

Ancient Daze

By Joshua Rothkopf

Gladiator is the kind of warm-weather bruiser you can have fun with—even while it's having its terrible way with you. It's a very proud movie: Only 20 minutes pass and we've

Gladiator
Directed by Ridley Scott

already been treated to a ferocious dog with orange eyes, a severed head flung in the mud, and the efficient devastation of a sizable forest in Germania. Those Roman legionnaires sure knew how to catapult a firebomb at their tribal enemies; so total is this opening rout that its only purpose is to wow us with crude imperial will. Says one commanding officer with the arrogance that comes with the scorched territory: "People should know when they're conquered."

In this picture, audiences are meant to be conquered too, not just thrilled but pummeled by its size, its cost, its thousands of extras—the mind reels at the catering alone. *Gladiator* is more than just a revival of the "sword-and-sandal" period epic, itself as dusty as a Roman coin; it's a return to the studio-driven colossus that throws a fortune at silliness just because it can. This excess used to have an ostensible justification in the threat of television, then in its infancy. Competitive innovations like the horizon-stretching Cinemascope made their debuts with the pomp and glory of *The Robe*; *Land of the Pharaohs* and *Ben Hur* chased ponderously after steadily dwindling receipts lost to the tube.

But the movie industry has long since given up the fight, edging ever closer to shortened attention spans and the emotional tidiness of *Friends*. Hollywood still knows how to spend money, of course. *Gladiator* assures us of this and tries to swap that for genuine engagement, not wholly in vain. But the grandeur rushes by impatiently; all too often the drama feels strictly small screen, like a video game. The script registers like a time-honored recipe that

has been undercooked: mix a dozen chariots with several gallons of fake blood, add the angst of a slave or two, a pinch of decadence—yet the dough doesn't rise. How can you have circuses without any bread?

The director, Ridley Scott, must have seemed a good choice on paper, a virtual guarantee of luster. Most famously, he turned artificiality and craft into an utterly persuasive, rain-drenched doomscape with *Blade Runner*, a sci-fi benchmark that continues to impress after 20 years of technological advances. Scott can even impart the air with tactility, fogging his interiors with motes of dust or, as in *Gladiator*, slowly

(*Alien*), or icons in a post-feminist Mustang commercial (*Thelma & Louise*). As in the arena, only the strongest survive this suffocating prettiness, and Russell Crowe just makes the cut as Maximus, our titular hero, despite a poorly developed role. Crowe deserves better: He pulled off a tour-de-force in last year's *The Insider* as the conflicted corporate whistleblower. Try to imagine that part with none of its outspokenness and all of the glowering and you'll come to a fair approximation of this film's Maximus—a general of few words who, through bad luck and the jealousy of the emperor's son, comes to be sold as a slave. Now a gladiator, he must fight his way to fame and a trip to the Colosseum for his vengeance.

That's basically it for the plot, which all but cries out in its thematic impoverishment. It underutilizes Crowe, a waste, and overtaxes Scott, who is



JAAP BUITENDIJK/DREAMWORKS

Stand by your man.

falling snowflakes. "Rome is the light," we hear early on; Scott takes this literally, bathing the film in creamy hues of gold falling into darkest shadow under icy skies. The film never fails to look absolutely delicious.

More problematic is his tendency to turn people into objects as well, either as artificial replicants (*Blade Runner*), warm homes for parasitic monsters

required to propel the brunt of the momentum through showdowns of kinetic action—never his strong point. His precision falls apart in one choppy battle sequence after the next, each a blurred mess of microsecond edits and shutter-speed twiddling. For all his command, he can't seem to sustain a simple narrative of blows, sidestepping the promise of catharsis with an

impressionist's fickleness that infuriates. (Scott did start off as an art school student.) The bag of tricks is never depleted: slow-motion impalements, computer-generated dismemberment, handheld nausea. I was praying for a tiger attack on the cameraman just so he might retreat by a few yards to establish some perspective; instead we have to wait for the dust to settle to make out the casualties.

