

The Last Days of Pompeii

US : 1935 : dir. Merian C Cooper & Ernest B Schoedsack : RKO : 96 min
 prod: Merian C Cooper : scr: Ruth Rose & Boris Ingster : dir.ph.: Eddie Linden Jr
[David Holt](#)
 Preston Foster; Basil Rathbone; Dorothy Wilson; Alan Hale Sr; John Wood; Louis Calhern;
 Gloria Shea

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	□	€	Z	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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**“ Pompeii... Drunk with wealth and power...
 Rotten with pagan pleasures...
 Doomed to fiery death from the skies! ”**



Preston Foster seeks to impress David Holt with the muscles that slew the boy's own father. They could be a mite tactless, those gladiators.
 Source: *Those Endearing Young Charms*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“Blacksmith Foster aspires to wealth and power as a gladiator; the climactic spectacle scenes are thrilling and expertly done, by the same special effects team responsible for

"KING KONG". Also shown in a computer-coloured version. *** ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - abbreviated copy of the above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"In ancient Pompeii, various personal dramas are submerged in the eruption of Vesuvius. Starchy melodrama capped by a reel of spectacular disaster. Scr: Ruth Rose and Boris Ingster, from the novel by Lord Lytton. Special effects: Vernon Walker & Harry Redmond. * "

"Well-done spectacle minus romance and cast names¹. Should do all right generally."

- **Variety**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"Bulwer Lytton's novel is jettisoned, as the foreword admits, and instead we are offered a story about a gladiator (Preston Foster) who leaves Pompeii for Judea, where he meets Pontius Pilate and is scornful on hearing of a Great Man born in a stable. Will he get back to Pompeii in time for the eruption of Vesuvius? It cannot come a moment too soon but when it does the effects are derisory. Alan Hale, Dorothy Wilson and Louis Calhern are also mired in this farrago of nonsense."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Peace-loving blacksmith strives for wealth by becoming a champion gladiator. Average story bolstered by spectacular scenes of the destruction of Pompeii, a technical tour de force. *** "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Despite special effects from Willis O'Brien and the team behind **"KING KONG"**, this historical epic about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius lost \$237,000 at the box office and didn't, in fact, start to make money until it was re-released on a double-bill with **"SHE"** 14 years later. The film actually bears no relation whatsoever to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel, and much of the dialogue is of the wooden variety. Preston Foster is solid but uninspired in the lead role as an honest blacksmith caught up in the momentous events prior to eruption, but acting honours go to Basil Rathbone as Pilate, whose scenes were all shot in just seven days. Rathbone played the same role again 27 years later! ** "

¹ Hurrah!

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

" **"THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII"** is a spectacle picture, full of action and holds a good tempo throughout. What is presented is a behind-the-scenes of Roman politics and commerce, both of which are shown as smeared with corruption and intrigue². Basil Rathbone comes very close to stealing the picture with his playing of Pontius Pilate. Jesus crosses the path of Marcus (Preston Foster), one time gladiator, who is in Judea on a little business deal (horse stealing) which he carries out as the silent partner of Pilate.

Foster has the central role. He carries through from the boyish blacksmith of the opening sequence to the rich man who in the end sees his beloved son face probable death in the arena (just before the volcano erupts). On the way he is gladiator, slave trader, horse-stealer and general tough guy, but more the victim of a fierce semi-barbaric environment than of any personal cruelty trait."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Roman blacksmith Preston Foster becomes a gladiator after tragedy takes his wife and baby. En route to fortune, he adopts the young son of one of his victims. In Judea, he sees but refuses to help Christ³, who cures the boy following serious injury. Touched by Jesus, the boy grows up to help runaway slaves. Tremendous special effects. *** "

Those Endearing Young Charms note:

"The historical novel by Sir Edward Lytton tells of the immoral decadence that was Pompeii's around 79 A.D. Preston Foster plays the lead role of Marcus, a former blacksmith turned gladiator. David has the role of a young boy named Flavius, who Marcus adopts after having killed the boy's father in a gladiatorial battle."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday

² Unlike American politics and commerce today?

³ Doubtless because he was already dead 50 years by the reign of Nero...

Times Guide to Movies on Television",
"The Time Out Film Guide" or "The Virgin
Film Guide"]

Remade in Italy in 1960 as a Steve Reeves sword-and-sandal epic. RKO had rather a nerve to take the title of an established novel and merely stitch it onto hokum of their own devising – and wildly inaccurate hokum to boot. Schoedsack had co-directed the same studio's "**KING KONG**" two years previously. It remains one of the most cherished works in cinema history, untarnished by sundry tacky ripoffs and misbegotten remakes, but the film's status certainly didn't rub off on its director. Maltin cites David Holt's name as fourth in the cast, and the Video Movie Guide synopsis suggests he has a role of some substance. Here 8, he made his debut the year before in "**YOU BELONG TO ME**", but his best role was unquestionably as the ghastly Sid to Tommy Kelly's Sawyer in "**THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER**" (38), a performance he effectively reprised the following year as "Gussie" in the opening scenes of "**BEAU GESTE**".

Full marks then for dispensing with the obligatory matinee romance, but minus ten for teleporting poor old Jesus from the reign of Tiberius just to keep the Christian lobby quiet (while the rest of the audience lap up all those "pagan pleasures"). This period seldom crops up in the archive - the two versions of "**SATYRICON**" being obvious exceptions - because boys, curiously enough, are conspicuous by their absence from most Graeco-Roman movie epics; this in defiance of the fact that both cultures floated on a sea of slaves, and discouraged women from going about in public, so that, as is still the case in many Moslem countries today, men and boys dominated the human landscape. Ah, but we won't have it be that way, says Hollywood. We also not, cries Cinecitta. Accordingly, though Tommy Rettig pops up briefly in "**LAND OF THE PHAROAHS**", and Richard O'Sullivan briefer yet as Pharaoh Ptolomey in "**CLEOPATRA**", there is a dearth of good boy roles in the epic genre as a whole, even though the Bible itself contains many.

See subject index under **HISTORY** and **ORPHANS / ADOPTION**.