

A new, crisper Ben-Hur ‘will score with the young’

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A promotional image for the latest incarnation of Ben-Hur.



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By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Many years ago, when I visited the Cinecitta Studios in Rome, I saw a huge Roman statue rise majestically close to the entrance. It was a relic from one of the most memorable scenes in the history of motion pictures — a thrilling chariot race from the 1959 William Wyler’s Ben-Hur — adapted from Lew Wallace’s 1880 novel, Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ. Remember the death-defying race between Charlton Heston’s Judah Ben-Hur (a Jew) and Stephen Boyd’s Messala (a Roman nobleman) — who fixes blades on the hubs of his chariot to destroy the others in the race?

The film won 11 Oscars (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, etc) — a tally that remained unbeaten till Titanic came along in 1997, clinching an equal number of Academy Awards. In 2003, The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King also walked away with 11 Oscars. We are waiting for a fourth celluloid work to get as many Oscars.

Now, 57 years after Wyler’s Ben-Hur hit the screens, the MGM classic was recently recreated in Cinecitta and behind it on an empty field. Russian helmer Timur Bekmambetov digitally inserted some of the monumental Roman statues to make his Ben-Hur look as period-wise realistic as possible.

There were other variations during the shoot of the modern version of the movie — which opened in India last week. Jack Huston (as Ben-Hur) and Toby Kebbell (Messala) — playing on-screen adoptive brothers (not friends as in the earlier version) who later turn rivals because of political differences — were seen racing on chariots around a specially made track — only that this time their jalopies were drawn not by horses but pickup trucks. It was said

that getting horses to pull chariots would be considered “unsafe” and even “dangerous” in today’s times. “Basically, when you’re going around the arena with 32 horses, the slightest mistake could lead to death,” Huston — who will reprise Heston — told the media recently. Of course, a traditionalist will hate the modern Ben-Hur. This is only to be expected. But, all the same, it is interesting that Wallace’s novel still holds some kind of fascination after 136 years.

The 1959 edition was seen as one hell of a gripping film, each frame captivating viewers with its strong emotional quotient and a storyline which had all the masala of a great, great drama. Those who have put in the money this time are confident that Ben-Hur will score with young audiences, who would have never seen Wyler’s work. Obviously, there is an entire generation which has not watched Heston’s Ben-Hur.

Bekmambetov’s creation is a story of faith and frustration and revenge in which two brothers, Ben-Hur and Messala, fall apart with tragic consequences. However, unlike the 1959 movie, this one ends on happy note.

In 3D and made at a whopping cost of \$100 million (against \$15 million in 1959), Ben-Hur has some great screen moments. The sequence about how a Jewish prince of Jerusalem, Judah Ben-Hur, faces humiliation and torture as a galley slave rowing Roman war ships (a punishment meted out to him after he falls out with Messala, a general in the Roman Army which was then occupying Jerusalem) is terrifyingly powerful. So too is that famous chariot racing scene — where we see the defeat of Messala and the victory of Ben-Hur that finally paves the way for a joyous family reunion and reconciliation. Ben-Hur’s mother and sister are miraculously cured of leprosy, which they had contracted during their terrible and long incarceration ordered by Messala.

However, the 1959 race was far more spectacular and nail-biting, I would think. There was no happy end in that Ben-Hur, with Messala dying from the wounds he had sustained in the race — though Ben-Hur’s mother and sister are cured of leprosy here as well.

Many critics have not been pleased with the current Ben-Hur, and some have felt that the climax need not have been happy.

But then at just two-hours (opposed to the three hours and 44 minutes of the 1959 edition), the director has been able to pack in a good gist of the tale. And, despite initial trepidation, I quite enjoyed Bekmambetov’s Ben-Hur.

And let us not forget the message in it. The director said in one of his interviews that his aim was to not only provide thrills, but also spread the idea of forgiveness, which the “world so desperately needs today”.

Dharmadurai

Seenu Ramasamy’s Dharmadurai may appear too simplistic in today’s complex world of intrigue and perfidy, may even be lambasted for veering towards the coincidental. Even a trifle preachy in parts. But it is a film that has been scripted with subtlety and helmed without the melodramatic — which Tamil cinema is notoriously renowned for.

And helping the narrative has been a fine performance by Radhika Sarathkumar. As the protagonist, Dharmadurai’s (essayed by Vijay Sethupathi, a Ramasamy favourite) mother — portraying a harried woman trying to keep together her large family — she is real and lovely.

Dharmadurai is particularly difficult, constantly at war with his brothers. Restless and drunk most of the time, he is not at peace with the world, having been wronged by his family — which demolishes his dream of marrying a simple village girl, Anbuselvi (a fine piece of acting by Aishwarya Rajesh of the Kaaka Muttai fame). He never loses an opportunity to shame his brothers in the village where they live, and where Dharmadurai had once practised medicine.

Pushed to the wall, the brothers plot a murderous revenge, but Dharmadurai, tipped off by the mother, escapes into a flashback mode — where we learn about his life in a medical

college at Madurai and his two girlfriends, played by Tamaannaah (as Subhashini) and Srushti Dange (as Stella). However, by the time Dharmadurai retraces his steps trying to find Stella and Subhashini, much water has flowed under the bridge.

The movie travels along with its hero, taking us to some of the most picturesque spots in Tamil Nadu, captured hauntingly by cinematographer M Sukumar. There are a couple of amazing shots of the evening sky. Some soothing Yuvan Shankar Raja music adds to the beauty of it all.

Also, a relatively more expressive Tamaannaah (a pleasing relief from her normal wooden self) and a comparatively more-at-ease Sethupathi pushed Dharmadurai a little higher in my esteem. Overall, a far better Tamil work than many of the recent releases.

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