

# The Gladiators vs. Spartacus, Volume 2



# The Gladiators vs. Spartacus, Volume 2:

*Abraham Polonsky's Screenplay*

By

Abraham Polonsky

Annotations and Critical Commentary

by

Fiona Radford

with

Background Essays on Related Topics

by

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The Gladiators vs. Spartacus, Volume 2: Abraham Polonsky's Screenplay

By Abraham Polonsky

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*The films that are [planned but not completed, or completed but lost] are much better in our minds than the ones we actually have. So they're in tune with our Platonic ideals, and in that sense we need [unproduced and/or lost] films. They're an important element of our conception of Cinema as Art.*

Farran Smith Nehme, *Missing Reels* (2015) 167.

The contributors to this volume dedicate it to the memory of Abraham Polonsky, whose screenplay for *The Gladiators* may now be read and discussed for the first time 60 years after it was written. He himself wrote: "It was one of my better scripts." Through it, we have some idea not only of what the movie would be like, but of Abe's vision of a better world: not just in antiquity, but in the present.



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\*Chapters not ascribed to any author's name are our joint contributions.



## FOREWORD

When Henry MacAdam asked me to write this Foreword to Volume 2, which publishes for the first time my father Abe Polonsky's screenplay for *The Gladiators*, I was not sure where to begin. But after some thought, I decided to share a few of my early memories of what it was like growing up the son of a blacklisted writer and director.

I was twelve when my parents first told me that my father Abe had been blacklisted, quite a few years into it. My parents came from a generation that did not share much with their children, so I knew nothing except school, playing with friends, and that I needed to be home for dinner by six. My sister is older than I, so she may have been more cognizant of the changes the blacklist had effected in our parents' lives, but up until they made a point of informing me, I had been unaware.

My parents also told me that I should not tell anyone else. That did not work out. Almost immediately, I spilled the beans about my father's blacklisting, and therefore also about his Marxist sympathies, to my friends. It seemed like a consequential thing to share, a secret that might make me important by association. However, we lived in New York City, and no one really cared.

Though my father was blacklisted for eighteen years, and missed many critical creative and financial opportunities because of it, he still successfully supported his family by continuing to write using "fronts." The front would be a writer of whom the Studio or the Network would approve—meaning Abe would either use the name of a writer without Leftist associations (with their permission, of course), or use a pseudonym. During those years, he wrote novels and plays, TV shows and movies, almost entirely without credit, and many of which I did not discover until years later.

Abe was an incredibly talented writer and storyteller, and despite the hardships imposed by the blacklist, he could not imagine being anything else. His interests were unbounded: Politics, Literature, Psychology, History, and Language. He taught himself to read French so that he could study Proust, an enduring favorite of his, in its original language. He wrote every day, either in his diary or on a project for which he had been hired.

I recall coming home from school one afternoon, and finding Harry Belafonte in my dad's den, working on a screenplay together. At that time, Harry was a worldwide star, so it was like having one of the Beatles come

for a visit. My friends cared a lot more about that than they did about the blacklist. I believe that the screenplay they were working on was *Sweetland*, but it was never produced.

*The Gladiators* screenplay and the United Artists project to film it, and the ensuing duel with Dalton Trumbo's and Universal Studios' *Spartacus*, the two focal points of these twin volumes, are among many things previously unknown to me. After Henry brought my father's long-lost screenplay to my attention, I read it. Though in my estimation both his script, and Trumbo's, have similar charters, *The Gladiators* has a distinct tone with regard to the characters' morality and the corruptibility of power. It is a theme my father concerned himself with often in his writing, as well as in his life, and one that differentiates it from the Kubrick film.

I'd like to thank Henry and his colleagues for the hard work, research, and time they put into creating this book. And for bringing *The Gladiators* to my attention. It is wonderful to see my father's words on the page anew.

Henry Polonsky  
June 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our debt to many individuals and institutions is large, and we hope that all receive a word of appreciation here and/or in the text or footnotes. If anyone who should be acknowledged is not, the oversight is inadvertent and we apologize.

Special thanks to Abe Polonsky's son, Henry Polonsky, of Los Angeles, who with his extended family (the Polonsky Family Trust) serves as the legal custodian of Abe's intellectual property. Henry has contributed the Foreword to this volume, for which we are most grateful. Thanks also to the Polonsky Family Trust for permission to publish for the first time *The Gladiators* screenplay, as well as excerpts from Abe's personal *Journal*, quotations from his published novels, essays, and interviews, and to re-publish the letter from Abe to Paul Radin (now in the Martin Ritt Collection) that was first published in Volume 1. Photographs of Abe Polonsky are also reproduced with the permission of the Polonsky Family Trust, unless otherwise credited.

Tom Sayers and Gordon MacAdam read early drafts of both volumes, and contributed to improvements in each. Brian Hannan enthusiastically lent time and energy to identifying sources, sharing illustrations, and suggesting ways to improve both volumes. Brent Shaw has been supportive throughout this project, suggesting improvements along the way. Fiona Radford allowed access to her doctoral thesis, *The Many Legends of Spartacus*. Thanks also to John Bokina for sharing publications on, and correspondence about, modern manifestations of Spartacus lore and legend. Those and more are now encapsulated in his *Images of Spartacus*, forthcoming in 2021. Prof. John Schultheiss, Director Emeritus of The Center for Telecommunication Studies, California State University at Northridge (CSUN), encouraged our research. In some ways, this project is a much later sibling of his publication of the Polonsky screenplays *Odds Against Tomorrow*, *Body and Soul*, and *Force of Evil* two decades ago.

