

Spartacus Redivivus: Hollywood's Blacklist Remembered

Henry Innes MacAdam, DeVry University

Kirk Douglas, *I Am Spartacus: Making a Film, Breaking the Blacklist* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2012).

Readers of Kirk Douglas' popular autobiography *The Ragman's Son*¹ (hereinafter *RS*), especially the chapter devoted to "The Wars of Spartacus", will be in familiar territory with this new memoir centered on the making of *Spartacus* (1960). George Clooney's Foreword is a tribute to Douglas' role in exposing the hypocrisy and mendacity of the McCarthy Era in Hollywood and the rest of the entertainment industry beginning in 1947. While it's not mentioned by Douglas or Clooney, the latter's brief contribution is directly related to his multiple roles (director, co-writer, actor) in *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005), the most recent and perhaps the best Hollywood account of the anti-Communist impact on 1950s commercial network TV in America. CBS's Edward R. Murrow took on McCarthy directly, blunting his toxic effects by exposure on *See It Now*, in concert with Senator Stuart Symington's Congressional hearings that led to McCarthy's formal censure at the end of 1954. In Hollywood that process of detoxification took longer, and *I Am Spartacus* (hereinafter *LAS*) is Douglas' in-depth revisit of his important, but not exclusive, role in accelerating it.

In the Post-9/11 age of the USA's Patriot Act (2001), and subsequent attempts by the Bush II and Obama administrations to replace genuine Cold War tensions with the mirage of "global Islamo-Fascism", this is a good time to remember the turbulent 1950s: e.g. the French loss of Indochina and the U.N. stalemate in Korea; the space and missile races between the USA and the Soviets; the struggle for racial desegregation in the USA. Chapter 1 of *LAS* sketches the main features of Hollywood's role in the post-WW II era when neither Truman nor Eisenhower took on McCarthyism in general or the blacklist in particular, and studio executives were still reluctant to offer substantive roles to American actors of color, offer films of almost *any* value to female directors/producers, or deal with male and female homosexuality. By the late 1950s, Hollywood was struggling with many social issues but reluctant to initiate or undertake needed changes. Though Douglas (as a Hollywood insider) claims no special insight when those issues were current, his account of them in *LAS* shows that the making of *Spartacus* proved to be his personal wake-up call.

This review will treat both topics (*film* and *blacklist*) of the book's title separately, with full knowledge that making this movie was inextricably tied to the filmmakers' own roles in exposing the blacklist for what it was: a byproduct of the fear-mongering for political gain in local, regional, and national politics that grew from anti-Left sentiments in the USA fed by the global politics of the Cold War. In each of those two areas, "Making the Film" and "Breaking the Blacklist," I will draw attention to sources of information that I feel are either neglected or under-utilized by Douglas and others interested in this era of Hollywood history. These include some very recent, personal recollections of Douglas' closest associate in the creation of *Spartacus*, producer Edward Lewis. Before doing that, a few observations about what readers will find, or not find, in *LAS* would be appropriate.

It should be said at once that although enjoyable to read, *LAS* is *not* a user-friendly volume. There is no Table of Contents for its twelve chapters, each of which is prefaced by a snippet of dialogue from the movie. There is an Epilogue and 30 unnumbered pages (dubbed an *Image Gallery*) of photos, divided almost equally into those "In Front of the Camera" and those "Behind the Scenes". There are three pages of Acknowledgments, no Bibliography, and (most disappointing) there is *no Index*. Lack of the latter is an egregious oversight in a book of 210 pp. full of personal and place names as well as political issues and the expected Hollywood gossip. Lack of fact-checking is evident in numerous places (see below), and more careful proofreading would have caught the misattribution of two lines of film script: that prefacing Chapter 6 is actually spoken by the character Gracchus (not Crassus), and that for Chapter 7 by Batiatus (not Marcellus). Douglas includes recently discovered photos from Universal's archive; all are reproduced in black and white and many are of poor quality, which lessens the volume's overall professional effect (I cannot speak for the quality of photos in the e-book version). There is a difficult-to-explain *incompleteness* to this volume, in part because it is very much a "one-man show."

Making the Film

From its release in October, 1960, to its public attendance by President John F. Kennedy in January, 1961 through its capture of four Academy Awards in April, 1961, *Spartacus* overcame expected and unexpected obstacles during nearly three years (beginning in December 1957) of a protracted pre-production, production, and post-production process through Douglas' own company, Bryna Productions. Significantly, Douglas and his producer Edward Lewis recruited a truly stellar cast: Charles Laughton, Laurence Olivier, Peter Ustinov, and Jean Simmons were the "name" actors in major roles. Aficionados of the film will also call attention to superb secondary performances by Charles McGraw and

