

The world première of FRANZ ABRAHAM'S BEN HUR LIVE at London's O2 Arena on Sept. 17, 2009 was a huge success, not least because it included the first high-speed chariot race for over a thousand years, STAGED LIVE.

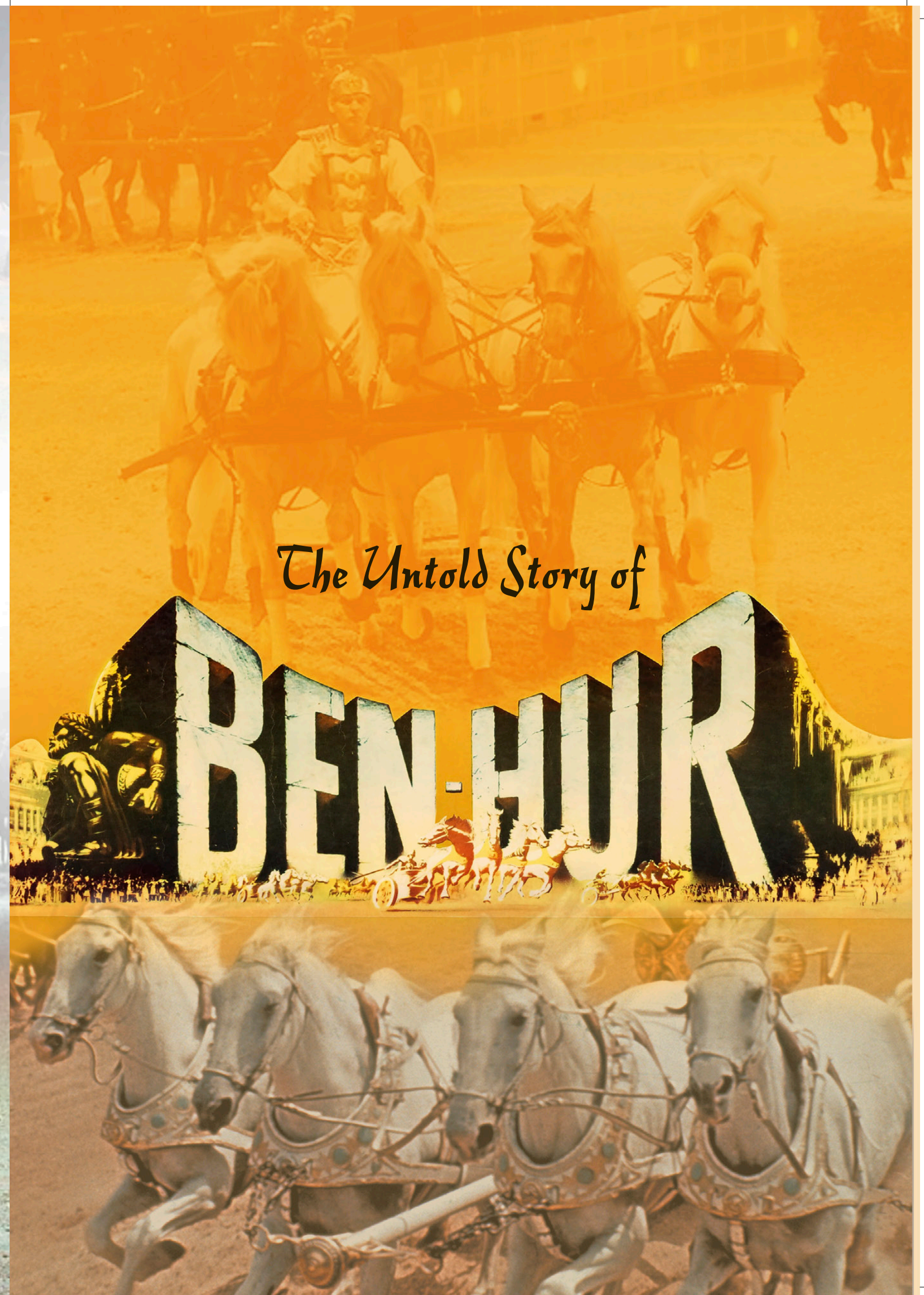
The media was full of lavish praise:

