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LEW WALLACE'S *BEN HUR*

By JACKSON E. TOWNE

OLIVER LAFARGE, in his "Santa Fé. The Autobiography of a Southwestern Town," speaks of General Lew Wallace as the "first recorded member of the town's art colony," for Wallace wrote the sixth, seventh and eighth books of the novel "Ben Hur" in the Palace of the Governors at Santa Fé while serving as Territorial Governor of New Mexico from 1878 to 1881.

The present writer well remembers how Dr. Edgar L. Hewett, as a former Director of the Museum of New Mexico had assembled a number of interesting relics pertaining to Lew Wallace, including the General's morris chair with lap board on which he wrote; his bronze bust, presented to the institution by his son, Henry Wallace; portraits, with one of the General wearing the rather too long beard which he affected in the 1870's; copies of some of his most important executive orders; a set of his most important works; and the letter certifying to the portions of "Ben Hur" written in the Palace, as follows:

(although the letter is dated from Crawfordsville, Indiana, "May 6th, '90," the General wrote on stationery bearing the letterhead of the "Territory of New Mexico, Office of the Secretary, Santa Fé")

Dear Sir:

Touching your inquiry whether "Ben-Hur" was written in the old palace of Santa Fé, I beg to say it was finished there. That is, the MS. was completed at the same time of my appointment to the governorship of New Mexico (1877), down to the sixth book of the volume, and I carried it with me.

When in the city, my habit was to shut myself after night, in the bedroom back of the executive office proper, and write till after 12 o'clock. The sixth, seventh and eighth books were the result, and the room has ever since been associated in my mind with the Crucifixion. The retirement, impenetrable to incoming sound, was as profound as a cavern's.

Very respectfully.

(Signed) Lew Wallace

"Ben Hur" is not a great historical novel, it cannot be compared with "Quo Vadis" or with "War and Peace." But "Ben Hur" has had by far the most financially successful series of dramatizations for stage and screen of any novel written anywhere. The technicolor production released by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer company and premiered in New York City at Loew's State Theatre on November 16, 1959, is confidently predicted to prove the most profitable single film in the entire history of the motion picture industry. The Metro production is expected to surpass the financial record of Paramount's "The Ten Commandments," reputed to have earned \$27,000,000 in its first 19 months of showing; and a figure of \$30,000,000 for "Ben Hur" has been quoted in *Variety*.

The earnings of "Ben Hur" have certainly been out of all proportion to the quality of the original novel. *Has it been the chariot race that has been such an attraction?* We can account for some of the latest success because of wisely chosen adapters, such as Maxwell Anderson, S. N. Behrman, Christopher Fry and Gore Vidal; looking backward, we can highly credit the competent acting of such old stage players as William H. Farnum, Conway Tearle and William S. Hart, and currently, again, much praise is doubtless due such effective screen players as Charlton Heston, Sam Jaffe and Finlay Currie; but are these factors sufficient to explain the enormous earnings? There remains an enigma for the serious theatre and screen critic. In the meantime, the record in mere quantitative terms is certainly striking.

"Ben Hur" was published as a novel by Joseph Henry Harper of the well-known firm of Harpers of New York on November 12, 1880. A contract was signed which gave the author a 10 per cent royalty. In the first seven months after publication the novel only sold about 2,800 copies, earning for Wallace less than \$300. (The book was priced at a dollar and a half.) By 1883 Wallace wrote to his son that he hoped for \$100 a year from "Ben Hur" and the earlier novel of the conquest of Mexico, "The Fair God," together. During the initial months after publication some of the harshest and shrewdest criticisms of "Ben Hur" appeared. For a balanced,

academic judgment of the story the reader is referred to Carl Van Doren's strictures in his "The American Novel" published some fifteen years after Wallace's death.

Following a slow start, sales of "Ben Hur" began to boom, and as Irving McKee puts it in his popular biography of Wallace: "the rill became a brook, the brook a river, the river a flood." And Mr. McKee summarizes :

Schools, colleges and clubs without number swam with the tide and swelled it; as no other novel it was good for the young, the impressionable, the wayward. By the close of 1889, 400,000 copies had been sold, and there was no sign of a slackening. In 1890 various newspapers, perhaps on the authority of Harpers, said it had outsold *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. . . . By 1911 a million authorized *Ben-Hurs* had been disposed of, not to mention pirated copies in England and Germany. It was translated into German, French, Swedish, Bohemian, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and Lithuanian, and printed in Braille. . . . Harpers in 1944 estimated that at least 2,500,000 copies had been sold. . . .

