

BREAKING THE PHYSIQUE BARRIER:

STEVE REEVES AND THE PROMOTION OF *HERCULES*

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On 20 February 1958, a movie was released in Italy that would, over the course of the next two years, vault American bodybuilder Steve Reeves from a level of relative obscurity to international stardom. The low budget *Le Fatiche di Ercole* (*The Labors of Hercules*) was filmed using recycled Hollywood sets and non-“A-list” actors, yet it obtained a level of success in Italy that had not been seen since the golden years of Italy’s silent film era.¹ The film’s surprising popularity with Italian audiences attracted the attention of independent film producer Joseph E. Levine, then living in Boston, who purchased the distribution rights to the film, exported it to the United States, and marketed it so successfully that it became, according to Reeves, “the most successful picture in the world . . . the entire world, in 1959.”²

Scholars in film studies have generally argued that the film’s success in America was due primarily to the massive advertising campaign Levine created as he promoted the movie—renamed simply *Hercules*—in ways not used by other film distributors in the fifties.³ However, perhaps equally important to the film’s success was the charismatic Reeves—an actor who looked physically unlike any other leading man in this—or any previous era. While many film critics panned *Hercules* as cheaply made, badly dubbed, and starring a man with limited acting skills, the public paid scant attention to these high-brow opinions and fell in love with *Hercules* and its handsome star.⁴ President John F. Kennedy even counted himself among Reeves’ fans, as did British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who, according to an inside source, “especially admired Steve Reeves as Hercules.”⁵

The enormous popularity of the film—and Reeves—during the waning years of the 1950s—marked the first wave of a cultural shift in the appreciation of the male physique on the big screen. After *Hercules*, the idea that leading men would display muscularity along with their handsome faces became, while not ubiquitous, far more widely accepted, and the built body—the bodybuilder body—began appearing in a number of other costume dramas that followed in its wake.⁶ As film historian Steven Cohan wrote about *Hercules* and the other “peplum” (“Peplum” refers to the thigh-high kilts and tunics worn in these early epics.) or “sword and sandal” films of this era, “Like the physique photography of the period, which supplied the conventions for representing the muscular body on screen, the . . . films dispensed with the pretense of disavowing the eroticism of the male body beautiful . . . these spectacles appeared to reinscribe a very orthodox understanding of masculinity.”⁷ This was certainly true for *Hercules*, and the affirmation of Reeves’ body as strong, attractive, hyper-masculine, and “monetizable,” would launch dozens of other “sword and sandal” epics starring weight-trained actors in the decades that followed, epics which also impacted muscularity in traditional films.⁸

While much critical attention has been given to the muscular, hard-bodied stars of the 1980s such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, this essay focuses on the birth of the modern peplum era through a history of the early career of Steve Reeves and the marketing of *Hercules*, his first major film.⁹ While most critics agree that Reeves and *Hercules* launched a new and very popular genre of films—dozens of other sword and sandal epics were made in the decade after its release—scholarly discussions have focused primarily on the peplum genre as a whole rather than unpacking

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Reeves' body played a large role in the success of *Hercules* and throughout the film Reeves struck poses that showed his wide shoulders and narrow waist to advantage. In this scene, near the end of the film, Reeves gets ready to mimic Samson and wrap the chains that had been holding him prisoner around the pillars of the palace of Jolco and pull it to the ground.

the story of how Reeves, Levine, and an unlikely low budget film made in Italy made it all happen.¹⁰ This essay attempts to fill that gap.

The Age of the Chest

Historical epics set in Biblical/Classical times were not unknown in Hollywood when Reeves was cast as Hercules. Victor Mature had starred in *Samson and Delilah* in 1949 and *The Robe* in 1953. Kirk Douglas

made *Ulysses* in 1954, while Charlton Heston played Moses that same year in the *Ten Commandments*.¹¹ The bare male torso had been on display in enough movies by 1958, in fact, that critic Richard Armour suggested in *Playboy* that the era might well be remembered as the "Age of the Chest." According to Armour, Marlon Brando led the new turn toward exposing the male body in his performance as Stanley Kowalski in *A Street Car Named Desire* (1951), but he had been followed by Burt Lan-

caster in *From Here to Eternity* (1953), William Holden in *Picnic* that same year, and then, in 1954, by Kirk Douglas in *Ulysses*.¹² Despite Armour's prescience on the growing popularity of male muscles in the movies, these mainstream actors possessed what one might call "good physiques," but their bodies looked nothing like those of the top bodybuilders of this era—George Eiferman, Clarence Ross, Bill Pearl, Reg Park, and, of course, Steve Reeves.¹³ Brando and Douglas, for example, had visible biceps, prominent deltoids, and modest pectoral development, yet their bodies had none of the fullness of muscle or overall symmetry that caused Eiferman to recall that when Steve Reeves walked along Santa Monica Beach men and women often followed him as if he were some sort of "exotic and beautiful new species."¹⁴ According to film historian Steve Cohan, the difference in these earlier films and the films that came out post-



The difference between the fully-muscled Reeves body and that of other leading men in this era can be easily seen in this photograph of Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*, released in 1960.

Hercules, was that, "the peplum films . . . glorified the physiques of their starring actors and were thus able to appeal to both women and men."¹⁵

And appeal Reeves did. Reflecting on the unusual path of his career, Reeves commented later in his life that, "As Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball, I broke the physique barrier in show business."¹⁶ While silent film star Bartolomeo Pagano (famously known for playing the Italian strongman Maciste), and various American Tarzans (such as Johnny Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe), might argue with Reeves' claim, his breakthrough performance in *Hercules* unquestionably helped other weight trained men—particularly bodybuilders—make the transition to the big screen in the years that followed.¹⁷ Reg Park, Gordon Scott, Ed Fury, and Mickey Hargitay, all of whom starred in their own sword and sandal epics in the 1960s, may have been Hercules' immediate heirs, but Schwarzenegger's *Conan The Barbarian* (1982) and the other films of the 1980s in which the built body was vital to the film's ticket sales, were also its descendants. Sylvester Stallone, whose ripped body has been central to the success of his *Rocky* and *Rambo* serials, has talked openly and frequently about the debt he owes Reeves. In an on-stage interview in 2014, Stallone told an audience, "When they say that films don't influence people's behavior, that's not true. When I walked into a theater and saw Steve Reeves, it changed my life. I went outside and started lifting everything I could. I'm telling you it was truly a seminal moment in my life. And, if I hadn't seen that film, I wouldn't be here today."¹⁸ On another occasion, Stallone went further, telling a reporter that seeing Reeves in that darkened theater was "like seeing the Messiah."¹⁹ Thousands of other young men had similar personal conversion moments while watching *Hercules*. Ralph Bansigore, to give just one example, wrote in a Steve Reeves fan magazine, "As a teenager I was overweight and flabby . . . [but when I saw *Hercules*] my life was changed—forever. The impact of that perfect physique was profound and permanent. I went home, took off my shirt and looked in the mirror. I have been working out ever since."²⁰

Becoming a Bodybuilder

Stephen Lester Reeves was born on 21 January 1926 in Glasgow, Montana, to parents Lester Dell Reeves and Golden "Goldie" Boyce.²¹ Steve's father, Lester, died in 1927 in a tragic accident when a pitchfork

became trapped in a wheat threshing machine and, as the workers were trying to release it, it catapulted through the air and punctured his abdomen. Although he lingered for several days, doctors were unable to repair his ruptured organs and he died of peritonitis.²² Steve was only eighteen months old at the time of his father's death, and so never really knew him, although older family members recalled that Lester had also had an impressive physique and unusual strength.²³ Steve and his mother were living separately from Lester at this time, staying with her parents on the Boyce's ranch in Peerless, Montana. Steve remembered these early years as among the happiest of his life. His grandfather taught him to ride by the time he was three and, as Reeves recalled, he'd "get up in the morning, play in the woods, or in the river . . . or get on my horse and ride all day . . . I was totally carefree."²⁴

Sadly for Steve, the carefree life didn't last. In 1930, with the ranch faltering and the Great Depression settling over America, Steve's grandmother passed away, and Goldie and her son moved to Great Falls, Montana, so she could find work and relieve her father of the need to financially support her and her preschool son. She found work as a waitress at the Rainbow Hotel and for the first couple years in Great Falls, she and Steve boarded with a young married couple and the woman looked after Steve when Goldie went to work. In time, Goldie began searching for a better job and was hired as the live-in cook for the town's physician, a man named Dr. Porter. While Goldie was no doubt happy to be offered the better paying position, she was not allowed to keep Steve with her in the doctor's private home. In what was probably a heart-wrenching decision on her part, she then made arrangements to send Steve to a boarding school/orphanage located in Helena, Montana, a two-and-a-half-hour drive southwest of Great Falls.²⁵ The Montana Deaconess School was home to a number of "rural boys and girls whose parents, for a variety of reasons were unable to care for their children" during the early years of the twentieth century.²⁶ Steve stayed there for the next three years, reportedly seeing Goldie primarily at Thanksgiving and Christmas.²⁷ When other boarding students went home in the summers, Reeves instead went to his Uncle Earl's ranch (the brother of his mother) where he helped out,



Bartolomeo Pagano was the first strongman hero of Italian cinema. During the silent film era he appeared in more than 30 films under the stage name "Maciste" and was a great favorite with Italian film audiences.

worked with horses, and deepened his love of ranch life.²⁸

The summer after he turned ten, Steve stayed with the Hall family, friends of Goldie's, at a cabin on the Smith River. Steve soon noticed that seventeen-year-old Vernon Hall, who chopped the firewood for the family that summer, possessed an impressive physique. Reeves later recalled that, "When Vernon would take off his shirt and swing that hefty axe, his muscles flexed with every move."²⁹ Vernon, although young, had already found his way to barbell training, and even though Reeves was not around Vernon much after that summer, he always cited Vernon as the reason he began to think about bodybuilding.³⁰ Reeves no doubt enjoyed that summer hiking, camping, and swimming with the Hall children, and at the end of his stay there Goldie did not send him back to Helena to school.³¹ Instead, mother and son moved to Oakland, California, where Steve lived for the next eight years of his life—although again—not always with Goldie.³²

Goldie and Steve arrived in Oakland in 1936 and moved in with a former waitress friend from Montana named Frances Chamberlain and her husband. The plan was for them to stay with the Chamberlains until Goldie found work and could get her own place, but, despite her best efforts, she was unable to find work in Oakland. Finally, she took a job as a live-in housekeep-