Herbert Lom. John Gavin and Tony Curtis added glamour without substance; stronger scripts for each would not have helped. The initiative to film Howard Fast's sloppily written, virtually unedited, privately published novel (initially sold via subscription from the basement of Fast's flat in NYC) came from Lewis through his wife Mildred, not from Douglas. It is also Lewis (now 92) who must be given the lion's share of credit for steering the erratic project through to completion, especially in face of a rival project to film Arthur Koestler's literarily and philosophically superior novel *The Gladiators* (1939). Alciona/United Artists announced plans to screen it (with Yul Brynner and Anthony Quinn in the top roles) on 17 October 1957 in the *New York Times*, but Douglas makes it appear (*LAS* 44) that he and his colleagues at Bryna were blindsided by these widely publicized plans when he pitched *Spartacus* to United Artists several months later.²

The tangled tale of how those two parallel film endeavors began almost simultaneously, then flirted with combining resources, but ultimately chose an elimination contest, is reminiscent of the decade-later competing movies *Napoleon* and *Waterloo*, only the latter of which made it through to a disastrous release in 1970.³ *LAS* outlines the major stages of the Bryna-Alciona struggle from the very end of 1957 through the autumn of 1959, but seems unaware that producer Paul B. Radin (1913-2001), who optioned Koestler's novel for Alciona, did not abandon hope of filming *The Gladiators* until the summer of 1960. Douglas had just been passed over for the lead in *Ben Hur* and needed a big-budget epic with heroic dimensions to offset his reputation as a Hollywood "heavy." His bad-boy reputation was earned as much by his arrogant dealing with actors and studio bosses as it was with characters on the screen. His role as Van Gogh in *Lust for Life* (1958) softened that image with a nomination for Best Actor. The chance to play Fast's reluctant hero Spartacus would reprise less abrasive characters in his first movies. Bryna and UA had just collaborated very successfully on *The Vikings* (1958). Douglas believed they could do it again.

But UA's Arthur Krim turned down his bid to film *Spartacus* because of his commitment to *The Gladiators*, a project Douglas had to have known about for two months prior to his pitch. His dilemma now was to find the funding for his own project, and in *LAS* (45-55) he takes us along with him as he shopped the film to most of the major studios (Paramount; MGM; Columbia). No deal. "[To] make this picture I was willing to be as ruthless and pragmatic as I had to be" (*LAS* 55). Though Douglas minimizes his discussion of it, he is clear that joining forces with UA became an option: "Eddie Lewis and I discussed the possibility of combining the two projects. Marty Ritt would direct. Yul and I would co-star" (*LAS* 45). That is not how Lewis remembers it. In a letter to me of 19 July 2012 he states: "Your information that there was some plan to combine

filming [*The Gladiators*] with *Spartacus* is completely incorrect ... the only thought ever about *The Gladiators* was as a competitor.” Correspondence in the Martin Ritt Collection at the Margaret Herrick Library in Pasadena (*Oscars.org*)⁴ supports Douglas, though Lewis may mean that *a formal agreement* to merge the projects never occurred. UA declined the “offer” but not before considering Douglas as co-star with Yul Brynner in their upcoming *Magnificent Seven* (1960).

The ironic circumstances of two films on the same historical subject at the same moment in time isn’t explored by Douglas, who nevertheless sees chance and/or fate intervene on two occasions to put him on track to make *Spartacus*: his failure to get the lead in *Ben-Hur* (then filming in 1958), and his decision *not* to accept producer Mike Todd’s offer to accompany him on the doomed flight to NYC on 22 March 1958. The parallels in the rival film projects are striking: novels on the Spartacus slave revolt by former members of the Communist Party, and scripts for each film by blacklisted writers (Abraham Polonsky for *The Gladiators*; Dalton Trumbo for *Spartacus*). Polonsky’s journal entries for this period trace his involvement with the Alciona/UA project, including a mention on 29 May 1958 that “Paul [Radin] called yesterday night [and discussed] uniting [the two movie projects,] with [Kirk] Douglas to play Crixus”.⁵ Nor does Douglas touch on the fact that Trumbo’s script omits entirely the strong Jewish element in Fast’s novel and in Fast’s script, which is directly paralleled in Koestler’s novel and Polonsky’s script for *The Gladiators* (see “Further Considerations”). It was Universal International that ultimately agreed to distribute *Spartacus*, but only after they made the final editorial decisions about it.

Though there is no lack of details in *LAS* about the making of *Spartacus* (in many instance events and episodes described in *RS* are enhanced or embellished), it is to Douglas’ credit that he provides large doses of self-criticism throughout the ten chapters devoted to that film’s troubled production. Among major decisions for which he takes full or partial credit are allowing Fast to script his own novel, allowing UI to insist on Anthony Mann as director, and allowing actor Tony Curtis to take a prominent secondary role in the film. All of those choices failed in one way or another and even if they didn’t collectively derail the project, the first two created crises that soured relationships on and off the set, and the third gave critics of the finished film a perfect opportunity to highlight that mistake in casting. As a counterbalance were several courageous decisions: hiring Dalton Trumbo (under an alias) to replace Fast, and tapping Stanley Kubrick to replace Mann just a few weeks into shooting. Above all, Douglas’ decision to rely on Edward Lewis’ good judgment throughout the ordeal was critical in seeing it through to completion. Lewis and Douglas had already worked together on several other Bryna movies.

