

# SPARTACUS

Directed by Stanley Kubrick  
Produced by Edward Lewis  
Distributed by Universal Pictures  
Released in 1960

**B**ucking the post-war trend of Biblical spectacles when he is spurned by William Wyler, Kirk Douglas cemented his Hollywood legacy by making *Spartacus*.

By the time of the film's production, the story of a Thracian-led slave war had long been a Communist touchstone. The Spartacus story, almost forgotten, was championed by Karl Marx and his ilk; they saw in the slave rebellion against Rome an ancient precursor to their ambitions of usurpation, hoping the dream of Rome's destruction could be realized at the expense of its modern incarnation, the industrial elite.

Howard Fast wrote the novel Spartacus in jail, serving three months for contempt of Congress. The year of the book's publication, Hollywood suffered through the endless Red purge, which targeted Hollywood reactionaries. Refusing to testify before Congress, screenwriter Dalton Trumbo also went to jail. He, like Howard Fast, was a Communist refusing to implicate his comrades. Forced to write his subsequent screenplays under various pseudonyms, Trumbo was freed by *Spartacus* executive producer Kirk Douglas, who is credited with breaking the Hollywood blacklist by securing Trumbo's credit for the film's screenplay.

Douglas, a Jew like Howard Fast, was bypassed in favor of Charlton Heston for the title role in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur*. Douglas took the rejection as a challenge, and set about tackling his own costume drama. Anthony Mann was hired to direct, but after two weeks of work, including the opening sequence at the quarry, he was shown the door. As is frequently the case with the history of *Spartacus*, recollections vary, but Mann, who was comfortable with Westerns and action extravaganzas, balked at Douglas's insistence that their portrayal of Spartacus show him to be, in equal parts, a commander and a lover. So Stanley Kubrick was brought on board. He was an American whom Douglas had worked with before. But tensions didn't subside with Kubrick's arrival. The tone of the picture was constantly in question, with Trumbo's naive hopefulness and Kubrick's gloomy vision of fractured humanity providing philosophical bookends. Taking into account studio politics and the threat of boycotts, it's a wonder the picture is as good as it is. Kubrick soldiered on, later disowning the film. From here on he would never make a picture without the security of total control.

*Spartacus* was rushed into production, with Kirk Douglas trying to beat out a competing movie on the Spartacus rebellion. Laurence Olivier, Peter Ustinov, and Charles Laughton were courted for this rival production, but Douglas won them over by the strength of Trumbo's script. However, the slave rebellion scenes hadn't been given enough time, and rewrites were necessary during production. A constant concern was how much of the battles were to be shown. According to some, a montage of battle scenes compressing Spartacus's years-long Italian crusade was filmed, but ultimately scrapped, leaving just the destruction of Glabrus's camp and a desperate struggle against three armies. Extensive re-shoots were deemed necessary by Douglas and the Universal brass after Trumbo wrote a scathing critique of the

rough cut. He thought the Spartacus character emasculated, reduced to a mere inconvenience in the eyes Rome, to forestall any right-wing criticism of perceived anti-establishment messages. This editing decision telegraphed the general's ultimate failure too early in the picture, Trumbo complained. Kubrick thought the political intrigue of Rome should be matched by infighting amongst the slave brigadiers, that, as it stood, the film portrayed them as hopelessly idealistic and boring.

To the production's benefit, the conflicting visions of writer Trumbo and director Kubrick are never reconciled. The audience must find its own answer to the big question: *What is the point of fighting for a hopeless cause?*

The evil that Spartacus confronts is best represented not in the film's cutting depiction of Darwinian political machinations, but in the "over-painted nymphets" whose visit turns Batiatus's gladiator school upside-down. These women harbor a variety of lusts. Treating the gladiators as mere playthings, they choose their combatants (particularly Draba) for their sexual appeal. Later, once the Ethiopian has Spartacus pinned to the wall, the women insist on a kill. Either they think a kill is the most entertaining facet of gladiatorial exhibitions or they wish to be worshipped with a sacrifice. A more disgusting episode is difficult to imagine. The women, along with Batiatus and Marcellus, view Spartacus and the others as animals who are only interested in wild sex and fighting. Intimations of anything deeper are a threat to their sensibilities.

Draba's death is set up brilliantly. When Spartacus first greets him, Draba says gladiators don't make friends; they may have to kill each other some day. But Spartacus does make a few friends at the school. This shows us that Draba is so tender-hearted that he can't risk getting friendly, because he knows that sentiment kills. Spartacus's closest friend is Crixus. They have a talk about what they'll do if they're paired with each other in the imminent death match. Spartacus says that they'll kill each other, because they have to. But when the two pairs are announced, Spartacus is matched with Draba! Now we remember what Draba said about not making friends—he'll tear Spartacus to pieces. But his face doesn't register hate or even determination. His countenance betrays a peaceful resignation to injudicious fate. With Spartacus pinned to the wall, the cosmic joke that had Draba smiling before the fight now manifests itself for the rest of us. Draba has no defense against his conscience; this would be murder, and he won't do it. Looking at Crixus's face when he stumbled out after killing Galeno, it seems the guy who wins is really the guy who loses.

