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## It May Be Box Office, But Is It the Bible?

WILLIAM LEE MILLER

IT SEEMS we have had Salome all wrong. According to the Columbia movie "Salome," she was a good girl—as good, that is, as you could expect a fun-loving Rita Hayworth character to be—but she was betrayed by her evil mother. Rita—pardon me, Salome—liked to enjoy herself and all that, but she wouldn't want anybody's prophet killed, particularly not Stewart Granger's. Really, Mr. Granger had converted her, in one of the easiest and vaguest conversions on record, to The Law or Humanity or something, and she was going straight. She did her dance to try to save John the Baptist, and she was all busted up when they brought in John's head on a platter, his glassy eyes staring up at the ceiling through the ketchup. It was heart-rending.

The improvements that the moviemakers have worked in Salome's character are as nothing to the improvements that they have been working in the Bible for years. With the memories of "Quo Vadis," "David and Bathsheba," and "Samson and Delilah" still vivid, one would think we had had quite enough of Hollywood's own peculiar brand of Biblical interpretation for a while, but the movie men plainly have decided that we need still more spiritual food. According to a report in the *New York Times*, we are to be treated to no fewer than twelve of these "inspirational" pictures, including "The Robe"—now released after years of breathless anticipation; "The Prodigal," starring Ava Gardner (presumably as part of the Riotous Living); and "The Story of Mary Magdalene," in which Rita Hayworth will demonstrate her piety once more. Cecil B. De Mille, famous for his efforts in bringing the Bible to the multitudes, is going

to persevere in good works by re-making "The Ten Commandments," and our Ambassador to Italy, Mrs. Luce, has written the screenplay for "Pilate's Wife." It's going to be a big year.

"SALOME" represents this genre in something like its worst form: It has sex, crowds, noise, color, thrills, religious sentimentality, big names, and at the heart of it all a monumentally fatuous plot. The picture would not be worth further discussion if it were not that there are so many such pictures and they cost so much and so many people go to see them and they are so very bad.

They are not bad in just an ordinary way; they are bad in Hollywood's own colossal way. The stupidity at the center often is surrounded by all kinds of secondary excellence. The big stars show themselves in these movies, and serious performers, too, are somehow persuaded to appear in supporting roles, as Judith Anderson, Charles Laughton, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke do in "Salome." One of Hollywood's more intelligent directors, William Dieterle, directed "Salome." The color may be colorful, the music may be musical, the cutting and camera work and costuming and sets may all be the best of their respective arts. Subordinate parts of the plot may even make some sense. These Biblical spectacles represent an impressive display not only of material abundance but also of technical skill and creative ingenuity. And all of this is expended to make a picture whose high moment is a shot of Rita Hayworth rolling awkwardly on a rug.

The American motion-picture industry—and some would say America as a whole—seems to be more able to

handle technical problems than interpretative and moral ones, and therefore tends to treat the former as the really significant problems. Hollywood's response to the inroads television has made on the movies appears to be a frantic search for a new technical "improvement," even at the expense of a considerable debasement of the content of the films. In this new age of depth, width, height, curvature, expansion, Natural Vision, stereophonic sound, and all the other cinematic wonders, the Biblical epic seems destined to be one of the chief vehicles for conveying to the world the new marvels of cinema technology, and at the same time, inadvertently and ironically, for revealing new dimensions of spiritual obtuseness.

But these films, so weak in spirit, are plenty strong in the flesh, and that in a very literal sense. Fortunately for them, what might be called the original Bible provides a goodly number of stories about women presumed to be beautiful, so that Hollywood's version of the Bible can go along for quite a while.

"Salome" is built from this sure-fire formula, religion baptizing sex and sex making religion more interesting. In case anyone should miss the fact that Miss Hayworth represents sex, she is greeted whenever she makes an entrance, which is what she does most of in the picture, by a surge of violins, a stir in the crowd, a great deal of ogling by the male members of the cast, and considerable dialogue about her beauty. She is carried up through the crowd, for instance, in a fancy sedan chair, her face all covered with a veil and yet another elaborate costume of fancy colored silks flowing about her, and the music swells, and then, perhaps, we cut to Charles Laughton and Stewart Granger looking down at her from a balcony, awe-struck, and informing each other what a jewel of beauty she is, yes, a veritable gem. On a few occasions Miss Hayworth is shown by herself, and the audience is permitted to draw its own conclusions.

THE DANCE, of course, is the climax of the picture, so much so that the creator of it gets a panel in the credits all to herself, just like the director. But when we finally get to

the dance, it turns out that Charles Laughton as Herod, and not Rita Hayworth, is the big star. Once again the film exerts itself to demonstrate vicariously that, by golly, this is sexy. Miss Hayworth does stride around the platform, fluttering scarves, taking off veils, rolling her shoulder and one thing and another, but every few feet the camera cuts to Laughton's face, close-up against a blood-red background, and he drools, and snorts, and leers, and stares, and pants in a display of passion so altogether overwhelming that Miss Hayworth's mild efforts seem insufficient to account for all the uproar.