More credit is given Lewis than anyone involved in the making of *Spartacus* except Douglas himself—Lewis is there on virtually every page of *LAS*, from his dramatic decision to bring Fast's novel to Douglas' attention on the actor's 41st birthday (*LAS* 43) through the final battle scenes of the film shot in Spain in late 1959 and re-shoots early the next year (*LAS* 147). There is a separate tribute to Lewis in the Epilogue (*LAS* 168). What is troubling is that several important meetings at which Lewis is said to be present (i.e. a meeting with Douglas and Kubrick to decide who should get credit for scripting the finished film; lunch with Trumbo and Kubrick at the UI canteen shortly thereafter) are now contested as not taking place. The former is disputed by Lewis in a letter to me of 4 August 2012 ("there was no such meeting"), and the latter by Trumbo's daughter, Mitzi ("my father did *not* have lunch with [Douglas and Lewis and Kubrick] at the Universal studio commissary").⁶ To be fair, both scenes are included in the "Spartacus" chapter of *RS* and neither Lewis nor Kubrick, to my knowledge, took issue with their veracity when that autobiography was published 24 years ago (Trumbo died in 1976).

These are some "memory differences" that have yet to be resolved and they are not the only aspects of *LAS* that deserve critical attention. Appraisal of *Spartacus*' value as more than just a commercial action movie actually came before the film's release in the fall of 1960. Hollywood journalist David Chandler received approval from UI and Douglas to conduct a series of cast and crew interviews the previous spring. They were to be background for, if not part of, a book in preparation, *The Year of Spartacus*, in which he planned to document the film's making from inception through post-production. In addition to a number of lengthy taped interviews, transcribed shortly after completion, Chandler prepared a typescript of some 70 pp. of narrative that followed developments up to the late summer of 1958 when Olivier, Laughton, and Ustinov signed on for major roles. That much of his book-in-progress Chandler shopped around to several editors who expressed interest, but the project died a quiet death when publishers learned that the film might be stillborn because it was based on a novel written by a former Communist and (worse) scripted by Hollywood's premier blacklisted screenwriter. All eight segments of the manuscript, and the interview transcripts, are available at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, as is some of the material deposited there by Douglas in the 1960s (also available are the typescripts of Fast's and Trumbo's film treatments and their screenplays).⁷

It is therefore surprising that Douglas makes no mention of *The Year of Spartacus*, in part because Chandler is quite laudatory of the movie, and also because he was writing with the film-making project still underway. Apart from

the movie's initial mixed reviews themselves (critical assessments moderated when *Spartacus* garnered four Oscars), there was generally a favorable impression of the film until the re-mastered, slightly enhanced version was released in 1991. Since then, especially with the publication of Martin Winkler's edited collection of essays entitled *Spartacus: Film and History* (1995),⁸ the movie has come under increasingly negative scrutiny as a failed attempt (albeit still the best example of the "Roman-era epic" so common at the time) to dramatize the sketchy story of the most iconic figure of class struggle from antiquity. That same year a sharp critique by main-stream Roman historian William V. Harris appeared in another edited collection: Mark C. Carnes (gen. ed.), *Past Imperfect*.⁹

Harris understandably takes issue with some *historical* aspects of the film but is fair in showing how Trumbo's script either ignored or reshaped the most egregious errors or fantasies of Fast's muddled novel. He is also aware (as is Douglas himself) that Koestler's treatment of the same fragmented sources for *The Gladiators* resulted in a far better book (see "Further Considerations" below). There is no mention of the two other 20th century novels on the same theme: James Leslie Mitchell's *Spartacus* (1933) and Maurice Ghnassia's *Arena* (1969). Harris' practical concerns about Roman politics and how *Spartacus*—in spite of Trumbo's improvements—distorts, conflates, or otherwise over-simplifies them, are paralleled by several of the other academic contributors to *Past Imperfect*. Harris seems unaware of Fast's original screenplay of his own novel, and also ignorant of Polonky's screenplay for Koestler's novel—a script (*not* irretrievably "lost" as some have claimed)¹⁰ that is superior to both Fast's and Trumbo's *because it emphasizes the fundamental split in the slave army over the ultimate goal of the insurrection*. It was precisely that tension, between the followers of the Celtic gladiator Crixus and those who favored the Thracian gladiator Spartacus, that the historical sources now available to us single out as the "fatal flaw" in the eventual failure of the struggle against Rome. Koestler and his interpreter Polonsky used that crisis effectively for *The Gladiators*, but neither Fast nor Trumbo did for *Spartacus*. On this point Harris is (inevitably) silent, and so is Douglas.