Backstage, following the 1947 Mr. America contest in Chicago, Reeves poses with several members of the "Olympettes," who helped hand out trophies and assist in various decorative capacities during the show.

er in Napa, about fifty miles north of Oakland but, once again, Steve could not live with her. For the next three years they saw each other primarily on weekends and holidays while Steve lived with the Chamberlains.³³ In 1939, she returned to Oakland and soon afterwards married Earl Maylone, who worked as a repairman for the phone company. Steve, Goldie, and Earl then moved to their own home in East Oakland where Steve lived until leaving for the Army.³⁴

According to his biographer, Chris LeClaire, Steve always had some kind of part-time job, and gave money to Goldie to help support their small family. However, he also seemed to enjoy his teen-age years in Oakland, making friends, watching movies, and eventually thinking about how to build strength and muscle. It was in Oakland, with money he earned, that Reeves began attending the Saturday matinees at the local movie theater. Like most teenage boys he was drawn to films featuring action and strong leading men such as Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, and especially Johnny Weissmuller, his favorite actor during his boyhood.³⁵

To get around the city in these years, Reeves rode his bike. He began cycling at around age twelve, riding to school and using his bike to deliver newspapers to the customers on his paper route. Riding a bicycle without gears on Oakland's hilly streets proved to be a great physical challenge for Reeves. There was one particularly steep, two-mile hill between his home in the Oak Knoll neighborhood and East Oakland—where several of his main friends lived—that he reportedly attacked as if it were part of a Spartan workout.³⁶ After winning his bodybuilding titles, the Oakland bike rides became part of the legend of how Reeves created his exceptional body at such a young age. Reeves later claimed that he viewed these rides

as if they were training rides: "I got a lot of my thigh development from riding my bicycle up the hills in Oakland. I really worked at it."³⁷

Reeves first lifted weights when he was about fourteen after losing an arm-wrestling match to a smaller friend named Joe Gambina. Surprised that his larger size hadn't allowed him to dominate, Reeves learned that Gambina worked out with weights and so had had an edge on him.³⁸ After the match, Gambina loaned Reeves

a *Strength & Health* magazine with John Grimek on the cover and then invited him to come over to his house to train with him.³⁹ The memories of Vernon Hall, and the images of Grimek and other bodybuilders, inspired Reeves—who had never really had the opportunity to participate in team sports—to take lifting seriously. And so, after some workouts at Gambino’s house, and a brief period of training in his own garage with a set of weights he bought from his paper route earnings, Reeves began looking for a better place to train and someone to give him sound advice.⁴⁰ He found the perfect place at Ed Yarick’s Oakland gym and he also found, in Yarick, an able coach, a supportive friend, and a badly needed father figure.⁴¹ The story of the physical transformation Reeves made under Yarick’s direction is the stuff of screenplays. Reeves began working out at Yarick’s gym at age sixteen and gained thirty pounds of muscle in his first four months of training. When Reeves graduated two years later in 1944 at age eighteen, Yarick wrote, “he weighed a solid 203 pounds,” and “in the opinion of many experts Reeves could have won the Mr. America contest that year if he had entered.”⁴²

Reeves wasn’t able to enter the contest, of course, because America was at war and like most male high school graduates that spring, he enlisted in the Army almost as soon as he had his diploma in his hand. Reeves spent six weeks in basic training that summer, and was then shipped to the Philippines where he saw action at the Battle of Balet Pass and managed to catch a severe case of malaria that brought his bodyweight down to 175 pounds. After two months in the hospital, and several more reoccurrences of the disease, Reeves was transferred to the Quartermaster Corps and sent to Japan where he was stationed outside Tokyo as part of the occupation force.⁴³

Discharged from the Army on 18 September 1946, Reeves made his way back to Oakland to see Yarick and his mother and to begin trying to figure out what he was going to do for the rest of his life. At Yarick’s gym he began training regularly again, regained most of his weight, and entered and won his first bodybuilding title—Mr. Pacific Coast on 21 December 1946. He won the contest again in 1947 and then quickly added Mr. Western America 1947, Mr. America 1947, Mr. World 1948, and Mr. Universe 1950 to his resume.⁴⁴

After winning the Mr. America title in Chicago in June of 1947, Reeves began emerging as a true sport celebrity. Both the Associated Press and United Press

International covered the contest and their wire reports sent Reeves’ name and photographs around the world. Major and minor newspapers across America showed Reeves in posing trunks, holding his trophy, with a million dollar smile on his handsome face, or posed with bathing-suit clad models to affirm his masculinity. It wasn’t that most of the previous Mr. Americas hadn’t also been handsome men, it was simply that they hadn’t been *this* handsome, or a war veteran, or so disarmingly shy and nice. The Harrisburg, Illinois, *Daily Register*, for example, described him as a shy, blue-eyed, war veteran who apparently really told reporters, “Gee, it’s wonderful, I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”⁴⁵ Closer to home, the San Bernardino County *Sun* carried the AP story reporting that seven of the eight judges had found Reeves to be “physically perfect” and that the crowd watching the contest had whistled and stamped their feet when he began posing.⁴⁶ The Associated Press even did a feature profile on Reeves the following month, entitled, “New ‘Mr. America’ Handy Around the House, Too,” that in addition to explaining that Reeves could cook and sew played up his attractiveness to women. According to the article, Reeves was so handsome that women often gave him wolf-whistles and came up to him without knowing who he was to ask for his autograph, or feel his muscles. “Steve gets a lot of feminine double-takes,” the reporter concluded in an understatement.⁴⁷

Reeves’ victory at the Mr. America had also made him an international star in the world of bodybuilding and the darling of the muscle magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. Over the next several years his photographs appeared on the cover of nearly every muscle magazine in the world—at least once—and the descriptions of his physique in some of those magazines were so hyperbolic that they could have been written by a publicist.⁴⁸ *Muscle Power* author Gene Jantzen described Reeves as “one of the most astonishing muscle men ever to make his appearance at a best physique contest,” going on to write that Reeves’ physique resembled that of cartoon character Little Abner’s, as Steve had “tremendous shoulders and latissimus muscles tapering into a wasp-like waist of scarcely 29 inches.”⁴⁹ The normally reserved Peary Rader was even more extravagant in *Iron Man* following Reeves’ Mr. America victory in 1947:

Most of the audience left the Auditori-

um amazed that such a muscularly perfect specimen existed. It was unbelievable that anyone could have such huge muscular size and yet retain the perfect balance in proportions, the excellent separation that Steve Reeves displayed. Here was a man who combined the massive muscular development that appeals so much to barbell men with the broad shoulders and slender hips that the average man prefers. Here was a man who not only had a magnificent physique, but also combined it with a very handsome face crowned with beautiful jet black, curly hair; a magnetic personality and a flashing smile that showed his ivory white teeth.⁵⁰

Gordon Venables of *Strength & Health* similarly wrote, “You have to see this young man to really appreciate his build and good looks. Photos don’t do him justice, he’s twice as good as his pictures!” Venables then went on to claim that Reeves was more than just another bodybuilder, he was going to be a culture changer. “I believe a change has been wrought in the conception of the perfect male physique!” Venables enthused, “His tremendous breath of shoulders and extreme slimness of waist are symbolic of the New Physique.”⁵¹ Venables could not possibly have predicted just how accurate his words would be in the years ahead as Reeves and his classically-inspired physique would impact far more than the world of bodybuilding.⁵²

Becoming an Actor

After giving his last interview at the Lane High School auditorium in Chicago, where approximately three thousand people had watched him win the 1947 Mr. America title, Reeves returned to his hotel to find a letter waiting for him from Wallace Downey, a theatrical agent from New York who’d been at the show. The agent had written, Reeves recalled, “If you’re interested in show business, I think you have potential. Give me a call or write me a letter and I’ll see that you go to acting school on the GI Bill of Rights. We’ll find you a little apartment, and on weekends we’ll get you into vaudeville acts so you can make some extra money.”⁵³ Reeves took the letter back to Oakland with him—where he had started attending chiropractic school on the GI Bill with the idea that he might go into the gym business—and waited several weeks before calling the agent to explore

the idea of acting. Following that call, Reeves transferred his GI Bill credits to the Stella Adler Dramatic School for Acting in New York City, moved into a small apartment that had just been vacated by James Garner, and began taking classes at the acting academy that counted Marlon Brando among its alumni.⁵⁴ Reeves never felt comfortable at Adler’s and soon left because of a disagreement with an acting coach who could only visualize him as a character actor. He stayed in New York, however, and enrolled at the Theodore Urban School of Acting, where he found the training more useful to his career goals.⁵⁵ Like other young, struggling actors in New York, Reeves went to casting calls, worked a variety of odd jobs to cover his expenses, and with help from his new agent worked as the straight man for Dick Burney in a vaudeville-type, stand-up comedy act appearing in resorts and small theaters on the weekends. Burney and Reeves were playing at a movie house in New Jersey when a talent scout for Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille saw Reeves for the first time and asked him to come in and do a screen test. He was interested in Reeves as DeMille was starting a new project, a biblical epic called *Samson and Delilah*, and thought Reeves was perfect for the part. Reeves took the screen test in his street clothes at Paramount’s New York office and was ecstatic to be offered a seven-year contract to work for the studio with the idea that he’d take further acting classes in California and play Samson when DeMille got the film into production. He flew back to California on his twenty-second birthday, feeling like his future was assured.⁵⁶

Upon meeting DeMille in his Hollywood office, Reeves discovered that the director had a copy of Tony Lanza’s famous photograph of him with his arms stretched overhead. The photo was sitting next to shots of Paramount stars Dorothy Lamour, Bing Crosby, and Bob Hope.⁵⁷ Initially heartened by this, Reeves was understandably surprised when DeMille told him that in order to play Samson, he expected Steve to lose twenty pounds because he would otherwise look too large on screen. The idea that he should be smaller and less muscular to play Samson—a heroic strongman—made no sense to Reeves, and so, while he eventually dropped about seven pounds, he refused to lose all the weight. Reeves admitted in later years that at that point he was still too wrapped up in bodybuilding to be willing to compromise his hard-earned physique. “I didn’t have my priorities straight,” he recalled, and so when the contract

came up for review at the end of its first six months, he was not surprised when DeMille released him.⁵⁸

