

Poster Exhibit:

HERCULES and THE RISE OF THE “PEPLUM” FILM

Hercules movies, also referred to as Sword and Sandal Films, Gladiator Films, and, to those in the know, “Peplum” * films were a trend that began in the late 1950’s and continued on into the mid-60’s. These films have been largely forgotten by most people except for the die-hard fans (like yours truly) who have kept demand up for these films through the various home-video markets. The last time they were part of pop culture was via a joke in the movie AIRPLANE! (1980) where a gay character makes advances with the line “Do you like Gladiator movies?” (also, in the 90’s, a few of these Hercules movies were shown as part of Mystery Science Theater 3000, but that’s something of a cult-y TV show that not everyone knows about. And of course, Disney took a crack at it with an animated version in the 90’s, but to this date there have been no announcements about them turning HERCULES into a Broadway musical) Although the main attraction of these movies was to showcase the muscularity (or hyper-masculinity, even) of the main actors, they were not considered in the minds of the public at the time to be a gay attraction. They fell under the category of “Family-Friendly” movies. There was even a Hercules cartoon for kids that made Hercules very similar to the comic book Superman. (and what is Superman but an updating of the Hercules myth?) However, there’s no denying that there did exist an underground gay audience for this type of film, who would get their thrills in a more covert manner. So maybe it’s appropriate that we showcase these movies in June, which is now known as Pride Month.

These movies paved the way for the concept of “The Bodybuilder as Movie Actor.” Steve Reeves was the most famous of these bodybuilder/actors, since he was the first in line to play Hercules, in 1959. Gordon Scott (who was also a movie Tarzan) was also famous for appearing in these films. And then there were the others, like Reg Park, Alan Steel**, and Mark Forest, eventually leading to the appearance of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the very minor film HERCULES IN NEW YORK. Arnold would become the most famous and popular of a second wave of bodybuilder/actors in the 1980’s. (think of Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Carl Weathers, Dolph Lundgren....) So although the Historical backdrop of the Ancient World has vanished, we still have muscled-up heroic characters acting out scenarios of good vs. evil. (Today we have Chris Pratt in the GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY movies, for instance)

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* Note: “Peplum” refers to the short skirt that was worn by men in that time in history.)

** There are numerous FACEBOOK groups devoted to the Sword and Sandal genre and also to individual actors who starred in them. Encouraged by other fans, Barry has a Facebook page displaying original artwork of Alan Steel: SWORD AND SANDAL CINEMA -BARRY YUEN ART GALLERY.

HERCULES AGAINST THE MOON MEN (1964)

After several years of Hercules movies, things were starting to feel a bit stagnant, so that's why producers began coming up with off the wall ideas, like combining the peplum with the horror genre (as in *HERCULES IN THE HAUNTED WORLD* and *THE WITCH'S CURSE*), and in this case, the science fiction genre. This time, the obligatory evil queen plans world domination (again, bringing to mind Fascism) with the assistance of other-worldly invaders from the Moon. Hercules has to use his super-strength to avoid being drilled full of holes like Swiss cheese by an elaborate spiked death trap. I like Alan Steel as Hercules, especially when he gets a big goofy grin on his face when he gives a pounding to some bad guys. Steel began his career as a body double for Steve Reeves (and there weren't many people who had a physique similar to Reeves, so he was pretty much a shoo-in for the job) and appeared onscreen briefly in some of Reeves' movies, like *HERCULES UNCHAINED* and *THE GIANT OF MARATHON*. He was rewarded by the producers by being given his own Hercules movie to star in, but the Hercules trend was soon to peter out, being supplanted by a combination of Spy Movies and Spaghetti Westerns in the mid-60's, which would become the next big rage.

GOLIATH AND THE BARBARIANS (1959)

Steve Reeves as Emilio takes on the secret identity of "GOLIATH" to combat invading forces. Even though he was not Hercules this time, this movie was a substantial hit on the basis of the goodwill Steve Reeves had amassed already for the one movie. The financial success of the 2 Hercules movies led to a swarm of copycat films, with the hero being named or re-named *HERCULES*, *SAMSON*, or *GOLIATH*.