Very different are the views of *Spartacus* expressed by film historian Duncan Cooper in his two contributions to *Film and History*: "Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus?" and "Dalton Trumbo vs. Stanley Kubrick." That difference focuses on the tensions between UI executives and Douglas/Bryna about the issues of the film's moral boundaries (sex, language, violence) and its political dimensions (as expressed by the slave revolt itself and Rome's reactions to it, and the interpretation of both in Fast's book and in Trumbo's screenplay). Set against the corrosive atmosphere of anti-Marxist, anti-Communist paranoia in the USA, and the moral strictures of the Hays Code in Hollywood (1934-68) and

the entertainment industry, those twin issues of revolt and repression shadowed the manner in which the finished film would be presented to the general public. Thus any discussion of Cooper's contributions to *Spartacus: Film and History* are best examined below in the section on the Blacklist.

Breaking the Blacklist

This book's title is the movie's most famous line: "I'm Spartacus!" Intoned by the surviving male slaves after the final battle against Roman forces, it serves not only as a reminder of Douglas' iconic role in the film, but also as an echo of the often strained relationships among those who saw the film through to release: producer Edward Lewis, successive directors Anthony Mann and Stanley Kubrick, successive screenwriters Howard Fast and Dalton Trumbo, Douglas (who served as executive producer), and the always anxious, sometimes craven, and ultimately duplicitous executives at UI. It was the latter who nearly pulled the plug on the film's production and/or release on several occasions in fear of red-baiting columnists like Hedda Hopper and negative public backlash prompted by reactionary organizations like the American Legion. Douglas' career was on the line; Bryna and even UI (in financial trouble at that time) would not have survived a flop. Trumbo's marginal existence as a cut-rate script writer (under various aliases since 1947) would have become complete oblivion, and the blacklist's grip on the entertainment world made stronger and its temporal duration extended.

Douglas insists that the blacklist was effectively overcome with UI's agreement (prompted by Douglas *and* Lewis) to give onscreen credit to Dalton Trumbo for his script. Lewis optioned the film rights from Fast, but only on the agreement that the author would be allowed to write the screenplay. That proved to be only the first salvo of what became a series of acrimonious exchanges with Fast, who was not adept at scripting books (even his own) into films and who left himself open to reprisals by Lewis and Douglas which eventually cost him co-writing credit when the film was released. When sole credit (but no Oscar) went to Trumbo for the screenplay it intensified a growing resentment between Fast and Douglas and a longstanding animosity between Fast and Trumbo. The former lasted until Fast's death in 2003 and continues today through his children.¹¹

The Hollywood blacklist *was* breached in 1960, but not only because Trumbo's name appeared in the opening credits of *Spartacus*; Trumbo's name as screenwriter was *also* on Otto Preminger's *Exodus* that same year, a decision that the director had publicly announced before filming began. Just as Preminger's proactive stance regarding Trumbo is glossed over by Douglas, there is no

indication in *LAS* that the “broken” blacklist’s effects lasted until the late 1960s. One example will suffice. It took acclaimed writer/director Abraham Polonsky (1910-1999), hired to script *The Gladiators* in early 1958, another decade before he could openly write (*Madigan*, 1968) and direct (*Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, 1969). Thus recent attempts to downplay the effect of the blacklist in the late 1950s (e.g. Meroney and Coons in the *Atlantic.com* piece cited in endnote # 11) are revisionist accounts that ignore the real and continuing harm that was being done to actors, writers, directors, producers, and musicians. Actress Lee Grant, a lifelong friend of Douglas, was blacklisted at the onset of her film career in 1951 and was unable to find work in Hollywood until 1967. The careers of many others never recovered.¹²

Douglas and Edward Lewis are now the only two principal figures still alive who were involved with the entire project to film *Spartacus*, and then in the aborted attempt at full restoration before its re-release thirty years later.¹³ Lewis in particular has been the “silent partner” in the long and convoluted development of what has almost become the *mythology* of creating this movie. In recent private communications with me during the summer of 2012 he mentioned a volume of memoirs now underway, one part of which will illuminate his role as *Spartacus*’ producer. It is not speculative to suggest that important aspects of that project will be seen quite differently, as would be the case if Kubrick (d. 1999) had written about it or if Chandler’s *The Year of Spartacus* had been completed and published.

Thanks to the detailed (80 pp.) analysis of the film’s script by Trumbo (now available in the Criterion Collection edition of the movie), we know far more about its genesis and its development than we would from Douglas, who willingly admits that he believes Trumbo’s critique is a model worthy of emulation (*LAS* 134-139). Trumbo is certainly *the* key figure in understanding the complex dynamic within which Douglas, Lewis, Kubrick, and the studio executives at UI worked during filming. That is precisely why Duncan Cooper relies heavily on that lengthy critique of the finished but not fully edited movie by Trumbo available (in the typescript original) within the Kirk Douglas Collection at WCFTR. Use of this document is evident in both of Cooper’s contributions to *Spartacus: Film and History*. The full title of each is “Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus? Production, Censorship, and Reconstruction of Stanley Kubrick’s Epic Film” (pp. 14-55) and the much shorter “Dalton Trumbo and Stanley Kubrick: The Historical Meaning of Spartacus” (pp. 56-64). Cooper also contributed to the “restoration” of *Spartacus* in the late 1980s.

