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# RadioTimes

29 OCT-4 NOV 2005 95p



## ANCIENT EGYPT

But what's polystyrene got to do with it? See p8!

## DES LYNAM

Countdown? "It never occurred to me to do it at all!"

## CREATURE COMFORTS

Meet the voices behind the new Plasticine faces

## ROCKET MAN

Robson Green explodes!

**FREE INSIDE:**  
**POCKET FILMS CALENDAR**  
CINEMA & DVD guide for NOVEMBER

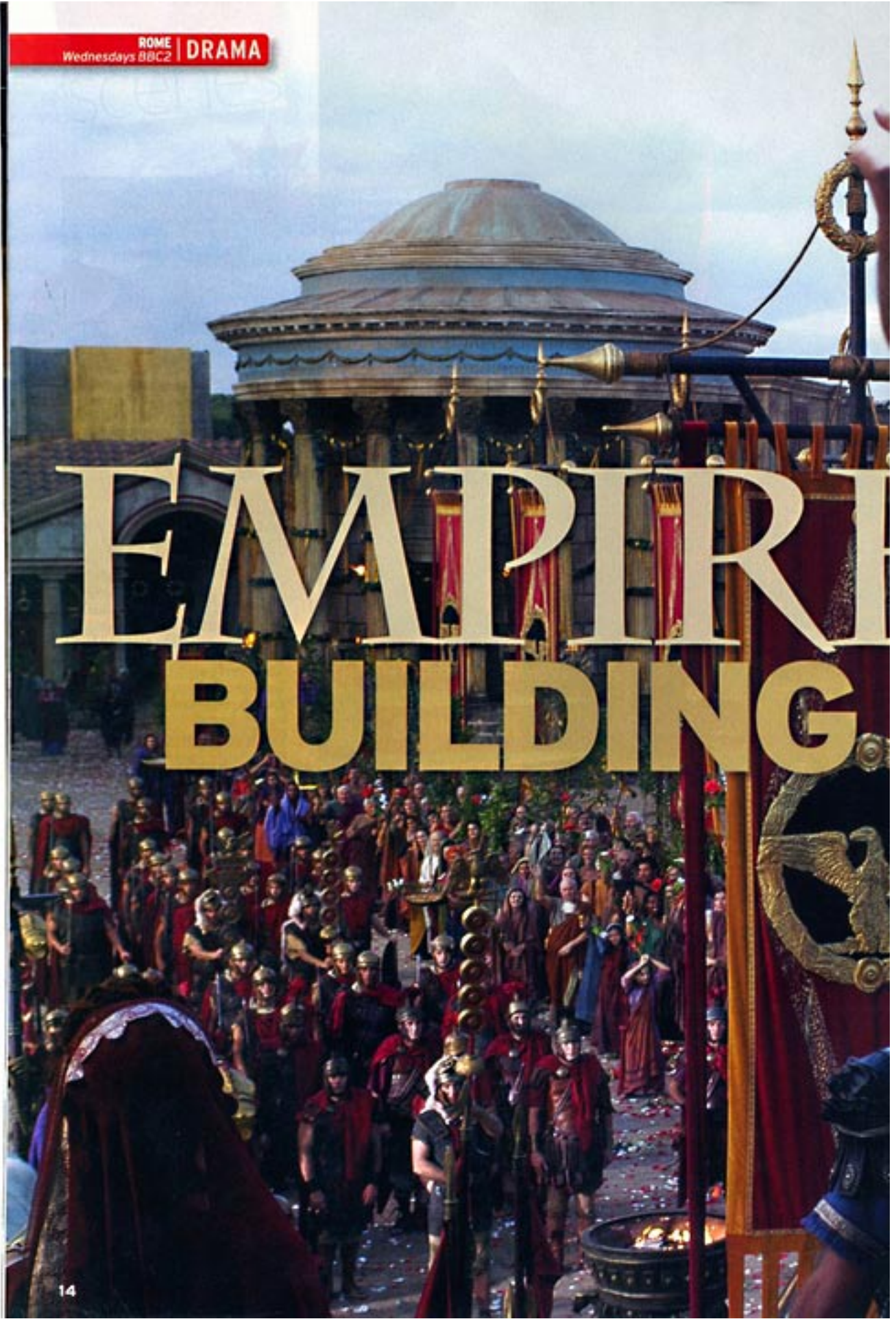
# ROME

Find out how long it took to build this one!

Rome, Wednesday BBC2

ROME  
Wednesdays BBC2 | DRAMA

# EMPIRE BUILDING





**FRIENDS, ROMANS...**  
Claran Hinds as Caesar during filming of a crowd scene. Computer-generated imagery was used to bulk up the numbers in the area where the blue screen is (below). Military trainer Billy Budd, a former Royal Marine, took 65 extras who were appearing as soldiers to boot camp to train them in Roman military tactics. "The minute we got there, I did the worst thing you can do to young Italian guys, which is to confiscate their mobile phones! The man who trained the best each day got a three-minute call that night."