HERCULES (1959)

When HERCULES opened in theatres in the summer of 1959, it was a colossal blockbuster, and the main reason for this would have to be Steve Reeves himself. Literally no one had ever seen anyone who looked like him before, either in the movies or in real life. He had been a former Mr. Universe, and physically, he was the most perfectly developed man in the athletic world. It was said that Steve Reeves could make anyone look bad just by standing next to them. It didn't hurt that he had a handsome face, either, which made him perfect for movies. Prior to this, he had ambitions to become an actor, had taken some acting classes, and had even appeared in a few movies in minor roles, most significantly, in an Ed Wood movie, Jail Bait. But HERCULES changed everything for him. It instantly made him world-famous, but not rich, since he had been paid very little for that movie. Steve would drive a harder bargain to appear in the sequel, HERCULES UNCHAINED.

In the story, loosely based on Greek mythology, Hercules arrives in Jolco, falls in love, fights the Nemean lion and the Cretan bull, joins the quest for the Golden Fleece, then arrives back in Jolco to overthrow a corrupt regime. The trope of the Evil Ruler would occur again and again in these movies. (the days of Hitler and Mussolini were not far behind at this point in history)

DUEL OF THE TITANS (1961)

Steve Reeves and Gordon Scott are teamed up to play Romulus and Remus, founders of the city of Rome. Reeves is the morally upright brother, while Scott is the brother that turns into a power-mad egomaniac who has to be defeated by the end of the film.

THE WITCH'S CURSE (1963)

Probably the most peculiar of the peplum movies. Unlike the other movies, this one doesn't take place in Ancient Greece. Legendary hero Maciste (not Hercules this time) arrives in 19th Century Scotland and battles a witch's curse by descending into Hell. Hell is reached by uprooting a tree and climbing down into the hole (yep, simple as that!). While there, he meets Prometheus and combats an aggressive giant, walls of fire and, in a WTF moment, a herd of rampaging cattle(!). The director claimed that his lead actor, Kirk Morris, couldn't memorize lines, so he cut most of them out of the script so Morris could play a lot of scenes silently.

MY SON, THE HERO (1963)

This movie is famous for having its trailer narrated by Mel Brooks. Because the movie itself is difficult to see today, a lot of people have the mistaken impression that it's an early Mel Brooks film. However, it is not, even though the cartoonish poster art and the new title (which has a Jewish flavour to it) might make you think so. The story concerns the myth of The Titans, who have been imprisoned in Hades, but are set free by the Gods to take down a prideful King who has bathed in magical waters that have made him immortal, and who now proclaims himself to be a God. Nowhere in the movie is there a Jewish mother who boasts, "My Son, The Hero."

HERCULES UNCHAINED (1960)

Now that a demand had been created, this movie would make even more money than the original. In order to prevent a war between 2 brothers who are rivals for the throne, Hercules goes on a mission as an emissary, but gets waylaid by an evil queen who uses the “Waters of Forgetfulness” to give him amnesia and claim him as her husband. She plans to have him mummified and put on display when she gets tired of him, in a twisted form of “bragging rights”. So sexuality is a larger part of the story this time, although it’s all alluded to coyly, in 1950’s fashion. Hercules’ affections are divided between his wife at home, who is “good”, and the Queen, a “Black Widow” who is decadent and sexually voracious (and wears too much make-up). Hercules regains his memory, escapes, and returns home to find that everything has gone to hell in a handbasket. The action gets a bit confusing towards the end, and Hercules has to fight a den of tigers this time, but in the end the old regime wipes itself out, paving the way for a new ruler.

HERCULES, SAMSON AND ULYSSES (1963)

When Hercules’ ship is blown off course, a wacky case of mistaken identity occurs involving Hercules being mistaken for Samson, who is an outlaw in this country. What are the odds of that happening? The funniest moment is when the King points at Hercules and intones, “There is only ONE man with that kind of strength....SAMSON!” The story is kind of a prequel to the Biblical tale of Samson and Delilah, showing how they met before the whole unpleasantness of her betraying him and getting him blinded. At the end of the movie, Hercules advises Samson that it might not be a good idea to let Delilah live, and Samson basically goes, “Nah, it’s all good.” Irony!

