

Ben-Hur (1959)

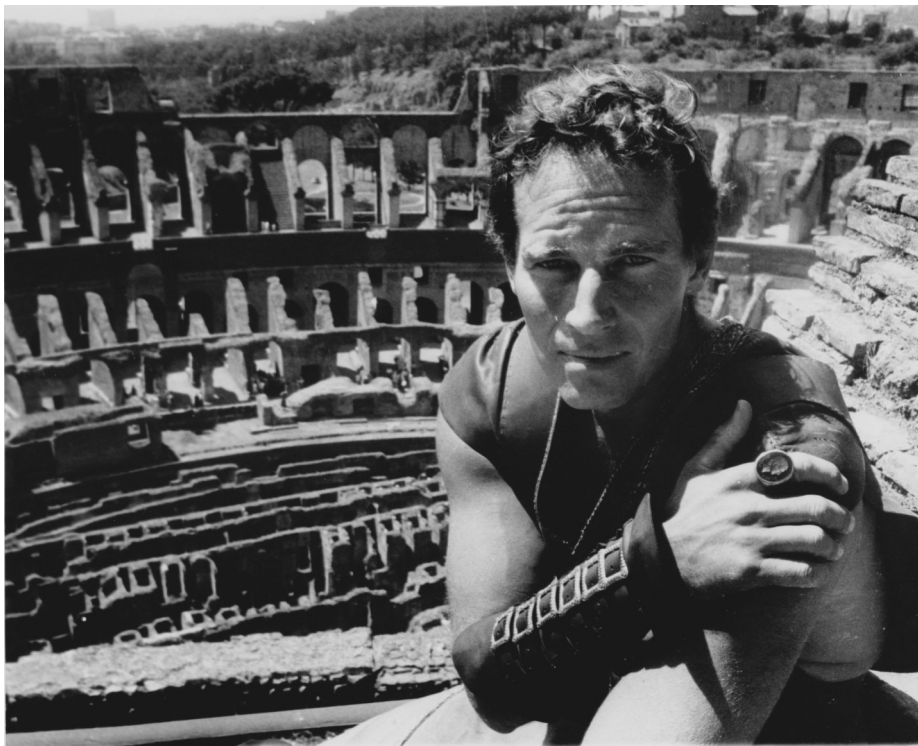
By Gabriel Miller

In 1925, twenty-three-year-old William Wyler had been in America for five years. That October, he got a job as one of sixty assistant directors to work on the chariot-race scene in MGM's "Ben-Hur." The studio had hired thousands of extras for the chariot race, and Wyler was in charge of getting his section of spectators to stand up and cheer. The young man from Mulhouse, Alsace-Lorraine, was no novice, however. By that time he had already directed six two-reel westerns for Universal and was the youngest director in Hollywood.

By 1957, MGM -- which had long been Hollywood's most glamorous studio -- was facing bankruptcy. Sam Zimbalist, a prominent producer of epic films ("Quo Vadis," "King Solomon's Mines"), begged Wyler to direct a remake that would either save the studio or finally destroy it. The project was conceived on a grand scale: this "Ben-Hur" would have three hundred sets, including a replica of Ancient Jerusalem covering half a square mile; the city's entrance, the Joppa Gate, stood over seven feet high; the arena for the chariot race spanned eighteen back-lot acres (six times the size of the arena built for "Gladiator"); and an artificial lake was dug for the naval battle scenes.

Although Zimbalist worked on him for months, Wyler was reluctant to take on "Ben-Hur." Later, in explaining why he finally did so, he sometimes claimed that he wanted to outdo Cecil B. DeMille, and sometimes that his ambition was to make a film in every genre and he had never made an epic. While there was no doubt an element of truth in both those reasons, Wyler had also been offered a very lucrative financial package: he was guaranteed 8 percent of the gross revenues or 3 percent of the net profits, whichever was greater, and an upfront payment of \$350,000. The film eventually grossed more than \$76 million.

Zimbalist wanted Wyler not for the spectacle -- he felt that would take care of itself--but for the distinctive touch that Wyler was famous for to animate the film's intimate and personal scenes. The producer wanted spectacle, but he also envisioned a story with depth, featuring absorbing relationships, and Wyler certainly delivered that aspect. "Ben-Hur" is staggering in its scale, yet the intimacy of the relationships and characterizations remain engrossing. Wyler was able to manipulate the space afforded by the 65-millimeter camera to capture the epic scale of the back-grounds as well as revealing close-ups of the characters.



Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur inside the Roman Coliseum. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

To achieve this effect, Wyler felt he had to substantially overhaul Karl Tunberg's script, which he disliked. Noted playwrights Maxwell Anderson & S.N. Behrman had worked on it earlier, but now Wyler felt the script required a stronger narrative line and needed to be pruned of its stilted, archaic language. Gore Vidal was hired to revise the script. Believing that the conflict between "Ben-Hur" (Charlton Heston) and Messala (Stephen Boyd) needed to be made deeper and more complex, Vidal suggested a subtext of a lover's quarrel stemming from an emotional relationship in their youth--he said he wanted Messala to behave like a "spurned lover." In later years, Wyler claimed not to remember this conversation, but he did frame the reunion scene between the boyhood friends in a way that echoed the postwar reunion of Al and Milly Stephenson in *The Best Years of our Lives*, which suggests that he took Vidal's suggestion seriously.

Charlton Heston disputed the extent of Vidal's influence on the script, claiming that British playwright Christopher Fry had made the most important changes. Wyler wanted Fry to elevate the language, giving it a more biblical tone without making it sound formulaic or Hollywood-archaic, and Fry performed this task admirably. Neither Vidal nor Fry would receive screen credit, however. Wyler wanted Fry to share the screenplay credit, but Tunberg objected. (Vidal claimed that Fry felt that Vidal deserved credit as well.) The Writers Guild ruled in favor of Tunberg. The dispute received unfavorable publicity and no doubt cost Tunberg the Oscar for best screenplay, the only award the film failed to win.

The film is also influenced by Wyler's politics and by the aftermath of the Hollywood blacklist. An enthusiastic supporter of Israel and donor to Israeli causes, Wyler revealed in an interview that he had also been attracted to the film because the struggle of Judea under Rome and the Judeans' struggle for independence still resonated in Israel's current struggle. He was also an early supporter of America's entry into World War II, having been affected as a child in Mulhouse by anti-Semitism from both the Germans and the French. (Mulhouse was the birthplace of Alfred Dreyfus and members of that family still lived there when Wyler was growing up.) Messala's lines--"In the name of the gods, Judah, what do the lives of a few Jews mean to you?" and "You are a conquered people ... you live on myths of the past" -- raised issues that still resonated with the director.

During the HUAC investigations into "subversive influence on motion pictures" -- "The Best Years of Our Lives" was one of a dozen films named in a HUAC report as containing Communist propaganda -- Wyler was active in co-founding the Committee on the First Amendment. The CFA, whose aim was to defend the rights of people to keep their political beliefs to themselves, sent a delegation of Hollywood stars to Washington as a show support for the unfriendly witnesses. When Judah resists Messala's demand that he inform on his people, Wyler was comparing America to the Roman Empire in its attempt to subvert civil liberties.

"Ben-Hur" was based on the best-selling nineteenth-century American novel by Lew Wallace, who had been a Union general during the Civil War and the territorial governor of New Mexico. Wyler made significant changes to the novel: whereas Wallace was interested in Judah's relationship to Christ -- the novel is subtitled "A Tale of the

Christ" -- in the film, Wyler is less interested in the religious aspects of the story. His Judah's conversion to Christianity seems indirect, his interest motivated primarily by his love for Esther. And although Wyler's filming of the Christ figure is also indirect, it nonetheless resonates with emotion and feeling. The audience neither sees His face nor hears Him speak, as only minimal pipe-organ music accompanies His appearance.

The film's centerpiece was the chariot race, which was only mentioned briefly in Tunberg's script but ran to thirty-eight pages in the revision. The influential editing, magnified by the lack of music in the scene, allows the audience to experience the race as the drivers do, and it taught spectators and generations of directors how to film and edit action scenes. (George Lucas has commented that he relied on this scene and on the film in general for his "Star Wars" films.)

The filming of "Ben-Hur" began in May of 1958 and was supposed to last until November, but Wyler did not finish until January of 1959. The finished film was a resounding success, winning a record eleven Oscars, including a third Best Director award for Wyler.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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