Trumbo and Douglas wanted the film to depict the slave uprising *not just* as a minor revolt aimed at escaping from gladiatorial bondage and the chance

to pillage the neighboring areas (“Small Spartacus”), *but also as* evolving into a mass movement that threatened Rome’s existence (“Large Spartacus”). Cooper’s summary (an expansion of articles first published in *Cinéaste*)¹⁴ is salutary reading; it underscores Trumbo’s concern that the “Large Spartacus” view of the event had already been diminished during an editing process directed at a “Small Spartacus”. In other words, UI studio executives favored reducing the film’s revolutionary aspects. Their concern centered on the cost of the film (\$12 million then, \$120 million now) and the fear of it failing totally if (in columnist Hedda Hopper’s words) its “Commie author” (Fast) and its “Commie scriptwriter” (Trumbo) caused it to be banned by reactionary organizations and savaged by right-wing critics (RS 332—Hopper’s comments are not reprinted in *LAS*). The finished film was put on the chopping block, and the first order of priority was making it acceptable to the conservative media and the morality code that was there to “protect” movie-goers from liberal extremes. It is clear in *LAS* that Douglas not only read Cooper’s two essays but has now taken the opportunity to give Trumbo’s assessment its due. Douglas notes:

I watched helplessly as UI decided to remove much of the film’s potentially controversial content. Without my approval, Universal made forty-two cuts to the film. As [head of production] Eddie Muhl later admitted, they were “for content, not for length” ... But it wasn’t just sex, violence, and language they were after. Even more cowardly and reprehensible was what they were really doing in the editing room ... Universal was now even more concerned about the political message of the film.

The bulk of the cuts they ordered were designed to reduce Spartacus’ historical significance. “Large Spartacus”, the warrior who fought for the fundamental principle that every man should be free to determine his own destiny ... was reduced to, at best, “Medium Spartacus” ... Although he was still depicted as more than just a runaway slave concerned only with his own safety, any hint that he might have been leading a successful revolution was removed from the film. His many victories over the Roman legions [attested in the ancient sources] were cut out. Much of the extra footage we’d shot in Spain to depict those early victories was eliminated ... This was Eddie Muhl’s plan all along (IAS 157-158).

Nothing of this struggle to salvage the integrity of *Spartacus* appears in *RS*. UI’s “studio hatchet job” process is ignored and we find only two bland sentences: “*Spartacus* went back to the editors after the reshoots [in Spain], and I

went to Mexico to film another Bryna production, *The Last Sunset* ... When I got back, the editing of *Spartacus* was in the final stages, and the scoring" (RS 328; 331). Eddie Muhl's name is absent from that book's Index. Thus an entire segment of *LAS* Chapter 11, five pages (155-59), is devoted entirely to the process by which the film was stripped of the elements that might have rendered it "great" instead of just "good". Unfortunately the restorations done for the 1991 re-release were minimal; it is not even clear how many of the "forty-two" cuts were actually incorporated (a brief accounting of the missing footage is given in Cooper, "Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus?" pp. 16-17). A lot was made of the inclusion of the "oysters and snails" dialogue between Olivier and Curtis, but where are the missing battle scenes, and the footage of Laughton on a tour of the slums of Rome with John Gavin? Where is the *Zeitgeist* of the film? There is more needed than just the full restoration of *Spartacus* (perhaps impossible), just as there is more to the story of its making that *LAS* omits, minimalizes, or otherwise misconstrues. Thus a few closing thoughts are offered here in no order of importance.

Further Considerations

(1) Only those there at the time can fully comprehend the complexities faced by Douglas, but it is evident from the written recollections or interview comments of others (e.g. Fast, Trumbo, Kubrick, and Lewis as well as Olivier and Ustinov) that much of what *LAS* presents is the author's view through a narrow prism. That *two* films on the Spartacus revolt were underway in 1958 *wasn't* just the coincidence that Douglas indicates it was. Apart from the fact that Fast's and Koestler's novels were enjoying popular reprints as paperbacks, the world of Roman spectacle was a cinema staple. The Italian epic *Spartaco* (1954) gained some visibility in the USA as *The Sins of Rome* (1955). *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) got plenty of attention as the sequel to the popular and lucrative *The Robe* (1953).¹⁵ Thames Williamson's novel *The Gladiator* (1948) was a popular paperback reprint in the mid-1950s, a Neronian-era tale that cried out for treatment by Hollywood but was instead overtaken by the rapid *Quo Vadis?* (1951). The only saving grace of *QV* was Ustinov in the role of Nero, an early indication of his Roman-era epic talents.