After being dropped by Paramount, Steve was at loose ends. He moved to Santa Monica for a time, living with fellow Mr. America George Eiferman in a boarding house right on Muscle Beach.⁵⁹ He continued looking for acting work in the Los Angeles area but to pay his rent and make ends meet, he also held a variety of odd jobs—parking cars, working in the post office, modeling, and eventually working at Bert Goodrich's American Health Studio.⁶⁰ His most successful television work was on Ralph Edward's show during 1951 where he did the on-air commercials, held props, and acted as straight man for Edwards.⁶¹ The exposure on Edward's nationally broadcast show helped Reeves land a part on Broadway the following year in the well-regarded musical, *Kismet*, which kept him busy through 1954.⁶² In the spring of 1954, during a break from his theater work, Reeves returned to LA to play Ed Perkins, a Mr. Universe contestant, in the MGM romantic musical comedy *Athena*, starring Jane Powell and Debbie Reynolds. It was his biggest role to date and although he had relatively few lines, his physique was featured prominently.⁶³ In July of 1954, he appeared in a summer stock production in Sacramento of a play called *Wish You Were Here*, getting excellent reviews for his depiction of the character "Muscles," a teen-aged boy involved in a summer romance at a camp in the Catskills.⁶⁴ After the show closed, Reeves went back to Muscle Beach for a couple of weeks before heading to New York to resume his work in *Kismet*. At the beach he met eighteen year old Sandra Smith, whom he married on 31 January 1955. After the close of *Kismet* in the fall of 1954, Steve landed another Broadway role in Carol Channing's *The Vamp*. Unfortunately, the play closed about a month later and Reeves was again out of work and growing tired of New York winters. According to LeClaire, the couple then drove to Florida, eventually landing in Fort Lauderdale where Reeves decided to put acting aside and go into the gym business. The Steve Reeves Gym in Fort Lauderdale, opened in February of 1956 and had several hundred members within a couple months. Although she stayed with Steve in Fort Lauderdale for a time, Sandra was never happy there and soon moved back to California to stay with her parents, while Steve stayed behind. They officially divorced in September of that year, and Steve moved on as well, selling the gym to one of his members before returning to Los Angeles.⁶⁵



In 1951, Reeves got one of his first breaks when he was chosen by *This Is Your Life* and *Truth or Consequences* host Ralph Edwards for a recurring role on his *Ralph Edwards Show*. Edwards decided to hire Reeves as his on-air sidekick because the program was on during the daytime and he thought—accurately as it turned out—that Reeves would prove attractive to women.

Becoming Hercules

Meanwhile, in Rome, Italian producer-director Pietro Francisci had been looking for at least five years for a male lead with "the right combination of muscularity and drop-dead good looks" to play Hercules in a film based on a script that he had co-authored with Ennio De Concini and Gaius Fratini.⁶⁶ According to Reeves, it was Francisci's thirteen-year-old daughter who saw him in *Athena* and insisted her father go immediately to the theater and see the movie.⁶⁷ After seeing Reeves in the film, Francisci began trying to track him down and eventually sent a telegram to Bert Goodrich's gym in California, hoping that it would reach Reeves. In an interview about the making of the film, Reeves told Steve Helmer that he got the telegram but at first ignored it as he'd promised Ray Wilson that he was giving up show business so that he could be a bigger part of the expansion of Wilson's American Health Studios chain. Within



Hercules director, Pietro Francisci, on the far left, relaxes with Reeves and some of the production crew in a courtyard outside the Titanus studio in Rome. Francisci reportedly had a difficult time locating Reeves after seeing him in *Athena* and used his son's muscle magazines to track down the star. Francisci directed both of Reeves' *Hercules* films, paying the actor only \$10,000 for each movie. In today's dollars that translates to just over \$80,000 per film.

a couple of weeks, however, an envelope arrived at Goodrich's containing a plane ticket to Rome and a five thousand dollar advance. The enclosed letter explained that the film company, Lux-Titanus, was preparing a mythological film to be shot in Italy and that they wanted him to star as Hercules. Steve later claimed that at this point in his career he'd essentially decided to stay in the health club business, as the pattern of his acting career had been that he'd occasionally land a small part here and there when a man with muscles was needed, but then never seem to get chosen for larger or more traditional roles. Reeves believed that the main reason he hadn't had more success in the early part of the 1950s was that his body was *too* built—too large and perfect—and that the leading male actors in this era effectively blackballed him. According to Reeves, "people like Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck and Burt Lancaster said they wouldn't let me work with them. In other words if there was a part for me, and they were going to cast me Lancaster said, 'No.' And Peck said, 'No.' And Gary Cooper said, 'I'm not

going to walk with that guy in the swamps of Louisiana with my shirt off!'"⁶⁸ Further, American Health Studios had become the largest chain of health clubs in the country, and Ray Wilson had promised Reeves a chance to grow with the company. He could imagine a solid future there doing public relations work, perhaps even settling down.⁶⁹ Ultimately the reality of the plane ticket in his hand and his hunch that this might be his last chance to star in a movie—even if it was a movie made in Italy—trumped the security of southern California. Reeves decided to gamble on the man often described as "the Cecil B.

DeMille of Italy," told an unhappy Wilson he was quitting, and flew to Rome to begin filming in June of 1957.⁷⁰

Several factors made the late 1950s a perfect time for the emergence of the modern peplum genre in Italy. Before *Hercules*, the Italian film industry was mostly producing black and white so-called neorealist films that depicted the depressed conditions then existing in Italy in the aftermath of World War Two. Neorealism was a film movement that began in 1946 with Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, Città Aperta*; included Anthony Quinn's starring turn in the somber strongman film *La Strada*, in 1954; and also included Vittorio De Sica's highly acclaimed *Umberto D* in 1955. Although well received by critics, the films primarily focused on the crumbling Italian economy and the generally low national morale.⁷¹ In contrast, *Hercules* and most of the peplum films that followed it were like modern romance novels and never pretended to be more than escapist fare. Filmed in color with sets depicting Ancient Rome,

Ancient Greece, and other mythic landscapes, these historical costume dramas reminded Italians of their country's glorious past and created a simple moral universe that posited good versus evil. Francisci's hope with *Hercules* was that Italy—and, if possible, the rest of the world—might be ready to dispense with reality for a time and escape to myth and romance.

Francisci had reason to think his gamble was not entirely crazy. He'd directed Dino de Laurentis' successful 1954 costume drama called *Attila* starring Sophia Loren and Anthony Quinn.⁷² In the United States, he also knew that most major Hollywood studios had begun making historical epics in an attempt to renew the public's interest in movies after World War II. The rapid growth of television had eroded ticket sales and so Hollywood began re-thinking the kinds of movies that would appeal to the public.⁷³ The production of large, grandiose epic films shot in the new colored film stocks (Eastman Color or Technicolor) and projected on the gigantic movie screens needed for the wide-screen formats of Cinemascope, Vista Vision, and Panavision, brought new excitement to the movie-going experience and meant that these costume dramas looked nothing like 1950s television. As Hollywood had hoped, the public responded by more frequently forsaking the small screen in search of grander entertainments in movie theaters.⁷⁴ Because Biblical and mythological scripts were perfect for the needs of these new technologies, a number of American film companies began working out of the Cinecittà and Titanus studios in Rome so that they could use the surrounding countryside for their outdoor scenes.⁷⁵ In the late 1940s and 1950s Hollywood production com-

panies were also offered tax breaks by the Italian government for using Italian studios.⁷⁶ Italian filmmakers like Francisci directly benefitted from these American productions as most film companies left behind their sets, props, and costumes rather than transport them back to California. This made it possible for *Hercules* to be made for only \$110,000 and yet look like a "big budget" movie.⁷⁷

While the American epics of the 1950s came to Italy for authenticity, the Italian peplums made in this same era—like *Hercules*—settled for mythological simplicity. Patrick Luciano explains the difference succinctly in the introduction to his book, *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens*. "But unlike the traditional Hollywood spectacle, which attempts to reproduce as much historical accuracy as possible," and even prominently displays the names of their historical advisors in their credits, Luciano wrote, "the Italian spectacle relies heavily on presenting simple, yet popular stories based on national lore and the idea of moral uplift."⁷⁸ Adherence to the historic version of a tale, and



Before the movie's final sequence, the makeup team made sure that Reeves' physique would be seen to best advantage by applying oil to his arms as if he were getting ready for a bodybuilding contest. Note also the thick-soled sandals Reeves wore throughout the film to make him appear even more Herculean.



Reeves' love interest in both *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* was Italian actress Sylvia Koscina who had her first big break when Francisci cast her as Iole, the princess of Jolco. Koscina appeared in more than 100 films and television shows, most filmed in Italy, before her death in 1994.

even logical thinking, were often suspended in such tales in order to fulfill the standard plot tropes necessary for good to conquer evil. Francisci's version of the Hercules tale certainly fits this description. After it opened, critics of the film harped frequently on the many liberties taken with the Hercules myth. *Time* magazine dubbed it "muddled mythology" and *Life* magazine later described it as challenging the credulity of a fourth-grader.⁷⁹ Historical and mythological accuracy didn't deter the film's American promoter Joseph Levine, however, as he claimed in an interview with *Esquire* columnist Gay Telese that what he'd been drawn to when he first screened the film was that "it had something for everybody. It had a dragon for kids, musclemen for growing boys, a shipwreck scene for waiters and clerks. Who doesn't dream of getting stuck on an island with some broads? And the picture had Steve Reeves. He appealed to women."⁸⁰

