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Director Bekmambetov Revives Ben-Hur

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IMDB

One of Hollywood's newest movie▣moguls is attracting plenty of attention these days. Timur Bekmambetov — the founder of▣Moscow's Bazelevs Productions — has directed▣"Ben-Hur," a $100 million budgeted epic re-adaptation of the 1959 Charlton▣Heston classic.

The Russian-Kazakh▣producer-director's two-hour "Ben-Hur" is backed by two mega studios —▣Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer — and will hit the screens across Russia on▣Sept. 8.

The 55-year-old filmmaker and visual▣effects maven becomes the first Russian director to tackle a film of this▣magnitude, which in its previous reincarnation garnered 11 Oscar awards,▣including the best picture laurels. For Bekmambetov it represents the most▣expensive effort of his career.

"It's a great book [Lew Wallace's▣1880 novel] and it's very unique because it's a fictional version of the▣biblical story," Bekmambetov said when he accepted the challenge.

Naval battles and chariot races make Ben-Hur an action-packed entertainment package. Unlike the earlier versions — the first versions of "Ben-Hur" were silent films — this new production employs the latest cinematographic technology and mounted mini-camera gadgetry to capture the chariot race's close-ups. The races in Bekmambetov's version were staged at Cinecitta Studios near Rome, just as in the 1959 version.

"Ben-Hur" is the epic story of Judah Ben-Hur, a prince falsely accused of treason by his adopted brother Messala, an officer in the Roman army. Stripped of his title, separated from his family and the woman he loves, Judah is forced into slavery. After years at sea, Judah returns to his homeland to seek revenge, but finds redemption.

The leads of Judah and Messala are portrayed by relative newcomers Jack Huston and Toby Kebbell, respectively. A veteran of the American cinema, Morgan Freeman, plays the part of Ilderim, the African owner of the Arabian stallion Judah nurses back to good health. Freeman once again proves to be an indispensable cast member.

Reaction to the film's advance media screening was somewhat mixed when compared to the previous version. The producers are hoping that the younger audiences will react more positively.

Although "Ben-Hur" represents Bekmambetov's costliest effort to date, bringing him much public recognition, his American portfolio has been in the making for some time. His first Hollywood film, "Wanted" with Angelina Jolie and Morgan Freeman, brought in a whopping $340 million in ticket sales.

"Morgan Freeman and I worked together before. I couldn't wait to collaborate with him again," explains Bekmambetov.

Freeman recalled, "I noticed that the director and producers laugh a lot. Where there is a lot of laughing that means they are happy with what they are getting."

Other films from Bekmambetov include social media-themed "Unfriended," the vampire franchise of "Night Watch" in 2004 and "Day Watch" in 2008.

"The emotional themes of the film, vengeance vs. forgiveness, are timeless. The conflicts the characters experience are as relatable today as they were in Roman times or 1880 when the novel was written," producer Sean Daniel told The Moscow Times.

When he was convinced to direct the film, Bekmambetov observed: "In many ways we still live in the Roman Empire, we still live with its values. Power, greed and success rule the world, people try to achieve everything in harsh competition and only a few realize that true human values are collaboration and forgiveness."

"Timur is a very unique director," said producer Daniel. "He is cutting edge contemporary in his vision, but also a very classical thinker. He's really the perfect combination for a project like this."

For more information see
benhurmovie.com

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