

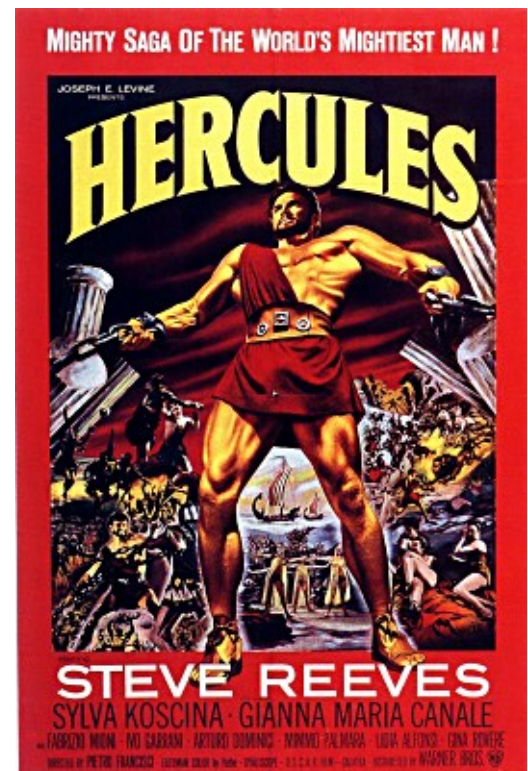


The Sword & Sandal Pages

The Italian Peplum Potboilers

Historical and mythical heroes have always been a staple of Italian cinema, but with the international success of the 1958 *Hercules*, with American bodybuilder Steve Reeves, the Sword & Sandal films became an instant pop culture hit and Italy's most famous export. They are also called Peplum flicks, so named after the skimpy costumes usually worn by the studly stars. A number of heroes from old stories & legends were mined for material – Hercules, Maciste, Ursus, and more – but the plots never varied much. And when exported for American drive-ins or TV, the heroes were always renamed either Hercules or Goliath anyway. A whole series of such flicks was repacked for American television and titled the “Sons of Hercules” movies, simply to disguise the fact that Hercules was played by a different actor each week.

The glory days of sword & sandal among Italian film exports lasted less than ten years; they were soon replaced by spaghetti westerns, and after them the zombie & cannibal flicks. But the Peplum has been with Italian cinema since the beginning, and they still get cranked out regularly. Hercules, after all, is immortal.





presented in chronological order
(far from a complete list, but it's growing)

HERCULES

(1958) dir: Pietro Francisci; lighting & special fx by Mario Bava; w/ Steve Reeves, Sylva Koscina, Fabrizio Mioni.

Hercules just wants to fall in love, but winds up battling the first in a long line of vile usurpers. Based loosely on the Golden Fleece and other tales, the story just has Hercules bouncing off random plot points. It was good enough to start a tidal wave of Sword & Sandal flicks, and it does have a decent budget with some nice sets & locations... but the script is just a meandering and dull swamp of mangled mythology, and the characters bear a remarkable resemblance to stick-figures. With the exception of one goofy dragon, it is not as silly as many of the films that followed, but nowhere near as much fun, either.





GOLIATH AND THE BARBARIANS

(1959 - Italy) dir: Carlo Campogalliani; w/ Steve Reeves, Chelo Alonso, Giulia Rubini, Luciano Marin.

When the barbarian horde invades his homeland and kills his pop, one broad-shouldered country boy goes on a rampage and starts his own resistance movement -- at least until he falls for the enemy princess (hubba, hubba). It has good photography and music, a fun cast, and most astonishing of all for a Peplum flick, an honest-to-goodness *plot!* Okay, a predictable one, but it sweeps along at a fast clip with plenty of action and a bunch of delightful snarling villains, stalwart heroes, and of course, the hot, ball-busting babe who finds her match in Goliath. Now this is Sword & Sandal the way it ought to be.



the CONQUEROR OF THE ORIENT

(1960 - Italy) writ & dir: Tanio Boccia; w/ Rik Battaglia, Irene Tunc, Paul Muller, Gianna Maria Canale.