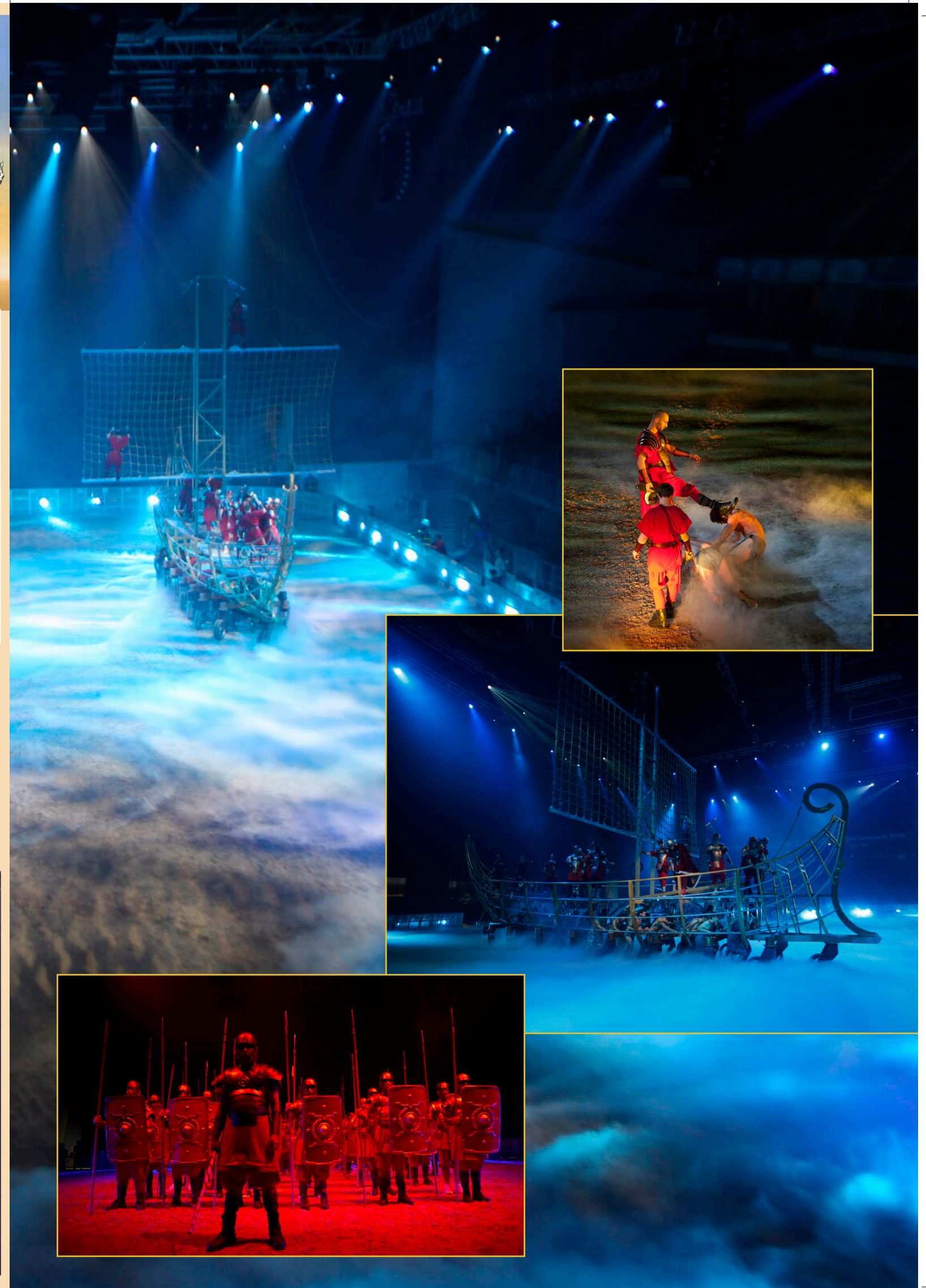
"A production of the century" *The Times London*
"A cry of "Bravo" would come from God" *DER SPIEGEL*
"Richard Wagner would turn green with envy" *Daily Telegraph, London*
"Almost like a biblical miracle" *Münchner Abendzeitung*
"Circus Maximus 2.0" *Die Welt*
"The XXXL-Spectacle" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*
"Entertaining, hypnotic and a runaway triumph" *The Sun*
"It feels like you were sitting in the Circus Maximus" *Hamburger Abendblatt*

BEN HUR LIVE meant spectacular entertainment for the whole family – the Formula 1 of ancient times, the Circus Maximus of today. Apart from the Chariot Race itself, it included highlights such as a naval battle with immense galleys on a sea of fog and fantastic light effects, all imbedded in one of the greatest and most dramatic story lines that has ever have been created. A story of love and friendship, hatred, revenge, and redemption.

BEN HUR LIVE set entirely new standards in Live-Entertainment. 20 shows altogether, over 40,000 spectators in London and almost 100,000 spectators in Hamburg, Munich, Stuttgart and Zurich, all generated a turnover of more than €8 million. But even so, as a commercial enterprise, it eventually failed. Why? This film will begin to answer that question.

DESIGN: SHARON SMART
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IMAGES FROM THE LIVE SHOW AT THE O2, LONDON



THE SEA BATTLE



Those two words immediately conjure up magic.

The great chariot race in which Judah Ben-Hur overcomes social and political prejudice (you might say anti-Semitism) is one of the defining images of the cinematic age. And not just in the famous Charlton Heston film, but in the two films which preceded it, in the three films that have followed trying to emulate it, and in the daring and in many ways triumphant attempts to stage it, literally, in a theatre. Can you imagine teams of horses thundering around an indoor arena in death-defying noise and apparent chaos? One man could: the German entrepreneur Franz Abraham, whose