In due course, Wallace was besieged with offers for the dramatization of "Ben Hur." He was in correspondence with a number of famous actors about it, with Lawrence Barrett and Alexander Salvini; and Henry Irving once seriously considered attempting the role of Simonides which is so ably played by Sam Jaffe in the current film version. No first rate dramatists applied, and in 1899 Wallace agreed to a production to be directed by one Joseph Brooks of the firm of Klaw and Erlanger, with the story to be adapted by one William Young of Chicago. Wallace's royalties were to be double those he had received from Harpers. Claude L. Hagen designed a machine to manipulate "waves" in the naval scene, treadmills for the chariot race (a refinement of the mechanism used previously in the Klaw and Erlanger production of "The County Fair," written by Charles Barnard and Neil Burgess), and a moving panorama of the arena.

The Young adaptation involved thirteen scenes in six acts: the desert with a pantomime of the Wise Men, the roof of the Hur palace in Jerusalem, the galley, the raft, Simon-

ides' house, the Grove of Daphne, the Fountain of Castalia, Ilderim's tent, the Orchard of Palms, the gateway to the Circus, the arena, the vale of Hinnom, and Mount Olivet. A shaft of light (25,000 candle power) was used, growing brighter to signify Christ's approach and dimmer at His exit, Jesus Himself not actually being impersonated.

At the opening performance the title role was not taken by William H. Farnum but he soon stepped into it, and was later regarded as having been the most successful of a number of actors in the part, including Conway Tearle, Henry Woodruff, and Thurston Hall. Messala was played from the start by William S. Hart who later made a great reputation in grade B Western movies. One of the last interpretations of Messala was given by Franklin Pangborn who later became a slap-stick two-reel film comedian, specializing in outraged floor-walker impersonations.

The premiere of "Ben Hur" occurred at the Broadway Theatre in New York City on November 29, 1899. General Wallace was present, conspicuously seated with Mrs. Wallace in a lower proscenium box, and made a brief appearance before the footlights between the acts. The performance ran for three hours and twenty-nine minutes, which is interesting to compare with the running time of the current film of sixty years later which takes three hours and thirty-two minutes. (The silent film version of 1925 ran two hours and eight minutes.)

The dramatic version was an immediate and smashing hit in New York in 1899. It held the stage for twenty-four weeks, until May 12th, and reopened again in the fall. The more serious critics found much fault, just as the earliest critics of the novel had done, but everyone went to see the production. The New York *Clipper* speaks of "packed houses," "a triumphant success," "record-breaking attendance," and "enormous business."

In 1900 the big heavy show set out on the first of many tours to the leading theatres in the major cities of the United States, annual tours which were to continue unbroken until the play was finally withdrawn, in Newark, New Jersey, in the last week of April, 1920. There were Australian tours.

and London productions. Unfortunately the stage version of "Ben Hur" never played in Santa Fe, nor even in Albuquerque, or anywhere in New Mexico. One of the first of the tours took the show to Indianapolis, which was in a sense Wallace's "home town," when he was not living in Crawfordsville.

Fifty years ago the present writer had the pleasure of seeing "Ben Hur" performed on the stage of the Davidson Theatre in Milwaukee during the 1908-09 tour, when the good English actor, Conway Tearle, had the title role. The boatswain in the galley scene had a sort of gavel with which he pounded time for the oarsmen, and he ominously began pounding the gavel several minutes before the curtain went up on the scene. The gray sheets fluttering to represent waves in the raft scene made a poor illusion; but the chariot race was an undeniable thriller!

For some reason, Claude Hagen's panorama of the arena was dispensed with, and the horses, chariots and charioteers performed against black curtains with strong spotlights thrown onto the stage from the wings. There were only two chariots, with two horses each. The horses galloped slowly forward, facing directly into the footlights, immediately reminding of the horses used to pull the smoking fire engines of the 1900's. The rollers of the two treadmills made a tremendous noise, filling the darkened auditorium with thunder enough to suggest the giving way of a gigantic log boom on the Columbia River. So noisy were the treadmills that the clatter of the horses hooves, the grinding of the wheels of the chariots, and the crack of Messala's whip were quite inaudible. After a few moments, Messala's chariot slipped into a slant, and the audience knew that the villain's chariot had lost its wheel, as in the story. Ben Hur's chariot then moved a little forward on its treadmill, and the curtain came down—amidst wild applause!

Joseph Brooks, the Erlanger representative who first contacted Wallace about the play, was killed in a fall from the eighth floor of his home on West 79th Street, New York, November 29, 1916 (the anniversary of the opening in 1899). He was believed to have earned a fortune of \$250,000 as director of "Ben Hur."

Mr. McKee, in his biography of Wallace, summarizes the success of the stage version for us :

It was destined to be performed 6,000 times, mostly in big cities and at high prices; a total of 20,000,000 persons were to pay \$10,000,000 to see it. The itinerary for twenty-one years—with enlarged stages, S. R. O. signs, full-length seasons—is unequalled in the history of the theatre. It is a roll call of America, and of some of the rest of the world. *Ben-Hur* broke down another barrier: as the novel was bought by people who had never read a novel before, the play was stormed by newcomers to the theatre. . . .