Okay, this time we're in a vaguely Arabic kingdom but with the same old plot -- nice peasant boy turns out to be



the son of the sultan and must battle the “vile usurper”. This thing did have some budget... but it also has a B-rank cast who clearly didn't get enough rehearsal time, the script is suffering seizures and is told through the most stilted and verbose English translation I've ever heard, and the action scenes are performed by people who had not the slightest idea of how to handle weapons or ride horses. All this does give it some MST3K potential; which is good, because without heckling, this butt-zit of a movie is practically unendurable.

GOLIATH AND THE DRAGON

(1960 - Italy/France - aka *The Vengeance of Hercules*; *Revenge of Hercules*) dir: Vittorio Cottafavi; w/ Mark Forest, Broderick Crawford, Eleonora Ruffo, Gaby André.

Mighty Goliath (Hercules, whoever) must fight monsters, jealousy, and an ugly king who's not very nice (and none too bright, either). Although terribly silly, this one has a fairly sizable budget and a sizable cast. It succeeds in being a lot more fun than the usual Sword & Sandal drivel thanks to a script that's an avalanche of heroics, lies, betrayals, clueless maidens, vile villains, and goofy monsters. The only thing that keeps it from being a truly great flick is the cast, all of whom seem completely preoccupied, as if they're trying to remember this week's shopping list. And Broderick Crawford goes through the whole film looking as if he's demanding his fifth glass of scotch. Still, it's a non-stop romp through all the peplum clichés and is rather more fun than it deserves to be.



BAD CINEMA DIARY

the LOVES OF HERCULES

(1960 - Italy - aka *Hercules vs the Hydra*) dir: Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia; w/ Jayne Mansfield, Mickey Hargitay, Massimo Serato, Tina Gloriana.

Moments after his wife is assassinated, Hercules finds new love with a big-busted queen. But before the happy ending, he gets bit by a styrofoam hydra, seduced by amazons, has to lead an army against yet another wicked usurper, and punch out an apeman. With Mr. & Mrs. Jayne Mansfield as stars, they put a much bigger budget into this one than the usual Hercules flick. There are some mighty snazzy sets & costumes; and the script, while still stupid, is actually kind of fun. Hargitay is the biggest weak spot -- he recites his lines like he's in a trance and his herculean strength gimmicks are all pretty lame. Mansfield, of course, is trussed up to take full cinematic advantage of her impossible figure -- and she appears with black hair, purple hair, or red hair, take your pick.



ATLAS IN THE LAND OF THE CYCLOPS

(1961 - Italy - aka *Maciste vs the Cyclops; Monster from the Unknown World*) dir: Antonio Leonviola; w/ Gordon Mitchell, Chelo Alonso, Vira Silenti.

Our Atlas is actually Maciste, a real nice fella who has the IQ of slime mold and spends all day sucking in his stomach; he has to stop a naughty queen and her pet cyclops in a script that could flummox Stephen Hawking. Although mindless, it's a fair production with some nice sets and plenty of action -- even though most of that consists of Gordon grunting and straining for various odd reasons. It's a fun bit of sword & sandal, although you might avoid it if you're easily disoriented.



GOLIATH AND THE VAMPIRES

(1961 - Italy - aka *Maciste versus the Vampire; Samson versus the Vampires*) dir: Giacomo Gentilomo; w/ Gordon Scott, Gianna Maria Canale, Jacques Sernas, Leonora Ruffo.

To save his sweetheart, Goliath/Maciste journeys to a kingdom ruled by an nasty old vampire -- he fights lots of generic guards and



finally even has a duel with himself. The script on this thing is so disjointed, it may well have been ad-libbed; no event really leads to another and then the bad guy goes poof. However, it does get Gordon into a lot of fights and strong-man stunts, which is all that really mattered, I'm sure. Unfortunately, the fun value here is dimmed by a lot of padding, one painfully gratuitous kid sidekick, and some bad dancing and worse music. You need to bring some major slack for this one.



HERCULES IN THE HAUNTED WORLD

(1961 - Italy - aka *Hercules at the Center of the Earth*; *Hercules versus the Vampires*) dir: Mario Bava & Franco Prosperi; w/ Reg Park, Christopher Lee, Leonora Ruffo.