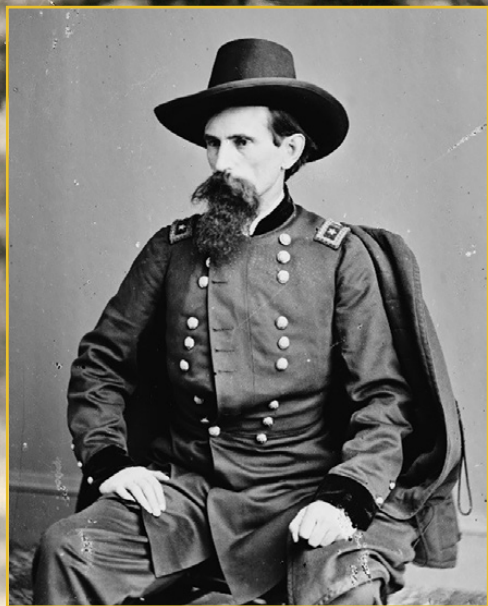
FRANZ ABRAHAM

very name as the father of the Jewish people only adds to his extraordinary achievement. He enlisted more than 400 performers, 46 horses, two donkeys, five falcons, two eagles, two vultures and 120 doves. The fact that his enterprise eventually failed does not detract from his attempt.

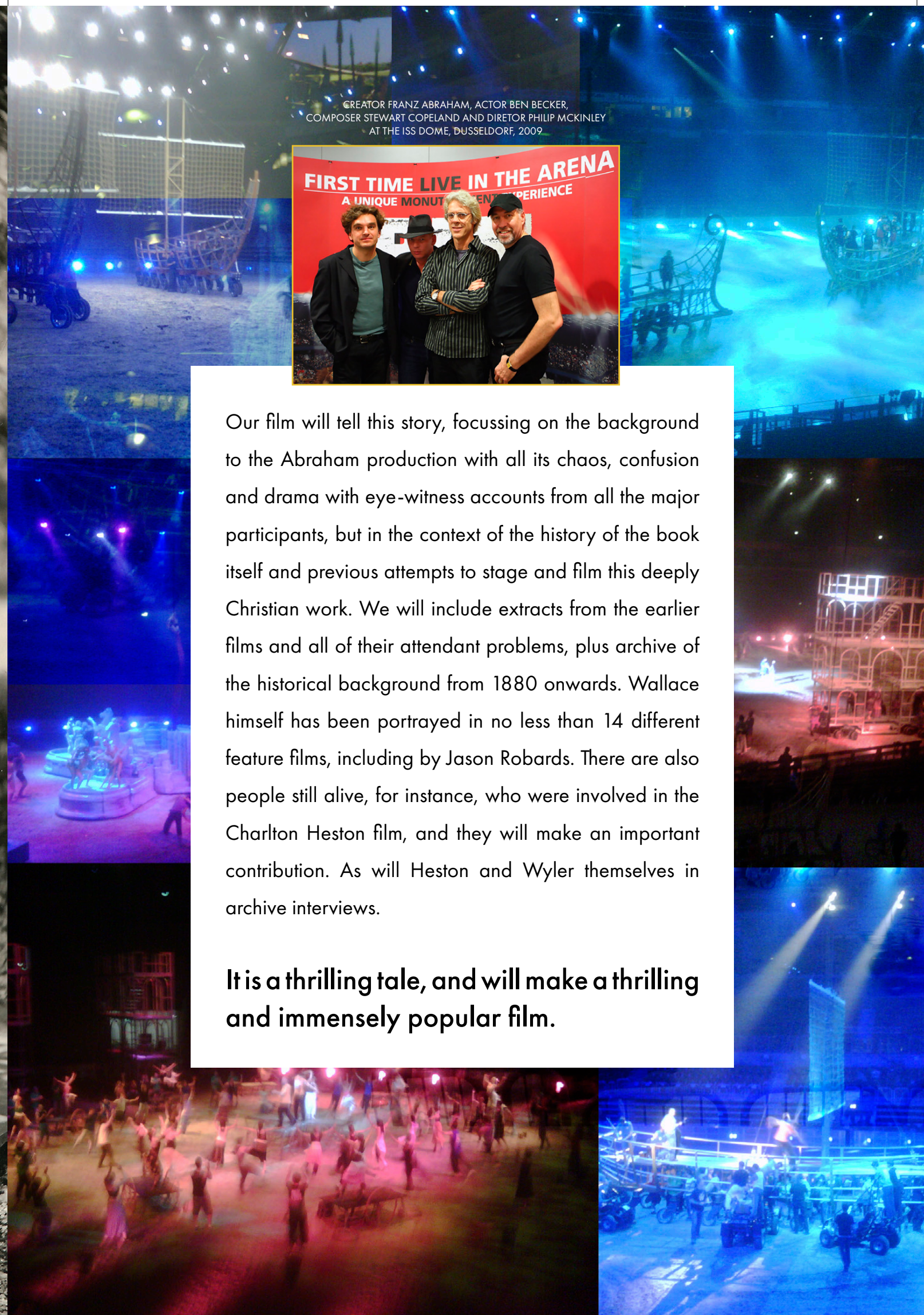




GENERAL LEW WALLACE
WRITING IN THE SHADE
OF HIS FAVOURITE BEECH TREE,
CRAWFORDSVILLE, INDIANA



MAJOR GENERAL LEW WALLACE, C.1862



CREATOR FRANZ ABRAHAM, ACTOR BEN BECKER,
COMPOSER STEWART COPELAND AND DIRECTOR PHILIP MCKINLEY
AT THE ISS DOME, DUSSELDORF, 2009



Our film will tell this story, focussing on the background to the Abraham production with all its chaos, confusion and drama with eye-witness accounts from all the major participants, but in the context of the history of the book itself and previous attempts to stage and film this deeply Christian work. We will include extracts from the earlier films and all of their attendant problems, plus archive of the historical background from 1880 onwards. Wallace himself has been portrayed in no less than 14 different feature films, including by Jason Robards. There are also people still alive, for instance, who were involved in the Charlton Heston film, and they will make an important contribution. As will Heston and Wyler themselves in archive interviews.