(2) The influence of Koestler's *The Gladiators* isn't given its due in *LAS* though it cast a longer shadow than just the rival project to film it. Douglas expressed that in a letter to me of 14 July 1978: "I do have great admiration for Koestler's book and feel that it would have and still would make a wonderful movie." In both his autobiography and this new memoir he has nothing to say about the literary merits or political philosophy of the book, even though it was read with interest by Kubrick (who wanted to integrate some of its bleak realism

about the brutal nature of failed revolutions due to what Koestler termed “The Law of Detours”), and read with distain by Trumbo.¹⁶

(3) Howard Fast’s role in *Spartacus* is outlined by Douglas in *RS* and *LAS*, but Fast’s contributions run deeper than just a screenplay that was dismissed as “crap” and “unsalvageable” (*LAS* 49; 51). Fast had produced a film treatment dated 27 May 1958, was then given (writers unidentified) a three-page list of suggested improvements, and within a month of that handed in a provisional screenplay. Douglas would have us believe it was “buried” when Trumbo was hired, but Fast’s script, when compared with Trumbo’s, indicates that Trumbo reworked entire scenes, as well as dialogue, with no acknowledgement of Fast’s screenplay.¹⁷ At one point (June, 1959) Trumbo indicated he might quit out of frustration with the constantly changing screenplay over which he had little control since he wasn’t on the set (*LAS* 123-129). In a panic, Fast was called in as a “script doctor” to rewrite or create more than 20 key scenes (perhaps now impossible to identify). This goes unmentioned in *RS* and *LAS*; for knowledge of it I am grateful to Duncan Cooper in personal communications. Fast’s full role needs reconsideration beyond his own often bitter commentary for the Criterion Collection edition and his family’s hostile, sustained vendetta against Douglas.

(4) *Spartacus* was one of the last big-budget, premium-actor Roman epics that appealed to intelligent audiences, garnered credible critical acclaim, and turned a profit. By the time that *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) had drained the coffers of their respective studios the genre had spent its creative energy. It was not until the re-make of *Fall* in the guise of *Gladiator* (2000) that “sword ‘n sandal” films again gained some respectability. It wasn’t long before American TV saw the chance to cash in on the box-office success of *Gladiator*, but this time it would be with a brand-name mini-series, *Spartacus* (2004) aired by the USA Channel. Fast lived long enough (d. 2003) to have his novel optioned a second time, but that production was a pale imitation of the original film even if closer historically to “what actually happened.” No such attempt at accuracy went into the planning of studio executives at HBO for their two-season series *Rome* (2005; 2007). An even greater disdain for history has been the hallmark of the Starz Channel’s *Spartacus* for two of the three-season series of gut-wrenching, gore-spattering mayhem that has proved to be steadily popular. The final season will air in early 2013. In July 2011 GK (Graham King) Films (UK) announced a new big-screen version of *Spartacus* in the planning stage. In May 2012 Michael B. Gordon, who scripted the Greek epic *300* in 2006, was said to be developing an original screenplay for the new film. I have not been able to find more current information on this project, which may indicate that it’s in financial difficulty.¹⁸

(5) Abraham Polonsky's screenplay for *The Gladiators*, long thought to be "lost", is not. In July 2011 I was able to locate and purchase a mimeograph copy at one time in the personal collection of theatrical producer and playwright Waring Jones. This I hope to publish with background context and full commentary in the near future. On the title page *The Gladiators* had been crossed out and "Spartacus" written over it. Three names were hand-printed: *Kirk Douglas*, *Laurence Olivier*, and *Jean Simmons*. This copy of the script was "received" by someone with specified initials on 10 March 1960. I sent a photocopy of that page with a cover letter on 10 September 2011 to Kirk Douglas for comment, since I believe the screenplay had been sent to Bryna Productions. He received my letter and enclosures, but has offered no clarification. At that same time I also wrote to Susan Polonsky-Epstein, daughter of the director/screenwriter, to alert her that I had found the screenplay, but so far I have received no response. An indication of how forgotten the attempt to film *The Gladiators* became is its lack of even a mention in books specifically about failed movie projects, e.g. Chris Gore, *The 50 Greatest Movies Never Made* (1999), and David Hughes, *Tales from Development Hell: The Greatest Movies Never Made* (2nd ed., 2012).

(6) Of the four serious novels (noted above) so far written about the Spartacus slave revolt, those by Koestler and Fast introduced a strong Jewish element into the narrative. For Koestler's *The Gladiators* it was an unnamed Essene moralist and prophet (given the name "John" in Polonsky's screenplay). For Fast it was the Galilee-born David, Spartacus' bodyguard. In both novels those characters are among the last of the insurrectionist survivors to be executed by crucifixion. In the screenplays of Polonsky and Fast there is much emphasis on the role of those Jews. Trumbo (who was not Jewish) includes a shadowy character named "David" who is given no ethnic or religious identity. It may be worth investigating why that was so in a movie produced (Lewis), directed (Kubrick) and acted in (Douglas) by American Jews.