Mitzi Trumbo generously allowed us to include a family photo of her father Dalton Trumbo in the company of Bryna producer Edward Lewis, and to quote from her father's published books and unpublished documents. Quotes from several Koestler publications are reproduced here courtesy of the Arthur Koestler Estate in conjunction with Peters, Fraser,

& Dunlop, Ltd., London. Gabriel Miller shared recollections of Martin Ritt's family, and photos of Ritt, that he acquired during research for his volumes on Ritt's movies and interviews. Anne O. Fisher graciously tracked down difficult-to-access Russian sources relative to the making of the now-lost silent film *Spartak* (1926).

Mary Huelsbeck generously answered requests for multiple items in the WCFTR movie archives. Kristine Kreuger did the same at the Margaret Herrick Library. Nancy Randle and Ann Leifeste were available for independent research work in Los Angeles, CA (UCLA Library) and Austin, TX (Harry Ransom Center), respectively. Nancy kindly agreed to let us include her working notes on the Polonsky Collection at UCLA Library in our comments about it in Chapter 3. Sharon Rubin and Dan Fenton in London skillfully expedited the publication permission process at the Koestler Estate. Paul Buhl and Dave Wagner shared with us the wealth of information they gained in working with Abe Polonsky on their biography of him. Kirk Douglas knew of this work in progress from the beginning, and during the summer of 2019 wrote to say he was looking forward to reading it. We regret that wish could not be fulfilled. A copy of his letter to us was in the condolences sent to Michael Douglas at the time of his father's death in early 2020. Jeff Pirtle, Director of Archives and Collections at Universal Studios, and Michele Hadlow at the Everett Images Collection, helped us find key illustrations.

To Dori Seider, and to Joanna Baymiller, we extend special gratitude for a complete read-through of the final text, a labor that consumed more hours than either would want to admit. Cooper's thanks go in particular to editor of *Cineaste* Gary Crowds; his sponsor and mentor Prof. Martin Winkler; to Prof. Theresa Urbainczyk; to close friend and advisor William Morrow, and to friends and critics Steve Fagin and Rick Van Houter. We also thank Harry Waldman and Dan North, who independently but very complementarily trail-blazed for us in their respective volumes (*Scenes Unseen*, and *Sights Unseen*) exploring the value of unproduced movies.

A few words about publication permissions are relevant. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to publish portions of, or entire documents (especially letters), unpublished as well as published. In all but a few instances, this was successful, and we are grateful to the granting individuals and agencies for that assistance. Unfortunately, successive and sustained attempts to make contact with some family members, or literary executors, or publishers, of deceased individuals resulted in failure, and this is deeply regretted. Nevertheless, the authors of those documents and/or illustrations are acknowledged in the text and/or the footnotes on the relevant pages of this, and its companion, volume.

Although we have shared the laboring oars in getting this large vessel into harbor at Cambridge Scholars Publications, we were always aware throughout the voyage that awaiting the docking of the text, illustrations, and whatever else was on board, were Managing Editor Adam Rummens and his staff in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Our thanks go to them, especially to Sophie Edminson (Publication Designer) for seeing this heavy-laden ship through the publishing process. This volume, as did its predecessor, goes to press at precisely the time the global Covid-19 pandemic has begun to impact every aspect of the social, economic, and private life of us all. We are especially grateful it has been completed on schedule.

Henry I. MacAdam  
Fiona J. Radford  
Duncan L. Cooper

#



# PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

Call from Marty [Ritt]. For a screenplay. [*The Gladiators*.]<sup>2</sup>

## A Personal Note

My first opportunity to judge Abraham Polonsky's talent as a screenwriter was a delayed reaction precisely because of the blacklist. In 1959, during my senior year of high school in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, I went to a screening of *Odds Against Tomorrow* over the year's-end holidays. Though I then knew little of film technique, I was aware that this low-budget tale of a bank heist gone wrong wasn't just a latter-day *film noir* modeled on the classics of that genre from the 1930s and after. I had not then read the novel from which the movie derived, but the combination of a fast-paced story, a seasoned and talented cast, a compelling musical score, competent directorial work, and edgy dialogue driving the action, was memorable.<sup>3</sup>

Script credit went to someone named Nelson Gidding; I had no way of knowing that Polonsky had written it. It was exactly a decade later before I saw Polonsky receive writing credit for *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969). Though I learned of *The Gladiators* project from reading Bruce Cook's biography of *Dalton Trumbo* (1977), Polonsky's connection with it was not fully revealed until Kirk Douglas' *The Ragman's Son* appeared eleven years later (for details on both, see my contribution to the Preface for Vol. 1). Had I tried to make contact with Polonsky thereafter, and had he been responsive to my curiosity about his forgotten screenplay adaptation of the Koestler novel, this belated attempt to reconstruct the

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<sup>1</sup> As this is a co-authored Preface similar to that in Vol. 1, readers are asked to make allowances for its greater length. The initial remarks are those of MacAdam, followed by Radford, over our signatures. We trust our editors and readers will find this approach acceptable, and helpful to this detailed exposition of Abraham Polonsky's screenplay.

<sup>2</sup> Handwritten entry in Abraham Polonsky's *Journal* for 26 January 1958.