It is a thrilling tale, and will make a thrilling and immensely popular film.

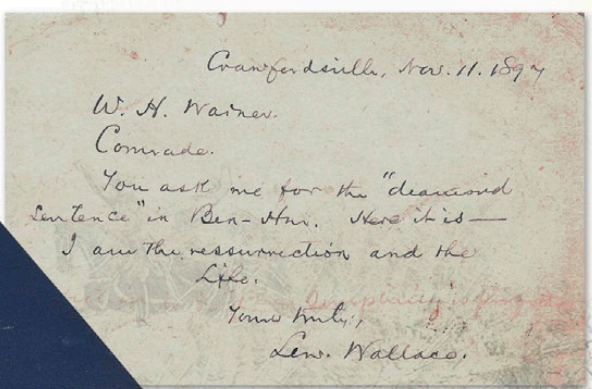


STEWART COPELAND



Franz Abraham's staging in 2009, with music by Stewart Copeland, famous as drummer with The Police rock group, was an attempt to continue that tradition. It too featured a live chariot race, gladiatorial combat, and a sea battle. The production used 46 horses, 500 tons of special sand, and a cast and crew of over 400. All of the show's dialogue was in Latin and Aramaic of the period, with voiceover narration also from Stewart Copeland.

BEN-HUR
FIRST DAY COVER



Every aspect of Ben-Hur demands attention. The 1880 book on which all subsequent manifestations are founded has never been out of print. With its subtitle 'A Tale of the Christ', it was one of the most important and influential Christian books of the 19th century, easily out-selling every book at that time except the Bible. It is a tale of vengeance and spiritual forgiveness through Christian redemption, God's benevolence and the compassion of strangers. No wonder it was even blessed by Pope Leo XIII. And the fact that it was written, after years of research, by a retired Civil War Union General, Lew Wallace, Governor of New Mexico, US Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, only adds to the intrigue.

8 times2

And Abraham said: give me chariots of fire

Ben Hoyle meets the man bringing Ben Hur, gladiators and 20 lorry-loads of sand to the O. arena

The Munich-born film director Werner Herzog once said "There is a different sort of human being in Bavaria" and he should know. He has directed a 320-tonne public steamer over a mountain in the Peruvian jungle and threatened his favourite actor with a loaded gun. But for him "the most imaginative Bavarian of all" was "Max" King Ludwig II, the 19th-century monarch whose fairy-tale castle Neuschwanstein has become the most famous tourist image of Germany.

Herzog, however, has never met Franz Abraham. And next Thursday Abraham, an eccentric visionary to rank with the best of them, faces the defining moment of his career in London, with the world premiere of Ben Hur Live. Drenched in love, revenge and loss, there is nothing outside about the story of the 1st-century Jewish prince who becomes a gladiatorial hero and then a champion chariot-racer; two activities supremely unsuited to stage re-enactment. Ben Hur has already provided the definitive Hollywood epic: the 1959 film with Charlton Heston scowling in Oscar and saved MGM



entertainment. "Franz is a mad genius attempting the equivalent of climbing Everest naked," his English choreographer Liam Neeson says. The man himself says he is "not normal, in a very positive way". Everyone else reaches for a stronger descriptor: more or less immediately.

I find Abraham in the bowels of the Kings-Pinner Arena in Oberhausen, a bland industrial town near Düsseldorf where final rehearsals begin this month. He cuts a distinctive figure: powerfully built with feline eyebrows, curly hair and a theatrical strut. He speaks wonderfully well in English with a rich vocabulary and a hazelnut diaphragm for grammar. Indecently, he describes himself as his "aesthetic eye". Their three daughters, aged 11, 13 and 15, are here too, helping out with prep and cleaning jobs after their daily private and colleagues for his eccentricity and his leadership. Most of the time Abraham is fabulous company. But "once or twice a day", a senior staffer says, "Franz flips"

When he does you can see the anger boiling up from his toes. He clenches his fists, screws up his face and sinks to the floor like Basil Fawlty, emitting a low, furious roar. He bans individuals from speaking to him for months at a time. Not long ago he says he ran into a room where one of his IT staff was sitting. "I shouted at 120 decibels and then pushed a bookcase on top of him." Fortunately he came down quickly too.

The whole project carries a whiff of craziness. Wallace's novel Ben Hur — A Tale of the Christ is 129 years old. The Charlton Heston film was made 50 years ago. As the show's former head of marketing told me shortly before he lost his job, Ben Hur is "not exactly top of mind". Starry names linked with Abraham show — Umberto Eco, Martin Scorsese, Robert Redford and Daniel Radcliffe — never materialised. The dialogue is in Latin and Aramaic and the production logistics are terrifying.