(7) Only Fast's novel introduces the element of race via the African slave/gladiator "Draba", so admirably played (with negligible dialogue in the movie) by Woody Strode.¹⁹ That allowed Fast to tap into his American reading audience via overtones of the segregation/integration issues bubbling to the surface when the novel was at its peak of popularity (1951-1961). In his "buried" screenplay that concern carried over, though in both book and script he undercut the drama of the arena scene with Spartacus by allowing Draba to attack the Roman spectators *before* he fought. It is to Trumbo's credit that Fast's racial aspect was not only retained but intensified. No Hollywood film of that time (or earlier) had allowed a black to defeat a white on screen. Draba's defeat of

Spartacus, and his re-directed, suicidal attack on the Romans who had paid to see him kill in the arena, is one of the most powerful scenes in the film. It is acknowledged in *LAS* only in a movie still (*LAS* 102).

(8) Bryna was among several independent production companies to keep a stable of blacklisted writers on hand. In addition to Trumbo there were at least four more. While it provided them income during a difficult time, it also cut production costs. This is nowhere discussed in *LAS*, though Douglas acknowledges Trumbo's worth, and made sure that his income from *Spartacus* was linked to the film's financial success. What compensation Fast received for his unused screenplay is unknown.

(9) Howard Fast's memoir *Being Red* (1990) 243-268 makes it seem that his time (two months and 22 days) spent at a prison-farm in rural West Virginia was somehow equivalent to an indefinite sentence in the Soviet *gulag*. The evenings he spent playing softball contradict such conditions. Trumbo spent nine months in a similar federal camp but never emphasized it. To their credit neither of them "named names" and recanted to shorten the sentence. Fast went on to document his break with the American Communist Party in *The Naked God* (1957), what Trumbo later characterized as a "noisy departure" in keeping with his view of Fast's enormous ego. To my knowledge, Fast never wrote about his involvement with *Spartacus* except in private communications. When I wrote him in 2000 to ask about his screenplay he never answered. When I wrote in 2002 about a person he'd mentioned in *Being Red* he replied but was unwilling to offer help in finding him.

(10). In virtually every comment (print or recording) about *Spartacus* made by Douglas he has emphasized the importance he attached to the use of American and British actors in identifying the social status of the film's characters within the setting of ancient Rome. His plan was to give the part of upper-class Romans to British actors and relegate the slave characters to American actors. It succeeded only in part: Olivier and Laughton suited that scheme nicely for their parts as the senatorial antagonists Crassus and Gracchus, respectively. But the somewhat lower-class sleazy character of the gladiator-school owner played by Ustinov did not, nor did American actors John Dall and John Gavin as aristocratic Romans. For the few females parts American actresses Nina Foch and Joanna Barnes were cast in the roles of the frivolous Roman women who select the gladiators for combat. The oddest choice of all was to cast British actress Jean Simmons to play the slave-girl Varinia (who became Spartacus' wife). Instead of having her speak American English befitting her lowly status, she was instead imagined to be of British origin.

It is said that a mistress of the Duke of Wellington told him after yet another evening's vocal self-reflection on his military victory at Waterloo: "My dear Duke: Napoleon will be remembered for himself; you will be remembered for Napoleon." It would be facile to suggest that Spartacus will be remembered for himself, but Kirk Douglas will be remembered for Spartacus. This is the tenth book from the actor/producer/director/author, who has had an extensive film career and will leave an enviable legacy. His philanthropic work alone will perhaps endure beyond his Hollywood and literary endeavors. At the very least *I Am Spartacus* will re-awaken interest in one of the darker periods of Hollywood history. It will also re-introduce those who brought *Spartacus* to the big screen in spite of a laundry list of major difficulties. We should be mindful that "back-story" movies such as the recent *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) still draw audiences. Douglas' account of the creation of *Spartacus* has all the elements of just such a treatment. All that's needed is financing, a production studio and crew, a screenplay, a director, and a cast. Just what was needed for the making of *Spartacus*.

NOTES

¹ *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography* (New York & London, Simon & Schuster, 1988). My thanks to Dori Seidier for a critical reading of an earlier draft, and also to the editors of *Left History* for useful comments and agreement that what I had submitted was more acceptable as a review essay than as a book review. Credit for research assistance is given in the appropriate places in the course of this essay.

² Very little has been written about this film feud between Alciona/United Artists' *The Gladiators* and Bryna/Universal's *Spartacus* because almost no research has been devoted to it. I'm hoping to provide as detailed an account as possible in a forthcoming book that will feature the text of, and my commentary on, the script (long thought to be "lost") for *The Gladiators* written by Abraham Polonsky. See in this essay several references to that and other source material for such a book.

³ An excellent account of this is given by Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (New York, Donald I. Fine Books, 1999), 321-333.

⁴ I'm grateful to Barbara Hall (Research Archivist) and Kristine Krueger (National Film Information Service) for their help in obtaining copies of correspondence and press clippings from the Martin Ritt Collection at the Margaret Herrick Library.

⁵ Quoted with permission from the Abraham Polonsky Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society's Film and Theater Center in Madison, WI. My thanks to Harry Miller, Reference Archivist, for his help in securing photocopies of this journal. It is unfortunate that Paul Radin's private papers no longer exist, as I learned during e-mail exchanges in July-August 2012 with his widow Jane Radin in California. I am grateful to Melissa Brown, Writers' Guild West Association, for that contact information.