Crowds at my two screenings didn't seem to find these incoherent death matches insulting, even though they cater mainly to our bloodlust. Roars of the attending mob rock the house—and not just from *Gladiator's* deafening soundtrack. But the picture's screenwriters, speaking through rational senators, would also have us reprove the vulgarity of young emperor Commodus' 150 days of games: "He'll bring them death and they will love

him for it." Gloats Commodus: "I will give the people the greatest vision of their lives," perhaps reading from Scott's contract with Dreamworks.

Decadence, a dozen chariots, the angst of a slave or two, and gallons of fake blood.

(Joaquin Phoenix has a great time with the lip-quivering villainy.)

Everyone seems in on the gag though, turning the overall hypocrisy into something winking and watchable. "Win the crowd and you will win your freedom," intones Proximo (the late Oliver Reed), a former gladiator now both the owner and coach of Maximus; the plummy line reads like an agent's mantra. Clapping the brood-

ing Maximus on the shoulder, he confesses, "I'm an entertainer."

Putting on a spectacle is nothing more and nothing less—and it's the only truth in the film. Scott knows this and lets his images rule over fuzzy intimations in the script of incest and a populist crusade against tyranny. Where are these oppressed? They mass in the bleachers, victims presumably of abusive ticket prices. Looking out, Maximus vents his disgust at their base urges but (carefully) not ours; that would be no fun. Besides, Scott has more visceral concerns: a convoy of guards behind glossy black shields rising majestically from beneath the arena; Commodus' stainless white armor; glints in the spattered sand. By the end, any political dimensions have been shorn from the inevitable head-to-head—and maybe that's appropriate. After all, these people still had Septimus Servus to look forward to. ■

A Class by Itself

By Bill Boisvert

For centuries the bourgeoisie has fought a running battle with bohemia, pitting bourgeois sobriety against bohemian intoxication, continence against sexual abandon, calculation against emotion, science against nature, materialism against art,

Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There

By David Brooks
Simon & Schuster
284 pages, \$25

hierarchy against equality. Things came to a head in the '60s, when long hair and tie-dye squared off against brush cut and pin stripes; the bohemians routed the bourgeoisie, only to be driven back by the Reaganite reaction of the '80s. But the culture wars are finally over, David Brooks writes, for bourgeois and bohemian have finally realized that, working together, they can conquer the world.

Brooks' new book, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Classes and How They Got There*, is about the vanguard of this new cultural synergy. "Bobos" means

"bourgeois bohemians," the highly educated information and technology workers at the forefront of the New Economy. The hallmark of Bobos, Brooks writes, is their ability to reconcile opposites. They are the tattooed dot-com executives who put in 100-hour weeks overthrowing the corporate status quo. They are the well-heeled exurbanites who showcase their solidarity with the downtrodden by decorating their million-dollar homes with peasant handicrafts. They are the genteel denizens of S/M clubs whose Web sites primly advertise their anti-septically safe debauchery and extol mutual respect through bondage. Bobo consumerism is ecologically sensitive and morally uplifting, built around natural fibers, crusading long-distance carriers and conscientious recycling. Hailing from the nation's exclusive zip codes, Bobos pride themselves on their informality and dishevelledness. They are an anti-elitist elite.

While not exactly new, Brooks' observations about this much-observed group are often fresh and engaging. Yet the beguiling inconsistencies that Brooks

riffs upon raise troubling issues that his book never really confronts. Are the self-contradictory mores of this demographic an eclectic third way between doctrinaire extremes, or just so much hypocrisy? Are all social conflicts really a matter of clashing cultural sensibilities? Do anti-elitist manners signify the demise of the ruling elite, or the success of a kinder, gentler ruling elite that has co-opted and neutralized all opposition? Can a ruling elite ever be kind and gentle?

Brooks is a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard* and quotes extensively from older neoconservative publications like *Commentary*. By positing the Bobos as the synthesis of the world-historical dialectic between the '60s and the '80s, his book is really a reappraisal of the Baby Boomers from a neocon perspective. Born in reaction to the excesses of the New Left, but rooted in a tradition of Jewish intellectualism, neoconservatism has never been entirely at ease with the libertarians, militiamen and fundamentalists who make up its allies on the right. Brooks implies that the time is ripe for a neocon rapprochement with the Age of Aquarius.

According to Brooks, the Bobos emerged after World War II, when new SAT-based admissions policies at elite