<sup>3</sup> The best overall assessment of that movie is Schultheiss's *Odds Against Tomorrow: The Critical Edition* (1999). Schultheiss taped many hours of interviews with Polonsky, as well as with others (cast, crew, director, composer, etc.). There are, at present, no plans to publish the transcriptions.

rivalry with *Spartacus* (1960), and to provide a worthy presentation of his script, would surely be a denser, more comprehensive, and overall a much better volume.<sup>4</sup> Presenting his lost screenplay for *The Gladiators* in this volume is compensation; the backstory of its development in Vol. 1 should add clarity and context to that.

## Discovering Polonsky's Forgotten Script

In the early summer of 2011 my then-latest online search for a copy of Abraham Polonsky's hitherto "lost" screenplay was rewarded by a notice that one was on sale at a famous Berkeley, California bookstore. As I expected, Polonsky's name was not on it, nor (surprisingly) was the name of his front for that unproduced film, Ira Wolfert. It is also clear that what I purchased, when it became (date unknown) part of the stage and screen memorabilia collection of playwright Waring Jones, had been mistakenly identified as the screenplay for Kirk Douglas' *Spartacus* (1960). Good fortune prevailed (for me, at least) regarding my purchase: Serendipity Books went out of business just two months later, and its inventory of rare publications, obscure scripts, and much else, was auctioned two years later.<sup>5</sup> Details of the script's travels between 10 March 1960, when this copy was logged into United Artists main office,<sup>6</sup> and when Serendipity Books acquired it, have so far proved impossible to reconstruct.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> With Yul Brynner's death in 1985, Martin Ritt's in 1990, and Arthur Krim's in 1994, only Paul Radin outlived by a few years Polonsky's death in 1999. I regret not making an effort to contact any of those principal figures who were part of the inner workings of *The Gladiators* project. It is especially disappointing that none of them left behind either a memoir or an autobiography.

<sup>5</sup> A biographical sketch of Waring Jones (1929-2008) is available online at: [startribune.com/obituaries/13867831.html](http://startribune.com/obituaries/13867831.html).

<sup>6</sup> Yul Brynner moved Alcione Productions to Geneva, Switzerland in early 1959. Although he had commissioned *The Gladiators'* script (via Martin Ritt), it is likely that this copy of it, perhaps belonging to producer Paul Radin, was logged in at the UA office on 10 March 1960, two weeks after Radin resigned as VP of Alcione. He continued to push for the film to be made.

<sup>7</sup> Film studies, especially script development, were new to me at the time Polonsky's screenplay came to light. My appreciation for it as an artifact of *The Gladiators* project, and as an example of this literary genre, has now been enhanced by Kevin R. Johnson, *The Celluloid Paper Trail* (2019). Its subtitle (*Identification and Description of Twentieth Century Film Scripts*) invites its readers to engage in an adventurous journey of learning with a guide of wide-ranging experience.



What little I could discover came from Serendipity's last store manager, Nancy Kosenka, in a telephone call of 2 June 2011: "Peter Howard [founder-owner of Serendipity] obtained the Waring Jones Collection before Waring died [in 2008]. Peter began packing Jones' material on 28 December 2001." The online advertisement for it read: **"Polonsky (Abraham) = Screenplay/Arthur Koestler novel. Spartacus [Aka *The Gladiators*] [Screenplay]. Softcover 8.5" x 11"; three pins; red wrappers title *THE GLADIATORS* with this printed title crossed out and *SPARTACUS* written in [black] marker. 159 mimeographed leaves, printed on rectos only. Undated. With two 8" x 10" black & white [*Spartacus*] production stills laid in."** Not mentioned there is the handwritten list of the names of three actors (Kirk Douglas, Laurence Olivier, and Jean Simmons) added to the title page. All of them had leading roles in Universal's film of *Spartacus*. Nor does the ad mention the penciled note "**Rec'd 3/10/60 RDW**" on the title page. If the person with the initials "RDW" could be identified, the office at which the script was logged in could be verified.

Those details of the online advertising were followed by a short summary paragraph about the rivalry between Bryna Productions/U-I and Alciona Productions/UA to make a *Spartacus* movie, each with a blacklisted script writer. There was some basic biographical information about Polonsky. To date, I have not become aware of a duplicate of this mimeographed copy of *The Gladiators*, although at least a half dozen must have been printed during the protracted pre-production of the effort to film it. In 2016, I learned that a 176 pp. draft of this script is among papers in the Polonsky Collection at the UCLA (Charles E. Young Research) Library (Box 7 Folder 1 TN: 35245). That Collection was donated by his two children, Henry and Susan, in 2000, a year after Polonsky's death at age 89. The final two pages of that draft are missing, but in compensation it contains part of one, and all of another, scene later deleted before the second or third draft was completed at the end of 1958. The copy I found must therefore represent that last revised version, scheduled for yet another major makeover in January 1960, when *The Gladiators* project was greenlighted for a second time. Alas, it was not to be.

Polonsky's personal *Journals* (catalogued at WCFTR as "Diaries") attest that he began writing *The Gladiators* on 17 May 1958, one month after completing a 100 pp. (now-lost) film treatment. The film project included Yul Brynner and Anthony Quinn as co-stars, Martin Ritt as director, and Paul Radin as producer. In the summer of 1958 Sophia Loren and Michael Rennie were approached to take on major roles. Pre-production stalled when *Spartacus* began filming in January 1959. *The*

*Gladiators* revived in late 1959 and early 1960, but went inactive again when *Spartacus* was released to popular and critical success in October 1960. For the next 28 months, the Hollywood trade papers carried UA ads proclaiming that their Roman epic film was “Coming”, but the project was abandoned at the end of February 1963: no trade advertisement appeared in March of that year, and none thereafter.

