

REPORT ON SPARTACUS

SECTION I.

THE TWO CONFLICTING POINTS OF VIEW ON SPARTACUS

"Never give in! Never give in!  
Never, never, never. Never---  
in anything great or small, large  
or petty---never give in except  
to convictions of honor and good  
sense."

Winston Churchill

at Harrow School

Let me make myself perfectly plain at the outset: more than any film I've ever worked on, I want this to be a great picture. I think it can be.

From the opening of the film through the poem and the first real love scene between Spartacus and Varinia, sequence after sequence explodes onto the screen. The Roman scenes are, as we expected them to be, brilliant. But the delight and the surprise come in Kirk's characterization of Spartacus. There is here a warmth, a tenderness, a strength that is nothing short of wonderful. I have never seen anything like that first scene in the cell between him and Varinia. Throughout the whole Capua sequence, the expression on his face whenever he looks at Varinia - a combination of reverence and wonder and yearning - conveys the essential feeling of poetry. It is a very great achievement for both star and director; a piece of pure film for which no writer would dare take credit, since what has happened could never have been accomplished by words.

I've now seen the Roman portion of the film three times, and all of it twice. I ~~now~~ assume you would like me, as one professional talking to others, to discuss the film in the same spirit of candor with which you have discussed the script on which it is based.

We went into the <sup>project</sup> with four actors (Spartacus, Crassus, Gracchus, Batiatus) and a pretty girl, Varnina. Antoninus I don't count, although he probably adds something by his mere presence. We naturally hoped for the impossible: i.e., to get from each of the four principal actors 100% of his potential value to the story as a whole.

In my scale we got 100% of what Olivier had to offer, a skimpy 90% of Ustinov's potential, no more than 65% of Laughton's, and approximately half of Kirk's and Simmons's. Placing the value of one unit each on Olivier and Kirk, and of one-half unit each on Simmons, Ustinov, and Laughton, and averaging off, it appears to me that actor-wise we have realized about 73% of the potentiality of our cast as related, not to the individual actor, but to the performance value of each ~~to the story as a whole~~ to the story as a whole.

The first hour of Kirk is so lovely that with a few loops and re-cuts, plus contemplated re-writes, it is quite possible even now to get 90-100% of what he has to offer. He will automatically pull Simmons up with him. The possible result? We should have a lovely smash on our hands. And something more than a smash---a successful film financially in which we, as artists, shall all be able to take a quiet, personal pride.

The main point under discussion in this section of my notes deals with Spartacus and his characterization from his reunion with Varinia to the end of the film.

I am going to try to point out as objectively as I can what I consider to be our past mistakes which have brought us to this present condition, not to arouse old differences between us, but to resolve them in such a way that we shall not have to fear their repetition in the future.

From the very beginning there have been two perfectly honest points of view on the nature of the Spartacus story. They are, I hope, objectively summarized below:

LARGE SPARTACUS

The revolt of the slaves was a major rebellion that shook the Republic.

That it lasted at least a full year.

SMALL SPARTACUS

That it was, in reality, more on the scale of a jail-break and subsequent dash for freedom.

That it was much briefer in duration.

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2.

### LARGE SPARTACUS

That it involved a series of brilliant slave military campaigns, ~~involving~~ the defeat of the best Rome had to offer.

That it was finally put down only by the overwhelming weight of three Roman armies against the single slave army.

I should now like to point out how the scale of the campaign envisioned for Spartacus by each point of view led quite naturally to different points of view about Spartacus as a man, as a character, just as a great commander in a great war would probably turn out by the logic of events to be quite different from ~~that~~ an ordinary leader in a short dash for freedom---an escape:

### LARGE SPARTACUS

That once the die was cast, Spartacus fought for freedom for every man, woman and child in his army. Objective big.

That even though Spartacus may have suffered, in the earliest phase, one moment of doubt as to his objective, once he had overcome it he would never doubt again.

That Spartacus assumed leadership and exercised it actively, planning destinations, strategy, etc.

