

From the Manger to the Cross

By Daniel Eagan

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Acknowledged as one of the first great directors in film, Sidney Olcott was born in Toronto in 1873. After working as a newsboy, he joined amateur theatricals before becoming a professional actor. He entered film in 1904 as an actor, working at Mutoscope (which later became Biograph). When Frank Marion, a Biograph sales manager, formed Kalem with George Kleine and Samuel Long, they hired Olcott as their director.

Olcott's interviews are filled with entertaining tales of trying to shoot a Western without horses (he had cowboys pretend to dust off their clothes as they entered a bar) or of filming a biopic of Henry Hudson in 1908 with a cast of six — three of them Indians who are supposed to attack Hudson's ship, the "Half Moon." Less amusing to the Kalem owners was his version of "Ben-Hur," shot in 1907 from a script by Gene Gauntier. It became the subject of a lawsuit that cost Kalem \$25,000 and helped establish copyright protection for the estate of "Ben-Hur" author Lew Wallace and for films and scenarios in general.

Gauntier, born Genevieve Liggett in 1885 in Kansas City, wrote for the screen primarily to supplement her income as an actress. (In 1909, when she wrote and starred in "The Girl Spy," she was making thirty dollars a week as a leading lady, and twenty dollars per script.) Gauntier's 1928 autobiography "Blazing the Trail" is a fascinating and lively account of early filmmaking. She remembers Olcott asking her to write a version of "Tom Sawyer" limited to material he could shoot in one day, and adapted "Ben-Hur" in two days.

Gauntier took credit for the idea of shooting on location in Europe, although Olcott made the same claim. (Kalem did not have a permanent studio until it built a base of sorts in Jacksonville, Florida.) No matter who was responsible, Olcott and Gauntier led a Kalem expedition to Ireland in 1910 where they



JESUS BEFORE PILATE



"THEN DID THEY SCOURGE HIM?"

The Motion Picture Story Magazine, Vol. IV, No. 10, November 1912, published a 17-page treatment of the photoplay, including this page. View the full spread, which featured more than a dozen photos from the production, at [Media History Digital Library](#).

gave themselves tongue-in-cheek billing as the "O'Kalems" while making films like "A Lad from Old Ireland." They returned the following summer, spending three months in Dublin. On December 2, 1911, Olcott and Gauntier left on a longer trip, this one to the Mediterranean.

Their original plan had been to shoot adventure films in North Africa and the Middle East. They did make titles like "The Fighting Dervishes" and "Captured by the Bedouins," as well as the documentaries "Egyptian Sports" and "Ancient Temples of Egypt."

but the locations were so breathtaking that Gauntier began writing "From the Manger to the Cross." Fortunately for the filmmakers, the life of Christ included an interlude in Egypt, giving them license to film at the pyramids and in front of the Sphinx.

As filming progressed, they continued to expand the story, eventually making a five-reel film at a time when three reels were considered extravagant. Olcott recruited actors from the London stage to round out the Kalem stock company. In a 1924 interview with "Photoplay," he spoke about filming with "great precaution lest the sensibilities of the natives be aroused." While shooting Christ entering Jerusalem at St. Stephen's Gate, he claimed that, armed only with a revolver, he fought off an attack by twenty frenzied locals.

Gauntier's script broke Christ's life into ten chapters, using scenes taken from the four gospels (and quoting directly from them for almost all of the intertitles). The screenplay concentrates on familiar material — especially the nativity and passion— and of necessity shortchanges Christ's sermons and parables for depictions of miracles. Hers was a serious attempt to portray the gospels accurately, and refrained from overstatement.

Similarly, Olcott directed with a sense of reverence and a heavy dependence on pantomime. Scenes are staged as tableaux, emphasizing depth and multiple planes of action in the manner of director Edwin S. Porter. Olcott composed frames with strong diagonals that pulled viewers to specific areas in the foreground or background, and moved his actors in arcs that carried them first towards and then away from the camera, depending on the requirements of the scene. When Pilate questions Christ, Olcott uses match cuts that shift the angles of the scene, a daring technique at the time. Cinematographer George Hollister panned his camera across the remarkable landscapes, another advanced technique, and, given the limited film stock and harsh desert lighting, achieved some extraordinary exposures.

The ancient locations, the seriousness of their subject, and the freedom they enjoyed during their expedition clearly exhilarated the filmmakers. "From the Manger to the Cross" shakes off the fustiness and sludgy pacing of its contemporary films, and infuses its material with conviction, authenticity, and a bracing sense of immediacy. For many viewers, this was the New Testament brought to life, their first glimpse of the Holy Land, and for some, the first time they saw Christ personified. (It was not the first religious film, or even the first that featured Christ. Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet directed "The Life and Passion of Christ" in 1905.)

"From the Manger to the Cross" ended up costing Kalem around \$25,000. Its world premiere in London occurred on October 3, 1912, before an audience of clergy; the Bishop of London proclaimed it better than the Oberammergau Passion Play. The New York premiere was on October 14, with the general release the following year. By that time Olcott and Gauntier had left Kalem to form their own company, which they eventually brought to Universal. (Gauntier also married cast member Jack C. Clark while they were in Palestine.) Olcott went on to direct Mary Pickford, Marion Davies, and Rudolph Valentino, but Gauntier retired from film in 1918 in order to become a war correspondent.

"From the Manger to the Cross" was the only feature Kalem released. Vitagraph purchased the Kalem library in 1917. It released an edited version of the film, the basis of copies available today.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Daniel Eagan has worked for Warner Bros., MGM, and other studios as a researcher and story analyst. He edited HBO's Guide to Movies on Videocassette and Cable TV (Harper Collins) and MGM: When the Lion Roars (Turner Publishing), to which he also contributed articles. His work has appeared in Smithsonian, The Nation, The Hollywood Reporter, and other outlets.