A single copy of *The Gladiators* script later found its way into the Waring Jones Collection, but at what date and under what circumstances is not known. Alciona, founded by Yul Brynner in 1956, was moved to Switzerland in 1959, and in the late 1960s went out of business. United Artists still exists today, but the death in 1994 of longtime head Arthur B. Krim, who had actively promoted *The Gladiators* project, might have led to the sale of this ageing and unproduced screenplay to the Waring Jones Collection. Even Polonsky (1910-1999) was unaware of this revised copy, because he told my colleague John Bokina (in a telephone interview) that he “thought all copies of it had been lost.” Apparently, even he had forgotten the draft copy still among his papers. As recently as seventeen years ago, Polonsky’s biographers considered this script to be a casualty of the failed attempt to film *The Gladiators*: “Abraham Polonsky, remarkably enough, was the screenwriter working on the adaptation [of Koestler’s novel]—remarkable because Koestler was a darling of Cold Warriors, with absolutely no sympathy for blacklist victims. *Unfortunately, the script has been lost*”.<sup>8</sup> Polonsky had said nothing about it in interviews with them.

From my first reading of Polonsky’s *The Gladiators*, my intent was to see that it was published with a detailed Commentary, plus a full examination of Polonsky’s book-adaptation techniques and stylistic features. If possible, I wanted the presentation to include a background narrative essay providing a proper context within the years that film project was in direct competition with Kirk Douglas’ *Spartacus*.<sup>9</sup> Novelist and screenwriter Ira Wolfert, not on the blacklist, served as a front for Polonsky. It is not clear if Howard Fast or Dalton Trumbo, both of whom wrote screenplays for *Spartacus*, learned that Polonsky was scripting *The Gladiators*. UA seems to have done a better job disguising Polonsky than U-I did in concealing the identity of *their* blacklisted screenwriter, Trumbo, who wrote under the alias “Sam Jackson” and a “front”. Also at play is the difference in personality between those two men. Trumbo was known to be flamboyant and media-savvy, an outspoken opponent of

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<sup>8</sup> Buhle & Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight* 2003: 298 n. 56—my emphasis. I could find no support for the authors’ assertion that Koestler was hostile, or even indifferent, to victims of the blacklist.

<sup>9</sup> MacAdam, “*Spartacus Redivivus*” (2012): 66.

Hollywood's hypocritical attitude regarding "leftists" and "pinkos" and "fellow-travelers" within the film community. Polonsky, in sharp contrast, was reserved and non-combative.

He had earned steady money in the early 1950s for scripting episodes of CBS' *You Are There* (1953-55), and he was content to remain "under the radar" as long as he found regular employment in the shadows, and could continue writing fiction. He gave interviews, and occasionally published reviews. He relegated his criticism of "the current system" to his *Journals* and to private conversations with family, close friends, and sympathetic colleagues. At the very time (May 1958) that Polonsky began work on *The Gladiators*, *Variety* was crediting Ira Wolfert with the screenplay for that film. Wolfert and Polonsky were longtime friends in Hollywood of the late 1940s. Wolfert wrote the novel *Tucker's People* (1943), which became the movie *Force of Evil* (1948) directed by Polonsky, who co-wrote the screenplay with Wolfert. When Polonsky was later swept up in the blacklist and Wolfert escaped it, the latter was a natural choice as Polonsky's front. When UA had to say something public about a screenwriter for the forthcoming *The Gladiators*, Wolfert's name was fed to *Variety* for script credit. Wolfert had no other role in the pre-production effort except the agreed-upon use of his name.

In his autobiography Kirk Douglas notes: "Ira Wolfert was writing for UA. It didn't occur to us [at U-I] that he was just UA's front for *their* fast-writing blacklisted writer, Abe Polonsky. The whole system [of blacklisting and fronting] was ridiculous."<sup>10</sup> In his much later memoir, Douglas puts the discovery of who was *actually* writing *The Gladiators'* screenplay in dialogue form with his producer, Edward Lewis (the front for Trumbo), who had learned some disconcerting news:

"Wolfert's a front. He's their 'Sam Jackson'. 'Who's the real writer?' 'Abe Polonsky.'" Polonsky was a blacklisted writer/director with a keen mind and a quick pen. "So where does that leave us?" "Fucked!" said Eddie brightly.<sup>11</sup>

It is unlikely that Douglas later saw a draft of Polonsky's script, but he had certainly read the Koestler novel behind it. That is evident from his comment about *The Gladiators* in a letter to me of 19 July 1978: "I do have great admiration for Koestler's book, and feel that it would have, and still would, make a great movie." At the time of this writing, Douglas and Lewis have passed on. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the release of *Spartacus*

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<sup>10</sup> *Ragman's Son* (1988) 310-311.

<sup>11</sup> *I Am Spartacus* (2012) 59.

(October 2020) will recall their contributions to it, and to breaching the blacklist. When I wrote to request his permission to reproduce portions of his autobiography and his memoir, Douglas responded in a letter of 16 August 2019: “I hope your book is a great success. I look forward to reading a copy once it’s completed.” Copies of both volumes will become available at the Douglas and Polonsky Collections at the Wisconsin Center of Film and Theater Research, and at the Polonsky Collection at the UCLA Library.