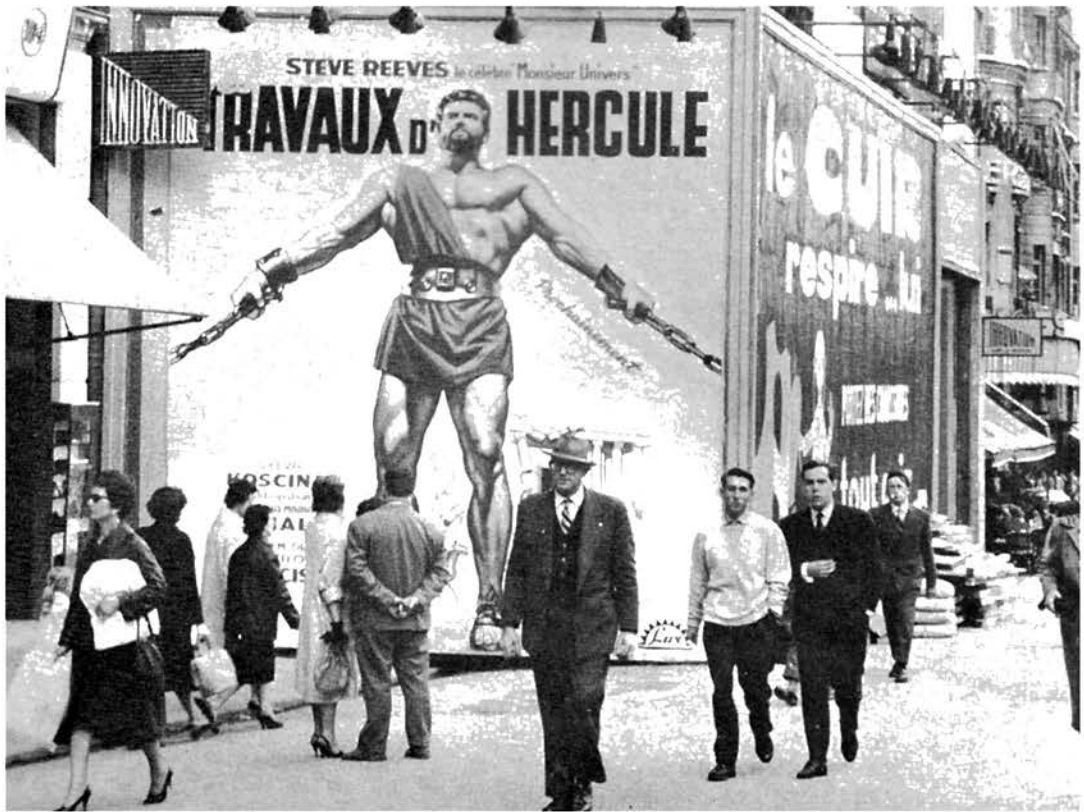
The plot for *Le Fatiche di Ercole* epitomizes what film historian Jon Solomon, in *The Ancient World in Cinema*, describes as Francisci's "unique recipe for comic, light, tongue-in-cheek heroism and romance."⁸¹ The film is a very loose adaptation of the Hercules myth and in it Hercules is portrayed not as a non-thinking brute but as a compassionate and intelligent hero. Reeves, in an interview with *Newsweek*, reflected on why he was well cast for this particular version of Her-

cules: "Of course my muscles helped, but my face was important too. It had to be a typical American-boy face, a sympathetic one . . . If a man has a tough face and gets into a tough spot, people say it served him right . . . But if you have a sympathetic face, they are sympathetic."⁸²

The film begins with Hercules uprooting a large tree in order to stop the runaway chariot of Iole, the princess of Jolco, played in the film by Sylvia Koscina. Once rescued, Iole joins Hercules as he is also travelling to Jolco, where King Pelias (Ivo Garrani) has recruited him to train the soldiers and to be a mentor to the king's son, Iphitus (Mimmo Paimara). Soon after he arrives, and in front of various characters from different Greek myths not normally associated with the Hercules tales, Hercules hurls a discus completely out of sight causing the spectators to realize that he cannot be mortal. Fearful of what he has brought to his kingdom, the king sends Hercules away, challenging him to kill a lion that has been terrorizing his subjects. This segment of the film is loosely based, of course, on one of the Labors of Hercules that the film's Italian title references. Hercules successfully subdues the Nemean Lion, but not before it delivers a fatal blow to the young prince Iphistus, next in line to the throne. The council of Jolco and Princess Iole both blame Hercules for the prince's death and Hercules is sent away by the king on a redemption quest to slay the Cretan Bull. Hercules leaves the city and seeks the counsel of the Sybil, who helps him renounce his immortality so that he can feel emotion, fight like other men, and have a family. This plot point is an important contribution in establishing the new peplum genre, Luciano argues, as Hercules could then be viewed by the audience as mortal, rendering him truly heroic and making him the object of sympathy, hope, and aspiration.⁸³

From this point, the film shows Hercules finding and slaying the Cretan Bull; rescuing Jason of the Argonauts (Fabrizio Mioni) and travelling with him in search for the Golden Fleece; visiting the island of the Amazons, and resisting their allure; battling the dragon that guards the Golden Fleece; and being thrown into prison when he returns with Jason to Jolco and it is understood that Jason is actually the rightful king of the land. Although now mortal, Hercules is, of course, still preternaturally strong and the film concludes with him ripping his shackles from the wall, demolishing a small

army of soldiers who try to subdue him, and in the most iconic scene from the film, wrapping the long chains that are still cuffed to his wrists around two pillars, flexing all of his muscles, and pulling down the palace in which he was imprisoned, *ala* Samson. As the credits prepare to roll, Jason ascends to the throne of Jolco, while Hercules and Iole drive away with the teen-aged Ulysses riding in the back of their cart. The sequel, *Hercules Unchained*, released on 14 February 1959, and also starring Reeves, picks up their tale where *Hercules* ends.



Hercules was big in Europe! This two-story poster for *Les Travaux d'Hercule* (*The Labors of Hercules* as it was known in France), graced the famous *Avenue des Champs-Élysées* in Paris, in 1958. The photo was taken by Renald Muchow, a Muscle Beach regular, then touring Europe with the acrobatic act known as Renald and Rudy.

Italian Release and Reception

Reeves stayed in Rome for an extra week after *Hercules* wrapped and met the woman who would become the second Mrs. Reeves during that time. Blonde, blue-eyed Aline Czartjarwitz, who could claim to be a Polish princess, had been educated in Switzerland, spoke six languages, and worked in the Italian film industry handling contracts and legal matters. She met Reeves at a party in Rome and the couple went out several times during his last week there.⁸⁴ He then took a short vacation in Majorca and returned to California where Ray Wilson agreed to let him work at a new gym that was opening in San Diego.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, in Italy, Francisci opened *Le Fatiche di Ercole* on 20 February 1958 with a gala premiere in Rome, and the film took off like a rocket.⁸⁶ It earned back its production budget in its first week and by the end of its Italian run had taken in 900,000,000 lire (approximately 12,000,000 dollars).⁸⁷

Where the neorealist films had been aimed at an upper class Northern Italian demographic, *Hercules* appealed to a new film demographic—the less educated, lower classes of Italy.⁸⁸ These viewers, many of whom were living in the hard economic times portrayed in the neorealist films, were delighted by this lighter fare and didn't mind that the *Hercules* script muddled the myth because most of them didn't really know the myth anyway. What they liked was the action, the beautiful women, and the fact that the handsome hero vanquished the villains.⁸⁹ Based on the response *Hercules* received in Italy, it seems safe to say that these kinds of viewers also liked and appreciated muscle.

Rural people in all cultures generally have a greater understanding for and appreciation of physical strength. Farm and other rural workers understand that all men are not equal when it comes to strength and that there can be great value in possessing a muscular body. Richard Dyer, in *White*, argues that the film appealed to rural Italians in large part because they and other rural people have always admired “big strong men . . . giant

boy babies were a source of wide interest, seen as a blessing, not least because their strength was of the greatest economic significance in rural labour.”⁹⁰ Film historian Maggie Gunsberg also contends that an aspect of the film’s success in Europe was the “popular tradition of . . . strongman shows in public squares and circuses.”⁹¹ The neorealist film *La Strada* depicts Anthony Quinn as exactly this sort of travelling strongman. Quinn plays Zompano, who travels like a busker and exhibits his strength in small villages in Italy by breaking a chain as he expands his chest. Unlike Hercules, however, Zompano is no longer young, and the tone of the film is dark and fatalistic. Reeves’ Italian film debut would offer viewers a much more conventionally handsome image for the strongman character as he was still in the full-muscled beauty of young manhood when he took on the role of Hercules. Reeves represented, therefore, a

body type that had both economic and aesthetic value to these viewers. They could imagine him working alongside them with a team of oxen, or pulling rocks from a field, and yet his body was more muscular and graceful than theirs—looking like the statuary from their early history—inspiring awe as well as understanding in the viewer.

The Americanization of Hercules

Reeves and most Americans had little knowledge of the film’s success internationally because it had still not opened in the United States more than a year after its release. Despite the fact that it was outperforming high budget Hollywood films such as the Elizabeth Taylor/Rock Hudson/James Dean vehicle, *Giant*, which had nine Academy Award nominations and a win for Best Director in 1957; and the British war epic, *The*



Joseph Levine launched his marketing campaign with what he called the “Explodation Lunch” at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. He served lunch to more than a thousand people—film executives, theater owners, and journalists—who dined under the gaze of the nearly three-story-tall figure of Reeves dressed as Hercules.

Bridge on the River Kwai, which won seven Academy Awards including best picture that year; no American distributor had picked up the rights to show *Hercules* in America. Levine, who had partnered with Francisci on *Attila*, finally decided he should take a look.⁹²

The football-shaped Levine (5'4" tall and generally well over two hundred pounds) began his career in Boston as a restaurateur.⁹³ He soon found his way into movie distribution, turning a small profit on the re-exhibition of several old Westerns. He then picked up the Japanese film *Godzilla: King of Monsters*, making it into an unexpected hit in the United States, before purchasing the rights to distribute the joint Dino de Laurentis/Pietro Francisci film titled *Attila* starring Sophia Loren and Anthony Quinn, which earned him two million dollars in America.⁹⁴

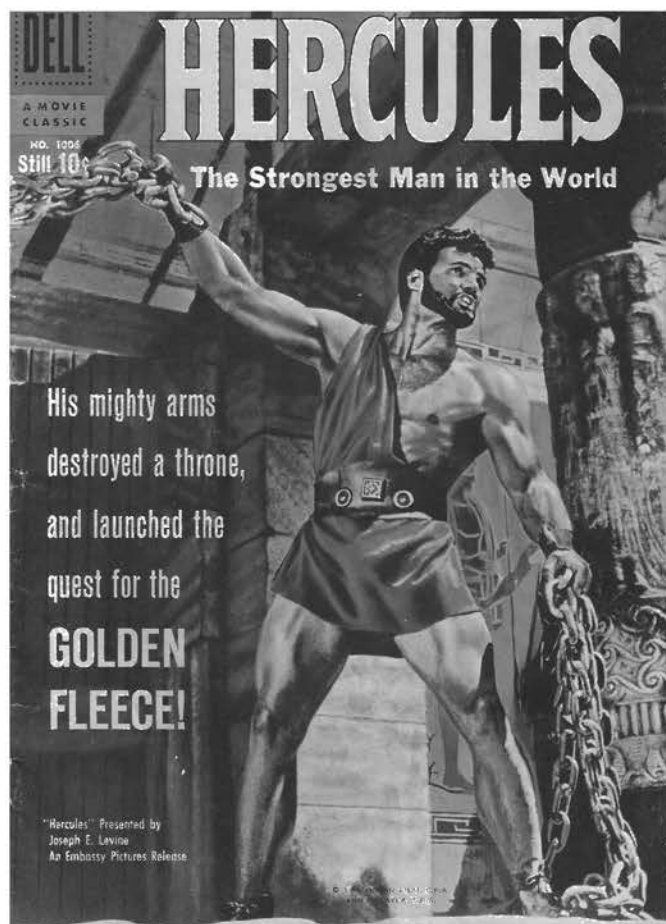
Although it had no known stars to help drive it, Levine knew *Hercules* was doing big business internationally and so he flew to Rome to meet with Francisci in mid-1958 and screen it.⁹⁵ He later recalled, "The picture broke down when we were showing it, but there was something about it that made me realize there was a potential fortune in it . . . It had action and sex, a near shipwreck, gorgeous women on an island and a guy tearing a goddam building apart. And where did you ever see a guy with a body like Reeves has?"⁹⁶ He bought the American distribution rights for \$120,000 and began planning the biggest, most expensive advertising campaign ever devoted to a film up to that time.

