

Film Review: Quo Vadis (1951)

Contributed by Karl Holzheimer

{[comments on]}It is 64 A.D. and General Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) is returning to Rome with his legions after three years in the field putting down rebellions in Brittany and Gaul. Emperor Nero (Peter Ustinov) is on the throne, and Vinicius' uncle Petronius (Leo Genn), an advisor to Nero, sets up accommodations for him with Plautius (Felix Aylmer), a retired Roman general, pending his victorious formal entry into Rome the next day. That evening Vinicius mistakes Lygia (Deborah Kerr) for a slave girl and starts to aggressively put the moves on her. It turns out that she is actually Plautius' adopted daughter—the biological daughter of the King of Lygia (hence the name). Inexplicably the two are drawn to each other. She, and her adopted father and mother, are Christians, while Vinicius is a swaggering military type who is fond of telling of his glorious and very bloody conquests in foreign parts (“We fought them with our bowels! Try it sometime!”). Their dinner that evening is interrupted by a visit from Paul, a traveling rabbi and a good friend of the family. He tells them that the apostle Peter will be arriving soon. As Vinicius listens to the family and the rabbi converse, he gets his first intimation of this burgeoning sect of Christians. And he is not impressed with the tenets of their faith. “Well, I don’t know a great deal about philosophy, and lovely women shouldn’t have the time to think that deeply,” he opines. Vinicius, however, is soon drawn into the politics of Rome. The Emperor Nero is quickly spinning into madness and, to make matters worse, his wife, Poppaea (Patricia Laffan) has an amorous inclination for Vinicius. Vinicius: “His new wife, Poppaea, sounds interesting - a harlot for an empress?” Petronius: “My dear Marcus, what a proletarian observation! You must know that a woman has no past when she mates with a god.” But Vinicius just can’t get Lygia out of his mind. He concocts a scheme, using an obscure point of Roman law, to have her all to himself. After he has her ripped from her adoptive family, tarted up to be presented to Nero, and is about to send her off to his estate to be used for his pleasure as he sees fit, she is still somehow attracted to him. And Lygia has made an enemy in Nero’s wife Poppaea. When Poppaea points out Lygia’s attractiveness to Nero, in a bid to get Nero to take Lygia for himself, she is thwarted (after some tactful maneuvering by Petronius) when Nero replies, “Dear Poppaea, one woman should never judge another. She hasn’t the glands for it.” Nero makes plans to “fiddle while Rome burns” and blame the Christians, Vinicius and Lygia’s paths continue to cross, and lots and lots of lions are gathered for a big show at the Coliseum. Quo Vadis represents both the best and the worst of the studio system in the Hollywood of its day. The best: it is truly visually spectacular. Literally thousands of extras were employed, the sets and costumes are lavish—especially noteworthy is the set decoration by Hugh Hunt, Miklós Rózsa’s score set the standard for epics to come, and Peter Ellenshaw’s matte paintings are beautifully rendered and beautifully employed. MGM’s decision to film at the Cinecittà Studios in Rome gave them access to hundreds of artisans who created tens of thousands of artifacts and costumes that would have been cost prohibitive in Hollywood. The worst: despite the efforts of three credited screenwriters the movie just kind of sits there. There is no excitement or dramatic tension. The love story at the center of its plot is not at all believable, and Taylor and Kerr are unable to produce a romantic chemistry to help it along. Director Mervyn LeRoy was an accomplished journeyman director of some great pictures for both Warner Brothers in the thirties and for MGM in the forties including: Little Caesar (1931), I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), Anthony Adverse (1936), Waterloo Bridge (1940), Johnny Eager (1942), and Random Harvest (1942) to name a few. He continued to direct commercially successful pictures until 1965. But although he masterfully orchestrated this massive production and brought the picture in on time and on budget, there is little evidence of a visual style and pace that would propel the similarly themed The Ten Commandments (1956), Ben-Hur (1959) and Spartacus (1960) to legendary classic film status.

Robert Taylor is not a great fit as Marcus Vinicius. He is not helped at all by being the only American in a cast of Brits. He comes across as too modern, someone who would be more comfortable barking orders to WWII soldiers on a beach rather than leading Roman legions against the Gauls. Deborah Kerr does the best that she can with what she is given to play. A combination of pious innocence and smoldering sensuality is hard to pull off, especially when in the screen vernacular of the day only bad girls got to play sexy. And her Lygia represents the purest of the pure. Yet we are still supposed to believe that she is drawn to Taylor’s Vinicius, who until halfway through the film anyway, wants her literally as his sexual slave. Kerr is lovely throughout and Taylor sports some really good Roman hair. Luckily for viewers of the film, Peter Ustinov as Nero, and Leo Genn as Petronius are a delight to watch. Ustinov dominates every scene he is in. His Nero is over the top and rightly so. Leo Genn’s sardonic Petronius matches him every step of the way. Both were nominated for Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor. Patricia Laffan as Nero’s wife Poppaea has some nice moments as well, as does Marina Berti as Eunice, Petronius’ slave and lover.

