



Ridley Scott: Building Cinematic Worlds

Gladiator

Gladiator

Director: Ridley Scott

©: DreamWorks LLC, Universal Studios

Presented by: Universal Pictures, DreamWorks SKG

In association with: Scott Free

Executive Producers: Walter F. Parkes,
Laurie MacDonald

Producers: Douglas Wick, David Franzoni,
Branko Lustig

Associate Producer: Branko Lustig

Scott Free Executive: Steven Kent Foster

Location Production Manager: Branko Lustig

Unit Manager: Judi Bunn

Production Supervisor: Ty Warren

Production Co-ordinator: Sallie Beechinor

Production Controller: Jim Turner

Production Accountant: Crystal A. Hawkins

Location Manager (Malta Unit): Mike Higgins

Location Manager (UK Unit): Terry Blyther

Location Managers (Morocco Unit): Jeremy Johns,
Ali Bakkioui El Otmani, Mohammed Benhmamane

Post-production Executive: Martin Cohen

Post-production Supervisor: Lisa Dennis Kennedy

2nd Unit Director: Alexander Witt

1st Assistant Director: Terry Needham

2nd Assistant Director: Adam Somner

Script Supervisor: Annie Wotton

Casting: Louis Digaiamo

Casting (UK): Kathleen Mackie

Casting (Morocco Unit): Mustapha Charif

Screenplay: David Franzoni, John Logan,

William Nicholson

Story: David Franzoni

Director of Photography: John Mathieson

2nd Unit Director of Photography: Alexander Witt

A Camera Operator: Peter Taylor

B Camera/Steadicam Operator: Klemens Becker

Video Operator: Lester Dunton

Visual Effects Supervisor: John Nelson

Visual Effects Editor: Wesley Sewell

Special Visual Effects: MillFilm

MillFilm Visual Effects Supervisors:

Tim Burke, Rob Harvey

MillFilm Visual Effects Producer: Nikki Penny

Special Effects Supervisor: Neil Corbould

Special Effects Supervisor (Floor): Paul Corbould

Animatronic Supervisor: Kevin Herd

Animatronic Designer: Astrig Akseralian

Prosthetic Supervisor: Neil Corbould

Editor: Pietro Scalia

Production Designer: Arthur Max

Supervising Art Director (Malta Unit): John King

Supervising Art Director (UK Unit): David Allday

Supervising Art Director (Morocco Unit):

Benjamín Fernández

Set Decorator: Crispian Sallis

Property Master: Graeme Purdy

Costume Designer: Janty Yates

Costume Supervisor: Rosemary Burrows

Key Make-up Artist: Paul Engelen

Key Hair Stylist: Graham Johnston

Title Design: Robert Dawson

Colour Timer: Dale Grahn

Music: Hans Zimmer, Lisa Gerrard

Additional Music: Klaus Badelt

Score Vocals: Lisa Gerrard

Conductor: Gavin Greenaway

Music Supervisor: Adam Milo Smalley

Music Editor: Dashiell Rae

Music Recordist/Mixer: Alan Meyerson

Production Sound Mixer: Ken Weston

Re-recording Mixers: Scott Millan, Bob Beemer

Supervising Sound Editor: Per Hallberg

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica imperiously dismisses the Roman philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius as ‘an historically overrated figure, presiding in a bewildered way over an empire beneath the guilt of which there already lay many a decaying patch.’ In Ridley Scott’s magnificent action film *Gladiator* the patch has become a serious infestation of dry rot that no amount of guilt, indigo or porphyry can disguise. The damage is carved on the performers themselves, many of whom seem to have been cast for their interesting facial scars as much as for their acting ability. As we watch the story – of Maximus (Russell Crowe), a Roman general demoted to a gladiator-slave who eventually revenges himself on the emperor Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), murderer of Maximus’ family and of his own father Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris), and the ruin of Rome – it seems fitting that most of the awesome buildings we see are computer- or effects-generated. For all their seeming solidity, they’re illusions standing in for ephemeral structures, projections of the melancholic Piranesian ruins they would become, as incorporeal and doomed as the neon-limned Los Angeles of Scott’s *Blade Runner*. Look on ye mighty and despair.

The biblical and Roman epics of the 50’s and 60’s were spectacles tooled to lure back the crowds with their historically justified bloodbaths and widescreen scale after television had begun to erode cinema’s audience. But they also fulfilled a more mass psychological function. Clearly they were working out anxieties about the west’s imperial role in the new world order, a west beset by barbarians on every front (*The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1964, on which *Gladiator* is largely based); fears about growing secularism (*Ben-Hur*, 1959); and coded justifications for the growing civil-rights movement (*Spartacus*, 1960). Even if the heroes lose their lives in the film’s short term, we know the values they stand for – individual freedom, democracy, republicanism, monotheism – are going to win in the end.

Gladiator’s subtext is as frank as a codpiece. Rome here stands in for America: corrupt at its heart, based on enslavement, dedicated to sustaining pointless wars abroad while the mob happily forgoes a more civil society for bread and circuses. One of the film’s better jokes is the way we’re invited to see parallels between its gladiatorial arenas and the sports arenas of today, right down to the announcer/promoter (David Hemmings) who hypes up the combatants before the bouts. While serving up dollops of exquisitely choreographed violence, *Gladiator* the movie is nonetheless implicitly critical of the present-day culture which spawns television shows like, well, *Gladiators* – the spandex-clad mock-heroic gameshow – and makes modern emperors of sports people and entertainers. When Commodus’ sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) tries to persuade Maximus to help her overthrow her brother, he complains, ‘I have the power only to amuse the mob.’ To which she replies, ‘That is power.’