⁶ Mitzi Trumbo, "Trumbo Family: Kirk Douglas Overstates Blacklist Role," *Salon.com* 7 August 2012.

⁷ Douglas removed an uncertain amount of this material when he researched *RS* in the 1980s, though in correspondence with me he never mentioned it as a source of information about the making of *Spartacus*. The publication of *LAS* should mean a return of that material to the WCFTR.

⁸ (Malden, MA., Blackwell Publishing, 1995). Only five of the eleven essays deal with issues involved in the making of the movie. The other six focus on aspects of the film's historical treatment of ancient political, social, or philosophical issues.

⁹ *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1995), 40-43.

¹⁰ An example of this screenplay's "obituary" is: "Abraham Polonsky ... was the screenwriter [for *The Gladiators*] ... Unfortunately, the script has been lost." See Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 173. At least one copy has survived which I hope to publish—see below "Further Considerations".

¹¹ John Meroney and Sean Coons, "How Kirk Douglas Overstated His Role In Breaking the Hollywood Blacklist," *The Atlantic.com*, 12 July 2012.

¹² One of the better personal accounts is Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: DaCapo Press, 2000). The author, now 94, has been willing to share recollections of his lifelong friendship with Abraham Polonsky in e-mail exchanges with me. One of the better overviews of the blacklist era is the edited collection of thirty five interviews by Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York, St. Martin's Griffen, 1999). See in particular the interview with Abe Polonsky, 481-494.

¹³ See the Criterion Collection two-disc edition, 2001. Disc 1 is the restored film as of 1991 with scene-by-scene over-voice commentary by Douglas, Fast, Lewis and Ustinov, plus comments by restoration expert Robert Harris and set designer Saul Bass (who also created the stunning opening credit sequence for *Spartacus*). Disc 2 contains promotional interviews and deleted scenes but its real value is background material on the blacklist, especially a copy of the documentary *The Hollywood Ten* (1960).

¹⁴ Duncan Cooper, "Who Killed *Spartacus*?" *Cinéaste* 18.3 (1991), 18-27 and also in the same volume "Dalton Trumbo vs Stanley Kubrick: Their Debate over Arthur Koestler's *The Gladiators*," 34-37. Both articles grew from initial thoughts in a preceding article, "*Spartacus*: A Second Look," *Cinéaste* 6:3 (1974), 30-31 (all of them are online at www.visualmemory.co.uk/amk/doc/cooperdex.html). See Cooper's summary of these in "*Spartacus*: Still Censored After All These Years," *Cinéaste* 20:4 (1993) 4; 61.

¹⁵ Fast may well have modeled his sadistic gladiatorial school trainer "Marcellus" on Ernest Borgnine's equally sinister role as the trainer "Strabo" in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*. Fast's character was incorporated into Trumbo's script without an attribution to Fast, the first of several indications that Trumbo had a copy of Fast's *entire* screenplay, meaning that it wasn't "buried" by Douglas after submission.

¹⁶ On the implications of this see the article by Natalie Zemon Davis, "Trumbo and Kubrick Argue History," *Raritan Quarterly Review* 22.1 (2002), 173-190; Duncan Cooper, "Dalton Trumbo vs Stanley Kubrick" (cited in endnote 14 above). It is evident that Trumbo disparaged Koestler at every opportunity, i.e.

personally as a renegade Communist turned right-wing celebrity, and ideologically as a muddled Marxist—the same charges that he also leveled at Fast.

¹⁷ Fast himself, to be fair, had “lifted” without attribution the name (as well as the Germanic ethnic origin) of Spartacus’ wife from his misreading of a footnote in the classic socialist history of ancient slavery: C. Osborne Ward, *The Ancient Lowly*. 2 Volumes (Chicago, Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1888; 1907) Vol. 1 (9th edition), 264 note 73. Trumbo gave “Varinia” a British heritage when Jean Simmons was hired to replace the German starlet Sabina Bethman just before filming started.

¹⁸ On the Starz “Spartacus” series see John Bokina, ““Kill Them All”: Spartacus Without Ideals”, a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL on 30 March 2011 (to be published). On recent manifestations of the Spartacus legend on film see his “Celluloid Spartacus: From Accidental Revolutionary to Sword-and-Sandal Muscle Man” in Will Wright and Steven Kaplan (eds), *The Image of the Hero* (Pueblo, Colorado State University at Pueblo, 2004), 73-79; on Spartacus in fiction see his “From Communist Ideologue to Postmodern Rebel: Spartacus in Novels,” *The European Legacy* 6 (2001) 725-730.

¹⁹ Strode has some interesting comments about the filming of *Spartacus* that have not been utilized in commentary on that movie, including *LAS*; see his co-authored (with Sam Young) autobiography *Goal Dust* (New York and London, Madison Books, 1990), 194-197.