

Best of enemies: (left) Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) threatens Maximus (Russell Crowe); (below) Maximus fights in the Coliseum.



RANT

Is it just me? ...or is Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* a spectacular cock-up?

asks Matt Glasby

WHAT WE DO IN LIFE echoes in eternity," says downshifting Roman general Maximus Decimus Meridius (Russell Crowe) with a suspiciously Australasian twang. Viewers may well sympathise. Overlong, overwritten and, in places, bordering on the slipshod, Ridley Scott's Oscar-garlanded epic takes more time to end than the Roman Empire did.

The problem with Olde Worlde films is that no one quite knows how people talked. *Gladiator's* three scribes solve the issue by having the characters spout heroic BS ("We mortals are just shadows and dust!") or horticulture ("Figs, apples, pears, the soil, Marcus, black, black like my wife's hair!"). The big cheeses, meanwhile, have a penchant for introducing speeches with speeches about speaking: "Let us talk together now..." intones dying emperor Richard Harris with a suicidal lack of haste. If you're going to make a shiny fight flick, can't it be incest and tigers for 90 minutes, rather than politics and herbs for 150?

Although Crowe's the best thing here, what do we learn of his character?

A) He's pretty hard and B) Christmas at his place won't be much fun this year. Besides Joaquin Phoenix's pantomime villain, a man who spends *millennia* trying – and failing – to boff his sister, no one else rises much above plot point. "I paid... so I could profit from your death," says slave trader Proximo (Oliver Reed). Glad we got that sorted.

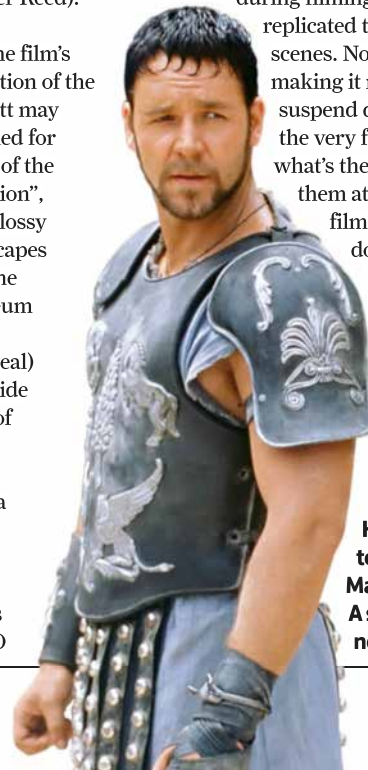
Most peculiar of all is the film's supposedly realistic recreation of the past. Scott may have aimed for a "Rome of the imagination", but the glossy CG cityscapes

look more like a Rome of the PlayStation, and the Coliseum scenes cut jarringly from close-ups of a handful of (real) people looking bored, to wide shots showing thousands of their computer-generated compatriots cheering. The opening battle of Germania is even more bizarre – a gargantuan filmmaking enterprise obscured by quick cuts and slow-mo, as if to cover the joins. At 9.20

minutes you can clearly see two extras chatting during a counter-attack. This isn't pedantry, it's poor filmmaking: something that will echo in eternity for all the wrong reasons.

Which brings us to what we'll call Oliver Reed Syndrome. Sadly, Reed died during filming and was digitally replicated to complete his final scenes. Not only is this distracting, making it ruinously hard to suspend disbelief – if you distrust the very fabric of an actor's face, what's the point in investing in them at all? You can see why the filmmakers felt compelled to do so (rather than recasting and reshooting), but it suggests that history rewritten, badly, can be obscured with SFX, while the rest of the film proves tragically otherwise. Or is it just me?

Agree or disagree?
Have your say at totalfilm.com/forums > **Magazine** > **Is It Just Me?**
A selection will be printed next issue.



'This epic takes more time to end than the Roman Empire did'

In our last issue, Paul Bradshaw reckoned that Dick Van Dyke's Cockney accent isn't that bad. Forum-ites respond...

JAYKAYS HAT
Being a real cockney, I have previously laughed at Van Dyke's ridiculous accent but having read your piece on this I've realised it really is all part of the charm of *Mary Poppins*.

JEFFBISCUITS
At least he didn't do it with a chav accent. Mary Poppins set in modern London would be unbearable.

PROFHIGGINS
Van Dyke's may be forgiven because we were kids when we watched it and didn't notice, but it's still a benchmark for aural assault.

FAMILYGUY
His accent's OK – no less unreal than anything else. But you have to wonder why no one had a word on set.

KRAVITZ
Can we really get that upset about an unbelievable accent in a film about a magic flying nanny?