

Demetrius and the Gladiators

The incomparable composer Franz Waxman, so the story goes, was so outraged by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science's failure to even nominate colleague Alfred Newman for an Oscar in recognition of his monumental achievement with *The Robe* (1953) that he promptly resigned his membership in the august Academy. Bristling with integrity, this extravagant gesture takes on even further luster when we realize that Waxman had only recently become the first composer to win the Oscar two years in a row: for *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *A Place in the Sun* (1951), a pair of dark, intriguingly modern and moody scores that fully demonstrate this restless composer's mastery of every genre and ability to grow with every assignment. When Waxman resigned from the Academy, it *meant* something.

It was equally significant when, just a short time later (in one of those Hollywood coincidences that wasn't really very coincidental), Waxman accepted the plum assignment of scoring *The Robe's* sequel, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954)—with the proviso that his screen credit would explicitly state that his music was based on Newman's. In this, he was in some sense commenting on what everyone in town already thought they knew: that Demetrius was a shrewd attempt to capitalize on the historic success of the first CinemaScope picture, *The Robe*. As the screenwriter of both films, Philip Dunne, put it in his delightful autobiography, *Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics*, *Demetrius* was "a harebrained adventure... using bits and pieces left over from the original: those actors we hadn't killed off, plus the expensive sets, wardrobe, and props which had embellished our reconstruction of Caligula's Rome."

Even before *The Robe* opened, the canny Twentieth Century Fox production chief, Darryl F. Zanuck, had *Demetrius and the Gladiators* under way. *Robe* veterans Dunne, producer Frank Ross, art directors George W. Davis and Lyle Wheeler, and actors Victor Mature, Michael Rennie, and Jay Robinson were now freshly energized by newcomers; director Delmer Daves, cinematographer Milton Krasner, and composer Waxman replaced their counterparts still occupied on *The Robe*: Henry Koster, Leon Shamroy, and Newman.

The surprise is that, while *The Robe* eclipsed its successor in its day, decades later, it looks like *Demetrius* is, in fact, what Dunne called it: "a far better pure movie." It certainly has a darker, more twisted story: while *The Robe* details a skeptic's journey to faith, *Demetrius* weaves the story of how a believer's faith is tested. It is, as Fox's lurid publicity had it, the tale of "Christianity's first back-slider...[who] becomes disillusioned with the inheritance of the meek and gives himself to excesses." Oooh: excesses!

Demetrius (Mature) is the eponymous character who allows us to enjoy both saintliness and sin: a slave-turned-Christian whose religious conversion and rescue of the red homespun garment Jesus wore on the cross constitutes a significant plot point in *The Robe*. The robe itself remains in contention in the sequel, with a lavishly crazed Emperor Caligula (Robinson, superbly over the top) determined to lay hands on it to stave off his gnawing fear of death. When Demetrius refuses to reveal the item's whereabouts, he is forced into gladiatorial service; there he catches the perpetually wandering eye of Caligula's bff, Messalina (Susan Hayward), flame-haired priestess of Isis and extravagantly unfaithful wife of the apparently ineffectual bookworm, Claudius (Barry Jones).

True to his beliefs, Demetrius is initially dead set against both mortal combat in the arena and another

kind of battle in Messalina's bedchamber. But the apparent death of his beloved Lucia (Fifties heart-throb Debra Paget) at the brutal hands of another gladiator (a young and very cheery Richard Egan) shatters his faith, and before long he is thrillingly running roughshod over the Commandments, slaughtering a cohort of colleagues without a second thought and enthusiastically submitting to Messalina's seductive wiles.

Some of the credit for the cut-loose liveliness of *Demetrius and the Gladiators* must surely go to Delmer Daves, a writer-turned director who had already proved his mettle on a host of terrific genre pictures: *Pride of the Marines* (war film), *Dark Passage* (film noir), and *Broken Arrow* (Western), among many others. Unlike his *Robe* counterpart, Henry Koster, who struggled with the demands of the brand-new CinemaScope technology, Daves seemed to take to the widescreen format with natural aplomb. Aided by his superb cinematographer, Milton Krasner—the Fox stalwart responsible for the look of films as diverse as *A Double Life*, *All About Eve*, and the Oscar-winning *Three Coins in the Fountain*, released the same year as *Demetrius*—Daves devises a vibrant epic, craftily utilizing the 'Scope frame.