#### 'The Message'

But the secondhand character of the sex is outdone by the eclectic character of the religion. The message of John the Baptist, for example, is a weird mixture of a few of the Biblical phrases attributed to John, plus a kind of script-writers' synthetic pseudo-Biblicism ("those who live in hatred and strife shall be banished from the universe"; "truth shall be clear as crystal"; "you shall blossom like the rose") and, for good measure, some out-and-out modern sentiment, as when John speaks glowingly of a future time "when humanity shall prevail." Stewart Granger expresses his faith in these same terms to his old chief, Pontius Pilate: "I have found a loyalty greater than Rome—humanity."

But for John the Baptist to voice a modern script-writer's confusion between God and humanity is more than an anachronism. It is evidence of the reason why these Biblical movies are so un-Biblical: They do not acknowledge that the significance of the Bible lies in its interpretation of life and not in its details. If these movies bear any relation to the Bible at all, it is only in the most inconsequential of these details; that there are distinctive Biblical *ideas* different from the prevailing modern ones does not in the slightest way suggest itself in these films. These pictures are modern pulp-magazine stories, with some names and events taken from the historical sections of the Bible.

In "David and Bathsheba," which was better than most of these Biblical films, it was not just that Bathsheba's arm plainly bore the mark



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of a smallpox vaccination, or that David urged Uriah to try to look at things from the woman's point of view, but that Bathsheba's relationship to David was made a modern romantic love story. In "Quo Vadis" a genial and avuncular St. Peter told his boy companion that maybe when they were through fishing for men they would have a little time to fish for fish! These movies are like that, a grafting of Biblical figures and events onto essentially modern categories. They make mention of Galilee and of the Jordan, but the message comes straight from Southern California.

THIS MESSAGE is that the real world is that of size, color, noise, thrills, and the most primitive and immediate emotions, the world of earthquake, wind, and fire. The Biblical movies appeal to the same motives and imply the same scale of values as the beast and monster pictures, with supersize lizards and the like, or the 3-D films in which the audience is pelted with arrows, sped over roller coasters, and leapt at by lions. The whole approach is literal and materialistic. When a heavenly vision or a miracle is shown, it is represented with a physical exactitude that only a scientific age would consider important. God becomes a kind of super magician who works strictly physical and capricious miracles, and the Bible is treated primarily as a book of tall tales about His tricks.

A few details taken from the history, drama, and legend of the Bible are removed from the context of the meaning of the whole Bible, and given meaning instead from the sentimentalities of contemporary popular culture. As in a soap opera, good and evil are separated and embodied in particular persons; in "Salome" it is important that the audience understand that Herodias is Bad, so great pains are taken to make this unmistakably clear by her lines, by the curl of Miss Anderson's lip, and by the sinister visage of her adviser. As in cowboy fiction, virtue is very specifically rewarded on earth, and vice is very specifically punished.

The American motion-picture industry does make films of sensitivity and insight, and it is not entirely the fault of Hollywood that

the "religious" pictures are not among them. Some of the blame must rest on the kind of religion in America which provides the audience for these films. If people are taught that there is some special edification to be derived from the annual repetition of the details of the story of David and Goliath, or from the memorization of Biblical verses out of context, or from the dressing up of three boys from the Intermediate Department in bathrobes and bedroom slippers to play Wise Men in the pageant, then people are sure to think these movies are religious. Both those whose religion consists in gritting the teeth and holding on for dear life to the literal

historical truth of every word of the Bible and those who think religion is equivalent to current popular sentiments can find their creeds represented in these films.

The closing scene of "Salome," Rita Hayworth and Stewart Granger listening to the Sermon on the Mount, is exactly like the colorful, strictly representational pictures of that event on the covers of many Sunday-school leaflets, and the film's closing gimmick—a "this was the beginning" in place of "the end"—is not unlike the twists and tricks of many preachers' sermon titles. These movies play to the crudest part of American religiosity, a part which unfortunately is not small.

## The Pity Of Alan Paton

ERIC LARRABEE

TOO LATE THE PHALAROPE, by Alan Paton. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.50.

"OUT OF AFRICA," said Pliny the Elder, "always something new." Out of South Africa we have been getting something less new than paradoxical, which is a coincidence of political decline and literary elevation, of *apartheid* on the one hand and on the other an inexplicable flowering of humane talent: Uys Krige, Peter Abrahams, Jack Cope, and numerous others—among them Alan Paton. Out of Mr. Paton we do have something new, his second book, as awkwardly titled as the first—*Too Late the Phalarope*.

It is an admirable volume, though flawed, partly by the preconceptions that readers may bring to it and partly by the account thereof the author has taken. In some respects he has let himself be distracted, by the power of his own moral suasion, from the obligations of the book itself. Yet among its virtues is that of turning another face to the world than the thick-set intransigence of the racists, so that one may read the

novel as an implicitly political document—learning in the process that other intelligent views may be held of South Africa than one of perfunctory agitprop disgust. The unhappy country that gave us Malan cannot be defined without saying that it also gave us Alan Paton, who is no negligible gift.

Inevitably a reader of *Cry, the Beloved Country* will open the new book in the hope not only of having South Africa defined to him but having it done as successfully as Mr. Paton did it before. Here there may be disappointments. Having made himself plain in his first novel—as plain as an individual can be asked to make himself in such a riven land—Mr. Paton has reduced his perspective by two dimensions. Having said his say about black and white in the terrible grip of one another, he has limited himself this time to the single group of whites whose qualities dominate his country, the Afrikaners, and has chosen to speak through their mouths.

In this respect, *Too Late the*