

Maximus Overdrive: "Gladiator"

Written by Mike Schulz

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GLADIATOR

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, a surprisingly pungent and entertaining historical epic, displays, among other things, the pleasures of a great audience-grabbing pot (based loosely on actual events).

In 180 A.D., the goodhearted, honest, and very tough General Maximus (Russell Crowe) stands to be the new emperor of Rome after the death of his father-figure, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris). This does not, however, sit well with the emperor's actual son, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), a conniving, weak-spirited pipsqueak who believes the throne is rightly his. Quickly enough, Commodus murders his father, attempts to kill Maximus, and has the general's wife and child slain; Maximus, subsequently, falls into a near-catatonic depression and is captured as a Roman slave, forced to fight, until his death, for the entertainment of the masses as a gladiator.

His prowess on the killing field, however, makes him a local legend, and he's soon recruited to perform his skills in front of Emperor Commodus and several thousand Romans at the Colosseum. The citizens love Maximus; the emperor, needless to say, would love to see Maximus dead, and vice versa (preferably at his own hand). Does Commodus, who has a

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shaky-at-best relationship with his citizenry, risk losing their favor by having Maximus killed, or does he risk his own life by allowing him to live?

It's a nifty storyline, and you can practically *feel* the interest level rising in the movie theater when the film reaches this critical juncture – it's one of those "What's going to happen *now*

?" moments that Spielberg's Indiana Jones movies often reveled in, and it's rather intoxicating to feel that rush again in a popular movie.

Gladiator

is simplistic, almost primitive, moviemaking, but it has something that's becoming all too rare in modern films: power. The film opens with an extended battle sequence that's a bit too confusing (it's the Romans versus the Germans, although we have no idea why), but director Ridley Scott stages it with such verve – waves of arrows shooting through the air like fireworks, crushing sound effects, splattering blood – that it grabs you by sheer magnitude and something resembling beauty; its kinetic charge wipes all questions of logic or motivation out of your head.

That's Scott's style throughout the movie. *Gladiator* is often dopey and features numerous lines of bummer dialogue (the script is credited to David Franzoni, John Logan, and William Nicholson), but the action scenes and juicy plotting more than compensate. This is true even of what should be the worst scene in the movie, where Maximus does battle while tigers are let out of their traps to inflict further damage. Truth be told, I kind of dreaded seeing

Gladiator

simply because

one shot

in the trailer had me laughing out loud – the one with the obviously computer-generated tiger making a leap at our hero. The computer effect was so incongruous and phony that I couldn't believe it actually made it into the preview; it made me expect the worst. And, yes, the tigers look sorta ridiculous. (That's true of a lot of the CGI animation in the film, on display every time we see a long shot of Rome, and plenty of times within the Colosseum itself.) But through wizardly editing and topnotch staging, even this scene, which reeks of modern technology infringing on history, moves quickly and enjoyably. You can critically decry just about every scene in the movie, and you'll still admit it

works

Like Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, which this film strongly echoes, *Gladiator* is more about spectacle than character, but it's still nice to see the movie cast as well as it is. For my money, Russell Crowe is far more impressive here than he was in his Oscar-nominated role in last year's *The Insider*.

Considering the four-square, noble nature of Maximus, it's shocking that he gets more variety

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out of his readings here than he did as Jeffrey Wigand; he even manages an ironic moment – and a smile! – here and there. And as far as action heroes go, Crowe could be a major contender. It's been a long while since we've had a truly

tough

tough-guy star kicking tail in the movies, and as those who've watched him in

Romper Stomper

and

L.A. Confidential

know, the man's got range. More than one person is likely to agree with the comment I heard when leaving the theater: "Russell Crowe kicks

ass

!"

The rest of the cast does, too, but more metaphorically. Joaquin Phoenix has a scary instability that's hypnotic – he could be channeling Crispin Glover – and as the sister Commodus has an unhealthy interest in, Connie Nielsen is a level-headed, touching figure. (In another *Braveheart* comparison, she seems modeled after Sophie Marceau, whom she closely resembles.) In his brief screen time, Richard Harris comes through with some marvelous line readings, even though he can't totally shake his Irish brogue in the role of a Roman emperor, and we get fine moments courtesy of Derek Jacobi and Djimon Hounsou (mostly unseen since his tremendous work in

Amistad

). Best of the lot is the late Oliver Reed as Proximus, the man who takes Maximus the slave under his wing. With a beautiful, mournful gaze (you see a lifetime's worth of killing reflected in his sad eyes) and the majority of the film's laugh lines, it's a fitting career caper for this British thesp. (He died as the film was nearing completion.)

Gladiator certainly has the scope of a great film, but not quite the inspiration for one – it doesn't delve too deeply into its politics (which might actually aid it as a popular hit), and its finale, an extended one-on-one showdown between Maximus and Commodus, feels like something of a letdown. But it has more than enough energy and strength to qualify as a good one, and as summer action flicks go (it's time to admit that Hollywood's summer begins the first week of May), it's even better than that. It's got grit and passion, and it really moves; it'll kick ass for a lot of moviegoers.