Backstage I find Abraham's wife, Grandid. She describes herself as his "aesthetic eye". Their three daughters, aged 11, 13 and 15, are here too, helping out with prep and cleaning jobs after their daily private and colleagues for his eccentricity and his leadership. Most of the time Abraham is fabulous company. But "once or twice a day", a senior staffer says, "Franz flips"



Har attitude and a lot of credit". It has 30 rooms, turrets and its own lift. In one corridor we passed a poster for a David Hasselhoff concert. "Normally this is in the toilet," Abraham says, looking pained.

His office was covered in charts and checklists with headings such as Target Groups and How to Motivate Them, with thoughts on how to track grandsons, boy lovers and foes. We talked a bit about the orgy scene. Apparently the dancers were being cast "not primarily according to their dancing abilities but for looking like they have a nice body".

Growing up, Abraham was a height-mid-class child. "I'm more than one or two-dimensional" but lacking charisma. "In puberty I had complexes and problems," he explained. "I had a girlfriend very late. Ben Hur was the first film I saw in the cinema. The following year, 1972, his father, a successful car dealer and part-time racing driver, was killed in a crash. Abraham, who was at the track and says it was sabotage, became obsessed with motorsport, but a bad accident on the autobahn at 22 ruined his dreams. The following year, 1973, he had a prospect of a career in Formula One.

Changing tack, he flung himself into staging shows by big international stars such as David Bowie, Plácido Domingo

and the Rolling Stones. Later he put on his own events, covering the market in absurd-sounding arena spectacles such as Aida — Monumental Opera on Fire and Dances — The Musical. His production of Germano Ruocco, complete with "erotic scenes with naked girls imitating an orgy" he says, has played to more than a million paying customers around the world.

But nothing matched the buzz of motor racing, until now. "Psychologically everything that comes after that is a search for a replacement," Abraham says. "I think my dedication to Ben Hur is really about my dreams of an arena version of Spartacus, his awesome film, a Christ show and something with North American Indians" in a giant topic.

So far everything seems to be on track. In the Oberhausen arena a scarlet Czech glances over the roof of his chariot and is dragged halfway round the arena at full gallop on his stomach, steering his horses all the time. A mobile sweatshop has sprung up in the far area with dozens of women bent over sewing machines trying to recast the costumes sent from America (Abraham had pronounced them "shit"). Next to them a group of stout men are holding a meeting of four languages and they eat a series of tinny tables grown under the weight of various cuts of sausage, salami, steaks and pickled vegetables. Ticket sales are healthy (360,000) and counting although Abraham is still "disappointed".

Cash flow is a serious worry. "We are short of £15 million," he says. "At the moment it's not even sure if we reach London." The following day he has to find £95,000 to pay three hotels, a catering bill and the Russian cast, who are threatening to strike. (When I last saw a few days later, he says he found £160,000 overnight, had £100,000 covered on the terms over the following morning, and managed to "postpone" the rest.)

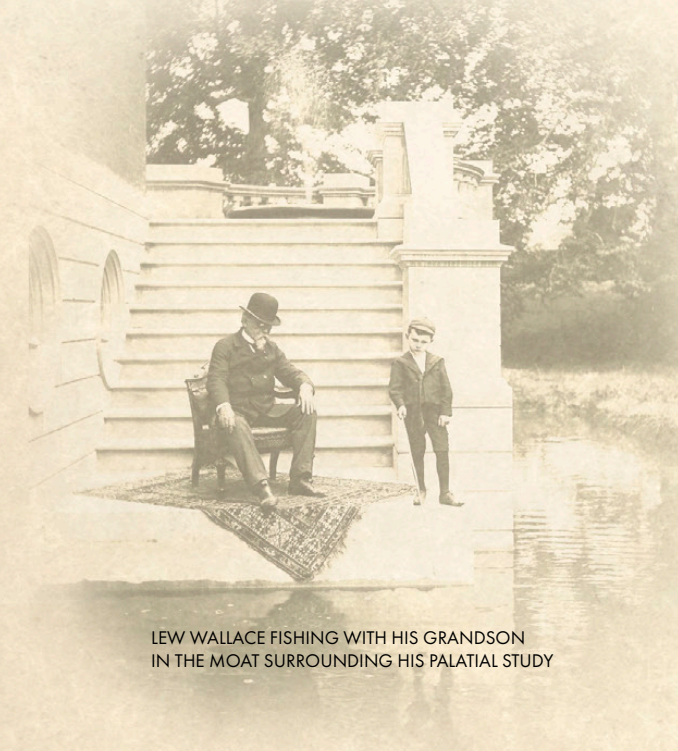
It changes the credit crunch and the inexcusable cowardice of Germany's wealthy young things. "These banking, full of fear, uncreative, fat-assed financiers that most producers would never begin to touch." The stakes are enormous — there is no big investor and Abraham has personally taken on millions in debt. But if he can pull it off, Ben Hur Live might just restore the boundaries of live

entertainment. "Franz is a mad genius attempting the equivalent of climbing Everest naked," his English choreographer Liam Neeson says. The man himself says he is "not normal, in a very positive way". Everyone else reaches for a stronger descriptor: more or less immediately.