Thanks are due to my co-authors, Fiona Radford and Duncan Cooper, for making this complex and lengthy project much easier to research and prepare for publication. Without their separate skills at sifting through sources, and drawing upon their storehouse of movie lore in general, and Hollywood blacklist history in particular, it is doubtful I could have completed this task at all, especially in its present form, on my own. In the Preface to Vol. 1, Cooper has contributed an account of how his interest in the person and the legend of Spartacus eventually led us toward each other. Just below, Fiona Radford shares her own recollections of that same process. Whether it was pure chance, a remarkable coincidence, or simply fate, we were drawn together for this purpose. It should also be noted here that all three of us owe a debt of gratitude to Abraham Polonsky’s son Henry, who has been most supportive and helpful throughout research on every aspect of this project, and who graciously contributed the Foreword. We also hope the Polonsky Family Trust will find these volumes a worthy presentation of Abe’s achievements: before, during, and after the blacklist.

Henry I. MacAdam

## **The Journey to the Other Side of the Story**

Although I cannot claim to have seen *Spartacus* (1960) on the big screen when it was first released, Spartacus has been weaving his way in and out of my life now for almost three decades, after first encountering him on my television during my early teens. Of all the old Hollywood epics that I watched in the ensuing years, the Kirk Douglas tale of the Third Slave War always stood out. However, when I decided to study historical films for my PhD, I had no intention of focusing on just one film. I happened upon some articles about the 1960 film by Duncan Cooper when preparing my first paper, and this re-ignited my relationship with the rebel-gadiator. The focus of my research shifted to the *production* of this film, rather than to interpreting the finished product, which led to an exploration of various archives. Those included the Dalton

Trumbo Papers in the Special Collections at UCLA, the Special Collections of the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles, the Kirk Douglas and Dalton Trumbo Papers at the Wisconsin Centre for Film and Theatre Research, the Howard Fast Papers at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and finally the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts, London. Some of the crucial interviews with the cast and crew of *Spartacus* had been removed from the Wisconsin archives; copies were generously supplied to me by the same Duncan Cooper who had unknowingly kickstarted my thesis project. Examination of the remaining documentation suggested that the 1960 film had been irreparably impacted by a rival Spartacus project starring Yul Brynner, the outlines of which were mentioned in Douglas' autobiography *The Ragman's Son* (1988).

After the successful completion of the thesis, *The Many Legends of Spartacus* (2012), and undertaking a teaching career, my active involvement with that movie seemed over, even though Douglas' detailed memoir of its troubled production (*I Am Spartacus*) appeared that same year. That changed when MacAdam contacted me in 2016, and told me that he had material relating to the rival project that had been so vital in shaping *Spartacus* (1960). He was especially interested to enlist my help in providing a wide-ranging Commentary on the newly discovered screenplay, and Abraham Polonsky's interpretation of Koestler's novel. The chance to be involved in this project, alongside Duncan Cooper, whose work on *Spartacus* influenced mine since the beginning, and John Bokina, who was then working on his forthcoming volume about *Images of Spartacus* (2021), was too tempting to ignore. Both Duncan and Mac have been incredibly supportive and patient as I juggled work on *The Gladiators* with family, full-time teaching, and cohosting a podcast (*The Partial Historians*) on all things Roman.

Working on the Commentary has in a sense meant breaking down the screenplay and looking for the details. Of particular interest to me, in both my thesis and this project, is in examining how the patchy, one-sided, and sometimes contradictory ancient material has informed and shaped the script. Koestler and Polonsky pursued an angle that suited their purpose, highlighting the internal divisions of the slave army that are indicated in various accounts. However, stepping back at the end of this process, I am also aware of the larger implications that emerge from this study. Anyone who has studied the production of *Spartacus* (1960) will be aware that there was a lot of bitterness and tension both on the set and after the project had wrapped. Memos from the archives, such as 'The Sequence on Vesuvius' by Trumbo, document the struggle over the characterization of

the titular character, most notably between Trumbo himself and Kubrick, who was introducing Koestlerian ideas.<sup>12</sup> Articles like Natalie Zemon Davis' "Trumbo and Kubrick Argue History" (2002), give the impression that the inclusion of more Kubrick-Koestler ideas would have led to an edgier, darker, more engaging, and quite frankly, 'better' film. We will never know for sure what might have happened with this competing film project had it gone to production, but the surviving Polonsky script contains a crucial element—*consistency*—the lack of which caused much of the drama on the Universal Studios project, and marred their finished product.

Polonsky's characters, particularly major ones like Spartacus and Crixus, are well-crafted and contribute to a clear overall vision. In keeping with Koestler's novel, and as theorized by academics like the aforementioned Zemon-Davis, it is a darker and grittier slave rebellion than we are presented with in UI's *Spartacus*. As someone who has read pages and pages of Trumbo's and Douglas' battles regarding the competing visions for this story, I continue to wonder: would *The Gladiators* have made a 'better' movie than the one that beat it to the screen? It is difficult to judge, as Polonsky & Co. did not have the opportunity to develop the script to the same extent that the team on the Trumbo-Douglas film did, nor do we know how *The Gladiators* would have evolved once it went into production.