So Spartacus is unarmed and the fight is over. The Ethiopian is supposed to execute his fellow gladiator, for his failure. Instead, Draba sacrifices his life, taking the place of Spartacus. Jesus, in the gospel of John, said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Spartacus was planning to kill his friend Crixus, and here Draba spares a man whom he claimed was not his friend. And by Draba's example Rome tastes the bitter herbs of inevitable defeat.

Crassus, who considers power a birthright, speaks of Rome as a mistress to whom a man must abase himself. He'll stoop to any low to satisfy the desires of Rome, and, seeing himself as the embodiment of Roman might, wants the handsome Antoninus to satisfy his sexual proclivities despite Antoninus's preference for "oysters." Wisely, Antoninus runs. But when he

is captured with Spartacus, Crassus has the perfect opportunity to "test this myth of slave brotherhood." Surrounded by a ring of centurions, Spartacus and Antoninus are given swords. The 'winner' gets crucified. Echoes of the Draba-Spartacus fight abound. (A really good test would have been for Crassus to say that the winner goes free. But he can't have Spartacus starting *another* slave rebellion.)

Knowing the pain and indignity of crucifixion, Antoninus and Spartacus try to kill each other out of mercy. Otherwise they'd never fight. But Crassus can't deal with their selflessness. Just as his maniac-slap of a shackled Spartacus could not be returned but with spittle, here, with Spartacus's assertion that the oppressed millions of tomorrow will rise up and destroy Rome, Crassus tells Spartacus that he holds his wife and child as slaves. Crassus plays dirty, and having finally broken the proud gladiator-general, orders him crucified.

Now, how excellent would it be for a centurion in this scene to question everything? He could tell Crassus that this is all wrong, that these slaves are a tribute to Rome, not a curse. Crassus loses his temper and orders the centurion disciplined, but the others refuse to comply, so Crassus storms off in a huff, knowing he has enough rebels on his hands already, unwilling to press the issue and see the city descend into chaos. He has to swallow his pride for the sake of his gluttonous mistress, fabled Rome.

When pressed by Tigranes Levantus to face the inevitability of defeat, Spartacus replies that when a free man dies he loses the pleasure of life, but when a slave dies he loses the pain of life. So the slave has nothing to lose. On another occasion he waxes confident that an army of gladiators can defeat anything the Romans throw at them. So in the dramatic context of the story, how can they lose? Simply put, they forgot they were slaves.

Many critics fault the human element of the film's middle third—numerous shots like the dwarf dancing with the dog and the old lady squirting the baby with cow's milk. The most pitiful narrative detour is the broken couple burying their baby. In fact, the countless scenes of the army scaling mountains and reclining by campfires threaten to drown the whole epic in syrupy sentiment.

But one scene, the best, saves the middle third—Antoninus's song. The poet sings of youthful remembrances, the lessons learned from family, the cherished feelings "long ago, long ago...long ago." He sounds the refrain "I turn home" so much that the effect is less a recollection of happier days before slavery, and more an imagined *something*, perfect and holy, a dream by force of will made true. While he speaks we're granted a lovely montage of the idyllic camp with its emancipated denizens. At the end of the performance, Spartacus asks where Antoninus learned that song. "My father taught it to me" is the reply. "I was wrong about you, Poet," says Spartacus. "You won't learn to kill. You'll teach us songs." But Antoninus seems determined to prove his worth in battle like everyone else. "There's a time for fighting and a time for singing. Now you teach us to sing. Sing, Antoninus."

Spartacus is not just saying that beauty is more transcendent than war, but that he knows they could lose. He'd rather think about an idealized past than an ashen future. Being on the march so long, embracing the joys of living for the first time, leaving behind the hard days so gratefully forgotten, his army is destined to fail. They no longer fight like an army of slaves because they're an army of freemen. They have much to lose, and the fear of death

tempers their fury at Rome. The lose the edge, they collapse before an onslaught of Roman steel, they are defeated. But they have lived a more rewarding life than any Roman general or nobleman. Before the final campaign, Spartacus opines, "I'd rather be here, a free man among brothers, facing a long march and a hard fight, than the richest citizen of Rome...."

*Spartacus* boasts engaging performances and a tremendous score; the contribution of a forceful screenplay is surpassed by exemplary thesping and composer Alex North.

