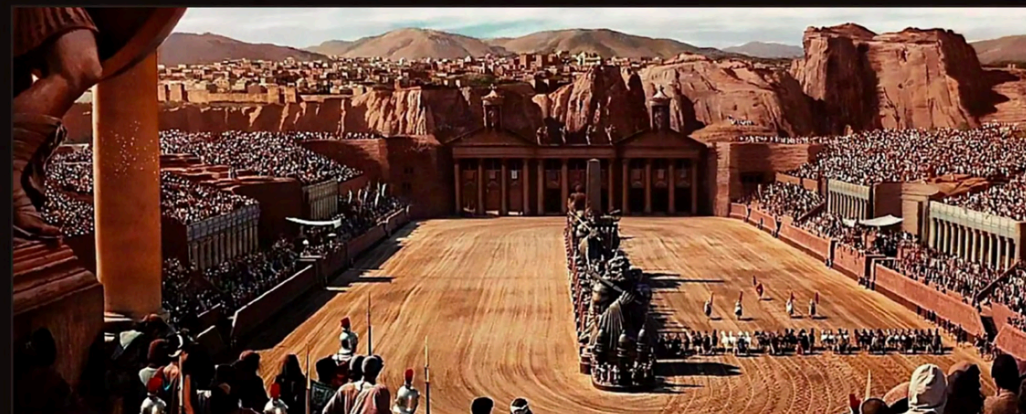




The making of an EPIC

Considered one of the greatest historical epics of all time, 1959's *Ben-Hur* also made history by winning the most Oscars ever at that year's Academy Awards. Steve O'Brien looks back at its making...



Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur, who is enslaved by the Romans but is eventually set free and becomes a champion charioteer

It was the highest grossing film of 1959 and, up to that point, with a budget of just over \$15 million, the most expensive movie ever made. To say that *Ben-Hur* is one of the most important features in the history of cinema would be underselling its significance. Sixty-five years after its release, it's still the definitive historical epic, a grand, sweeping, three-hour-plus behemoth that, to this day, holds the record for the most Oscars (11), alongside *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) and *Titanic* (1997).

Of course, the 1959 movie wasn't the first big-screen take on Lew Wallace's 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. When it was released in 1925, Fred Niblo's version, starring Ramon Novarro, grossed over \$10 million against a then-mammoth \$4 million budget. But that film was silent and in black and white, so, by the Fifties, largely forgotten. But with historical epics by then back in fashion – *The Robe* was the highest grossing film of 1953 and *The Ten Commandments* the No.1 movie of 1956 – what better time than to revisit Wallace's Biblical-era story of a rich Jewish prince who, after incurring the

wrath of his one-time comrade Messala, now a high-ranking Roman tribune, finds himself sent to the slave ship, later to break free, intent on wreaking revenge on his former friend?

The story had everything – a tough, sympathetic, muscle-bound hero, a supremely hissable villain and lashings of action.

Plus, being set in first-Century Jerusalem, it was a chance for Hollywood's very best production designers to give audiences something truly awe-inspiring and in full, eye-popping Technicolor too. If there was a sure-fire hit in the fall of 1959, it was William Wyler's *Ben-Hur*.

Yet for all the confidence of the final picture, *Ben-Hur's* journey to the big screen was anything but smooth. MGM had first announced a fresh version of Wallace's beloved, bestselling novel in 1952. Over the next seven years, it would go through a multitude of iterations. At one point, it was set to go into production with Karl Tunberg writing, Sidney Franklin directing and with Marlon Brando as the lead. According to the novelist and screenwriter Gore Vidal, more than 12 versions of the script had



The chariot race was filmed at Cinecittà Studios in Rome

been written by various writers (including himself) by the spring of 1958. In the end, it was Tunberg alone who was credited as the movie's writer, with its director, William Wyler, appealing in vain to the Screen Writers' Guild to have the English writer Christopher Fry added to the credits.

'A PIECE OF JUNK'

Vidal, then one of America's most acclaimed novelists, was one of the more high-profile hirings on *Ben-Hur*. He'd been approached by the film's producer Sam Zimbalist, with the simple request, "Will you have a go at it?"