A potential issue might be that not many of Koestler's or Polonsky's characters are likeable or appealing (Lydia especially invokes my ire). That is not necessarily a problem, but would figures like the Spartacus we see in these pages have had the charisma of "the man in the fur-skin" presented by Koestler? Trumbo, Douglas, and Lewis had struggled with the "remoteness" of Fast's Spartacus, and in a sense, Koestler's slave leader was also ambiguous. It would have taken actors of great dynamism to bring this story to life, but Yul Brynner was probably just the man for the job. Regardless of the cast, an observation in a 7 September 1959 letter suggests that Polonsky knew that the script still needed an overhaul, as he commented when there seemed to be a real possibility of restarting the project: **"....when I re-read the screenplay I too was a different person, and felt in a hundred ways how it could be better, clearer, more forceful, and so on."** However, now that this script is finally seeing the light of day in the modern era, the Koestlerian-Polonskyan band of anti-heroes (and a heroine) within it could discover an audience even more prepared to embrace the story of a revolution gone wrong.

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<sup>12</sup> 'The Sequence on Vesuvius', Box 39, Folder 12, Kirk Douglas Papers.

It is already noted that in the final stages of this project, Kirk Douglas sadly passed away. Mr. Douglas has left behind an additional large collection of his personal papers. According to Assistant Director Mary Huelsbeck, many of these will be added to his existing archive at the WCFTR (Madison, WI) in late 2020 or early 2021. It is not yet known if more Spartacus material is contained in these papers, but it is exciting to consider that the 'lost interviews' Douglas did with David Chandler, and/or a final Trumbo script, might be among them. That would open up further possibilities for researchers.

Spartacus has been reinvented and reimagined in a myriad of ways, in recent times most often as an “underdog” or champion of the oppressed. This means that, in my eyes, he has never lost his relevance, and studying representations of this gladiator can shine a valuable light on the context at the time of the Polonsky script’s creation, as well as the present. I hope that these volumes on one such construction will prove enlightening to the reader. In the current political and environmental climate, we clearly still have the need for a ‘Spartacus’ figure to lead the most important rebellion yet against the powerful in our world.

Fiona J. Radford





## INTRODUCTION

*The value of a book of this kind stands on a double plinth: (1) the author's ability to ferret out the missing or myth-laden details and plausibly recount the events; (2) the ability of the author to make the reader see why this event was so important.*<sup>1</sup>

This Introduction underscores the two most important aspects of our two-volume research: (1) a summary of the development and demise of a project to film Arthur Koestler's epic novel *The Gladiators*, and (2) the presentation and evaluation of the once-lost screenplay for that movie by blacklisted director/writer Abraham Polonsky. Biographical sketches of Koestler and Polonsky give readers a context for the creation of the novel, as well as its interpretation via the script. The first aspect was addressed immediately within Volume 1. The second is the main focus of this companion volume, which allows readers access to not only the full text of a forgotten blacklist-era script, but equally important, provides a literary analysis of Polonsky's screenplay. That is presented not just as Polonsky's interpretation of Koestler's historical novel about the Spartacus Revolt, but is viewed through the wider lens of earlier and later recreations in fiction and in film, of the Slave War or Gladiator's War of 73-71 BC, that speak to ancient and modern struggles for human freedom.

Film rights for *The Gladiators* were negotiated by producer Paul Radin in the winter and spring of 1957 on behalf of the Ashley-Steiner Company in Los Angeles, a talent agency that had worked closely with Yul Brynner since his arrival in Hollywood from the Broadway stage. Later that year, those rights were sold to Brynner's Alcione Productions, a newly formed independent production company with major ambitions. Announcements that the project was then in pre-production appeared in both the *NY Times*, and in *Variety*, during October of 1957. Koestler's literary agent secured a contract for a paperback printing of the novel to appear at the time of the film's release. Brynner and United Artists signed a multi-picture contract, including—and featuring—*The Gladiators*, scheduled for release in 1959. Before the end of 1957, Radin corresponded with Koestler, and they

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Larry Ceplair's review of Kevin Brianton, *Hollywood Divided: The 1950 Screen Directors Guild Meeting and the Impact of the Blacklist* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2016) in *Cineaste* XLII.3 (2017) 75-76 at p. 75.

planned a meeting in Austria in the early spring, with Brynner and director Martin Ritt, to discuss production plans.

In January 1958, Kirk Douglas and Edward Lewis began pre-production on a rival project for Bryna Productions to film Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus*. UA turned them down when Douglas approached Arthur Krim for financing, regardless of Douglas' prior knowledge about Alcione's announced movie. Film rights were secured for *Spartacus*, with Fast hired to draft a screenplay. Polonsky agreed to script *The Gladiators* in late January 1958, and met with Radin and others in Hollywood in March; studio ads promoting *The Gladiators* appeared in trade papers in late February, and again in early April. What became a "race to the screen" was underway.

Polonsky's 100 pp. step outline (film treatment) was completed in April, 1958. Ritt brought it to Europe, where Brynner joined him and Radin in a conference with Koestler. Polonsky began writing his script in mid-May, but by the end of that month became aware that a rival project was being planned by Bryna Productions. When Fast started writing his treatment in May, he wasn't aware that Douglas had plans for blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo to take on that task if his (Fast's) script proved un-filmable. Douglas and Lewis discovered that finding financing and distribution rights would be difficult because of the competition from *The Gladiators*. In late May, an offer was made by Bryna to Alcione (i.e. by Douglas/Lewis to Ritt/Radin) to combine their projects, a surprise development about which Polonsky was clearly aware. This offer of collaboration was rejected by Brynner, via a letter to Radin and Ritt.