Levine had spent more than half a million dollars promoting *Attila* and so he already knew that you had to spend money to make money in the film promotion industry. However, for *Hercules* he set aside more than a million dollars just for advertising, an unheard of figure in this era when films generally opened slowly and there was little advertising on television. As Levine had hoped, the sheer magnitude of the figure, and Levine's unmitigated *chutzpah* worked as publicity magnets and became a major part of the press coverage surrounding the film.⁹⁷

According to Levine's wife Rosalie, the idea for the launch party for *Hercules* began with a comment from an industry executive who said in response to Levine's publicized budget that he wasn't planning to launch *Hercules*, he was planning to "explode it."⁹⁸ Upon hearing that remark, Rosalie decided that the exploding movie idea should be the luncheon's theme and so sent out invitations to twelve hundred industry

executives and journalists consisting of small black boxes inside which were miniature rubber bombs she had specially made and imprinted with the details for the "Explosion Luncheon."⁹⁹ The ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Manhattan filled with more than a thousand guests for the \$40,000 affair on 29 March 1959. Each guest received fancy press kits, posters featuring Reeves, and other marketing trinkets.¹⁰⁰ The press-books Levine distributed that day were also Herculean, measuring 30 inches by 40 inches as opposed to the standard 15 inches by 10 inches, and instead of stacking them on tables, women in revealing togas handed them out to attendees.¹⁰¹ A nearly three-story cardboard cutout of Reeves, dressed in a leopard skin costume, towered over the diners, sharing wall space with dozens of other banners noting Levine's marketing partnerships with magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Seventeen*. The Meyer Davis Orchestra backed up popular singer Vaughn Monroe who sang the theme song to *Hercules*.¹⁰² The only thing missing, in fact, was Reeves himself, who was not invited by Levine and probably couldn't have come anyway because he was then back in Italy making a new film.¹⁰³

Levine dedicated \$350,000 to television advertisements releasing eight different trailers for the film.¹⁰⁴ Before *Hercules*, television had not been used as a major medium for movie advertisements, but he believed that seeing some of the action from the film would help build ticket sales.¹⁰⁵ Levine also advertised extensively on radio and spent more than \$300,000 on print advertisements in newspapers and magazines. Full-page ads appeared in 132 magazines, including such major publications as *Life*, *Look*, *The American Weekly*, and the Sunday newspaper supplement *Parade*, which then reciprocated with a full-page feature story on Reeves, glowingly titled, "The World's Best looking Man."¹⁰⁶ Fan magazines such as *Movie World*, *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, and *Silver Screen* featured ads intended to appeal to avid moviegoers. At least twenty-five male-oriented magazines such as *Front Page Detective* and *Official Detective Stories* also featured full-page ads.¹⁰⁷ Chapman argues, "the hunky movie star showed up in just about every national men's periodical," because Levine "realized at once that other out-of-shape postwar males all across North America would respond in a big way to the handsome, muscular, prize-winning athlete who starred in this extravaganza."¹⁰⁸ According to film historian Luciano, an estimated 136 million people saw a *Her-*



Levine's promotional campaign for *Hercules* was one of the first to include spin-off products like this Dell comic book released in conjunction with the film in 1959. It was drawn by the famous comic artist John Buscema.

cules ad in a publication somewhere that year.¹⁰⁹

As for the muscle magazines, Levine doesn't seem to have placed any ads in them but he did send numbers of photographic stills from the movies for them to use. Bill Doll, who'd formerly done publicity for *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and several other Hollywood blockbusters, was hired by Levine to direct the press campaign for *Hercules*. Doll created a six-page pamphlet with a drawing of Reeves as Hercules on the cover, "Joseph E. Levine" in large type over "Hercules" and a quote stating, "Immense and Immortal Was Hercules' Strength Like the World and the Gods to Whom He Belonged." Reeves' name does not appear on the front cover but he is featured inside, on the back page, as "The Star," in a brief bio that describes his meteoric rise to the top of the European film industry.¹¹⁰ In addition to the pamphlet, Doll also sent a press release announcing

the American opening of the film, and a set of captions entitled, "The Story of 'Hercules' Told with Photographs," that made it easy for magazine editors to use the images in large magazine spreads, such as the one in *Mr. America* entitled "All Italy Goes for Mr. America."¹¹¹ The movie stills of Reeves in his Hercules costume, helped ensure that the movie and Reeves' body appeared and reappeared in the muscle magazines at little cost to Levine. They remain desired collectibles.

In our modern era, spin-off products are part of the marketing of most films, and here again Levine led the way, working with Dell Comics to release a Hercules comic for children.¹¹² Levine also appealed to the youth market by distributing "Herculean Hamburgers" in some cities and he strategically deployed test-your-strength machines in several locations scattered around America so that when someone succeeded in hitting the bell on one of these machines, Levine made a donation towards a charity.¹¹³

The *Hercules* campaign seemed unending. Posters of Reeves as Hercules were displayed on telephone poles and store walls as the movie came to different cities.¹¹⁴ The promoter even sent out more than 700 four-pound chocolate statues of Reeves to film critics and theater owners to garner their support for the film.¹¹⁵ The message was simple: *Hercules* was coming to a theater near you, and it would have something for everyone. You were going to want to see it.

Levine had the formal premiere for *Hercules* at the Paramount Theater in Hollywood in May of 1959. It then opened in 145 neighborhood theaters and earned \$900,000 in its first week. In week two, Levine did something that no film distributor had ever done before. On 25 July 1959 he opened the film simultaneously in 600 theaters across America. *Hercules* played at 125 theaters in New York City alone. The Pathe film lab, which made the six hundred copies of the film, reported that it was the largest order they'd ever had for a movie.¹¹⁶ The film industry had never seen anything like it and began to talk about Levine as if he were a genius. A profile of Levine in *Life* magazine explained that "Levine's most basic instincts direct him to numb the customers with thunderous broadsides of advertising and then lure them simultaneously into hundreds of theaters to see simultaneous screenings of just one picture."¹¹⁷ The article went on to suggest that this two-step process, consisting of "The Levine Campaign" and "The Levine Saturation," had more than worked. It had made a hit of what should

have been a B level film and it had also elevated Levine into the most important movie producer in Hollywood. The film wasn't perfect, the *Life* profile continued, but "These unseemly criticisms, died away . . . into murmurs of awe . . . The reaction in Hollywood was similar to that which could be expected at Indianapolis if an unknown Boston tire salesman had won the Memorial Day 500 on an Italian motor scooter."¹¹⁸

By the time Levine was finished, *Hercules* had played in 11,465 theaters in America. Box office analysts reported that 24,000,000 people saw the film that year and it grossed \$18,000,000 in the United States alone.¹¹⁹ Adjusted for inflation, that's a staggering \$140,000,000 in 2014 dollars.¹²⁰

Becoming an Icon

Despite everything Levine did to promote the film, his "Explosion Campaign"—remembered by film scholars as a turning point in the marketing of feature films—would not have worked had Reeves not been the star of *Hercules*. Film critic Marjory Adams, writing for *The Boston Globe Herald*, may have not been impressed with the film, but she found Steve Reeves unforgettable. "The best thing about *Hercules* seems to be those rippling muscles of Steve Reeves. I don't think I have ever seen such powerful fluidity in any picture, dating from silent films until now. Victor Mature's physique in the role of Samson seems puny compared to that of the gorgeously stacked Steve . . . he looks like the kind of half-man-half-god who just might have gone through some of the adventures set down in this story."¹²¹ Similarly, Ruth Waterbury of the *LA Herald Examiner* also found the film's value in Reeves, writing that "Hercules in the figure of Steve Reeves—and I do mean figure—is taller, bigger, heavier and at the same time smaller around the waist than any hero you ever saw. Or any human being."¹²²

The summer of 1959 was the high point in Reeves' film career. LeClaire notes, "Reeves became 1959's number one box-office star in America as well as in 26 European countries, the Middle East, and Australia, edging out Rock Hudson, Doris Day and John Wayne."¹²³ He was truly an international sensation. *Hercules* played four times a day over the course of a two-year period in Calcutta, India. It was also a huge success in Japan and Asia.¹²⁴ Reeves was quickly recalled to Italy to film a sequel to *Hercules* titled *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (released as *Hercules Unchained* in

the United States on 13 July 1960). Levine imported this feature as well and launched a similar campaign to that used for the first *Hercules* feature. This time the debut luncheon was held outdoors at Hollywood's Beverly Hills Hotel, as "Chanel No. 5 came spraying from the bushes every thirty seconds and a solid-ice Hercules stood melting in the Southern California heat, with colored electric light bulbs frozen into his muscles."¹²⁵ The film was not as successful as its predecessor in America, but it still fared well internationally. It became the most financially successful film up to that time in Great Britain where it played on a record four thousand screens.¹²⁶

The unexpected fiscal success of *Hercules* ignited a great many changes in the film industry. For one thing it made clear the potential of foreign imports in America. Also, saturation distribution and heightened publicity campaigns were used increasingly thereafter to maximize film profits. According to *Life*, Levine was "instantly acclaimed a genius and a leader of the industry." The Italian government honored Levine with the *Ordine al Merito della Repubblica* because of the increased attention the success of *Hercules* brought to Italian film productions. American industry professionals tried to duplicate Levine's epic success and immediately flew to Rome to see what pictures might be available for redistribution in America.¹²⁷ Howard Hughes notes that in the next eight years, US film companies would spend "approximately \$35 million per year to finance or buy the distributions rights to Italian films, or to make their own films with Italian studios as their production base."¹²⁸ Levine went on to form Embassy Pictures and would continue to import foreign movies as well as produce several important American films, including *The Graduate* and *The Lion in Winter*.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, Reeves would forever be identified with the role of Hercules, enjoying international stardom for the remainder of his acting career.