That in the moment of his supreme test, Spartacus's doubt centers about the problem of whether or not he has exercised his leadership as effectively for all the slaves as he could have; whether in this or that strategic situation his decision has been right. But that he never doubts the rightness of his cause, or the need for all of them to have engaged in it, even unto death.

### SMALL SPARTACUS

That it was a simple dash for the sea.

That it was put down by one Roman army.

### SMALL SPARTACUS

That once the die was cast, Spartacus envisioned nothing more than freedom for himself and Varinia. Objective small, personal.

That he does suffer the moment of doubt as to the objective, and probably suffers it repeatedly thereafter.

That Spartacus probably had leadership thrust on him, that he exercised it reluctantly, that he never be seen discussing destinations or planning strategy.

That Spartacus vacillates between the social end (freedom for all) and the personal end (freedom for himself and Varinia); that his doubts extend not only to the question of whether he should have led the slaves at all, but also to the question of whether the revolt actually should ever have occurred.

From the scope and purpose of the war derive the scope and purpose of the character; from the scope and purpose of the character derive certain personal, dramatic, and technical differences:

### LARGE SPARTACUS

Spartacus, like his great enemy, Crassus, is a man who both feels and thinks.

That Spartacus must be shown intellectually involved with the solution of the slave problems: which means he would have scenes of discussion, talk, plot: that he would be quite as eloquent, in his different fashion, as Crassus: that he would be just as intelligent as Crassus: that his stated aims are good and noble ones, involving much more than himself: that he is, in short, a man quite able to make himself understood to his followers and to the audience by means of the spoken word.

That Spartacus must be allowed speeches long enough to express his thought; and scenes long enough to reveal his plans, his objectives.

That there must be in the Spartacus story, once the break is made, a complexity, a story content, a plot, in short, equal to the plot of the Roman story: and that plot is necessary to drama.

That a strong Spartacus would naturally call for strong slave characters to play against and with him.

### SMALL SPARTACUS

He mainly feels; he is really not the equal of Crassus.

That Spartacus rarely, if ever, should be shown in intellectual discussion of strategy, morale, etc., (that is mere talk); that he would rarely seek to exhort or to inspire his followers (more talk); that he would rarely say anything that related good of the whole slave community---he would, rather, think of Varinia, his son, how his son will remember the fame of Spartacus, of himself---and all these limited thoughts (limited in terms of the slave objectives) should be stated with bombast rather than simply, and with that quiet eloquence which so often springs to the lips of simple, intelligent, devoted men.

That ~~the~~ speeches relating to intellectual problems (destination, strategy, politics, etc.) be cut altogether, or shortened to the point of mystification; that all such scenes be pared to the bone, or, better still, eliminated entirely.

That the Spartacus story must be simplified, simplified, simplified until every twist is taken out of it, every problem made elemental, the plot diluted, and the drama thereby diminished.

The weak characters (and poor actors) with and against whom Spartacus plays are a direct outcome of the small Spartacus concept.

TO THE

## LARGE SPARTACUS

That Spartacus, in his confrontation with Crassus, conducts himself as a man who comprehends that he has achieved a great moral victory even in defeat, while Crassus does not comprehend it; he has simply a fatal feeling of present defeat in victory, and a future threat that will ultimately destroy everything he holds sacred.

That Spartacus began as an animal and became a man; that is, he became conscious of others than himself. That the essence of manhood is to rise above the petty ambitions of one's own ~~self~~ self, and identify oneself with something larger, with mankind as a whole, with the good of mankind. That the spirit and intellect of Spartacus in his moment of defeat and moral agony rose so far above himself that it symbolized the spirit and intellect of the whole murdered slave community.

Thus far I have dealt only with the large and small concepts of Spartacus as developed when the man himself is in the scene. But characters are built in quite another way also: by showing the visible effect of what they do. Up to now I have dealt mainly with Spartacus visibly in action: now let us examine what has happened to the character of Spartacus in terms of the reactions his actions have provoked; in terms of how Spartacus has affected his enemies:

## LARGE SPARTACUS

The slave revolt affected the entire social structure of Rome.