Klaw and Erlanger made millions, Harpers and the Wallaces (father and son) hundreds of thousands, and a vast throng of actors, managers, stagehands, book sellers, and other middlemen fattened on *Ben-Hur*. . . .

General Wallace died at Crawfordsville, Indiana, on February 14, 1905. "Ben Hur" was on tour, of course, and that year it had played Indianapolis once again.

Within a few months after the final withdrawal of the play in 1920, preparations were under way for the first "colossal" silent movie version. The General's son, Henry, was paid \$1,000,000 for the rights by Erlanger, Ziegfeld and Dillingham; and the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio outbid all others in purchasing the rights. The studio then "labored for three years, 1922-1925, from Rome to Hollywood, expending \$4,000,000 more on (the staging from) a scenario by Carey Wilson and Bess Meredyth." Mr. McKee's biography continues:

The seafight was enacted in the Mediterranean with fourteen vessels and twenty-eight hundred men. Ten thousand actors, one hundred and ninety-eight horses, a specially constructed grandstand three thousand feet long, forty-two cameras (one of them in an airplane) were necessary for the chariot race, which cost a quarter of a million. . . .

Variety, the well known theatrical journal, in its number for November 18, 1959, gives us some further little known facts:

While a good part of the picture was photographed in Italy, some big scenes like the chariot race and interiors were done

in Hollywood. When the race was run, a wheel came loose on a chariot and several of the vehicles crashed into one another. Through a miracle, no one was hurt, but one of the most spectacular (and unplanned) scenes had been put on record.

In the chapter in his book, "The Lion's Share," devoted to "Ben-Hur," Bosley Crowther records that the picture when it finally opened on Broadway on December 30, 1925, ran 128 minutes and stayed at the George M. Cohan Theatre for a year. In fact, it didn't get into general release until the fall of 1927. According to Crowther, "Ben-Hur" lost money for Metro, but "the vast commercial prestige redounding to the company through having this picture was a tremendous . . . boon."

Total earnings, including those from a reissue in 1931 with sound dubbed in, totaled \$9,386,000 according to Crowther. With 35% subtracted for distribution, this left \$6,100,000. However, this had to be divided equally with the backers, who included Florenz Ziegfeld, Vincent Astor, Robert Walton Goelet and others. . . .

We conclude our references to the first of the great "Ben Hur" films with one more quotation from Mr. McKee:

The movie's first run on Broadway lasted twenty-two months, and then it pervaded the country and much of the world, after the manner of movies. Berlin applauded it; King George and Queen Mary attended a special showing at Windsor Castle; China banned it as pro-Christian propaganda . . . A movie edition of the novel sold enormously. Whoever had not seen *Ben-Hur* before saw it now, in cities, towns, hamlets.

We have already referred to the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film version (Santa Fe saw it now, of course!) which had its premiere in New York City at Loew's State Theatre on November 16, 1959, indicating the enormous earnings which are anticipated. And we have already mentioned the collaboration of a number of distinguished playwrights on the adaptation. It is undoubtedly the treatment which the more intimate scenes of the story have been given by these experienced authors which accounts for the praise which the film has received from all the more serious movie critics, from Mr. Crowther in the *New York Times* on into all the better national magazines which carry cinema reviews. For the first

time since 1880 the intimate scenes of the story have received general critical commendation.

The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film was directed by William Wyler. It will be presented twice daily to a reserved seat audience in no less than 30 American cities by March, 1960. Once again Santa Fe will miss a presentation of the story that was originally written in part in the Palace of the Governors. This is ironic, for the medium used should make for the widest dispersal in the shortest possible time.

We conclude with a paragraph from *Variety* magazine for Wednesday, November 18, 1959:

The statistics concerning the production are overwhelming. They include 1,500,000 feet of exposed film, six \$100,000 "Camera 65" units, 300 sets, 100,000 costumes, 1,500,000 props, 78 trained horses from Yugoslavia, 12 camels from North Africa, hundreds of other horses, sheep and other animals, 10,000 feet of electrical equipment, 25,000 extras and bit players, 1,000 Italian workers who labored one year to build the arena for the chariot race, 50 ships built especially for the sea battle, 18 custom-made chariots, 60,000 blossoms for a victory parade, two miles of pipe for water used in 40 minutes, one ton of specially designed ceramic tile . . .

"My God!" exclaimed General Wallace when shown all the elaborate scenery being placed in position for the dress rehearsal for the initial New York production of "Ben Hur" in 1899: "*Did I set all this in motion?*"

Hollywood, April 5 (AP)—The 15 million dollar movie "Ben-Hur," most costly in Hollywood history, reaped 11 Oscars last night. It was the greatest Academy Award triumph ever scored. *The Albuquerque Tribune*, April 5, 1960.

(F. D. R.)