

## Paper Mache for 7-31-26 by David Read

Hello, my name is David and I am a sword-and-sandal movie addict (with a little *Godzilla* thrown in for good measure). Anyone heard about the just released film "The Odyssey?" I saw it this week and was wowed by its majesty in director Christopher Nolan's hands. It also filled in some of the many gaps in my knowledge of Homer's classic. All the buzz around the film reminded me of my gateway to this genre of film. Enter former Mr. Universe, Steve Reeves. Reeves became an international sensation in the 1958 film *Hercules*. By today's standards the special effects are charmingly simple, but Reeves possessed exactly what audiences wanted, a commanding physical presence and a sincerity that made the myths feel believable. His success launched a flood of films featuring legendary figures like Samson, Goliath and others. They may not all have been historically accurate, but they were endlessly entertaining.

So, when did filmmakers fascination with these mythological heroes begin? The first Hercules movies appeared just a few years after the birth of motion pictures themselves. From the earliest days, filmmakers understood that audiences would always pay to watch heroes battle monsters, rescue kingdoms, and remind us that courage can accomplish what ordinary strength alone cannot. *The Judgment of Paris* (1904, France) is one of the earliest films based on Greek mythology. It was Directed by Georges Méliès, the pioneering filmmaker famous for *A Trip to the Moon*. It depicts the mythological contest that eventually led to the Trojan War. *Hercules* (1908, Italy) is generally considered the first feature film centered on Hercules. It was a silent film lasting about 10 minutes, at the time, considered a substantial production).

This all goes back to the time when the biggest box office superheroes didn't wear capes, travel through space, or carry vibranium shields. They wore leather sandals, bronze helmets, and flowing capes. They battled hydras, cyclops, sea monsters, and entire armies with nothing more than a sword, a shield, and an impossible sense of confidence. Part of the appeal was that these stories weren't just about spectacles. They wrestled with timeless questions like what makes a hero? Is strength enough without wisdom? Can freedom overcome tyranny? Those themes remain every bit as relevant today as they were in Homer's epics or Shakespeare's plays.

Next came the films by the incomparable Ray Harryhausen, whose stop-motion animation transformed mythology into cinematic magic. Harryhausen's creatures seemed alive. *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, and *Clash of the Titans* introduced me to skeleton armies, the Cyclops, bronze giants, harpies, and the unforgettable Medusa.

This genre isn't limited to mythological adventures. I also love the monumental historical epics like *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, *The Robe*, and *The Ten Commandments*, and more recently *Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* and even a recent *Ben Hur* remake. The famous chariot race in the original *Ben-Hur* remains one of cinema's greatest action sequences, accomplished through engineering, stunt work, and remarkable courage rather than digital wizardry. Perhaps the greatest sword-and-sandal film of the modern era is *Gladiator* with Russell Crowe. Brad Pitt starred as Achilles in *Troy*, based loosely on Homer's *Iliad*. Even actors like Dwayne Johnson have gotten into the act in *Hercules*, based on the graphic novel *The Thracian Wars*. There have been television shows like the various *Spartacus* reincarnations, *Hercules* with Kevin Sorbo and Lucy Lawless in *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

Perhaps films in this genre continue to endure because beneath the gleaming armor and dramatic musical scores lies something timeless, our enduring fascination with ordinary, or sometimes extraordinary, people facing impossible odds. Whether it's Hercules lifting impossible burdens, Jason sailing into the unknown, or Spartacus refusing to surrender his dignity, these stories remind us that courage never goes out of style. Sometimes the oldest heroes still have the strongest stories to tell.