The rest of Reeves' films would never match the popularity of these first two, however. Despite an increased salary of \$250,000 for his third feature, *The White Warrior*, his fame dwindled during the 1960s despite starring in 13 other films.¹³⁰ Levine would take a chance on two more of Reeves' features, *The Thief of Baghdad* and *Morgan the Pirate*, but despite having received a more limited version of the "Levine treatment," neither film was a major financial success.¹³¹ Nonetheless, Reeves left behind an incredible film lega-

**THE MIGHTY SAGA
OF THE WORLD'S MIGHTIEST MAN!**

SEE heroic Hercules rip down the Age of Orgy's lavish palace of lustful pleasure!

SEE the stupendous dragon struck down by Hercules' famed shipmate, Jason!

SEE the dauntless Argonauts dare the pounding perils of wine-dark seas!

SEE the seductive Amazons lure men to voluptuous revels and violent death!

SEE him crush the savage ape-men who guard the shrine of the Golden Fleece!

SEE the Mightiest of Men vs. the Mightiest of Beasts—the killer Cretan Bull!

And more wonders!

Cast of Thousands...
Cost in Millions!

EASTMAN COLOR
by Pathé and
in DYALISCOPE!

JOSEPH E. LEVINE PRESENTS

HERCULES

STARRING STEVE REEVES	SYLVA KOSCINA	FEATURING GIANNA MARIA CANALE	WITH Fabrizio Mioni • Ivo Garrani • Arturo Dominici Mimmo Palmara • Lidia Alfonsi • Gina Rovere	DIRECTED BY PIETRO FRANCISCI O.S.C.A.R. FILM-GALATEA	DISTRIBUTED BY Warner Bros.
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SEE IT AT YOUR LOCAL MOTION PICTURE THEATRE!

Levine ran full-page advertisements like this one in *Life* and many other American magazines in the summer of 1959. In the small boxes on the left, the ad exhorts readers to “See the Mightiest of Men vs. the Mightiest of Beasts—the killer Cretan Bull!”; and “See him crush the savage ape men who guard the shrine of the Golden Fleece!”; and, even more hyperbolically, “See heroic Hercules rip down the Age of Orgy’s lavish palace of lustful pleasure!” Other small print in the ad also claims a “Cast of Thousands . . . Cost in Millions,” even though Francisci’s production budget reportedly totalled only \$110,000.

Scholars estimate that from the Italian release of *Hercules* in 1957 until 1967, between two and three hundred other peplum films were produced.¹³² Reeves recalled that the rush to create movies like *Hercules* hap-

pened almost immediately. When he returned to Italy to film *Hercules Unchained*, “we began noticing other crews like ours, two and three beaches down from us, setting up cameras and filming *Hercules* films just like ours. It was unbelievable. They were using the same costumes, props, and even ideas as Francisci.” As Reeves explained it, it suddenly seemed that “everyone wanted in on it.”¹³³

The presence of the body-builder body came to define the peplum films more than anything else, and Reeves became the illustrative epitome of a new type of hero. In this way Reeves inspired millions of men to begin progressive resistance training and pursue better bodies for themselves.¹³⁴ Historian David Chapman notes, “Bodybuilding in the 1960s was still considered the recreation of a few cranks or narcissists of unreliable sexuality, but that would change, and part of that change can be laid at the sandaled feet of the peplum hero. It became okay, even cool, to go to the gym and try to look like Steve Reeves or Gordon Scott.”¹³⁵ One only has to look toward the action stars of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s to see how Reeves changed the paradigm for action heroes in film. The high visibility of his role as Hercules coupled with other peplum films featuring bodybuilders inspired a great number of viewers, including Schwarzenegger and Stallone. They, in turn, set a new standard for modern movie stars including Chris Hemsworth, Jason Statham, Hugh Jackman, Daniel Craig, Mark Wahlberg, Brad Pitt, and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson—who starred in a new *Hercules* in 2014. The glob-

al marketability of these actors can be linked back to Levine's recognition of Reeves' near perfect combination of good looks and sculpted physique. One only has to look at the recent outpouring of movies such as *Iron Man*, *The Dark Knight* trilogy, and the *X-Men* films to see the continued importance of muscled bodies in the movies. A significant portion of current media coverage is devoted to the ways in which certain actors prepare for these roles and how their bodies are often enhanced digitally. This was certainly the case of *300*, a movie which itself fits the requirement of a peplum film and inspired an eponymous workout routine. While Reeves may be overlooked in many cultural histories, the impact of his body on the big screen and the movement to embrace muscularity in the movies, remains pervasive, particularly in contemporary action films.

Reeves' film career ended quietly after filming his first western, *A Long Ride to Hell*, released in 1970. He wrote and starred in the film, but it did not fare well at the box office. Reeves always did all his own stunts—because it was almost impossible to find a stunt man with equivalent proportions—and during the shooting of the western he suffered a serious shoulder injury that convinced him it was time to hang up his sword, sandals, and six-shooter. He never retired his spurs, however, and spent his later years raising Morgan horses on a ranch property near Escondido, California. Reeves passed away in 2000, at 74, when a blood clot broke loose after exploratory surgery related to lymphoma.¹³⁶

Summing up the Reeves and *Hercules* legacy is a bit like trying to kill the many-headed Hydra. However, whether he was the Messiah, as Sylvester Stallone suggested, or a “demi-god” as some claimed in bodybuilding circles, or just an amazingly handsome man blessed with ideal genetics and the intelligence to know how to capitalize on them, Reeves through *Hercules* inspired thousands of young men to join gyms and take up weight training. It also opened a door, where there had not been a door before, to the idea that the built male body—the bodybuilder body—was heroic, masculine, desirable, and, most importantly, would sell movie tickets.¹³⁷ Arnold Schwarzenegger, his direct heir in Hollywood, wrote in his *Encyclopedia of Bodybuilding*, that Reeves “was handsome, personable, and had a magnificent physique . . . crowds used to follow Reeves when he walked along the beach, and people who knew nothing about him would stop and stare, awestruck . . . Reeves made movies and became an international star . . . [and]

in the 1950s . . . there was only one famous bodybuilder: Steve Reeves.”¹³⁸ More than 50 years after the release of Francisci's *Hercules*, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, in an interview for his 2014 version of *Hercules*, also claimed Reeves as his inspiration when asked by an interviewer, “Who was *your* Hercules growing up? Steve Reeves, Lou Ferrigno? Who was the character for you?” Johnson replied, “It was always Steve Reeves, yeah . . . Always Steve Reeves. When I was a kid . . . I appreciated the movies, and I was able to see them on VHS . . . but I was so enamored by the one-sheets . . . the posters. I had them in my room when I was a kid. So yeah, it was always Steve Reeves. He's the first one, you know.”¹³⁹

NOTES:

1. Howard Hughes, *Cinema Italiano: The Complete Guide from Classics to Cult* (New York: IB Tauris, 2011), 1.
2. Steve Reeves, “In Steve's Words,” *Classic Physique Magazine*, 5, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 21.
3. Measuring impact for films is difficult because there are many factors to consider. In terms of ticket sales, *Life* magazine estimated that *Hercules* was seen by more than 24 million people because of Levine's efforts at promotion. Paul O'Neil, “The Joe Levine Saturation Treatment Will Get You, Too—To a Movie: The Super Salesman of Super Colossals,” *Life* (27 July 1962): 76-82. See also: Howard Hughes, “*Hercules* Conquers the Box Office: Mythological Epics,” in *Cinema Italiano*, 2. The website “Top Films by Year,” ranks *Hercules* as the top grossing movie for 1959 based on unadjusted domestic totals. Viewed at: http://www.filmsite.org/box_office2.html. See also: Maria Elena D'Amelio's essay entitled “*Hercules*, Politics and Movies,” in Michael G. Cornelius, ed., *Of Muscles and Men: Essays on the Sword and Sandal Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2011), 15-27.
4. Richard Mason, “*Hercules*: Film Review,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1959. Mason wrote: “It is a slow-paced and stilted affair studded with routine spectacles that have been seen since movies immemorial . . . Steve Reeves throttles the screen evils with his big muscles in the old manner of Tarzan. There is added but unintended humor in the fact that his voice has the querulous pitch of a bank clerk's. Most of the dubbing is bad.” (Reeves' voice was not used in the film.) Erskine Johnson similarly opined in his column that, “The incredibly bad Italian-made *Hercules* . . . is cleaning up at the box office. The hard sell million-dollar exploitation campaign is better than the film.” Erskine Johnson, “Hollywood Glances,” *Miami Daily News-Record*, 18 August 1959.
5. Roy Howell quoted in “Books: Titan in Closeup,” *Time* (25 February 1966): 48. Howell authored *Churchill's Last Years*, (London: McKay Publishing, 1966.) President John Kennedy reportedly also loved “sword and sandal” films and told a reporter that his favorite movie was *Spartacus*, released two years after *Hercules* first appeared. Alex Moisi, “Five Presidents' Favorite Films: What They Watched When the World Wasn't Watching,” *Moviefone*, viewed at: <http://news.moviefone.com/2010/08/11/5-presidents-favorite-films/>.

6. Kirk Douglas exhibits more upper body muscle in *Spartacus*, released in 1960, for example, than he did in his earlier films. For information on the 1960s era of sword and sandal epics featuring bodybuilders Gordon Scott, Reg Park, Mark Forrest, Reg Lewis and Gordon Mitchell see: David Chapman, *Retro Stud: Muscle Movie Posters from Around the World*, (Portland, OR: Collectors Press, 2002); Steve Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1997), and Maria Elena D'Amelio, "Hercules, Politics and Movies," in *Of Muscles and Men*, 15.
7. Steven Cohan, *Masked Men*, 182-183. The term "peplum" refers to the short skirts or tunics worn by Reeves and other actors working in this genre. The term is widely used in Europe, especially Italy, when describing these kinds of films. In America, the descriptor "sword and sandal" is more common. See: Michael G. Cornelius, "Of Muscles and Men: The Forms and Functions of the Sword and Sandal Film," in *Of Muscles and Men*, 3-4.
8. See Hughes, "Hercules Conquers the Box Office," 1-27, and Chapman's book, *Retro Stud*, for a discussion of the films that came after *Hercules*.
9. For analyses of the impact of Stallone and Schwarzenegger see, for example: Steve Cohan, Ina Rae Hark, eds., *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2012); Dave Saunders, *Arnold and the Movies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Richard Corliss, "Box Office Brawn," *Time* (24 December 1990): 52; and Lance Morrow, "The Body Beautiful: Pumping Ironies," *Time* (17 June 1985): 84-5.
10. Chris LeClaire's authorized biography remains the only book on Reeves' life. Chapman's *Retro Stud* discusses Reeves at some length, but the book is designed as a history of film posters rather than a biographical history. David Dowling and George Helmer's, *Steve Reeves: His Legacy in Films* (Palm Springs, CA: Classic Image Productions, 2003), is an excellent but non-scholarly treatment of Reeves' film career. The other major source is a dissertation about Joseph Levine that discusses the marketing of *Hercules*: A.T. McKenna, "Joseph E. Levine: Showmanship, Reputation and Industrial Practice 1945 - 1977," Ph.D. diss., (University of Nottingham, England, 2008).
11. Cornelius, ed., *Of Muscles and Men*, 64, 104, & 201. See also: International Movie Database (IMDB in future footnotes) entries for Victor Mature at: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001514/>; Kirk Douglas at http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000018/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1; and Charlton Heston at: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000032/?ref_=nv_sr_1.
12. Richard Armour, "The Age of the Chest," *Playboy* (July 1958): 69-70. See Cohan's chapter entitled "The Age of the Chest," in *Masked Men*, 164-201, for a more nuanced discussion of these and other 1950s films in which the male body was exposed to viewers.
13. Biographical information on these bodybuilders can be found in Bill Pearl, et. al, *Legends of the Iron Game*, Vol. 2 (Bill Pearl Productions, 2010), 107-113 (for Clarence Ross); 129-135 (for George Eiferman); 173-181 (for Reg Park); and 197-207 (for Bill Pearl).
14. Jan Todd, Interview with George Eiferman, Las Vegas, Nevada, 12 August 1999.
15. Cohan, "Age of the Chest," 167.
16. Quoted in Dowling and Helmer, *Steve Reeves: His Legacy in Films*, 2.
17. For a discussion of the other bodybuilders who became actors in the 1960s, see David Chapman's *Retro Stud*; Howard Hughes' *Cinema Italiano*, 1-27; and Dowling and Helmer, 1-8. Born in 1878, Bartolomeo Pagono worked on the docks in Genoa until being discovered by Italian director Giovanni Pastrone, who cast him as a Nubian slave named Maciste in the 1914 Roman epic *Cabiria*. The Italian public loved the large, muscular actor and the following year Pagono starred in a film built around his slave character titled simply *Maciste*. Pagono's fame as Maciste was so great that he adopted it as his own stage name, and went on to star in more than 30 films during the silent era. A good discussion of his career can be found at: "San Francisco Silent Film Festival: *Maciste*, 1915," viewed at: <http://www.silentfilm.org/archive/maciste-1915>. The first screen Tarzan was Elmo Lincoln who appeared in the silent *Tarzan of the Apes* in 1918. Several Olympic swimmers also played the aristocratic jungle dweller, including Buster Crabbe (who also played Flash Gordon) and Johnny Weissmuller, who appeared in 12 Tarzan films, the first in 1932. See: Beth Rowan, "Tarzans through Time," at: <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/tarzan.html>.
18. "Sylvester Stallone about Steve Reeves," YouTube video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDN_HVfntpQ.
19. Chris LeClaire, *Steve Reeves: Worlds to Conquer: An Authorized Biography* (Chatham, MA: Monomoy Books, 1999), 184.
20. Ralph Banskigore, "Steve Reeves Mailbox," *Steve Reeves International Society Newsletter* 2, no. 3 (July 1996): 3.
21. Rick Lyman, "Steve Reeves, 74, Whose 'Hercules' Began a Genre," *New York Times*, 5 May 2000.
22. "Lester Reeves Victim of Fatal Accident While Threshing Wheat West of Richland; Dies Tuesday Morning," *Scoby*, Montana, news clipping from October 1928, viewed at: www.stevereves.com/Family/family.html.
23. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 19-20. See also: "In the Beginning," *Steve Reeves International Society* 1, no. 1 (1995). Lester Reeves was reportedly 6'1" tall and weighed about 200 pounds. "Family" viewed at: www.stevereves.com/Family/family.html.
24. Quoted in LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 24.
25. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
26. The Montana Deaconess School was both a home for orphans and a boarding school in the 1930s when Reeves stayed there. It is now called Intermountain. Ellen Baumler, "Into the Heart-Life of Children: Intermountain and a Century of Healing," viewed at: <http://www.intermountain.org/cen/>.
27. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 25.
28. *Ibid.*, 26.
29. "Bodybuilder" Steve Reeves International Society website, viewed at: <http://www.stevereves.com/Bodybuilder/bodybuilder.html>.
30. "California—Here He Comes!" *Steve Reeves International Society* 1, no. 3 (1995), viewed at: <http://www.stevereves.com/Bodybuilder/bodybuilder.html>.
31. *Ibid.*
32. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 30.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 32.
35. *Ibid.*, 34. Also: "An Interview with Steve Reeves," *Perfect Vision Magazine* 6, no. 22 (July 1994) viewed at: <http://www.drkr.com/reeves2.html>.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Terry Todd and Jan Todd, "Steve Reeves: The Last Interview," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 6, no. 4 (December 2000): 14. A photograph of Steve on his bicycle while hitting a biceps shot also circulated on the wire services following his Mr.



Levine's ability to generate enthusiasm for the release of *Hercules* can be plainly seen in this photo of the film's opening at the Pilgrim Theater in Boston. A marching band of bagpipers paraded down Washinton Street, followed by cars of "dignitaries" and the impresario himself—Joseph E. Levine.

America win in 1947. "Cyclist," *The Record-Argus* (Greenville, PA) 19 December 1947.

38. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 34.

39. See: "Those High School Days," *Steve Reeves International Society* 1, no 4 (1995). See also: Rick Lyman, "Steve Reeves, Whose Hercules Became a Genre," *New York Times*, 5 May 2000.

40. According to Ed Yarick, Reeves visited his gym and Jack Lalanne's gym frequently before deciding to train with him, and Reeves may also have lifted weights at Castlemount High School where he graduated, as there were weights there. Ed Yarick, "The Steve Reeves I Know and Remember," *Muscle Mag International* 2, no. 1 (May 1976): 33-34.

41. Reeves did not apparently view Earl Maylone as a father figure. "Earl was the kind of guy to buy everyone a round of drinks and he'd come home with half his paycheck gone," claimed Reeves. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 32.

42. Yarick, "The Steve Reeves I Know and Remember," 33-34.

43. *Ibid.*, 35 and LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 52. Reeves earned several service medals during the war.

44. "Bodybuilder" viewed at: <http://www.stevereves.com/Bodybuilder/bodybuilder.html>. See also: Todd and Todd, "Last Interview,"

3.

45. Claire Cox, "War Vet Happy When Named Mr. America of '47," *Daily Register* (Harrisburg, IL), 30 June 1947.

46. Associated Press, "Oakland Man Wins 'Mr. America' Title at Male Beauty Contest," *San Bernadino County Sun*, 1 July 1947.

47. Associated Press, "New Mr. America Handy About the House, Too," *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, 20 July 1947.

48. A sampling of some of these covers appears in Milton Moore, *Steve Reeves: A Tribute* (Dallas, TX: By the author, 1982), 28-29.

49. Gene Jantzen, "Steve Reeves: Mr. America 1947," *Muscle Power* 3, no. 7 (December 1947): 26. Little Abner was the heroically-muscled lead character in Al Capp's syndicated cartoon strip which appeared in American newspapers between 1934 and 1977. Viewed at: <http://lil-abner.com/about-lil-abner/>.

50. Peary Rader, "Steve Reeves—Mr. America, 1947," *Iron Man* 7, no. 5 (August 1947): 7.

51. Gordon Venables, "The 1947 Mr. America Contest," *Strength & Health*, (August 1947): 27.

52. Reeves believed in the Ancient Greek aesthetic maxim that suggested that the neck, biceps and calf should all have the same measurements. At his best, Reeves almost achieved this goal, having a

- measurement of 18.5 inches in the neck and 18.25 for his calf and biceps. "Bodybuilder," at: www.stevereves.com/Bodybuilder/bodybuilder.html.
53. "An Interview with Steve Reeves," *Perfect Vision Magazine*.
54. Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 7.
55. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 88; see also Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 8.
56. "An Interview with Steve Reeves," *Perfect Vision Magazine*; and Todd & Todd, "Last Interview," 8.
57. Lanza had titled the photo, "Perfection in the Clouds." Le Claire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 92.
58. Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 8; and LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 92.
59. Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 7.
60. In his early days at Muscle Beach, Reeves claimed: "There was a guy at Muscle Beach named Leo. He had Leo's Hot Dog Stand and things like that. He also owned a gas station. So, during that time I would go one day a week and work for about six or eight hours at his gas station and get a few bucks. And then a friend of mine named Dick Webster, he used to park cars at the Captain's Table there on La Cienega, a very elegant seafood restaurant. And he wanted one day a week off so I parked the cars one day a week for him. And then every once in a while some television show would call up and say, "Hey, we want you to be on the show. This is the Dinah Shore show and we need somebody like you." I'd say, "All right," and I'd make a few bucks that way." Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 10. See also: "An Interview with Steve Reeves," *Perfect Vision Magazine*; and "Hercules Movie Interview with Steve Reeves and George Helmer at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9ICgBi5CSg>. See also: "1948: Raves for Reeves from Europe to Hawaii," *Steve Reeves International Society* 2, no. 2 (1996); and Bill Pearl, "Steve Reeves," *Legends of the Iron Game*, Vol. 2, 135-144.
61. Aline Mosby, "Ralph Edwards has 'Male' Answer to TV's 'Dagmar,'" Unidentified newspaper clipping, Steeve Reeves Photography File, Todd Collection, H.J. Lutchter Stark Center at the University of Texas at Austin. See also: "From Mr. Universe to Mr. Movie Star," at: <http://www.stevereves.com/Newsletter/newsletters-1997-volume-3-issue-4.html>.
62. In addition to his performances on *The Ralph Edwards Show*, Reeves played a prison doctor in *Stars Over Hollywood* (1951). He also appeared on *Topper* in an episode called "Reducing," in 1953. Although not listed on the IMDb database, Reeves also worked on *The Red Skelton Show*, *The Jimmie Durante Show*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 10; and "Steve Reeves," IMDb website, viewed at: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0716302/>.
63. "Actor" *Steve Reeves International Society* at: <http://www.stevereves.com/Actor/actor.html>. For a fairly accurate list of Reeves' film and television appearances see his entry on the IMDb database at: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0716302/>.
64. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 159-160.
65. *Ibid.*, 159-168.
66. "Famed Attila Director has big new hit in Hercules," *The Times* (San Mateo, CA), 4 July 1959. See also: Patrick Luciano, *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens 1958-1968* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 41; and Chapman, *Retro Stud*, 6.
67. "Hercules Movie Interview with Steve Reeves and George Helmer," viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9ICgBi5CSg. See also: Chapman *Retro Stud*, 5; and D'Amelio, "Hercules, Politics, and Movies," 22.
68. Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 10. See also: Associated Press, "Shoulders Prove Asset in Italy," *Bridgeport Post*, 21 June 1959.
69. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 169.
70. "Hercules Movie Interview." See also: LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 170. Ten thousand dollars in 1957 is equivalent to a salary of approximately \$85,000 in 2014.
71. Robert Sklar, *A World History of Film* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 256.
72. "Attila," IMDb, viewed at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046731/>.
73. The growth of suburbs in the 1950s also impacted film viewing as people now had to drive and park to attend movies. Another factor was the Supreme Court's verdict in the Paramount Decision of 1948, which effectively broke up major studio monopolies, causing many theaters to close. See: Douglas Gomery and Clara Pafort-Overduin, *Movie History: A Survey*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 214-215. At the end of 1946, only 44,000 homes had a TV set; by the end of 1949, there were 4.2 million TV homes. By 1953, 50% of American homes had televisions. "Post War American Television," viewed at: http://www.earlytelevision.org/american_postwar.html. See also: "This Day in History: 3 May 1948—U.S. Supreme Court Decided Paramount Anti-Trust Case," viewed at: <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/us-supreme-court-decides-paramount-antitrust-case>.
74. Gomery and Pafort-Overduin, *Movie History*, 215. Often, as was the case with the poster for *Quo Vadis* (1951) the word "Technicolor" was printed in type nearly as large as the names of the film's stars, Robert Taylor and Deborah Kerr.
75. "Cinema: Hollywood on the Tiber," *Time* (6 June 1950): 42. See also: Gomery and Pafort-Overduin, *Movie History*, 216.
76. "Cinema: Hollywood on the Tiber," 42.
77. For a history of Italian film studios in the 1950s see: "The In-Crowd: Ten Cities that Shook Cinema," *Sight and Sound* 11, no. 9 (2001): 30-33.
78. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 2-3.
79. "Hollywood: All Muscle," *Time* (27 July, 1959): 34. "The scriptwriter seems to get Hercules mixed up with Samson, the Amazons with the ladies of Lemmos," wrote *Time*. See also: O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 77.
80. In a later interview Levine added "and men" when talking about Reeves' sexual appeal. See McKenna, "Joseph E. Levine: Showmanship, Reputation, and Industrial Practice," 73, and Gay Telese, "Joe Levine Unchained: A Candid Portrait of a Spectacular Showman," *Esquire*, (January 1961): 64-8.
81. Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in Cinema*, (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1978), 173.
82. Quoted in LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 184.
83. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 41, writes: "Even more crucial to the value of the peplum film, and yet problematic with respect to the narrative since it slightly varies the pattern, is Francisci's emphasis on characterization with regard to Hercules' abdication of immortality . . . in this sense, the films kept their body-builders mortal and exacting deeds from traditional heroics that were always 'fraught with peril.'"
84. Steve and Aline married on 24 June 1963 in Lucerne, Switzerland. LeClaire, "Worlds to Conquer," 174-176 and 221.
85. *Ibid.*, 176-177.

86. "Hercules," at www.imdb.com/title/tt0050381/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_dt_dt; and Kristi Wilson, "Hero Trouble" in *Of Muscles and Men: Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, 29.
87. Maggie Gunsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 101. Gunsberg writes, "The typical Italian audience of this peplum cycle was mainly lower class (proletarian and peasant), poorly educated (semi-literate or illiterate), and predominately inner city, Southern or provincial, viewing these films in *seconda* or *terza vision* cinemas with ticket prices under 300 lire [fifty cents]." *Seconda* or *terza vision* cinemas were second or third run theaters, where movies that had been released in theaters months prior earlier were re-played for lower ticket prices.
88. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 166.
89. *Ibid.*, 168.
90. Gunsberg, *Italian Cinema*, 98.
91. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 173. See also, "The Bridge on the River Kwai," at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bridge_on_the_River_Kwai, and "Giant (1956 film)" at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giant_\(1956_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giant_(1956_film)). See also: O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 77.
92. O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 76.
93. Attila was produced by Dino De Laurentis and directed by Francisci. P. K. Scheuer, "Meet Joe Levine, Super(sales)man!" *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 1959.
94. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 178.
95. "Hollywood: All Muscle," *Time* 74, no. 4 (27 July 1959): 34.
96. Levine was also featured in David Nathan, "The Man Who Sold Hercules," *Daily Herald*, 7 December 1960.
97. Skippy Harwood, "Even the Levine Parties are Major Productions," *Palm Beach Daily News*, 6 April 1986.
98. *Ibid.*
99. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 13.
100. McKenna, "Joseph E. Levine: Showmanship, Reputation, and Industrial Practice," 101.
101. Chapman, *Retro Stud*, 8; see also LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 177-178.
102. For those unable to make the event, Levine mailed out a letter addressed to "Friend Exhibitor," detailing the initial ten-day campaign that would include "the greatest TV saturation in every local market." McKenna, "Joseph E. Levine: Showmanship, Reputation, and Industrial Practice," 101.
103. "Hollywood: All Muscle," 34.
104. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 13.
105. Lloyd Shearer, "The World's Best Looking Man," *Parade: The Sunday Picture Magazine*, (31 May 1959): 2. See also: Chapman, *Retro Stud*, 13.
106. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 13.
107. Chapman, *Retro Stud*, 13.
108. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 13.
109. "Hercules" (Embassy Pictures Corporation, no date), Todd Collection, The H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.
110. The hiring of Bill Doll is discussed in "Hedda Hopper," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, 13 March 1959. Press Release entitled "The Princess and the Strong Man: Winning Screen Fame in 'Hercules,'" and, "The Story of Hercules Told with Pictures," (Typescript, Embassy Pictures Corporation, no date), Todd Collection, The H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin. Joe Weider, "All Italy Goes for Mr. America," *Mr. America* 2, no. 2 (August 1959): 20-24.
111. See for example, the image of Reeves that ran in *Strength & Health* in conjunction with Ray Van Cleef's article, "Strongmen the World Over," in September 1959, page 20; and the three pages of *Hercules* photos connected to the "Let's Gossip," column in *Muscle Builder* 9, no. 11 (August 1959): 21-23.
112. Dell Comics, No. 1006 *Hercules the Strongest Man in the World*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1959.) A second comic was released in conjunction with *Hercules Unchained*. It is Dell No. 1121 and was released in 1960.
113. Chapman, *Retro Stud*, 8. Levine gave away hundreds of Hercules bicycles when *Hercules Unchained* was released in 1960.
114. O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 77; and "Joe Unchained," *Time* (24 February 1961): 66. The statues bore the statement, "Made from the Strongest Chocolate in the World – If It Breaks You Can Eat It!"
115. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 180. Many of the openings were at drive-in theaters, catering to the youth market.
116. O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 77.
117. *Ibid.*
118. Luciano, *With Fire and Sword*, 13.
119. Dowling and Helmer, *Steve Reeves: His Legacy in Films*, 3-14. Conversion figure is from: <http://www.westegg.com/inflation>.
120. Quoted in LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 183. This Samson was the role that DeMille initially offered to Reeves.
121. *Ibid.*
122. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 183.
123. Dowling and Helmer, *Steve Reeves: His Legacy in Films*, 3-14.
124. "Joe Unchained," 66.
125. Dowling and Helmer, *Steve Reeves: His Legacy in Films*, 3-14.
126. O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 77.
127. Hughes, *Cinema Italiano*, xi.
128. *Ibid.*, 3.
129. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 184.
130. O'Neil, "Joe Levine Saturation Treatment," 78. Hollywood gossip columnist Erskine Jones reported that Reeves was paid \$200,000 to star in *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *The Battle of Marathon*. Erskine Jones, "In Hollywood: Steve Reeves Out-Recipes Hercules in Italian Film," *Redlands Daily Facts*, 10 June 1959. See also: Erskine Johnson, "Hollywood Today: Male Beauty Contest Winner Crashes Movies as Hercules," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, 11 June 1959.
131. Cornelius, "Introduction," *Of Muscles and Men*, 5.
132. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 178.
133. Dowling and Helmer, *Steve Reeves: His Legacy in Films*, 1-12.
134. Chapman, *Retro Stud*, 35.
135. Todd and Todd, "Last Interview," 1.
136. LeClaire, *Worlds to Conquer*, 11-12.
137. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bill Dobbins, *Encyclopedia of Bodybuilding* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 41-44.
138. "One-sheet" is a film industry term for a 27" x 41" movie poster displayed in theater lobbies.
139. Gig Patta, "Roundtable Interview with Dwayne Johnson for Hercules," *Latino Review* website, 24 March 2014, viewed at: <http://www.latino-review.com/news/2014/03/cinemacon-2014-roundtable-interview-dwayne-johnson-hercules>.

