

David and Bathsheba

David and Bathsheba was 20th Century-Fox's initial entry in the Biblical-spectacular trend of the late 1940s and early '50s. Paramount had offered *Samson & Delilah* in 1949 and MGM was about to release *Quo Vadis*. Fox production chief Darryl F. Zanuck decided to compete with a grand-scale King David scenario (and, later, *The Robe* and *Demetrius and the Gladiators*).

Released in August 1951, *David and Bathsheba* received five Academy Award nominations and became – at \$7 million in domestic box-office rentals – not only the biggest moneymaker in Fox history to that time, but also the top box-office film for any studio that year.

Zanuck at first called it “an honest, sincere Biblical story dealing with one of the greatest characters of all time” but then added a touch of show-biz reality: “Plus, it is a violent, sexy love story that involves illegitimacy and even murder.”

Historically speaking, David succeeded Saul as the King of Israel, circa 1000 B.C., and (as related in 2 Samuel 11 and 12) seduced Bath-sheba, the wife of one of his army officers. Their affair and her subsequent pregnancy, which was eventually revealed and condemned by the prophet Nathan, nearly ended his reign and her life (since adultery was a sin punishable by stoning).

Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, both fine and attractive actors, were Zanuck's choices from the start. Peck was already a four-time Oscar nominee, three of them for playing highly principled characters in Fox films (*The Keys of the Kingdom*, *Gentleman's Agreement* and *12 O'Clock High*); Hayward had been nominated twice, for *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* and *My Foolish Heart*.

Cast in key secondary roles were the stern-faced Raymond Massey as the prophet Nathan, who brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and becomes David's chief accuser; Kieron Moore as the cuckolded Uriah; Jayne Meadows as David's jealous first wife Michal; and the once-great silent-film star Francis X. Bushman, unbilled as King Saul in flashbacks to David's youth. A Polish wrestler named Walter Talun played the giant Goliath, and future Broadway star Gwen Verdon was given a showy cameo as a palace dancer who performs for David and Uriah.

Director Henry King was one of Zanuck's most reliable directors of big commercial films. Twice Oscar-nominated (for directing *The Song of Bernadette* in 1943 and *Wilson* in 1944), he had also helmed such estimable successes as *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), *The Black Swan* (1942), *Captain From Castile* (1947), *12 O'Clock High* (1949) and *The Gunfighter* (1950) – all of which boasted first-rate scores by Fox music director Alfred Newman.

King began the shoot with three weeks in the desert town of Nogales, Arizona, which according to Fox publicity was “selected for its resemblance to sun-baked Palestine” and where studio production designers built exterior sets to simulate ancient Jerusalem. The rest of the shoot, in late December 1950 and January 1951, took place on the 20th Century-Fox lot.

Alfred Newman, then eleven years into his twenty-year tenure at Fox, had already won four Academy Awards and another twenty-four nominations for his dramatic scores, songs and music direction. Because *David and Bathsheba* was a personal production of Zanuck's, Newman composed the score himself rather than assigning it to another composer. Studio records indicate that he spent 70 days on this assignment alone.

And he started early, because three sequences required on-set playbacks and needed to be written and recorded in advance of the rest of the score.

First was the “Ark of the Covenant” music, a celebratory piece (featuring horns, flugelhorns, harps, timpani and tambourines) for the arrival at the gates of Jerusalem of the sacred wooden container of the tablets of Moses. Dancers

lead the procession, one of the scenes filmed in Arizona.

The “Palace Dance,” half-way through the story, was choreographed by Jack Cole (whose later credits would include the Fox hits *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *There's No Business Like Show Business*). Newman wrote a two-minute source piece that Earle Hagen orchestrated for a 20-piece ensemble including brass, woodwinds and all sorts of exotic percussion that might have been appropriate in ancient Israel. Verdon's energetic, sensuous performance is still mesmerizing to watch.

He also wrote three short pieces for harp, brief musical interludes during David's recitation to Bathsheba of the 23rd Psalm. She removes a small harp from the wall and asks him to play – which Peck does, quite convincingly, although it is obviously a playback to a pre-recorded track by a professional musician (playing an Irish harp, studio choral director Ken Darby recalled many years later).

The dramatic score is built, for the most part, on three main themes:

“Bathsheba” is the music associated with David's lover, a passionate and unusually exotic theme, often for strings and often in 3/4 time. The Bathsheba theme makes up most of the main title and recurs throughout the film; it appears to greatest advantage when she makes her first appearance, bathing on a balcony where David first sees and admires her from afar.

“David and Bathsheba” is a string-based melody that serves as their love theme throughout the film. Newman again demonstrated his total mastery of the medium by writing an ascending melody that begins optimistically, and then soars with the possibilities of true love. The first full statement of this theme occurs as they embrace after their first meeting.

