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THE SCREEN

By MORDAUNT HALL.

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A Stupendous Spectacle.

BEN HUR, with Ramon Novarro, Francis X. Bushman, May McAvoy, Claire MacDowell, Kathleen Key, Carmel Myers, Nigel de Brulier, Mitchell Lewis, Leo White, Frank Currier, Charles Belcher, Betty Bronson, Dale Fuller and Winter Hall, adapted from General Lew Wallace's drama, directed by Fred Niblo. Special music score by David Mendoza and William Axt. At the George M. Cohan Theatre.

The magnificent pictorial conception of "Ben Hur," on which no less than \$3,000,000 has been lavished and which has taken nearly two years to produce, was presented last night at the George M. Cohan Theatre before an exceptionally brilliant gathering. As a film spectacle it is a masterpiece of study and patience, a photodrama which is filled with so much artistry that one would like to ponder over some of the scenes to glean all that is in them, instead of seeing just that passing flash. Ordinary conventional methods have for the most part been discarded by Fred Niblo, the director, who, while he has availed himself of every iota of photographic worth in the thrilling episodes, nevertheless finds it pleasant to get in trenchant streaks and positively sublime poetic touches. And when the march to Calvary is depicted it is done with such solemnity and quiet respect that one feels impelled to bow one's head.

On this production, which now is 12,000 feet in length, and which did not finish until after 11:30 last night, one must first comment upon the amazingly impressive structures, especially the Gate of Joppa, through which one perceives thousands of human beings forging their way, and the Antioch circus setting, which was built in Hollywood and where something like 9,000 persons were gathered as the audience for the chariot races. Although these episodes were filled with difficulty in the making, it is plain that the stupendous photographic feat was in reproducing the sea fight, which was filmed in the Mediterranean.

This comes in the first portion of the production and it is put forth with amazingly fine effect, particularly when two of the craft crash together and the fighting really begins. Here one perceives a half nude man slung over on the figure head of one of the wooden craft, and inside the vessels there are those hapless galley slaves who were doomed to row, year in and year out, pulling, in the half darkness, on a huge oar, while a fat Roman wields a mallet, beating time, according to what pace is wanted of the flesh and bone that propels the ship.

On one ship there are three decks of slaves, who are knouted when they become apathetic in their efforts, and just before the conflict occurs these sweaty, unkempt humans are shackled to their places. Mr. Niblo believes in numbers in everything. He shows it in this spectacle, and therefore when the vessel is about to sink there are scores of men's heads dotting the sea as they swim for the grinding cameras.

A most astounding performance happens in the initial chapter of this picture. It is that of a girl who was practically unknown on the screen eighteen months ago. She here delivers a portrayal of the Madonna that is gloriously beautiful. At first you may wonder who this young actress is, for her appearance is completely changed in the brief performance she gives here. She is none other than Betty Bronson, the girl who was selected to play the title rôle of "Peter Pan" a little more than a year ago, and who won further laurels by her impersonation of the slavey in Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella." In both those films she was a pert, lively, skittish little creature, fantastic, impudent or impish. In last night's presentation she is a creature of rare beauty, who herself seemed inspired in acting the rôle.

The famous chariot races have been depicted so thrillingly that this chapter evoked no little applause. Horses fell and piled up on each other. Chariots crashed and wheels went spinning or snapped in twain. There were Ben Hur's four white horses forging head, then losing ground, then coming up again, with the pugnacious Messala gazing at his adversary contemptuously, until the accident happens. The arena in which the race takes place is enormous, and from some of the camera "shots" the horses look like mere mice pulling on nutshells with a fly for a driver. About thirty horsemen could ride abreast in the narrowest section of this amphitheatre, and when the signal is waved for the race to start one can't help but be impressed by the space.

Some of the religious sequences are filmed in Technicolor, and by far the most successful of these episodes is Christ's ride into Jerusalem. In no place does Mr. Niblo show the Christus, the figure being concealed by palms as

he rides on the ass. In the journey to Calvary bearing the cross, one sees merely a hand holding the cross and the other hand is extended occasionally to heal the sick who have faith, the lepers who are shunned by the populace.

Ramon Novarro, who plays the part of Ben-Hur, is a sturdy, handsome young chap, with an excellent figure. His performance is all that one could wish, for he is fervent and earnest throughout, and restrained in his display of affection for Esther, a rôle acted by May McAvoy. She is pretty, but her appearance would have been more effective in this part had she not donned a curly wig. Claire MacDowell is capital in the rôle of the Mother of Ben-Hur, and her performance in the episode wherein she and her daughter, Tirzah, are supposed to be lepers, is most stirring. Kathleen Key is clever as Tirzah.

Francis X. Bushman, a man of mighty muscle, well suited to the character of Messala, is effective in his acting. Last night he was among the audience and during the intermission one had the chance of looking upon Messala dressed in a dinner suit. One of his many friends approached him and asked:

"Well, Francis, how do you like yourself?"

He seemed to have been so interested in the wonderful spectacle that he was unable to give a ready reply.

And in one of the aisle seats sat Marcus Loew, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, the concern responsible for the photodrama. He was glowing with pleasure and he had every right to feel pride in this effort and others now on Broadway. He has "The Merry Widow" at the Embassy, and "The Big Parade" at the Astor, besides "His Secretary" at the Capitol. David Warfield, who sat with him, congratulated Mr. Loew on his firm's production of "Ben-Hur."