And then there is Waxman's tantalizing score, which, while indeed incorporating several of Alfred Newman's incomparably majestic themes from *The Robe*, nevertheless manages to display a modernist élan and power all its own. *Demetrius and the Gladiators* was this fabulously versatile composer's first Biblical epic; as usual, he adapted his talents to a new genre with superbly dramatic dexterity. Yet here, as in virtually every Waxman score—and there are so many classics, including the likes of *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Rebecca*, *Fury*, *Humoresque*, *Night and the City*, *Rear Window*, *The Nun's Story*, *Peyton Place*—the dominant mood is one of what critic David Aspinall astutely called "habitual disquiet." How singularly appropriate for *Demetrius*, where anxiety, confusion, anger, and alienation are the overriding feelings—the moods that are both triggers for and responses to the overwhelming twists and turns of the film's narrative.

And how perfectly this all fits with the composer's personal story. Waxman's is the *echt* narrative of the European émigré to Hollywood, although his is in many ways even more dramatic than his confrères'. Born in a part of Germany that is now part of Poland, Waxman was a musical prodigy who initially bowed to family pressure and took a job as a bank teller, then bolted to Berlin and what he perceived as freedom. Supporting his ongoing musical studies by working as a pianist with the delightfully named Weintraub Syncopaters, Waxman, one night in the early 1930s, was set upon in the street by a gang of Nazi thugs and brutally beaten. Reading the savage anti-Semitic writing on the wall, he fled to America.

Despite his rapid success (by 1935, he was already writing the ground-breaking, career-making score for *Bride of Frankenstein*), the composer never quite lost his sense of something dark lurking around every corner. We are the beneficiaries of his unease—and in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, in particular, we can glory in music that is, by turns, suspenseful, disquieting, sinister, and, always, psychologically acute.

While flawlessly integrating Newman's moving elegiac/spiritual themes, Waxman also manages to introduce his own signatures: pizzicato strings, huge soundings of brass, and heart-rending dissonances that lose nothing in the emotional realm by being

strange and discomfiting. (Film music fans will on occasion be reminded of Alex North, a recent arrival in Hollywood who, while forging his own distinctive style, would certainly be influenced by Waxman.) Beginning with a pulse-pounding "Prelude" which twines Newman's themes with his own, Waxman moves on to one stunning cue after another. Stand-outs include the stirring—and pointedly disturbing—brass marches, "Claudius and Messalina" and "Gladiator March"; "Temple of Isis," which blends, in dramatically modernist style, the forces of orchestra and choir; "The Gladiators' Party," which features an exotic piece of dance music developing into a cue of frightening savagery; and the awe-inspiring "Messalina at Home," merging Waxman and Newman to a poignant fare-thee-well.

The Egyptian (1954), another Fox epic, has often been cited as the singular collaboration between two legendary composers—in this case, Alfred Newman and Bernard Herrmann. But in a certain sense, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* is its near-equal. In the same busy year, the terribly pressed Newman (then also the head of Fox's music department, as well as being perhaps the most in-demand composer in town) surrendered his music to his friend and colleague, Franz Waxman. The result was a score that, while paying homage to Newman's indelible work, also gave us the ever-burgeoning gifts of Waxman: a composer who never stopped growing. In the words of one critic, at the time of his death in 1967, Waxman was "at the height of his powers." He was, in fact, a singular musician who never stopped reaching for those heights.

—Julie Kirgo

ABOUT THIS RELEASE

Demetrius and the Gladiators has undergone a long overdue full digital restoration using the best that state-of-the-art audio technology can offer. The original 1954 elements had survived only on full coat 35mm magnetic tape, which, by the late 1990s, were deteriorating. As part of 20th Century Fox's ongoing music restoration efforts, those elements had been archived to the 2" 24-track format in 1997. This element, in turn, has been digitized for this project and restoration and remixing was undertaken at 96k 24bit resolution. Many of the orchestral cues had been finalized as three-track mixdowns, while others required the combination of "stems" for chorus, percussion and other components.

Sadly, three cues from the score had completely deteriorated by the time the original reels were transferred in 1997: "Kneel to Your God" (6m3/7m1), "Temptation" (7m2), and "The Kiss" (8m1). Using the original 4-track stereo audio for the film itself, we have rescued brief segments of these, which were unmarred by dialogue and sound effects and included them in the program in order to present as much of the score as possible. An additional excerpt of "Temptation," with sound effects but no dialogue, is included as a bonus track. Also in the bonus section is the deteriorated stereo version of the cue "Claudius and Caligula," while the main program features a more sonically palatable monaural mix.

Although the age and condition of the recording is somewhat apparent throughout, every effort has been made to bring out its original brilliance so that, as a listening experience, *Demetrius* may take its rightful place beside recent musical restorations of other Fox Biblical epics of the period.

— Mike Matessino