It precipitated a political struggle amongst the leaders of Rome.

Spartacus threatened Rome, producing a panic.

## SMALL SPARTACUS

That their confrontation be entirely personal, involving nothing more than a man angry at his defeat, and a man gloating in his victory. That the moral crisis of the moment be evaded entirely in favor of a petty clash between egotists.

That Spartacus began as a man (and for the first hour he is very much a feeling man after the first shock of arrival)---and ended as an animal, absorbed in his scene with Crassus only with the sound of his own name, the fate of his own person, the offense of defeat to his own vanity. Thus he would summarize the whole aspiration of mankind---freedom---with sneers, with jeering taunts---with large allusions to himself as Spartacus ---and with a gobbet of spit.

## SMALL SPARTACUS

It did not.

The struggle had nothing to do with Spartacus: he was an excuse, never a trigger or a cause.

He did not threaten Rome, and no panic must be seen or spoken of.

5.

#### LARGE SPARTACUS

The panic had the political result of overthrowing the Republic and installing Crassus as dictator.

That Gracchus is aware of the problem Spartacus has brought about in Roman politics, and speaks of it so that the audience can have further evidence of the stature of Spartacus.

That Gracchus later understands the imminent fall of the Republic, and attributes it correctly to Spartacus.

That Gracchus, in the end, completely understands that a Republic which existed on slavery was bound itself to become enslaved; that the freedom the Republic denied Spartacus would not be denied to the Republic itself. In short, that Spartacus killed the Republic that would not give him freedom: that Spartacus won---he defeated his enemy, and is the victor.

That Spartacus ~~never~~ finally understands this himself; and conducts himself with Crassus with the dignity and power befitting a victor.

#### SMALL SPARTACUS

There was no panic caused by Spartacus; hence Spartacus had no effect upon the internal politics of Rome; hence the dictatorship of Crassus merely happened, and any speech or scene attributing to Spartacus any influence upon Roman events must be cut.

That Gracchus is not aware of what Spartacus's rebellion means to the Republic; and that wherever Gracchus makes mention of Spartacus in such a way as to show his importance and threat to Rome, such mention must be written out of the scene.

That such attribution of influence exerted by Spartacus must be written out of the scene.

That Gracchus understands nothing of the sort; and that every line of dialogue indicating that he does thus comprehend the enormous stature of Spartacus be written out of the scene.

That Spartacus never understands what he did; in fact that he couldn't possibly understand, because every Roman speech, scene, and plot-bit attributing influence to Spartacus will be cut or written in such a way as absolutely to eliminate Spartacus as a character whose actions produced visible effect upon his enemy, the Roman leaders, people and state.



6.

In the foregoing summary of the Large and Small view on the character and story of Spartacus, I may have erred here and there. But if so, I think the errors are minor, and that the summary as a whole is correct and can be completely vindicated by the written record.

Throughout all the discussions---and they have gone on now for over a year---the writer has consistently held to the Large view of Spartacus. Our first, second and final scripts are ~~based~~ based on the Large view; the Small view has been kept out of them.

Throughout the writing of these three drafts it was agreed by all of us that the Spartacus sections were not written as well as the Roman sections. That they were not so well written is explained by the fact we had to get the Roman actors. It was agreed that we should have plenty of time to re-write the Spartacus part after we got the others under way and on the line.

We did a good many re-writes on the Roman story---scene re-writes, reorganizations, etc., but not once did we seriously tamper with the Roman plot. It stood as accepted and solid from beginning to end. Therefore, by merely improving the Roman scenes and adhering to the plot, we encountered no trouble. Basically---and quite naturally---the Roman portion of the story as it presently exists on film offers us no problems.

It is my assertion that from the very beginning of the Spartacus story we were just as solid plot-wise as we were with the Roman section. Construction-wise, all the Spartacus scenes were correctly spotted; they were dramatically spaced; they were based on the Large view of the character and they were consistent to it; and all they needed was a thoughtful re-write, (adhering to the plot) of individual characterizations or scenes.

