

"KING OF KINGS" IMPRESSES

Spectators Hushed Before Magnificence of Christ Life Story at Chinese Theater

BY EDWIN SCHALLERT

Magnificent in spectacular embellishments, tenderly reverential in the spirit of its interpretation, rich in inspirational and dramatic feeling, Cecil B. De Mille's production of "The King of Kings" dawned upon the screen last evening at Grauman's new Chinese Theater as a presentation remote from the ordinary realms of entertainment, but remarkable and without question far-reaching in its public interest.

There is no doubt that this elaborate picturization of the life of the Christ is the most notable achievement of a director long identified with accomplishments that in aim are both unusual and daring. And to say that it will attract a manifest attention from people in all walks of life, and irrespective of religious belief, is but to repeat a platitude.

IMPRESSIVE EVENT

As an event in filmland the first unfolding of "The King of Kings" on the screen took precedence even over the opening of a theater that in itself is a revelation of art and beauty. Grauman's Chinese Theater is the ultimate word in construction and imagination, and will long be a fascination to beholders of the film creations that are shown within its doors.

Triumphant also in resplendence was the premiere. Never has a great-

er audience assembled for any happening. Were it not for the nature of the attraction which they saw, it would be safe to say that no event of similar character, either local or national, had a more glamorous splendor. Impressiveness was, however, the true note that was struck on this occasion, owing to the dominating theme of the evening.

It is almost with reticence that one approaches an estimate of "The King of Kings" in relation both to the theater and the public. One is not inclined to rhapsodize about the mere glitter in viewing the significance of such a fulfillment as brings to the screen what, in the opinion of a great majority, may justly be termed a sacred subject, as well as the world's most powerful story.

Perhaps, too, this restraint was evi-

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KING OF KINGS GRIPS THROG

*Spectators Hushed by Awe-
some Effects Achieved*

*Inaugurates Newest Grauman
Cinema Temple*

*Chinese Theater is Mecca of
Filmdom's Society*

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dent in the reception accorded by the first-night audience. Their reaction is not to be conjured in this impression of the premiere in the conventional manner, nor are the usual words to be applied to an unfoldment, which, in the traditional sense, might be termed brilliant.

AUDIENCE SUBDUED

The first showing of "The King of Kings" was really observed with something that amounted to bated breath by the throng of celebrities that gathered for the premiere. There was applause for a technical feat here and there, but it was sporadic and uncertain, and the mood was a subdued one not only in the theater, during the showing, but also during the intermission and after the picture was finished. A tribute was nevertheless paid De Mille in this attitude, for one could hardly expect a wild demonstration of enthusiasm in token of a story that has long been regarded as one of the deepest tragical as well as spiritual import.

It is a strange anomaly, of course, that makes the first showing of the picture, telling this story incident to the opening of a theater that in its ultimate fulfillment will be dedicated purely to entertainment, and a Chinese theater in particular. Many might have been inclined to find in this circumstance an incongruity. And that such does exist cannot be denied.

However, once the picture itself starts, there is no remembering this detail. Attention is concentrated on the screen itself, and on the first impressions of Judaea as De Mille has visualized this.

The first sequences of the film are in color. There is preceding this no title sheet with the names of players. There is merely a brief dedicatory statement, referring to the bringing of the Christ story to all nations, and stating the hope that the picture itself may prove a modest contribution to this end.

MAGDALEN SHOWN

The opening episodes are in the house of Mary of Magdala before her repentance. Judas is mentioned as her favorite, but has been absent. Mary is told that the reason is his devotion to a certain Carpenter of Nazareth, and with chariot drawn by stamping zebras, the gift of a Nubian king. Mary goes in quest of him.

This is perhaps the most De Mille-ish moment in the picture. It has much of that familiar barbaric lavishness with which he formerly bedecked his allegorical sequences. It is a startling and voluptuous contrast to the remainder of the picture, introducing the main theme in a very sensational manner. Personally, I cannot see that it will excite any particular prejudice, because it is dramatically very effective.

There is a long lapse before the actual introduction of the Christ. It is this first introduction is actually to my mind the most glorious moment in the whole production. It is accomplished by allowing the audience to vision through the eyes of a child whose sight is restored the first impression of the Master. It is the most successful and effective result that has ever been accomplished in any drama of the Christ either on stage or screen in the first visualizing of the character. The image is first seen as an effulgent light filling the whole screen, and then later as an actual person.

COMIC RELIEF

The portrayal is then carried on through the life and teachings of Christ, and the development of a plot in which Calaphas is made to appear the villain. Incidents that seem widely separated in the Scriptures themselves are brought into proximity for dramatic effect. Particularly is this true of the tribute-paying scene, where the conversion of Matthew is joined with the "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and the drawing of the fish from the Sea of Galilee with the piece of money in its mouth. At this point, De Mille also rather cleverly proffers a comic incident of having the Roman soldiers try to catch fish with the same gratifying results as the apostle Peter enjoyed.