HERCULES AND THE CAPTIVE WOMEN

aka HERCULES CONQUERS ATLANTIS (1963)

Reg Park, a British bodybuilder, got to play Hercules this time. Park shows a more humorous side to the character, while Steve Reeves played it completely straight and solemn. Much is made in the first third of the movie of Hercules being very lazy and just wanting to sleep, but as soon as he gets in the middle of all these intrigues and becomes active, he's actually pretty impressive, doing a number of physically demanding things, like diving off a high cliff (no double used there!) and controlling a chariot that's driven by about 20 wild horses. The plot makes allusions to the Nazis, since Atlantis is governed by an evil Queen who has somehow created an army of identical, blond-haired warriors (an Aryan race? They look pretty creepy, anyway.) in her quest for world domination. And we all know what happened to Atlantis (and Nazi Germany).

HERCULES AGAINST ROME (1964)

The plot feels standard, almost like a fairy tale, with a princess in peril. The Emperor is assassinated by a usurper to the throne, who plots to have the Emperor's young daughter marry his boorish son. But not if Hercules has anything to say about it! In truth, Hercules has very little to actually say, since he's too busy beating up entire armies to make things right. It gives a whole new meaning to the joke "You and what army?" Alan Steel as Hercules excels in the fight scenes. For a big guy, he moves with lightning speed. It's a joy to watch him in action. Heroic music follows him whenever he gets into a scrap.

HERCULES IN THE HAUNTED WORLD (1964)

Reg Park gets to play Hercules again, but this time under the guidance of horror director extraordinaire MARIO BAVA. Bava had worked as a lighting cameraman on the first two Hercules movies with Steve Reeves, and created some beautiful lighting effects there. Now in the director's chair (and some people say that Bava directed a good portion of HERCULES UNCHAINED while the actual director slacked off), Bava created a horror movie version of a Hercules tale. Hercules has to descend into Hades itself to retrieve a magical stone that will cure his lover, Daienara, of a spell she has been placed under by her wicked uncle, played by Christopher Lee (Dracula himself!). Lee fulfills the role of the Evil Ruler this time, since he is ruling by proxy and plans to murder his niece, the true heir to the throne. Hercules seems a bit dense in this movie since he can't see what the audience sees, that Lee is plainly rotten to the core. The climax of the movie has a bunch of corpses rise from their tombs and their graves to attack Hercules. With Bava at the controls, the movie manages some creepy moments while lit with multi-coloured lights that make it beautiful to look at.

JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS (1963)

Hercules only plays a small part in this movie, and even disappears from the story about halfway through. The real stars are the special effects by Ray Harryhausen, who creates a giant, walking bronze statue, a flock of winged harpies, and most impressively, a 9-headed Hydra and an army of attacking skeletons. A classic of the fantasy genre, it was not a hit on first release, but had its reputation grow over time.

THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII (1960)

Steve Reeves is the star again, in this telling of, you guessed it, *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Curiously, the opening scene is virtually a play-by-play of the opening scene of *HERCULES*, with Reeves rescuing a young woman from a runaway chariot.

Christians are persecuted and tortured as part of a plot by a corrupt High Priest and his concubine. As a result of playing detective to uncover the plot, Reeves has his life threatened several times, eventually ending up fighting for his life (and the Christians) in the arena just before the volcano erupts and takes out the guilty and the innocent alike. Being the hero, Reeves survives the devastation, of course, and is re-united with his loved one, so something of a happy ending is achieved.

THE GIANT OF MARATHON (1960)

The historic Battle of Marathon is the basis for this movie, with Steve Reeves playing Phillipides, who runs a marathon to enlist the aid of the Spartans to defend Greece against invading Persians. As in *HERCULES UNCHAINED*, Reeves has 2 love interests, one girl who is “pure” and another who is more sexually experienced. You can guess which one he ends up with, and which one ends up getting shot – by the bad guys, just to be clear – with an arrow. Although he’s not Hercules in this movie, he does display extraordinary strength, like in a scene where he rolls boulders down a hill and into a battlefield – maybe not the best tactic, since you’d risk flattening some of your own men. This movie was a big financial hit when it was first released, but today it’s been forgotten by everyone except the Steve Reeves fans.