“The 23rd Psalm” has the most fascinating story of all. It does not reach its full flower until the film's finale, but portions of it appear throughout the film whenever God, His laws or His power are invoked. Studio cue sheets regularly refer to this music as “Nathan, the Prophet” because his presence usually signals a partial use of this theme. (Only the finale music is actually called “The 23rd Psalm.”) The music has a definite Hebraic character and, in its complete version, is marked *andante religioso* (flowingly, in a devotional manner).

All of Philip Dunne's script drafts concluded with David receiving God's forgiveness and a recitation of the famous Biblical passage. As David emerges from the Tabernacle to a drenching, drought-ending rain, a men's choir begins to sing, a *capella*, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

Women's voices join the men at “he restoreth my soul.” As David returns to Bathsheba, the choir (at “thou preparest a table before me”) receives instrumental support from trombones and tubas, a small brass group that grows in size and intensity to encompass trumpets, horns and percussion. The final measures – with a choir that began with 20 voices and ends with 56 – are among the most powerful and triumphant religious statements in the composer's career.

Ken Darby is credited on the music with the development and vocal arrangement of the piece. Edward Powell is credited with the orchestration on this and every other cue in the score (apart from “Palace Dance”).

Secondary motifs that recur in the score include “The Israelites,” a decisive martial figure for brass and percussion that is initially heard over the foreword following the main title; “Bathsheba's Destiny,” a heartbreaking piece best heard during the moments following her confession to David that she is pregnant; “Young David,” more lighthearted music for reminiscences of his youth (initially heard while he and Bathsheba are enjoying an afternoon in the

company of a shepherd); and “The Wrath of God,” a series of grim chords reflecting the awesome power of the Almighty (best heard when a man dies trying to prevent the Ark from tipping over).

Music carries the dramatic weight of several scenes, notably in the Gilboa sequence about 35 minutes into the film. Here, as David climbs the hill where Saul and Jonathan were slain, there is no dialogue for four minutes. Newman's music re-creates David's mental picture of the battle, at first melancholy, then increasingly strident and horrific as he passes the remnants of war and recalls the deaths of his friend and king.

Newman took more than forty-five studio hours, spread over thirteen days (mostly between late April and late May 1951), to record the entire score. The orchestra at its height contained sixty-eight players.

The film itself received mostly laudatory reviews. *The New York Times* called it “handsomely mounted and resplendent in the panchromatic hues of Technicolor” and praised Peck's performance as one of “majesty, deep feeling and force.” *Look* magazine admired it as “a more creditable attempt to bring biblical history to the screen in a reverent, poetic and tasteful manner.” *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that “Alfred Newman's score develops in intensity in the same fashion as the story, rising to powerful crescendos that sweep the action to its conclusion.”

Oscar nominations went to Dunne, cinematographer Leon Shamroy, the production and costume designers, and to Newman (who lost to Franz Waxman for *A Place in the Sun*).

Among Alfred Newman's many scores for religious pictures – including *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Robe* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – the music of *David and Bathsheba* ranks as one of his finest.

— Jon Burlingame

Sometimes miracles happen. *David and Bathsheba* was previously released on CD from what was then the only available sources, a combination of optical mono and transcription discs. That release was about fifty-five minutes of the film's cues, with an extra bonus of one repeated track in stereo. But, as sometimes happens, subsequent to that release the entire score was found in a vault that they should not have been in – the inventory was mis-labeled. Alfred Newman was a true visionary in terms of sound and recording and because of the technique he pioneered at Fox we are now able to present the entire score to *David and Bathsheba* in breathtaking stereo sound – it is, to my ears, one of the best sounding recordings from a film of that era to one of Alfred Newman's greatest scores.

— Bruce Kimmel

In the two decades since soundtrack producer Nick Redman began spearheading efforts to preserve and release classic Twentieth Century Fox films scores, vault doors have gradually opened wider and given up their treasures, some of which had previously been presumed lost to the ages. At the same time, audio technology (both mechanical and digital) has advanced to the point where the unplayable becomes playable and the unreleasable becomes releasable. *David and Bathsheba* is but the latest example, a true masterpiece from Alfred Newman recently discovered archived on 35mm optical film in a dual-track format: one track providing a “close shot” of the orchestra and the other a “long shot.” As has been the case with many releases of Fox's scores from before 1953 (when six track magnetic stereo took over), painstaking transfer followed by the application of careful processing and the proper balance aligns the two vintage optical tracks to reveal - in stereo - the ambience of the Fox scoring stage in its golden age glory.

— Mike Matessino