By mid-summer 1958, Polonsky had completed two-thirds of his screenplay, but was aware that several major British actors had already signed on for *Spartacus*. Fast completed a first-draft screenplay by the end of June, but it was "buried" in favor of Trumbo's. Bryna scored a major coup that summer by getting a trio of A-list British actors—Charles Laughton, Peter Ustinov, and Laurence Olivier—to commit to *Spartacus*, even though Trumbo's script was incomplete. Alcione had signed Anthony Quinn to co-star in *The Gladiators*, and hoped to bring on board Michael Rennie and Sophia Loren for other major roles. Ritt tried to get Bryna to agree to merge the two projects in October, but this time Douglas rejected the offer. Alcione surrendered their copyright on the title *Spartacus* to Bryna that November. Polonsky finished and revised his screenplay by the end of 1958; Bryna secured funding from UI Studios and announced that *Spartacus* would begin production in the New Year. Trumbo's "Final" screenplay was very incomplete.

*Spartacus* went into full production in late January 1959, and encountered several early setbacks that gave Alciana hope that *The Gladiators* project remained viable. Douglas fired director Anthony Mann, and hired Stanley Kubrick in his place; filming was behind schedule and over budget; it was widely known, but never announced, that Trumbo was writing the script. Trumbo went on strike in June—over loss of control of his screenplay; its uneven portrayal of the slave rebellion and its eventual defeat by Roman forces; his plans for screen credit, and through that, an end to the blacklist. Fast was brought back to Bryna as a script doctor. By August, principal filming of *Spartacus* was finished, but the results were panned by Trumbo in a scathing eighty-page report. The American Legion denounced “Commies” in Hollywood, and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) threatened to hold more hearings there. *Spartacus* appeared to be in critical condition, and perhaps in danger of sudden death.

UA President Arthur Krim, acting in concert with Brynner, asked Ritt to undertake a major revision of *The Gladiators* script, and Polonsky agreed. Radin went to Spain to set production plans in motion for shooting *The Gladiators* in the spring of 1960. Universal enlarged the budget for *Spartacus* to cover battle-scene production in Spain. In late December 1959, Radin announced a casting-call for *The Gladiators* (set for early January 1960), and named a new Production Manager at Alciana. Subsequently, those plans, and the script rewrite, were postponed when HUAC’s visit was cancelled, and Ritt was forced away from *The Gladiators* project to fulfill contract duties to 20th Century Fox. Director Otto Preminger announced, in late January 1960, that Trumbo had (re-) written the screenplay for *Exodus*, providing cover for Universal’s later confirmation that Trumbo’s name would be on *Spartacus*. Brynner committed to making *The Magnificent Seven* (filming to begin in March 1960). Radin left Alciana to work for UA, and announced in March that production of *The Gladiators* was re-scheduled for the coming summer. Pre-production was put off until late summer to see whether or not UI would award screen credit to Trumbo. Arthur Krim was already committed to breaking the blacklist by giving Trumbo credit for *Exodus*, and would not compete with another film that was doing the same thing if it appeared to have a chance of success.

*The Gladiator’s* ultimate hopes for production in 1961 rested on *Spartacus* failing at the box office when it was released in October 1960. Right-wing groups such as the American Legion made plans to picket theaters that showed it. It was released to mixed reviews (including a scathing pan by the *New York Times*), and box office receipts did not show

promising returns until late December. Early in 1961, President Kennedy attended a public screening in Washington, DC, a high-profile plus for the film. Not only did *Spartacus* begin to make money, it earned four Academy Awards in April 1961. By that summer, Alciona/UA returned to a “wait and see” approach regarding the question of whether *Spartacus* would not only recoup its \$12 million cost (\$100 million today), but turn a profit. Any plans for shooting *The Gladiators* in late 1961, or any time in 1962, were abandoned when *Spartacus* posted record earnings for UA.

Although UA continued to run trade-paper ads throughout 1961-62 touting *The Gladiators* as “Coming Soon”, promotion was discontinued by March 1963. That decision to abandon it proved practical when other epic films, such as *Cleopatra* (1963), and *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), were financial and critical disasters. Subsequently, apart from a few artifacts such as trade ads, almost all material evidence of the attempt to film *The Gladiators* evaporated. Polonsky’s script was considered to be one more casualty of the aborted project. Even books on “Unmade Movies” failed to mention it. Though he continued to write without credit during the 1950s (e.g. *Odds Against Tomorrow*, 1959), and later was able to direct again (e.g. *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, 1969), Polonsky’s best years in cinema were behind him by 1971, although he continued to write screenplays.

His script for *The Gladiators*—which is not even mentioned by his biographers Buhl and Wagner (2001) because Polonsky didn’t reference it in interviews with them—survives to remind us that he could, and did, transform a difficult and complex novel of an ancient slave rebellion into a screenplay that was worthy of Koestler’s bold vision of a failed utopia and a defeated revolution. Koestler’s solid literary career continued into the early 1970s, and he was awarded a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in the New Years’ Honours List of 1972. But his later work in parapsychology and Jewish ethnic origins proved controversial, and his health declined. Koestler died in 1983. Polonsky taught script writing and directing at universities in California until his death in 1999.

