. Winters, John Dunning. Production Design:
William A. Horning, Edward C. Carfagno. Music: Miklos Rozsa. Costumes:
Elizabeth Haffenden. Special Effects: Robert MacDonald, A. Arnold Gillespie.
Stunts: Yakima Canutt. Cast: Charlton Heston, Jack Hawkins, Stephen Boyd, Haya
Harareet, Hugh Griffith, Martha Scott, Sam Jaffe, Cathy O'Donnell, Finlay Currie.

SPECIAL INTRODUCTION WITH PROFESSOR HOWARD MILLER

Howard Miller is University Distinguished Teaching Associate Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. A native of Graham, Texas, Professor Miller received his PhD from the University of Michigan and since 1971 has taught a wide range of courses on the history of American religion. He has won many teaching awards, most recently the Friar Centennial Teaching Fellowship in 2008. He is working on a book on General Lew Wallace's best-selling novel, Ben-Hur, a Tale of the Christ, as a cultural artifact in America from its publication in 1880 to the present.

Professor Miller's lecture will locate the epic 1959 film of Ben-Hur in a tradition that is unique in the history of American culture. From its publication, Wallace's novel was periodically incarnated in new entertainment forms that have had a transformative effect on American entertainment and American society. The novel itself was, with Uncle Tom's Cabin, the best selling American novel of the nineteenth century. The stage version of the novel was seen by 20 million people on three continents between 1899 and 1919. The colossal silent film of 1925 epitomized the silent cinematic spectacle. And the 1959 film, the climax of the tradition, became a global sensation.

For almost a century, religious Americans learned to overcome their opposition to reading novels and to attending, first, the theater and, then, the moving pictures by "consuming" Wallace's "tale of the Christ," which was above moral suspicion. From that process emerged a crucial symbiotic relationship between religion and popular culture in the United States that has kept religion vital in the American republic even as it waned in the other western democracies. The result of that process has been a unique culture that became "secular" without ceasing to be "religious." Ben-Hur was central to that development.

William Wyler was one of the great directors of the American cinema and his body of work includes some of the most honored and distinguished Hollywood features of all time. Wyler studied business in Switzerland and music in Paris, but his career did not take shape until the early 1920s, when he came to the United States at the solicitation of a relative, Universal Studios boss Carl Laemmle. Wyler worked at the studio as a publicist, assistant director and, beginning in 1925, director of shorts and B features, mostly Westerns. At first Wyler was thought of as just another Laemmle relative but he soon proved himself an able craftsman and in the early 1930s, became one of Universal's greatest assets, directing such solid films as "The Love Trap" (1929), "Hell's Heroes" (1930), "Tom Brown of Culver" (1932), "Counselor-At-Law" (1933), and "The Good Fairy" (1935).

Following his stint at Universal, Wyler was signed by Samuel Goldwyn and it was the start of a mutually beneficial relationship. Wyler stayed with the producer for a decade, making such superbly crafted films as "These Three" (1936), "Come and Get It" (1936), "Dodsworth" (1936), "Dead End" (1937), "Jezebel" (1938), "Wuthering Heights" (1939), "The Letter" (1940), "The Westerner" (1940), and "The Little Foxes" (1941).

The outbreak of World War II had a huge impact on Wyler's life. Between 1942 and 1945 he served as a major in the U.S. Army Air Corps and directed a pair of documentaries, "The Memphis Belle" (1944) and "The Fighting Lady" (1944). In addition, he directed two key American films which both ended the war and captured the mood of the nation as it prepared for battle and, four years later, peace: "Mrs. Miniver" (1942) and "The Best Years of Our Lives" (1946). Wyler won Best Director Academy Awards for both films and both films won Best Picture of the Year Oscars. Wyler's postwar films (many of which he produced) were substantial: "The Heiress" (1949), "Detective Story" (1951), "Carrie" (1952), "Roman Holiday" (1953), "The Desperate Hours" (1955), "Friendly Persuasion" (1956), "The Big Country" (1958), "The Children's Hour" (1962), "The Collector" (1965), "Funny Girl" (1968), and his last film, "The Liberation of L.B. Jones" (1970).

Wyler was famous for demanding endless takes from his actors and his inability (or unwillingness) to articulate what exactly he wanted from them, yet the results speak for themselves. In 1965, he won the Thalberg Award for career achievement; eleven years later, he was the recipient of the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award. Ten of Wyler's films earned Best Picture of the Year Academy Award nominations and Wyler himself was nominated as Best Director nine times. But by far, his most honored film was "Ben-Hur."

Wyler's colossal remake of the 1925 silent classic stars Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish patrician in Roman-controlled Judea. When he refuses to squeal on rebellious Jews, his lifelong friend, the ambitious Messala (Boyd), has him enslaved and sends his mother (Scott) and sister (O'Donnell) to prison. Ben-Hur would die in the desert during transport if a kindly stranger (who he learns years later is Jesus) didn't give him water. He survives three years as a galley slave and waits for revenge against Messala.

During a great sea battle, Ben-Hur saves the life of a Roman officer (Hawkins) who frees him and brings him to Rome as his chariot driver. In the second spectacular action sequence of the film, the legendary chariot race, Ben-Hur defeats the cheating Messala but he does not find solace because his mother and sister now live in a leper colony. The tormented, wrathful Ben-Hur is striving for inner peace, which he can achieve by accepting Jesus and his message of love and forgiveness. But Jesus is about to be crucified.

"Ben-Hur" is the quintessential big-budget Biblical epic and it is always entertaining, even after the villain is vanquished. The chariot race sequence directed by Andrew Marton and coordinated by stunt-master extraordinaire Yakima Canutt is the stuff of cinematic immortality and has to be seen on the Paramount's wide screen to be fully appreciated. The sea battle is also impressive but besides the big action set pieces there's a very moving, very human story being told. Jesus is seen only from the back throughout the film but Wyler shows us the faces of those who look upon him and they express love and peace. The screenplay, based on the novel by Lew Wallace, is credited to Karl Tunberg but Christopher Fry, Maxwell Anderson, Gore Vidal, and S.N. Behrman also contributed to the script. Trivia: William Wyler served as assistant director on the original silent film version of "Ben-Hur" (1925).

"Ben-Hur" received twelve Academy Award nominations including: Best Picture (winner), Best Director (winner), Best Actor (Heston, winner), Best Supporting Actor (Griffith, winner), Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Film Editing (winner), Best Sound (winner), Best Special Effects (winner), Best Color Cinematography (winner), Best Music Score (winner), Best Costume Design (winner), and Best Art Direction-Set Decoration (winner). It ranks number seventy-two on the American Film Institute's list of the top one hundred American films of the twentieth century.

-Frank Campbell

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