"I said, 'I'd rather die, Sam, this is a piece of junk,'" Vidal remembered, years later. "He said, 'I know but I'm asking you as a personal favour.'" So Vidal flew to Rome to meet

William Wyler, where he suggested something truly subversive to underscore the animosity between the characters of *Ben-Hur* and Messala.

"So I said 'Willie, let's try something here,'" Vidal recalled in the documentary *Ben-Hur: The Making of an Epic*. "Let's make it a lover's quarrel. Could it be that the two boys had had some sort of emotional relationship, first time around? And now the Roman wants to start

up again and *Ben-Hur* doesn't. So Willie said, 'Gore, this is *Ben-Hur*! You can't do that to *Ben-Hur*!' I said, Well, if you don't do something like that, you won't even have *Ben-Hur*, you're going to have a motiveless mess on your hands. But I can write it in such a way that the audience is going to feel that there is something emotional between these two, which is not stated and which blows the fuse in Messala, that he's spurned." Vidal's homoerotic subtext made it into the finished film, but it was Christopher Fry who provided the final script polish. Vidal had been Zimbalist's choice of writer, not Wyler's, arriving in Rome in early May 1958 at the director's request

DID YOU KNOW?

One of the assistant directors for the movie's chariot scene was Sergio Leone, later to find fame as the director behind the Dollars trilogy of films.



Charlton Heston and Stephen Boyd with director William Wyler



THE CHARIOT RACE

If the movie has any standout scene, it's the now iconic chariot race moment. Yet despite lasting nine minutes and being the film's most talked about sequence, it wasn't, in fact, directed by William Wyler, instead being helmed by second unit directors Andrew Marton and Yakima Canutt.

It proved so complex (filming took five weeks – spread over three months – and required more than 200 miles of racing to complete) there was no way Wyler could oversee it, what with all his other commitments on the movie, so Marton and Canutt would instead show the rushes to the director at the end of each day.

Several urban legends exist regarding the scene, one claiming that a stuntman died during filming, another stating that a red Ferrari is in shot and a third that a modern-day wristwatch can be seen on one of the extras.

All are myths.



Messala and Ben-Hur toast the loyalty of old friends

Miniver (1942), The Best Years of Our Lives (1946) – both of which won him a directing Oscar – as well as the 1953 comedy Roman Holiday. Wyler and Ben-Hur seemed a perfect fit – not only was he able to adapt himself to a multitude of different genres and scales of production, but he'd actually started his career as one of the 30 assistant directors on the 1925 silent film. Yet Wyler initially turned the movie down, believing Tunberg's first script to be "very primitive [and] elementary". But producer Sam Zimbalist was desperate to sign Wyler, telling him he wanted the director to bring "body, depth, intimacy" to the film and tempting him with a mooted £10 million budget, the largest pot of cash Wyler had ever had available for a movie. MGM agreed to pay him a base salary of £350,000 (at that point, the largest fee ever paid to a director) and an eight per cent share of the box office gross. His intention, Wyler said later, was to make a "thinking man's" Biblical epic.

With William Wyler locked in, the search began for a leading man. The role of Judah Ben-Hur had been taken in the 1925 version by one of the biggest box-office draws of the Twenties, the Mexican-American heartthrob Ramon Novarro. MGM then weren't looking for a talented newbie for their epic – they needed a star.

Several of the era's biggest actors were considered – Burt Lancaster was offered the lead but turned it down, calling the script a "crashing bore". Paul Newman, Rock Hudson and Kirk Douglas' names were all floated.

A CAST OF THOUSANDS

But it was Charlton Heston who Wyler had his sights on, and that the 30-something beefcake had taken the lead in 1956's box-office-conquering The Ten Commandments hadn't gone unnoticed by MGM. Also, the fact that his previous film had been the Wyler-helmed The Big Country (1958) meant their leading man had a history with their director. For the role of Messala, meanwhile, Wyler plumped for a relative newcomer by the name of Stephen Boyd. Only Boyd's blue eyes were considered too similar to Heston's and Wyler requested that the Northern Irish actor wear brown contacts for the duration of the film. "He suddenly realised he'd cast all these blue-eyed actors, and it drove him crazy," remembered Wyler's daughter.

But as impressive as the actors are in Ben-Hur, it's arguably the sets and production design most cinemagoers were talking about as they left theatres in 1959.