The incident of the woman taken in adultery, and the driving of the buyers and the sellers from the temple, with Christ's refusal of worldly kingdoms, and his insistence on the spiritual crown are then told, leading to the culmination of the acceptance by Judas of the thirty pieces of silver for his betrayal, and the Last Supper. The first part of the film closes with the Last Supper, the light dying out on a white dove settling down by the cup or chalice. The Last Supper is without question one of the most inspirational scenes in the entire picture, because of the fine reverence with which it is handled, and the demeanor of Judas as contrasted to the other disciples which lends to the drama.

VIA CRUCIS GRIPS

The last part of the picture is concerned successively with the Garden of Gethsemane, the denial of the Apostle Peter, the trial of Christ before Pilate, the way of the cross and the crucifixion. In this scene of the crucifixion De Mille reveals his technical power at its most majestic point. There have been few effects to equal the lightnings and the earthquake which follow the death of Christ on the cross, climaxing in the rending of the temple veil. Easter morn and Christ's first meeting with Mary, the mother, and Mary of Magdala and his disciples are subsequently depicted, including the doubting of Thomas, which is carried out with a realism not characteristic of the original version and less convincing on this account. The picture closes with an impression of the spirit of Christ against a modern city-like background, and the words, "I am with you always."

There is no lack of theatrical values in all this. Every event that transpires is fraught with dramatic interest, and the general cumulative effect is nothing short of amazing. Very strong, indeed, is the denunciation of those who would cast stones, when the Christ writes in the sand the secret sins of those who are about to kill her. Deep with power also is that scene where Judas in a worldly manner attempts to heal the mad boy, and is only bitten on the arm for his pains, while Christ is shown releasing him to sanity. Very deep with feeling are the moments of the Last Supper, showing the de-

votion of the apostles to the Master, particularly of Peter.

MOBS UNDERDONE

Technically, I found the scenes of the trial and way of the cross deficient in the mob spirit. The second part of the picture, in the early part disappoints somewhat on this account. One expected to see the surge of a vast infuriated mass of figures, but the action seems badly scattered, and the mob, instead of being a mob, is more a mass of conglomerate individuals very much divided in opinion. That is not a mob, as mobs are known in history.

The way of the cross, too, seems very politely handled, and without any of the lashing fury that may logically be associated with such a terrific and mad event as this must have been in the streets of Jerusalem. Both these scenes are in very strong contrast to the scourging of the Christ and crowning with thorns, which are carried out vigorously enough, as are also portions of the Crucifixion.

It is difficult to mention players in connection with this picture, and in a way it is unfair because of the fact that the illusion should be preserved intact as regards identities. It is amazing how well this has been done in the instance of most of the characters. One is inclined to forget who he is in looking at the picture. At the same time, the interpretations cannot be altogether neglected particularly in such proximity to the world of picture-making itself.

EFFECTIVE ROLES

H. B. Warner is, of course, seen as the Christ—a fact that is widely known even if it is not mentioned on the screen. And though he is not the ideal type—nor is there perhaps an ideal type anywhere—he is in many scenes impressive. Particularly, I felt this to be the case in the Last Supper, the scene of the Temptation, and the opening moment. As long as his mood is serious, and there are not too many close-ups, the impression is satisfying. It is a thoughtful, earnest and reverent interpretation.

There are many people in this picture—too many to be numbered, and heralded. Nor is it entirely fitting. I may mention especially perhaps Ernest Torrence for his interpretation of Peter; Dorothy Cumming for her work as Mary the Mother; the various portrayals of the apostles.

The Judas of Joseph Schildkraut is a work of amazing dramatic force; the Calaphas of Rudolph Schildkraut, a skillful delineation of a difficult character.

Sam De Grasse, Victor Varconi and others. Jacqueline Logan as Mary of Magdala is most successful in the earlier episodes; a little disappointing in repentant wise, though her scenes are limited.

The camera work is superb, and the adaptation by Jeanie Macpherson, all things considered, remarkable.

PROLOGUE DAZZLES

The prologue adheres to a fine simplicity. Much of it is in tableaux form, and much is given over to choruses. There is also singing during the musical score by Hugo Riesenfeld, which score is itself a surpassing achievement. A harp ensemble is an effective musical addition.

The manger tableau, the flight to Egypt, the coming of the Three Wise Men across the desert, and the final dazzling transformation aiming at a celestial glamour all add to the spell of a presentation, which truly exerts rare and exceptional spell over its audience.

A word more with reference to the theater itself. No prophet is needed to foretell the future of this picturesque establishment. Sid Grauman has a home for the productions that he henceforward will show there whose fame will be international. The house is a dream of beauty both in lighting and decorative effects—an Aladdin's wonder palace that will be visited by all who visit Southern California, or dwell here, as an institution.