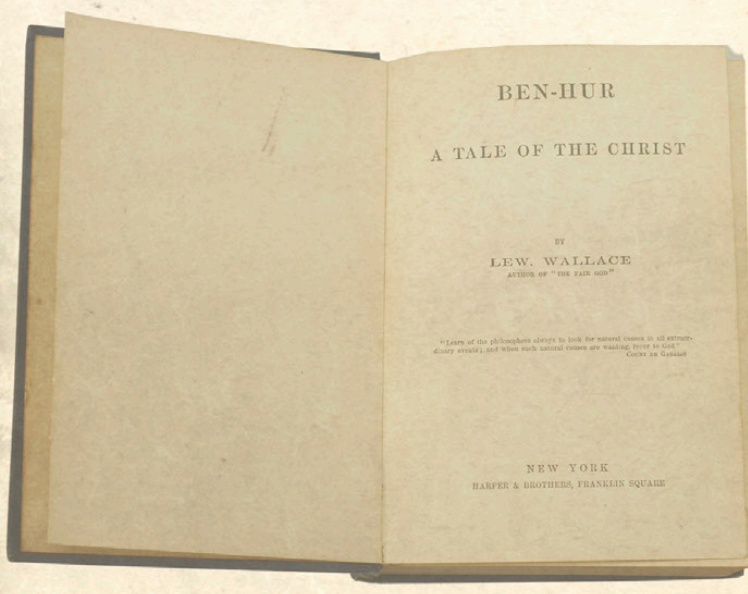
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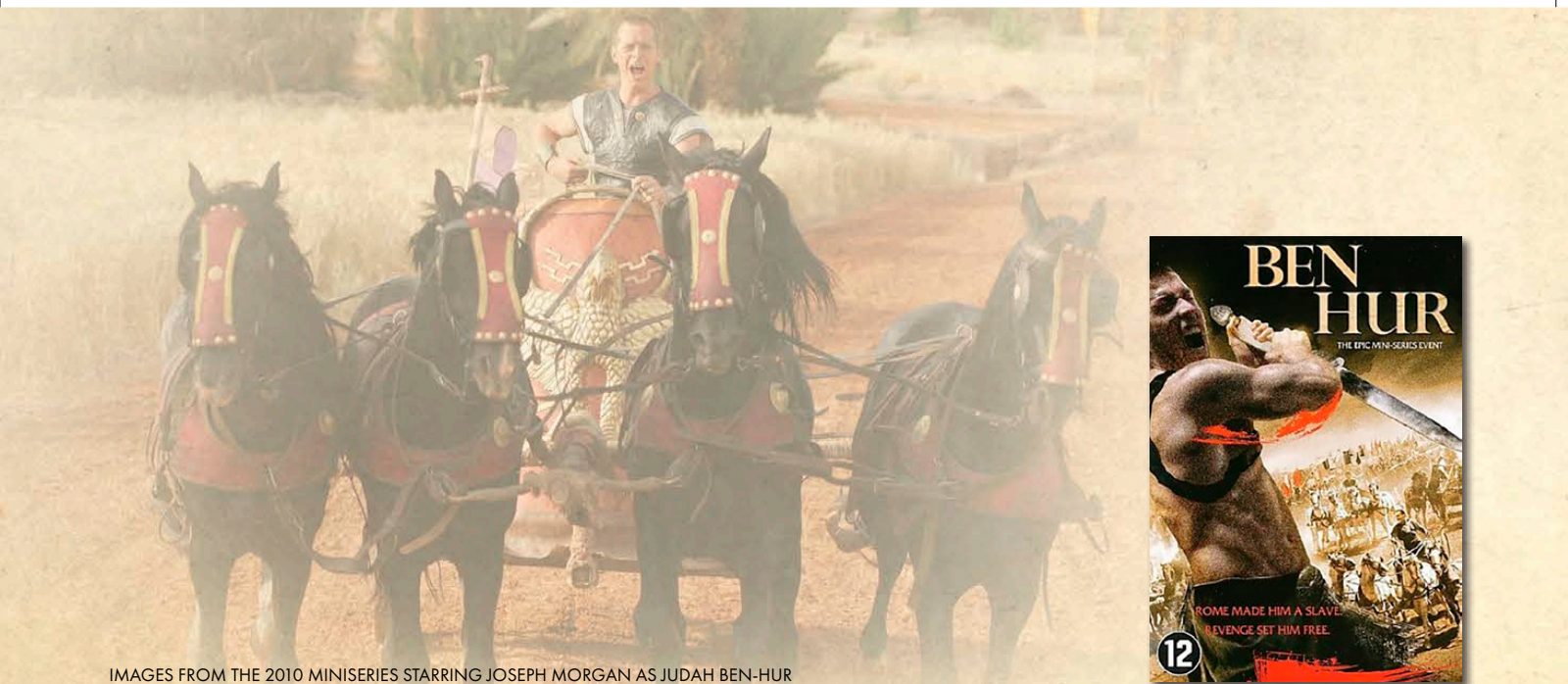