For an entire year, Ben-Hur was the biggest film production anywhere in the world, with a cast of thousands and more than 300 sets, some under construction a full year before the first frame of film was ever shot.

The city of Jerusalem alone covered 10 square blocks. By the time the sets were completed, the construction crew had used 40,000 cubic feet of lumber, more than one million pounds of plastic and 250 miles of metal tubing. 40,000 tonnes of white sand, meanwhile, was brought in from the beaches of the Mediterranean. "It was a big, lumbering production," said editor Ralph Winters, "that needed a lot of work and a lot of attention."

More than one million feet of footage was shot for the film, with the first cut running to four and a half hours. With some judicious editing, the final version would run to 213 minutes. Despite its length, MGM had faith in the film, lavishing it with a \$14.7 million marketing budget. By the time it premiered at Loew's State Theatre in New York City on November 18, 1959, everybody, it seems, was talking about Ben-Hur.



DID YOU KNOW?

The face of Jesus Christ is never shown on screen, and the actor playing him – Claude Heater – is not credited in the film.

Even the critics, who could sometimes be sniffy about these grandiose religious epics, were in thrall to Wyler's film, with The New York Times calling it "a remarkably intelligent and engrossing human drama" and Variety writing that it was "a majestic achievement, representing a superb blending of the motion picture arts by master craftsmen".

BOX-OFFICE WINNER

Ben-Hur went on to become the number one film at the US box office for six consecutive months, and was, up to that point, the second-highest-grossing movie of all-time behind Gone with

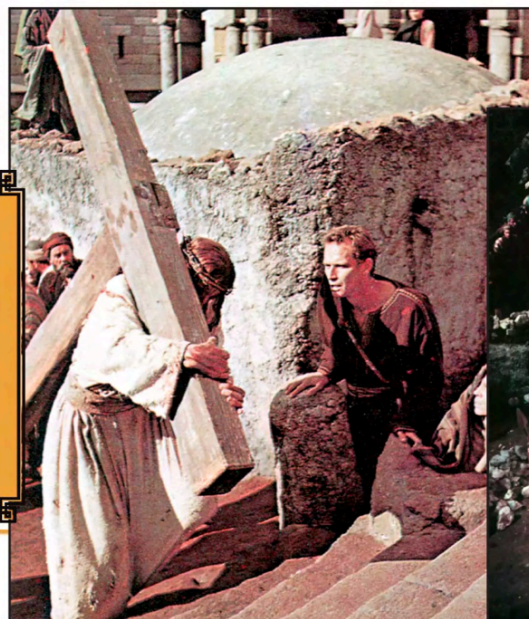
the Wind (1939). Nominated for 12 Academy Awards, it won 11 (including a third Best Director gong for Wyler), and, in 2004, the National Film Preservation Board selected it for preservation by the National Film Registry for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

Two subsequent adaptations of Lew Wallace's novel, one in 2003 and the other in 2016, have been released, but neither caught fire culturally or critically like William Wyler's 1959 version. Sixty-five years on from its release, Ben-Hur is still a byword for Hollywood at its most ambitious and epic.

THE CRUCIFIXION SCENE

As a reflection of the film's epic scale, shooting took nine months, finally wrapping on January 7, 1959. The final sequence shot, which took four days to film, was the movie's crucifixion scene, one that gave its director, William Wyler, quite a few headaches.

"I spent sleepless nights trying to find a way to deal with the figure of Christ," Wyler recalled. "It was a frightening thing when all the great painters of 20 centuries have painted events you have to deal with, events in the life of the best-known man who ever lived. Everyone already has his own concept of him. I wanted to be reverent, and yet realistic. Crucifixion is a bloody, awful, horrible thing, and a man does not go through it with a benign expression on his face. I had to deal with that. It is a very challenging thing to do that and get no complaints from anybody."



TOP 5 BOX OFFICE GOLD...

ROBERT MITCHUM FILMS



1 The Longest Day (1962)
\$439.3m



2 Not as a Stranger (1955)
\$410.8m



3 Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo (1944)
\$396.8m



4 Midway (1976)
\$323.7m



5 Ryan's Daughter (1970)
\$301.4m

Adjusted domestic box office gross using current movie ticket price (in millions) according to ultimatemovierankings.com