

Ben-Hur (1925)

By Fritzi Kramer

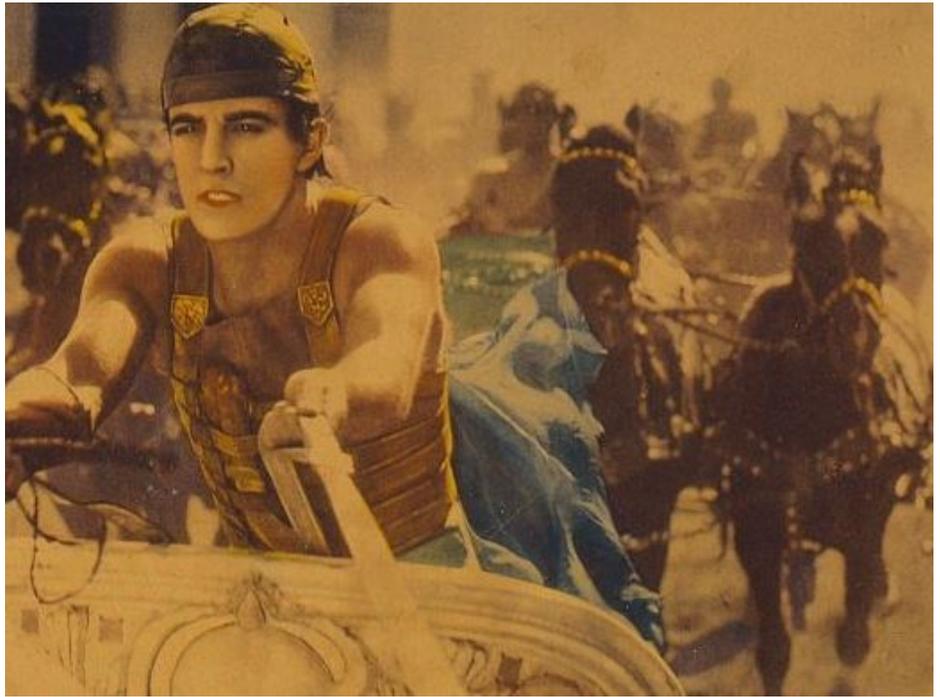
In 1880, retired Union general Lew Wallace published an epic religious novel entitled “Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ.” Forty-five years later, the book would be adapted into a motion picture hailed as one of the biggest, most expensive and complicated productions ever to come out of the American film industry.

The 1925 version of “Ben-Hur” is infamous for its troubled shoot. Directors, stars and writers were hired and then fired; the Italy-based production was halted and restarted and then halted again and pulled back to California.¹

There are tales of burning ships, dead stuntmen and unusable footage. However, amongst all the gossip it is easy to forget the technical accomplishments of the cast and crew of “Ben-Hur.”

Ramon Novarro was engaged to play the title role in the film after it had already been in production for months.² A relatively new star with a particular aptitude for costume roles, Novarro’s job was to carry a dense narrative and to survive an emotionally and physically taxing shoot. His character, Judah Ben-Hur, is a Jewish nobleman who is betrayed and enslaved by his Roman best friend. He spends the rest of the film looking for revenge, a quest that is concluded with a furious chariot race. The last act of the film is taken up with Judah’s conversion to Christianity.

Novarro’s greatest talent was his ability to bring light, boyish charisma to a role while also avoiding being swallowed up by epic sets and scenery; this skill is displayed to great effect in “Ben-Hur.” He does mug on occasion but he also has some moments of fine acting. For example, his character is enslaved on a Roman galley but manages to save the commander’s life during a pirate attack. After the ship battle, Novarro and the commander are rescued by another Roman galley. As he is climbing up the side of the ship, Novarro sees a galley slave staring back at him through the oar hole. He freezes. In spite of all he has done for the commander, could he be thrown back into slavery? His whole body shakes as he continues his climb. Novarro and director Fred Niblo manage to convey complicated emotions without a single word or title card; it’s the sort of scene that



Ramon Novarro as Judah Ben-Hur fiercely drives his chariot. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Collection.

demonstrates the power of silent film acting.

In his role as the primary antagonist, former matinee idol Francis X. Bushman is all bluster and swagger and he overacts outrageously. However, this works for his character, who is blustery and swaggering and given to overreacting. Bushman is broad but not bad and he certainly looks the part. Praise is also due to veteran actress Claire McDowell, who plays Judah’s mother. With her patrician features, McDowell was often cast as mothers and authority figures. Her scenes near the end of “Ben-Hur” are particularly good. Now a leper, she cannot touch the sleeping figure of her son without the risk of infecting him. She has not seen him in years but she must content herself with kissing his shadow. In the hands of a lesser actress, this scene could be maudlin at best and laughable at worst. McDowell gives it the dignity it deserves.

Meanwhile, on the design front, Cedric Gibbons and A. Arnold Gillespie under the direction of Andrew McDonald created epic sets through a combination of actual size and clever trickery. Their weapons of choice were hanging miniatures and matte paintings that combined seamlessly with genuinely large structures. The strong design vision extended to the costumes and props and the result can best be described as a medieval egg tempera icon come to life. The enhanced sets do not overwhelm the characters because they are all part of an organic whole.

Finally, “Ben-Hur” is to be praised for the tour de

force efforts of its editing team. A massive pile of exposed film, over a million feet, had been accumulating for months during the Italian and Hollywood shoots and Lloyd Nosler and his editing team were tasked with attacking that pile and turning it into a coherent and enjoyable film. Basil Wrangell had been hired in Italy as an interpreter and his status as the longest-standing member of the crew made him ideal to help catalog the mass of film.³ Wrangell recalled that he spent most of 1925 working until midnight every day and only receiving two Sundays off during that time. That million-foot mountain had to be whittled down to a mere 12,000 feet for the finished film. MGM executive Irving Thalberg, then recovering from a heart attack,⁴ oversaw the final round of cuts completed before the December 30, 1925 premiere of "Ben-Hur." It was a photo finish.

Did the efforts of the editing team pay off? The proof is in the film itself. The famous chariot race contains excitement, suspense, some very fine stunt work and direction but the brisk cuts help create a snappy pace. The other renowned set piece of "Ben-Hur" is just as impressive: Roman ships are set upon by pirates and a great battle ensues. The ship-to-ship combat looks harrowing and dangerous on the screen because it was just that: real ships, real smoke, real splinters. Clever cutting brings order to the chaos and the result is one of the very best naval battles in motion picture history. The aggressive editing saves Ben-Hur from the chief dangers an epic can face: a leaden pace and a tendency to meander over the beautiful sets.

While the backstage stories and the studio politics make for interesting reading, "Ben-Hur" is most valuable for what it demonstrates on the screen. It represents the art of silent film at its height and displays the massive resources at the command of major American studios. A group of talented performers and technicians joined forces to overcome difficulties and the result is movie magic. "Ben-Hur" is polished, gaudy, elaborate, epic. In short, Hollywood.

¹ Scott Eyman, *Lion of Hollywood: The Life and Legend of Louis B. Mayer*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005)

² Andre Soares, *Beyond Paradise: The Life of Ramon Novarro*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002)

³ Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By....* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968)

⁴ Mark Vieira, *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010)

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

Fritzi Kramer is the founder of the silent film website [Movies Silently](#). She has written for The Keaton Chronicle and the San Francisco Silent Film Festival.