This we never had time to do, and have not yet had time to do, and now, unless we agree on fundamentals, may never have time to do. The reason we never got around to re-writing within the limits of our ~~same~~ Spartacus plot based on the Large view of the character, is simple: the Small view took over, and compelled what amounted to three complete plot-re-writes of the Spartacus scenes from Capua forward. No writer on earth can shift plots that fast in the course of shooting, and simultaneously develop decently and fully the three subtly different characterizations they make necessary.

Let me again insist that I believe these differences of opinion based on Large and Small were perfectly honest. Indeed, it is not a question of honesty or of personalities---for when two opposites collide, one has to be wrong and one right, and rightness or wrongness have no relation to honesty in such a situation. But now in considering Large and Small, we must conclude that one is wrong. We must identify the wrong view; and then we must embrace without any reservations the right view.

Otherwise, we shall be utterly lost.

I say here and now that the Large view was correct in the beginning, that it was correct in all three script versions, and that it is still correct. I further say that the entire trouble with our film lies in the fact that after the January 16 version, all the endless re-writes involved a slow turn toward the Small view. For such elements of the Small view I have permitted myself, under pressure of time or persons or argument, to write into the script, I bitterly blame myself. I should have found some better way to make my point of view clear. I should have worked harder to persuade you. I should have been more stubborn. I should have fought the Small view to the bitter end; and I should not have written one line, word or scene to further it. That I allowed it to show up so strongly in my own re-writes is a mistake for which I take full responsibility.

However, I am persuaded that no fight of mine could have prevented what now stands on the screen as complete victory for the Small view. For I quickly discovered that no matter how I sought in the writing to preserve the Large view, every scene in which it appeared would be re-written by others, hastily and on the set. The Small view would not even now have been so small had even my Small view re-writes been approximately shot as written. But they were not. And I have no reason to believe that any Spartacus scene I write in the future will be shot as written.

NEVER

NOT

DOESN'T

Please do not credit what I now have to say to sheer vanity. Please believe that I am quite as capable as you of wanting this picture to be a success. Please believe that when my scenes are improved by re-writes, cuts, juggling, insertions, etc., ~~that~~ I am so pig-headed as to deny the obvious improvement; that I would condemn as bad that which is actually better than I wrote it. But please allow me to suggest that in instance after instance, your re-writes have not been as well written as the original scene; and that in certain instances they are downright bad; and that in practically all instances they fail, in their effort to improve an isolated scene, to take into consideration the story as a whole; and that the story as a whole as it presently stands is actually hurt by the re-writes; that if you only lose a little---one good line!---when you re-write a scene, and if you re-write a number of scenes as you have, then you hurt the whole picture considerably more than just a little. I don't say the audience will miss some of the genuinely good lines, ideas and speeches you have cut or watered down, for an audience can never miss something it never had knowledge of, that ~~exists~~ exist insofar as it is concerned. Nonetheless, you have lost in a way that can never be proved; you have made the picture less good than it could have been. You have effected this loss because, by and large, you have harmed more scenes than you have improved.

Let me suggest, not in reproach for the past, but as a practical suggestion for the future, that it is, as a matter of general policy, wiser to follow even a mediocre script, than hastily

SIMPLY

to improvise your own scenes at the last minute. I am quite as aware as you that you have purchased my lines and scenes; you have paid good money for them, and you have the right to do with them whatever you wish. The question I raise, then, cannot possibly be a personal protest. It ~~merely~~ asks: is it wise of you to exercise that right merely because you possess it? Do you help the scene and the picture as much as you harm it by treating dialogue and script as property rather than as something which resembles (or tries to) an art form? Would it not in the long run perhaps be better for all concerned if you had a writer do your re-writing rather than do it yourselves, segmentally instead of sequentially, and hastily rather than thoughtfully?