LEW WALLACE FISHING WITH HIS GRANDSON IN THE MOAT SURROUNDING HIS PALATIAL STUDY





What we propose is a film which tries to understand the extraordinary journey Wallace's book has travelled, beginning at the disastrous Civil War Battle of Shiloh in which the Union army of Ulysses S. Grant failed to overcome the Confederates with huge loss of life, for which Wallace got the blame. There's no question that his experiences there were later translated into his great novel. Then to the first attempt to actually 'stage' the book on Broadway in New York in 1899 where it was such a hit that it subsequently toured the world, from London to Sydney Australia, and



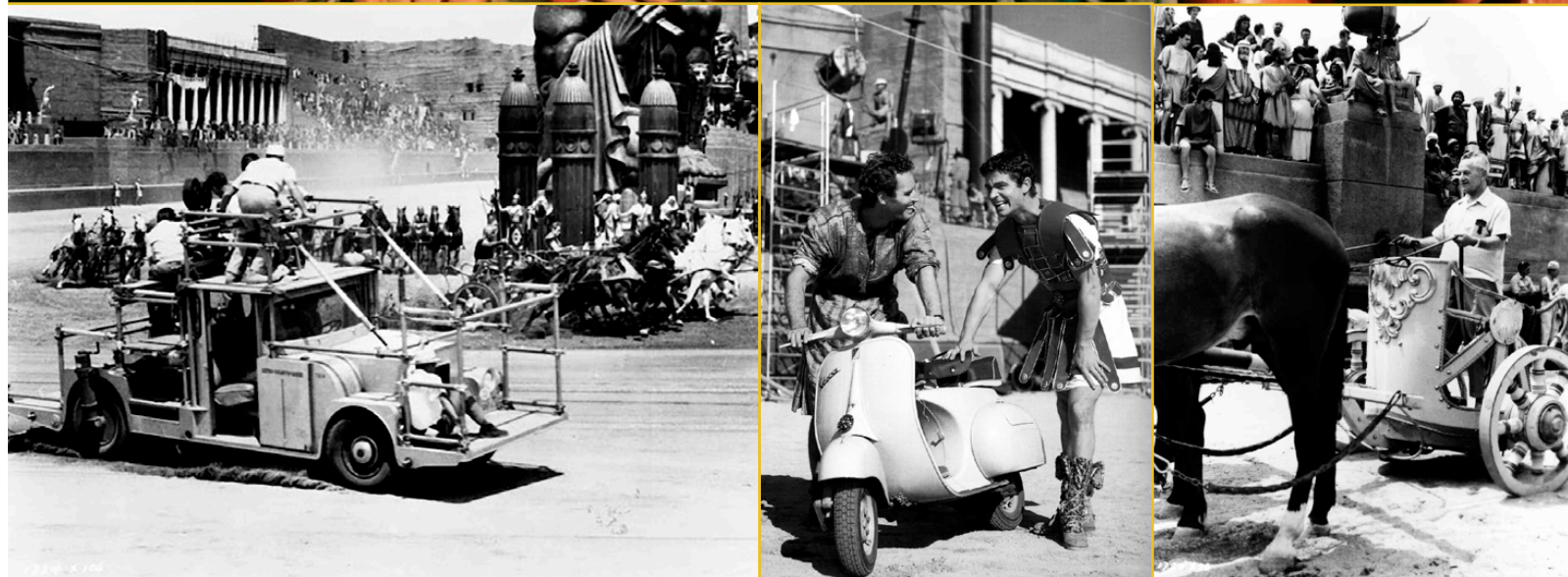
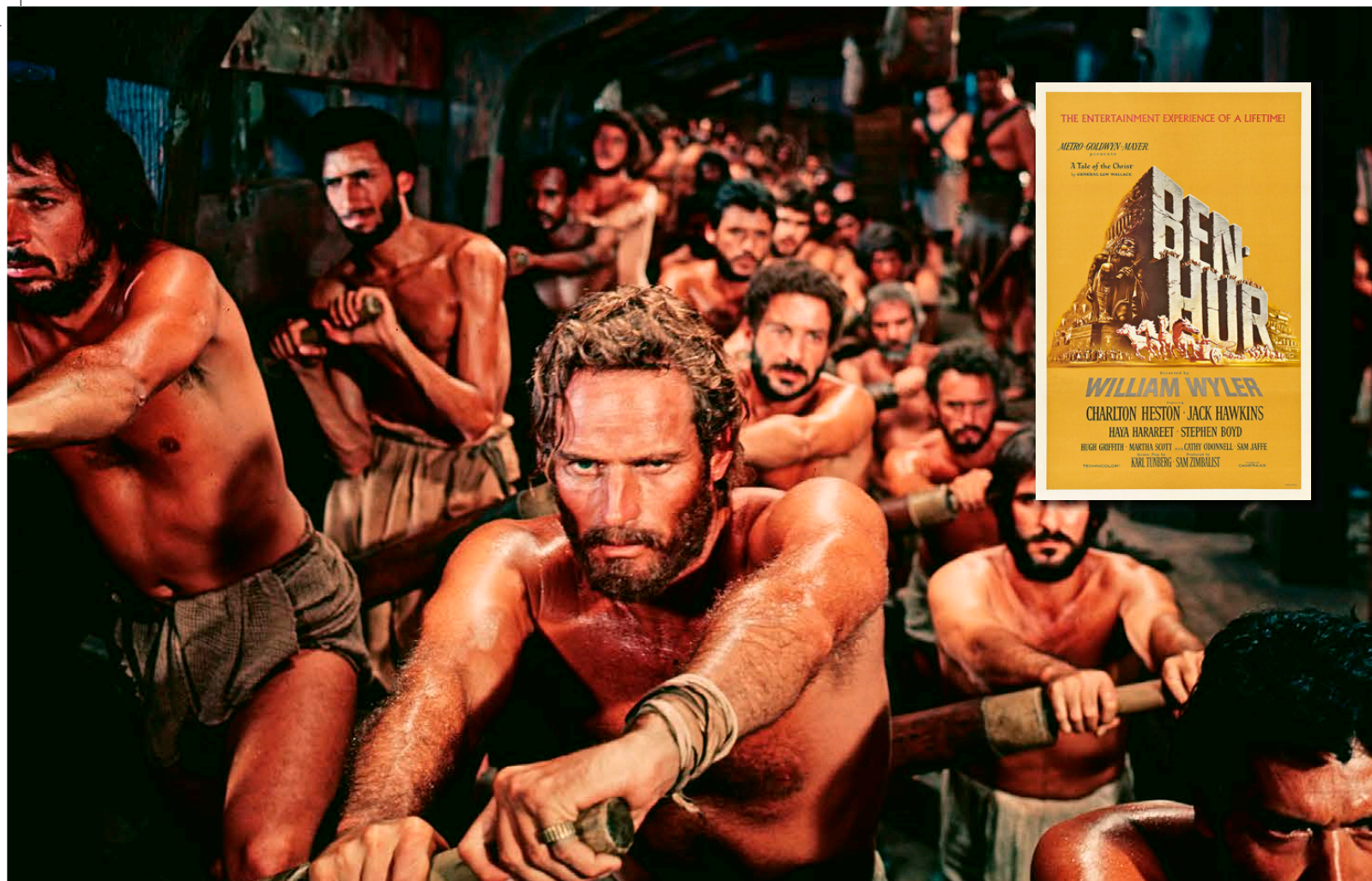
IMAGES FROM THE 2010 MINISERIES STARRING JOSEPH MORGAN AS JUDAH BEN-HUR