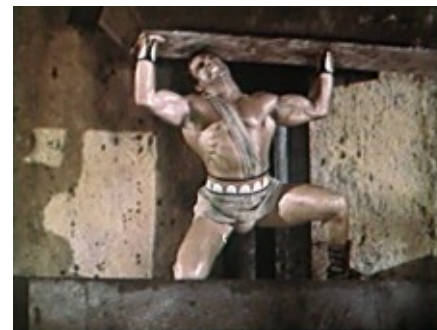
Herc and his pal, Theseus, have to battle through Hades itself to find the pretty rock that will save the wilting princess from the sneering usurper -- see divine love triangles, Greek zombies, witless comic relief, and even herculean tree pruning. With Bava at the helm, this certainly has some of the best photography and art direction of any sword & sandal flick. The script is every bit as brainless, however, and the Herc-gimmicks lack variety -- but it's far from boring as our heroes face an endless string of nonsensical obstacles and absurd plot twists. Even folks who aren't a fan of the genre can have fun with this one.



MOLE MEN AGAINST THE SON OF HERCULES

(1961 - Italy - aka *Maciste, the Strongest Man in the World; Maciste and the Night Queen*) writ & dir: Antonio Leonviola; w/ Mark Forest, Moira Orfei, Paul Wynter.

An underground kingdom of pasty-faced sun-haters takes lots of prisoners to run their giant human hamster-wheel; so young Maciste (here billed as the son of Herc 'cause American audiences don't know Maciste from beans) must set things right (by demolishing their entire civilization). They have some jazzy sets & costumes on this one, but the plot is about as coherent as a whirling Dervish on speed. There are a few boring bits, but they make up for it with plenty of crazy things for Maciste to do. Silly, certainly, but it shows more imagination and inventiveness that other films of the genre, and makes for a fun flick.



LAST OF THE VIKINGS

(1961 - Italy) dir: Giacomo Gentilomo; w/ Cameron Mitchell, Edmund Purdom, Isabelle Corey.

Cameron is a hard drinking and harder fighting Viking who returns home to find the usual problem: a usurper has murdered his father (durn usurpers). It has the same sort of drunken, staggering plot as any of its cousin peplum flicks, but has few boring bits and is a rousing little potboiler when you're in the mood for it. Quite a bit of the fun is provided by Purdom, who plays the usurper as some sort of Richard III who took a wrong turn at Albuquerque. Durn usurpers.



GLADIATORS SEVEN

(1962 - Italy/Spain) dir: Pedro Lazaga; w/ Richard Harrison, Loredana Nusciak, Livio Lorenzon, Gerard Tichy.

The brave prince of Sparta finally returns home, but of course an evil usurper has not only killed his daddy, but is trying to steal his sweetums, too. So our hero with the flashing teeth gathers his hard-charging buddies to set things right again. It's a mind-numbing if semi-competent production, built on a half-witted script that must have taken half the morning to write. It did, however, provide just enough chuckles to keep me from losing consciousness. It's tolerable, I suppose, if you're desperate for a Sword & Sandal fix.

Ancient Greece was just overflowing with an excess of evil usurpers -- I know, 'cuz I seen it in the movies.



the MEDUSA AGAINST THE SON OF HERCULES

(1962 - Italy - aka *Perseus the Invincible*; *Perseus Against the Monster*; *Valley of the Stone Men*) dir: Alberto de Martino; w/ Richard Harrison, Anna Ranalli, Arturo Dominici.

Hoo-hah. We got the Good City (featuring the Beautiful Tough-Gal Princess) which is being bullied by the Bad City (led by the Smirking Villainous Prince), then we have some schmuck in the wilderness who discovers he's the rightful heir to the throne of the Bad City. So, naturally, he frees an army from the Medusa (a bush with an eyeball) and saves both cities and rides off with the princess. Yes, the mentality of the script shoots a little low for most six-year-olds, but there's some right nifty battle scenes and two ridiculous monsters. If you've got the time to giggle at a silly movie, this one's a heap of fun.



HERCULES vs THE MOLOCH

(1963 - Italy/France - aka *The Conquest of Mycenae*) dir: Giorgio Ferroni; w/ Gordon Scott, Alessandra Panaro, Rosalba Neri (Sara Bay).