The three-part presentation of Volume 2 is quite similar to that of Volume 1. Part 1 Chapter 1 is a biographical sketch of Abraham Polonsky, with the emphasis on his film career before and during the blacklist years (1947-1968). Part 2 offers the complete text of Polonsky’s screenplay for *The Gladiators*, in conjunction with Fiona Radford’s full and detailed commentary. The latter is done in footnotes, rather than in the more usual explication within a separate section, allowing readers instant access to scene-by-scene annotations of the script. In preparation for this, Radford transcribed the entire screenplay into a Word file. This not only made the

script into a searchable text, it familiarized her with every aspect of it. But that represents only her preliminary work.

Readers unfamiliar with script analysis and commentary may not realize how much additional effort goes into full exposition.<sup>2</sup> Radford's task involved comparison and contrast of the draft script and the revised version, line-by-line, with the text of the novel at hand to demonstrate how the screenplay borrowed from, or added to, Koestler's storyline. Radford also consulted Fast's novel and script, and Trumbo's script, of *Spartacus*. She also checked the extant ancient sources about the Spartacus Revolt in light of how they were, or weren't, utilized in the novel and the screenplay of *The Gladiators*. Lastly, she consulted relevant modern academic studies of Spartacus in particular, and the Late Roman Republic in general, for their insights on this particular event in the light of what is known of ancient slavery and sporadic movements to attain freedom.

Two additional chapters in Part 2 present closely related studies. Chapter 3 recreates one partial, and one complete, scene from an earlier extant draft of *The Gladiators* script. Chapter 4 is a collection of excerpts, most with annotations, from Polonsky's private *Journal*. This is a record of his thoughts about, observations on, and plans for the movie, beginning with his initial agreement to write the screenplay through its completion, after at least one major revision of earlier drafts, almost a calendar year later. It is an invaluable document regarding development of the script, but also a major source for the two rival movie projects' backstory.

Part 3 is devoted to three essays on topics relevant to Polonsky's screenplay. Chapter 5 is a survey of novels and films devoted to the theme of Spartacus and the slave revolt he led, ranging from the early Victorian Era through the present day. That essay is primarily the work of MacAdam, as an expansion of an earlier article. Chapter 6 compares and contrasts the ways in which Polonsky interpreted Koestler's novel in creating his script. Finally, Chapter 7 explores how several individuals central to the rival project to film Howard Fast's novel, *Spartacus*, considered or opposed attempts to incorporate some of Koestler's views on the Spartacus Revolt, especially the reasons for its failure. That essay is primarily the work of Duncan Cooper, expanding on several earlier publications. Chapters not ascribed to any one author's name are our joint contributions; these include Chapters 1, 3, 6, and the Post Script.

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<sup>2</sup> There is no better example of this than the three volumes on Polonsky screenplays, and the films produced from them, by John Schultheiss. See the Bibliography for the publication details. A valuable overview of Polonsky's career is that by Andrew Marsden for 'The Great Directors' segment of *Senses of Cinema* (<http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/polonsky/>).

Our *Post Script* (rather than *Postscript*) replaces what would normally be a Conclusion. It is, in fact, an extra chapter that rounds out not just this volume, but both volumes. In its original form, it was just over ten pages, and went to press at that length. Additional information that came to light about critical decisions made during the first half of 1960, led us to look again at the events that led directly to another pause in the plans to film *The Gladiators*, that prompted UI to accept Trumbo's name on screen for *Spartacus*, and that ultimately brought about the demise of the blacklist, demanded a major re-write of this *Post Script*. In it, we reflect on two key topics that relate to Abe Polonsky's *script* in particular, and to the role of *screenplays* in the rival productions at the center of our research. One is the vexed issue of how to portray the split in the Slave Army, attested in the ancient sources, and a major factor in the rebellion's eventual defeat after the death of Spartacus. Polonsky (via Koestler) addressed that divisive issue; Trumbo (via Fast) did not, at least not in the final script, and in the released film. This issue was the core of the first half of the original *Post Script*.

The other half centered on the independent role of UA's Arthur Krim at the crucial juncture in late winter of 1960, when the issue of breaching the movie blacklist became a reality (via UI's *Spartacus*) for the Hollywood film industry.<sup>3</sup> Krim's difficult but critical decision then to delay *The Gladiators*, in favor of supporting Trumbo's role in *Spartacus*, and the successful release of that rival production, played a far more pivotal role than realized in bringing the film industry out of the long shadow of McCarthyism. What prompted the revision and expansion of the *Post Script* is what we subsequently learned of MCA head Lew Wasserman's largely unheralded role in urging UI to keep Trumbo on the *Spartacus* project until the end, and to award him screen credit in the face of intense opposition. This is now revealed in some detail for the first time, and in doing so we were prompted to give both men's bold actions some needed context. That includes both the general development of the studios before and after WWII, and the parallel politicization of Hollywood during that same time.

We thank the editors and the production staff at CSP for allowing us this opportunity to broaden and deepen the aim and scope of our *Post Script*, and by doing so offer readers more than just another afterthought.

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<sup>3</sup> Otto Preminger's announcement, in late January 1960, of Trumbo as screenwriter of *Exodus* was critically important in prompting UI's decision to give Trumbo screen credit for *Spartacus*. UA would distribute *Exodus*, and Preminger had Krim's full support in challenging the blacklist.