JACK HUSTON AS JUDAH BEN-HUR IN THE 2016 FILM AND MORGAN FREEMAN AS SHEIK ILDERIM

THE 2016 FILM BOMBED AT THE BOX OFFICE
 WORLDWIDE TAKINGS: \$94.1 MILLION
 PRODUCTION BUDGET: \$100 MILLION





BEHIND THE SCENES FROM THE 1959 FILM, L TO R: FILMING THE CHARIOT RACE; CHARLTON HESTON AND STEPHEN BOYD; WILLIAM WYLER



STILL FROM THE 2003 ANIMATION



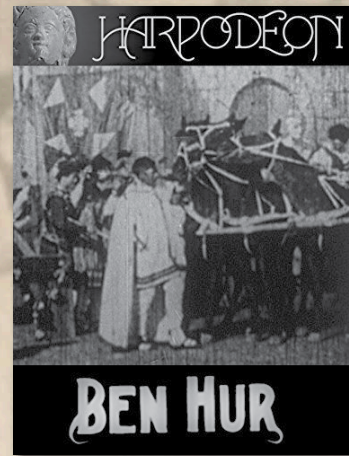
even included an actual chariot race on stage achieved (it was said) by "four great cradles" 20 feet long and 14 feet wide that moved "back and front on railways", while the horses secured with invisible steel cable traces galloped on treadmills towards the audience. The horses also drove the movement of a vast cyclorama backdrop, which revolved in the opposite direction to create an illusion of rapid speed. Electric rubber rollers spun the chariot wheels, while fans created clouds of dust.

It must have been an incredible spectacle, and little wonder it was seen by an estimated 20 million people.



ORIGINAL CAST OF THE 1899 BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF BEN-HUR WILLIAM S. HART (CENTRE) AS MESSALA.





1907 SILENT SHORT
BY KALEM STUDIO
DIRECTED BY SIDNEY OLCOTT
ADAPTED FOR SCREEN BY GENE GAUNTIER



Then came the films: six so far!! In 1907; again in 1925 starring Ramon Novarro, which became the highest grossing film of the silent era; in 1959, directed by William Wyler (who had actually been an assistant on the 1925 film) with its record 11 Oscars, including one for Charlton Heston as Best Actor; again in 2003 in an animated version; then a mini-series in 2010; and then a further film in 2016. And these do not include Ben-Hur chocolate, flour, toiletries including Ben-Hur perfume, Ben-Hur bicycles, cigars, automobiles, clocks, hair products, Ben-Hur clothing, household goods, jewellery, food products and action figures.



THE 1925 SILENT FILM STARRED RAMON NOVARRO AS BEN-HUR



HAYA HARAREET AND CHARLTON HESTON
IN THE 1959 FILM