In the past I have worked with, or my screenplays have been directed by, such competent, successful, and even brilliant artists as Sam Wood, Mervyn Leroy, Preston Sturges, |

Garson Kanin, Rene Clair, and Victor Fleming, whom I consider the king of them all. The films which resulted have won Academy Awards in all creative fields---acting, directing, writing, producing, etc. Not one of those directors nor one of those actors reewrote even a speech without consulting the writer, much less rearrange, cut, ~~and~~ re-wrote an entire scene. They were professionals who had respect for the work of other professionals. Once the script was approved, they had the guts to stand by it and shoot it, and in every instance they came through with a successful film. They knew, as all experienced film people know, that the dangers of haphazard set re-writing far outweigh the possibilities of gain.

Allow me to pursue the matter one step further. As matters now stand, the actor who comes off best is the actor (1) whose plot line has never been changed, (2) who requested the fewest changes in his part, (3) who made the fewest changes in his own lines, and even those with consultation, and (4) who never deviated so much as a word from the approved script in all of his ~~key~~ key speeches: Olivier.

Laughton and Ustinov don't come off quite so ~~well~~ <sup>well</sup>, and there is a reason: Ustinov was allowed to dabble mercilessly with their two parts. Because he is a writer, we gain a witticism and even a speech here and there: but those gains do not compensate for the loss of character delineation in Laughton, nor for the flippant way in which Ustinov overlooked story points in favor of gags. Much of what they did was wrong, and has already been cut. I shall indicate where I think further cuts are necessary. By and large, Ustinov's re-writes represent a loss. Fortunately the loss is not great enough for the audience to be aware of ~~it~~. Nonetheless they both would have come off better, particularly Laughton, if they had done no rewriting at all: and the final film as it involves them would have been much better and clearer as to Laughton's characteriza-

tion. In those ~~senate~~ senate scenes in which Ustinov did not meddle with a word of Laughton's lines, and in which both Laughton and Olivier depart not at all from the approved script, Laughton comes off at his best.

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~~\_\_\_\_\_~~. Nor do I feel here that the actor playing Spartacus is entirely to blame in this matter of on-the-set re-writes and reorganizations. I feel that there are certain approved scenes which Stanley quietly disapproves of; and that in order to get his way with them, he organizes a last-minute panic which enables him, on the spot and without consultation with the writer, to do with them as an emergency what he has quietly planned all along to do as a matter of policy. If this is not true, I instantly withdraw the suggestion. If it is true, all I can say is that a man who takes that responsibility upon himself has to be awfully certain he is right - and in certain places, as I shall try to point out, he was not right.

None of this is to say that the Spartacus scenes in the last half of the film are perfect, or right, or even approach being right. I do not exculpate myself from the onus of having written them. I do state that their plot has never been let alone long enough to develop a character, and that certain of the scenes - bad as they may have originally been - have been made worse by forcing concepts and lines upon the author which he hated, and by inept re-writing and re-wording on the set.

I have every confidence that if my work is left alone, I can ~~write~~ write a Spartacus that will be the equal of any other part in the film. The question is - do you--have that confidence? If you do have ~~some~~ confidence, I will write the scenes, we will then go over them and thresh out all differences, and then those scenes will be frozen and shot word for word as they are written. There simply is no other way to do it.

You see, I'm really in a difficult situation, and I'm crying for help. It must by now be clear to all of us that when scene after scene has to be revised or re-written on the set---when whole new speeches have to be added without my knowledge---we are compelled to come to one of two possible conclusions: (1) the writer is not handing in good scenes, or (2) the writer has completely lost the professional confidence of his star and director; they dare not trust his opinion that his scenes are good enough to be shot as they are written.

In either conclusion, the writer himself is at fault. If we are to proceed successfully, you must help me overcome these faults. You must explain to me the defects of my lines, the errors in my speeches, and the failure of my scenes---just what it is in my work that causes it always

to miss the mark in one way or another. You must also try to help me solve the problem of commanding your professional confidence---your respect. For until I win your confidence (I have not won it, and the fault is bound to lie within myself), I shall never be able to give you the lines, speeches, and scenes you so badly need to bring this picture up to its original promise.

With this rather despairing but perfectly honest appeal, I shall turn my attention to SECTION II, which follows: