

Lisa MAURICE

Roger Corman's Female Gladiators:
The Arena (1973) and *The Arena* (2001)

The pioneering work by scholars on the role of the ancient world in film has raised the issue of how such movies utilise that period in order to address modern issues and concerns. Recent scholarship in the wake of the hit movie, *Gladiator*, has in particular highlighted how the film draws parallels between modern American society and that of imperial Rome in order to pass social comment and criticism on the former. To date, however, the female gladiator of the big screen has been somewhat neglected. Yet in 1973 Roger Corman produced an exploitation movie set in the Roman empire, and centring around a group of female slaves who are trained as gladiators. Almost thirty years later, the movie was remade by the same producer. Both movies have the same essential plot; yet there are very striking differences between the two versions, differences that reveal more about the issues facing modern society than they do about ancient Rome.

Amongst the changes made in the production of the second movie are: a change of setting from Italy to a bleak fictional location in the far north of the empire; the removal of the element of racial tension that featured in the earlier film in which one protagonist was coloured and the other white; and the transformation of the character of the Roman Timarchus from a foolish and weak promoter of gladiator shows to an evil villain who represents Rome itself. While both films naturally stress the exploitation of the female slave, including titillating scenes of nudity and humiliation, the atmosphere of the 1973 movie is lighter, with a certain amount of tongue in cheek humour that is entirely lacking from the later version in which the Romans are graphically vilified as ruthless oppressors. Whereas the earlier film is concerned more with the issue of slavery and, in particular the oppression of women, an issue of central importance in the early 1970's, the message of the later version is, as in the case of *Gladiator*, an anti-Imperialist tirade in which Rome is to be compared with modern American society.