Having won the war against the barbarians, Maximus is a reluctant, apolitical hero. According to one report he was tellingly named Narcissus in David Franzoni’s original script, since rewritten by John Logan and William Nicholson but still an admirably expository and cerebral piece of work. Battle-weary, Maximus dreams only of husbandry (in every sense of the word) and of rejoining his family either in Hispania or the afterlife. In the subtextual schema of

Sound Effects Editors: Christopher Assells,
 Jon Title, Dino R. Dimuro, Randy Kelley
Stunt Co-ordinator: Phil Neilson
Fight Master: Nicholas Powell
Rome Technical Adviser: John Eagle
Consultant to Ridley Scott: Neville Shulman
Maltese Consultant: Albert Galea
Dedicated to: Oliver Reed
Studio: Shepperton Studios
Cast:
 Russell Crowe (*Maximus*)
 Joaquin Phoenix (*Commodus*)
 Connie Nielsen (*Lucilla*)
 Oliver Reed (*Proximo*)
 Richard Harris (*Marcus Aurelius*)
 Derek Jacobi (*Gracchus*)
 Djimon Hounsou (*Juba*)
 David Schofield (*Falco*)
 John Shrapnel (*Gaius*)
 Tomas Arana (*Quintus*)
 Ralf Moeller (*Hagen*)
 Spencer Treat Clark (*Lucius*)
 David Hemmings (*Cassius*)
 Tommy Flanagan (*Cicero*)
 Sven-Ole Thorsen (*Tiger*)
 Omid Djalili (*Slave trader*)
 Nicholas McGaughy (*praetorian officer*)
 Chris Kell (*scribe*)
 Tony Curran (*assassin 1*)
 Mark Lewis (*assassin 2*)
 John Quinn (*Valerius*)
 Alun Raglan (*praetorian guard 1*)
 David Bailie (*engineer*)
 Chick Allen (*German leader*)
 Dave Nicholls (*giant man*)
 Al Hunter Ashton (*Rome trainer 1*)
 Billy Dowd (*narrator*)
 Ray Calleja (*Lucius' attendant*)
 Giannina Facio (*Maximus' wife*)
 Giorgio Cantarini (*Maximus' son*)
 USA-UK 2000©
 155 mins
 Digital 4K

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the film, he's Shane with a shield, the good but innocent sword-slinger
 reluctantly recruited to clean up the town or, given that he never actually gets
 the role, Colin Powell, the most popular Republican president that never was.
 (You could have a lot of fun mapping the current US presidential race on to
Gladiator – could spoilt slimy Commodus be George Bush Jr?) Thankfully, the
 film eschews the heavy-handed religious symbolism that weighs down the
 older generation of epics: human through and through, Maximus is no Jesus
 figure, though casting directors ought to take a look at fervid-eyed Phoenix if
 anyone's thinking of remaking the Passion.

An effortlessly charismatic screen actor, Crowe brings shades of his other well-
 known roles to the part: the ruthless violence of his neo-Nazi in *Romper*
Stomper, the guileless strength of his thug cop in *L.A. Confidential*, his arrogant
 but righteous whistleblower in *The Insider*. Mel Gibson was apparently
 considered for the role (and it's easy to see how *Braveheart* was an exemplar
 for the story), but the choice would have been too pat, too easily crowd-
 pleasing. More deadpan and quotidian looking, the younger Australian (mostly
 keeping his native accent, as do almost all the actors here, successfully
 suggesting the multicultural nature of the empire) commands the movie
 magisterially, never more so than when hacking down opponents with a casual
 economy of movement, barely breaking into sweat.

Maximus' humourlessness is delicately balanced by the preening
 lasciviousness Phoenix brings to Commodus, managing to wriggle out of the
 shadow cast by Christopher Plummer's own career making turn in the same
 role in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. With practically the only speaking part for
 a woman, Nielsen (kitted out in a fetching array of quasi-modern primitive
 frocks complete with bondage ribbons and hennaed bindi dots between her
 brows) shows impressive range and projects a regal sexiness. Finally, adding
 ballast to the rest of cast is a gaggle of old timers: Derek Jacobi, invoking
 memories of his title role in *I, Claudius*, plays an epicene senator; Harris'
 Marcus Aurelius is both ethereal and imposing; and Oliver Reed – most of
 whose performance seems to have survived into the film considering he died
 while making it – swan-songs with his best performance since the Ken Russell
 days (the computer-generated footage of him is barely noticeable).

For my money, it's also the best film Ridley Scott has made. Less an auteur
 than a top-dollar *metteur en scène*, he's a self-effacing master of the action
 sequence. Here he's made the quintessential big budget studio product that's
 smarter than it looks, a fiendishly arduous logistical feat that clicks together like
 a well-tailored suit of armour. If there's a thematic line running through his work,
 maybe it's the focus on heroes – Deckard in *Blade Runner*, Ripley in *Alien*, even
 girl gladiator Jordan O'Neil in *G.I. Jane* - who put their necks on the line for
 corrupt organisations that don't deserve their loyalty (an allegory of the sacrifice
 filmmakers make for studios and the braying spectator mob suggests itself).

Maximus defends the empire to Marcus Aurelius by saying he's seen the rest of
 the world and it's 'brutal and cruel and dark. Rome is the light.' But his words
 seem mere idealistic rhetoric by the end: the light is dimming, the barbarians
 'don't know when they've been conquered'; the people don't deserve the
 republic he's returned to them. The promise (*Titanic* style) of recompense in the
 afterlife is the merest plaster over the decay that waits to spread.

Leslie Felperin, *Sight and Sound*, June 2000