Quo Vadis was commercially successful but received mixed critical reviews. From Howard Thompson of The New York Times: “Huge and stultifying. For those who like grandeur and noise—and no punctuation. Titanic in every way you would expect of Old Rome, from a visiting Hollywood which apparently utilized every nook and cranny, the cranniest thing of all being the love story.” But people did go see it. At the time, it was the second highest-grossing film in MGM history, topped only by Gone With the Wind, and garnered eight Academy Award nominations including Best Picture but won none. And it was legendary MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer’s swan song. He resigned from the studio effective August 31, 1951 after a prolonged battle with executive producer Dore Schary. In a sense Quo Vadis was the end of an era. But in another sense, Quo Vadis was the beginning of an era too.

“This is the movie that launched a thousand ships. This is the movie that launched a thousand imitations,” states film historian Sir Christopher Frayling in the documentary that accompanies the film’s DVD release. Along with Paramount’s release of Cecil B. DeMille’s Samson and Delilah (1949) starring Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr, Quo Vadis ushered in

a new era of historical epics of the ancient world which became staples of the 1950s, culminating with William Wyler's Ben-Hur (1959) and ending with George Stevens' The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965). There were scores more; many were incredibly popular. But these kinds of films had been big box-office since the birth of the movies. A 1913 Italian production of Quo Vadis was enormously popular in the United States. Close on its heels was another Italian epic Cabiria (1914), and both have been cited as incentives for early American film pioneers to top the Italians. D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915) and Intolerance (1916) are early examples. Cecil B. DeMille made many very successful films in this genre. Reportedly Mervyn LeRoy asked for advice from the master before departing for Rome to film Quo Vadis. When he asked DeMille why he kept returning to these kinds of films DeMille—ever the canny showman—replied, "How could you not want to use 2,000 years of publicity?" He took his own advice and remade his 1923 version of The Ten Commandments in 1956. It was his final film and the most commercially successful effort of his career. Quo Vadis was based on the novel of the same name by Polish writer and Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz. The novel was first published in 1895, and MGM acquired the rights to it sometime in the late 1930s. It was first considered as a vehicle for the young Robert Taylor. Then the names Orson Welles and Marlene Dietrich were bandied about. WWII put the project on hold. John Huston and producer Arthur Hornblow Jr. presented a treatment to Dore Schary, who liked it, and pre-production kicked in. Huston liked a young, unknown Belgian actress Audrey Hepburn as Lygia. Schary nixed an unknown for the part. Finally in 1948 it was announced that Huston would direct the project starring Gregory Peck as Marcus Vinicius, Elizabeth Taylor as Lygia and, featuring Huston's father Walter as Peter. Folks were sent over to Cinecittà Studios in Rome to get the ball rolling. The production was delayed however, and Hornblow withdrew as producer, Huston had to back out as director as he had another commitment, Peck developed an eye infection, and Elizabeth Taylor was loaned to Paramount for A Place in the Sun. That left the film in pre-production in Rome but with no director and no stars. Louis B. Mayer stepped in and assigned Robert Taylor and Deborah Kerr, both under contract to MGM, to the leads, as well as Mervyn LeRoy, also under contract, as director. One can only speculate what a different film Quo Vadis might have turned out to be had Huston, Peck, and Taylor worked out.

THE DVD

Warner Home Video has released a Quo Vadis (Two-Disc Special Edition) to DVD. In addition, they have released a high definition transfer to Blu-ray. The film has been digitally re-mastered by Warner's patented Technicolor re-mastering process. It looks truly spectacular. I watched the high definition Blu-ray release and could see no flaws in its visual presentation. The sound has not been remixed and is presented in monaural. Both editions have identical bonus features:

- A restored 3 ¼ minute overture for the film
- Commentary by F.X. Feeney
- Theatrical Teaser and Trailer
- In the Beginning: Quo Vadis and the Genesis of the Biblical Epic is a 45 minute documentary that expertly and entertainingly explains the film's production, the history of Quo Vadis the book and prior film adaptations, and the impact Quo Vadis had on films that followed.

THE CONCLUSION

In my opinion Quo Vadis is not one of the classics of its era or genre. If you enjoy films that laud the Christian religion though, you may be inclined to disagree. If, as I do, you enjoy biblical/historical epics, this is not one of the best. That said, its not one of the worst either. And it does merit its place in film history. The documentary is well worth a look too. At 171 minutes it may be on the longish side for those with only a casual interest. For high definition enthusiasts the Blu-ray is a must see, but maybe as a rental rather than a purchase. If you like epics, you'll no doubt enjoy this one. If you don't—and I don't know who you might be—you'll probably want to avoid Quo Vadis.

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