No, it's not really a Hercules movie -- they just slapped that title on it so it would draw a bigger English-language audience. Gordon Scott plays the noble prince Glaucos, who fights against the tyranny



of the wicked queen of Mycenae and her son, a bloodthirsty sociopathic man-god. Not just your average sword & sandal costume flick, this thing shows some ambition. Okay, it's not an epic masterpiece, but it does have a (relatively) big budget, big cast, big sets, big battle scenes, and big costumes. Even the script almost makes sense. Yes, there are still some mighty silly bits, but that just adds to the fun. This is a good one for fans of period pieces.

the **SONS OF HERCULES (in the Land of Darkness)**

(1963 - Italy - aka *Ercole l'invincibile; The Sons of Hercules*) dir: Alvaro Mancori; w/ Dan Vadis, Spela Rozin, Carla Calo, Ken Clark.

The muscley hero (only one son of Herc here) meets a batty witch, kills a dragon, and then spends an hour thumping heads to rescue his sweetie from snappy-dressing despots. It's a purely typical Italian Hercules flick (hastily repackaged for American TV) that somehow manages to be both action-packed and dull as dirt. There's plenty going on, it's just all so derivative and anti-climactic that it almost passes beneath notice. For hardcore sword & sandal fans only.



the **GIANT OF METROPOLIS**

(1964 - Italy) dir: Umberto Scarpelli; w/ Gordon Mitchell, Bella Cortez, Roldano Lupi. No skin; no gore.

20,000 years ago, Metropolis was the capital of Atlantis, and it enslaved the entire world with wicked science. So a muscle-bound farmboy tells them they are really bad and threatens King Yotar with doom. So they make him fight a bunch of people and torture him with, um, lamps, it seems. Wait -- now some people are dancing -- and it's really bad. Okay, we're back to the torture -- Gordon is grimacing under a spotlight. Now someone rescues Gordon and there are some utterly random fight scenes with really screwy swords. Oops -- Gordon just met some babe and kissed her -- they must be deeply in love. Urk. The plot on this thing whacks around like a superball trapped in a pinball machine. The flick is not merely clichéd, it absolutely glories in its clichés. King Yotar's dialogue is an almost unbroken stream of Evil Tyrant Famous-Last-Words. There's big plaster sets, tiny cardboard miniatures, gaudy costumes, horrid acting, and the flakiest looking plastic weapons you will ever see. In short, I thought it was wonderful.



HERCULES AGAINST THE MOON MEN

(1964 - Italy/France - aka *Maciste/Hercules and the Queen of Samara; Maciste vs the Stone Men*) dir: Giacomo Gentilomo; w/ Alan Steel (aka Sergio Ciani), Jany Clair, Anna Maria Polani.

That nasty queen is sacrificing most of the population to some mysterious creatures in the mountain, but Hercules (Maciste, whoever) sorts 'em out but good. It starts off as a haphazard story where Herc just dashes to and fro saving the rest of the cast, and it all occurs in a weird universe where time & distance are not constant. And then comes the big wind storm that provides enough padding to put half the planet to sleep. Parts of it are good silly fun, but the last half has about the same effect as a sharp blow to the skull.



HERCULES AGAINST THE SONS OF THE SUN

(1964 - Italy/Spain) prod & dir: Osvaldo Civirani; w/ Mark Forest, Anna Maria Pace, Giuliano Gemma, Angela Rhu.

Hercules gets shipwrecked in the wrong hemisphere and ends up helping the rightful ruler of the Incas defeat the vile usurper (it seems that wherever a vile usurper usurps something, Hercules will be there). We all know some of the warning signs of a bad movie -- here's one to add to the list: when the opening credits to an action flick include a prominent credit for choreography, that's a bad sign. And the dancing wasn't even very good (although it was less clumsy than the editing). Most of the bankroll here was spent on the climactic siege scene, which is huge and elaborate, but also really drawn out. The only saving grace in this flick is that it is stupid enough to be funny. To be honest, I rarely find myself giving a film spontaneous non-stop heckling (MST3K style), but this flick inspired me.

HERCULES AND THE MASKED RIDER

(1964 – Italy) dir: Piero Pierotti; w/ Alan Steel, Mimmo Palmara, Pilar Cansino.

The “Hercules” here is a gypsy strongman with a minor supporting role; our real hero is a Zorro wannabe who fights to free the oppressed Spaniards from an evil duke who runs around trying to do absolutely *everything* in the “Cheesy Villain's Handbook”. The script is certainly enthusiastic, but it's just a nonsensical blizzard of Sword & Sandal clichés.



Kind of fun, really, so long as you aren't a stickler for things like coherent thinking or common sense.



the LION OF THEBES

(1964 - Italy) dir: Giorgio Ferroni; w/ Mark Forest, Yvonne Furneaux, Massimo Serato, Rosalba Neri (Sara Bay).

Just another silly little Italian Sword & Sandal thing -- Helen of Troy & her studly protector end up in Egypt amid civil wars, assassinations, & betrayals. The script is haphazard (the English dialogue even more so) and the fight scenes are dorky. There are a few big budget crowd & battle scenes which looked like they could have been lifted from another movie. Mildly amusing, but only if you've a taste for such things.



SPARTACUS AND THE TEN GLADIATORS

(1964 - Italy) dir: Nick Nostro; w/ Dan Vadis, Helga Liné.

Um, some guys with no shirts bang their swords together -- the mean Roman guy laughs -- some slaves escape -- then they stick in some battle scenes from a bigger film and pretend to have an actual movie. Oog -- the cast is less expressive than hand puppets, the plot is in a coma, the editing (by Bruno Mattei) is done by random splicing, and the audience is asleep. It's not really an awful example of the genre, but there is so little effort put into this one, I wonder if anyone involved was actually aware they were supposed to be making a movie.



the TWO GLADIATORS

(1964 - Italy) dir: Mario Caiano; w/ Richard Harrison, Moira Orfei, Mimmo Palmara.

The long lost twin brother of wicked Emperor Commodus returns to save the empire for all that is decent and Roman-y. Pretty much just what you expect, but even by Peplum standards, this one is a bit shabby. With minimal locations and the sparsest of scripts -- we have a whole heck of a lot of horse riding scenes and torch-carrying mobs substituting for the bulk of the plot. It does, however, have a couple of hot babes (with IQ's somewhat below the common flea) and a lot of enthusiastic (if family-safe) battle scenes. It fills the basic requirements, I suppose, but that's about it.



the TRIUMPH OF HERCULES

(1964 - Italy) dir: Alberto de Martino; w/ Dan Vadis, Marilu Tolo, Pierre Cressey, Pero Lulli, Moira Orfei.

Hercules must battle some bald golden guys and his own stupidity to save Mycenae from a cunning usurper. The fight scenes are all pretty stupid looking and the acting is cardboard at best. But the script is fun Italian silliness that never stops long enough to make any sense. And it's kind of fun watching poor Dan Vadis run around in a constant power-flex to keep his muscles all bulgey. We also learn that wagon wheels were a major military weapon in ancient Greece, and that a helmet is useless if you get hit over the head with a clay pot.

HERCULES AND THE TYRANTS OF BABYLON

(1965 - Italy) dir: Domenico Paolella; w/ Rock Stevens (aka Peter Lupus), Helga Line. No skin; no gore.

Those wicked Babylonians are kidnapping the whole planet for slave labor. Unfortunately for them, this also includes Hercules' sweetums. So Herc comes in swinging a tree trunk and teaches them what fer. Pretty much nothing happens for most of the flick until they run out of script, at which point everyone tries to kill everyone else. It's a half-hearted, low-budget effort full of flimsy props and floofy speeches. They have some dramatic disaster and battle footage that was obviously ripped from some other bigger-budget flick, but everything else looks like it was filmed by sleep-walkers. It's mildly amusing for its silliness, except that it's so dang *slow*.



Non-Italian Pepla

HERCULES & THE PRINCESS OF TROY

(1965) prod & dir: Albert Band; w/ Gordon Scott, Paul Stevens, Mart Hulswit, Diana Hyland.

Hercules saves Troy from a virgin-eating sea monster, but of course, there's also a vile usurper to deal with. The whole thing runs less than 50 minutes and looks exactly like what it is: a failed TV pilot. The narrator keeps the fragmented plot moving along, and those patient enough to stick with it are rewarded with a nice dumb monster. This proves that Americans, too, can make goofy Italian movies.



The Bad Cinema Diary™ - 6th edition July 2009

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Icon Glossary:



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goopy Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually good flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.