Kirk Douglas leads his cast with assurance, skillfully portraying a man with complex emotions who has difficulty expressing himself. His earnest chemistry with Jean Simmons give his stolen moments with her character a poignant tenderness spiced with a hint of eroticism. Simmons adjusts her characterization when she's apart from her man, hiding Varinia's kindness, exposing only a resolute toughness, particularly in her final scene with Olivier.

Laurence Olivier is considered one of the greatest actors of the 20th century. Reportedly he wanted the part of Spartacus, but Kirk Douglas was able to deftly steer him elsewhere. Olivier serves up an extra helping of bravado in his role as Crassus, but his little gestures are far more intriguing. Here is a man who expects his every whim to be met, but who is politically astute enough to veil displeasure when he's (temporarily) denied. Notice the perfect balance of frustration and embarrassment on his face when, having resigned from the Senate, Gracchus roars that this is just another ploy of Crassus—he'll be back, *to take over*. (Laughton's achievement is in creating a character who is easy-going [reclining with Batiatus or courting votes] and tough as nails [calling Crassus's bluff in the Senate]. We're left wondering which facet of his persona is the act.)

Returning to Olivier, consider his loopy eyeball roll when he realizes he's seen Spartacus before; or, in another scene with Peter Ustinov, when he directs Batiatus to arrange the gladiatorial bout immediately, betraying just a hint of contempt for the glorified bootlicker. It's in these kind of scenes, rather than those showcasing Olivier's penchant for histrionics, that the screen's power to magnify subtle gestures is plainly evident. On the whole, Oliver does a great job. But there is nothing at fault with Ustinov.

Peter Ustinov's brilliant turn as Lentulus Batiatus is one of the greatest achievements in the film acting pantheon. His calculated obsequiousness, his comical disdain for anything provincial, and his penchant for safety at the expense of pride create a delightful character who provides comic relief plus a link between the slave and patrician worlds. Ustinov dominates the screen in humorous scenes, but moderates himself to accommodate fellow actors when the moment calls for straightforward drama. Ustinov takes risks and leaves an indelible impression in a star-studded film. Realize that the same guy who stands over the hero's cell, gleefully anticipating hot sex between Spartacus and Varinia, is the same guy who later rescues Varinia, pulling her away from the feet of a dying Spartacus to conduct her to safety. Nobody questions how the same character could be so reviled and beloved by the audience. It's not the screenplay that closes the deal—it's Ustinov.

Alex North was given a year to produce the score for *Spartacus*. This unheard-of schedule afforded him a chance to explore the psychology of the characters while observing the filming. Elements only hinted at in the screenplay come alive for the attentive viewer (or, more accurately, listener). Blaring and dissonant brass reflect the futile desperation of Crassus to still

his inner torment through military force. Shots of the slave army on the march are accompanied by compound meter brass and percussion that convey strength and the jaunty giddiness of freedom. The composer even looks ahead to the Empire's fall in the opening credits—taking a cue from title designer Saul Bass's image of a Roman sculpture disintegrating, North gives us loud, dissonant brass and panicky woodwinds to suggest the terror of societal collapse.

Since they do more dancing around each other than fighting, it's an inspired choice to have the battle between Draba and Spartacus scored like a ballet number. The music is more teasing than brutish, modulating ever upward to the inevitable silence. But that's only a false alarm North is sounding with his silence; though tripped by the net, Spartacus gets to his feet and the fight continues.

North caps it all off with his heart-breaking love theme, consisting of just four pitches—Varinia and Spartacus are simple people, and their love is elemental, and, by extension, universal. Also, the simplicity of the melody allows it to be used unobtrusively in many different guises. So it really works. Much of North's score for this film is meant to be listened to, not merely absorbed. This is a byproduct of his facility with polytonalities and jazz. He studied for two years in the Soviet Union, and upon his return to the United States, with Aaron Copland. Like Copland, he sought to liberate film music from the confines of Max Steinerish romanticism which only delineates action, not character.

Critics who fault the score for being too obtrusive are denying film music a chance to make anything but a subconscious contribution. That's just wrong. Plenty of movie music is bogus tripe, but the music for *Spartacus* is the best thing about the film.

If one thing about *Spartacus* doesn't make sense, it's the conceit of the Silesian pirates backing out of their deal to transport Spartacus's merry band. Kubrick pointed out that the real Spartacus twice led his army to Italy's northern border, but kept coming back. Did he lose control of the rebellion? Was it more about spoils than freedom? These questions go unanswered in a script that values a discourse on freedom more than an irony-laced polemic on man's fickle nature. And this is fine, except for the Silesian pirate angle demands that the Romans know what Spartacus's plans are. So Spartacus tells Glabrus to go back to the Senate and report that they just want to be left alone. Spartacus hopes his army will be allowed to leave peacefully. However, the Romans, both Crassus and Gracchus in their own way, use this information against Spartacus. Ultimately, Spartacus is betrayed, there are no ships and he must fight. The way to solve this screenwriting problem without making Spartacus look like a simple-minded rock cutter would be for him to tell Glabrus that they want to leave the country, and they want to go through the Alps! This way (Spartacus hopes) the Romans will stop fighting him, but won't know to influence the Silesians to betray his slave army. However, continuing our fanciful screenwriting, the Silesians approach the Romans in hopes of getting even more money, as opposed to the Romans approaching the Silesians (in the story as we have it). Telling Glabrus his plans stands as Spartacus's fatal mistake. Arranging his demise by similar means without sacrificing the hero's wily intelligence would nicely emphasize the dark fate of The Cause, and it would be more accommodating of the historical record. We must believe that Spartacus did all that he could.

One of movies' strangest love triangles is resolved when Batiatus spirits Varinia and child from the clutches of Marcus Crassus. Now the woman who once said, "forbid me ever to leave you" has no choice but to abandon her tenacious husband on a cross. Crassus always had the hots for the slave girl but, having finally taken possession of his 'property,' he's more enamored than ever, seeing that she's the lover of his great rival. He's less interested in her than he is in the man she will always love. But any attempt to understand his rival's appeal proves futile. She sees the weakness in Crassus, and considers him with condescending pity rather than fear. Spartacus has defeated Crassus through his faithful wife. "As long as one of us lives, we all live," he told her. So, with Varinia and son free, Spartacus has won. The film's ending justifies Douglas's insistence that the love story have its due. Having learned from Draba, Spartacus sacrifices himself, giving his life in the hope that future slaves, the legend of Spartacus inspiring them to say *no*, would exchange bleak servitude for the warm embrace of death. Eventually slavery would die, but while military victory remained an unrealized dream, this small victory between men would have to suffice. The son of Spartacus is free. Hope can live on. It still lives today.

Crassus ascended to the top because, in a time of crisis, control of the army was more valuable than control of the mob. But in a brilliant glimpse of the future, Julius Caesar is shown to have influence in both plebian and military circles. Crassus knows that, as he dispensed with Gracchus, someday Caesar will dispense with him.

But even with him dead, Crassus says he fears Spartacus more. Spartacus accepted defeat, both before and after Crassus won his victory. He accepted defeat because he was fighting for the future, knowing he was right, sure that (putting a positive spin on a rare pessimistic Spartacus observation) "we've started something that has no ending."

No matter how you slice it, Crassus has to win. The movie belongs to him, but history belongs to Spartacus.

When a man is confronted with a hopeless fight, he can either charge into battle or remain silent. It is the bravest warrior who shouts a rallying cry to keep his teeth from chattering. Though he may perish, his conscience is clear.

If he knows he must fight, but shuns the battle, he may live long, but he won't live well. The fundamental question of *Spartacus* is encapsulated in the dilemma of the gladiator. A gladiator in the arena must fight or he will die, either by his opponent's hand or by his master's. The conscientious gladiator must convince himself that he fights only in defense, that he must protect himself from his opponent. His opponent may think the same way. But both know that unless they are unified against their oppressor, they have no strength. Usually, because of distrust, they just fight each other and, by their resignation, perpetuate a gross injustice.

If a man sacrifices himself, change is possible. But if no man dares, evil goes unchecked. Sometimes the ultimate sacrifice is necessary. A man may think it is him against everyone else. But there is no mob—the crowd is made up of individual men with minds of their own. It's easier to just go along, but sometimes everybody is just hoping somebody else will take a stand.

Consider a slave facing the injustice of his bondage. He may acquiesce to this personal injustice, but his conscience must be clear. He may decide that his slim chance for freedom

pales in comparison to the rare glimpse of beauty he is afforded by nature, or the joy of love, or the fear of death. It is not the place of the free to judge the oppressed, but it falls to the oppressed to judge the actions of the free. When the gladiator stands in the arena, he can't just decide for himself, he must decide for his opponent as well. The hope is always the same, that my enemy become my ally.

Regardless of the odds, no cause is really hopeless. Ascribing hopelessness demands omniscience, something mankind is notoriously lacking. We cannot see the end, only the beginning. Spartacus believed he could win. And only when it was over did it seem foolhardy. But the sting of regret is more painful for the cowering man than for the man who dared greatly.

Spartacus could have abandoned his brothers-in-arms and escaped to freedom in another land. But he chose not to betray his compatriots, nor their cause. So they won't abandon him. That's why the *I'm Spartacus* scene is famous.

The gladiators in the ring are a symbol of mankind's distrust of his own race, because any man takes a risk by trusting another, just as a gladiator takes a risk in not fighting. But when trust is rewarded, the divine spark in all of us grows bright. And just like Spartacus, even if we lose, we really win.