The glory that was Rome lives on in a lavish new drama, but it isn't all pristine togas and temples, as Christopher Middleton found out

**N**o question about it, the film set of *Rome* is much better than the real thing. Walk round the remains of the old Forum Romanum, in the city centre, and all you get is ruins. Out on the edge of town, though, at the celebrated Cinecittà Studios, they've built a working, full-sized replica of ancient Rome that's not only 100 per cent intact, but also comes in a dazzling range of colours. Yes, that's right – colours.

"We never think of Rome as having been a colourful place, because Hollywood has always presented us with this idealised image of people in immaculate clothes walking past sparkling clean pillars," says the series' historical consultant Jonathan Stamp (*Colosseum: a Gladiator's*

*Story: Building the Great Pyramid*).

"The fact is, though, Rome in 52 BC was a bright, garish, pagan, filthy, smelly and thoroughly dangerous place to live." This becomes apparent when we stray from the main triumphal area, with its grandiose temples, and venture into the poorer parts of town – where the walls are covered not in glorious mosaics, but rude drawings and ruder Latin graffiti.

It's among the squalid alleyways that we find the run-down tenement that's home to the centurion Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd), who has returned to his wife and family after years spent fighting the Gauls. But war medals don't count for much in this rat-nibbled corner of the city, and right from the very first episode, Lucius and his former comrade Titus Pullo >



**A SOLDIER, SOLDIER**  
All the street graffiti and obscene drawings (above) are based on examples found on walls at Pompeii; below, the impulsive Titus Pullo, played by Ray Stevenson



**HEADS YOU WIN**  
Ten thousand brass coins bearing the likeness of Ciaran Hinds as Caesar (left) were struck for the production

**4 NEW MCKIDD IN TOWN**  
Kevin McKidd prepares for a scene as the unforgiving, pragmatic Lucius Vorenus

### Ten things you might not know about the Romans (and maybe don't want to)

- 1 They used communal lavatories: both sexes sat side by side with no partitions between them. Instead of loo paper, they employed a sponge on the end of a stick.
- 2 If a Roman soldier lost his shield he ran the risk of being crucified as a punishment – and a deterrent to others.
- 3 Slaves would be present in the room during their masters' lovemaking – fanning, serving drinks and so on.
- 4 When Romans sacked a city, they would kill every living thing in it – men, women, children, animals, pets and vermin – and hang up the corpses as a warning.
- 5 The extravagant fringe on top of a centurion's helmet wasn't just decorative – he used it as a direction-pointer to his men during battle.
- 6 When a Roman aristocrat had eaten his fill at a banquet, he would get a slave to dangle a feather down his throat so that he could be sick and make room for more food.
- 7 Most Romans were too scared to go out after dark; there were no police, and muggings were commonplace.
- 8 Forget Los Angeles – Rome had its own smog, called "nepheos" (the Greek word for cloud); it was caused by the round-the-clock burning of dung and straw.
- 9 Many Romans earned spare cash by selling their urine (for leather tanning) and their excrement (for compacting with straw and making into solid-fuel briquettes).
- 10 Romans had quite bad taste. They liked garish colours, and the height of fashion for rich women was to wear a bright blue or yellow wig to a social occasion.

(Ray Stevenson) find it hard to earn an honest crust in civvy street. Over the coming 11 weeks, their struggles at the bottom of the pile are mirrored by the attempts of their former commander Julius Caesar (Ciaran Hinds) as he makes his bid to control a republic careering towards civil war.

"We show both rich and poor, both 'upstairs' and 'downstairs'," says executive producer Frank Doelger, who instructed *Rome's* designers to take the backstreets of Calcutta as a visual cue. "We've sought to create a reality that will constantly intrigue and surprise the viewer. The aim is to make sure something is happening in every single street, in every single scene. You won't just see extras doing something vague in the background, you'll know straight away that you're in the fish market, the glass-blowing area or the

terracotta pot-making part of town."

**N**ot that achieving such realism is easy, particularly when constructing the set. "You have to make an effort to build in wonkiness," says production designer Joseph Bennett, head of a 300-strong army of temple-erectors and basilica-builders. "The backstreet tenements in ancient Rome were poorly constructed and always collapsing, so we've had to give our buildings a bit of a teetering feel, as well as putting in lots of detailed post-construction touches, like painting scorch marks on the walls where fire torches are fixed. We've worked hard at giving this city a lived-in look."

Hence a section in the costumes department marked Ageing and Dyeing. On the day of our visit, we

find a couple flicking dirt onto a white tunic, so that Mark Antony (James Purefoy) will look like he's been on a long and muddy horse ride. But it's not just the locals' soil-distributing skills that have brought the producers here to Rome, as opposed to, say, Pinewood or even Hollywood.

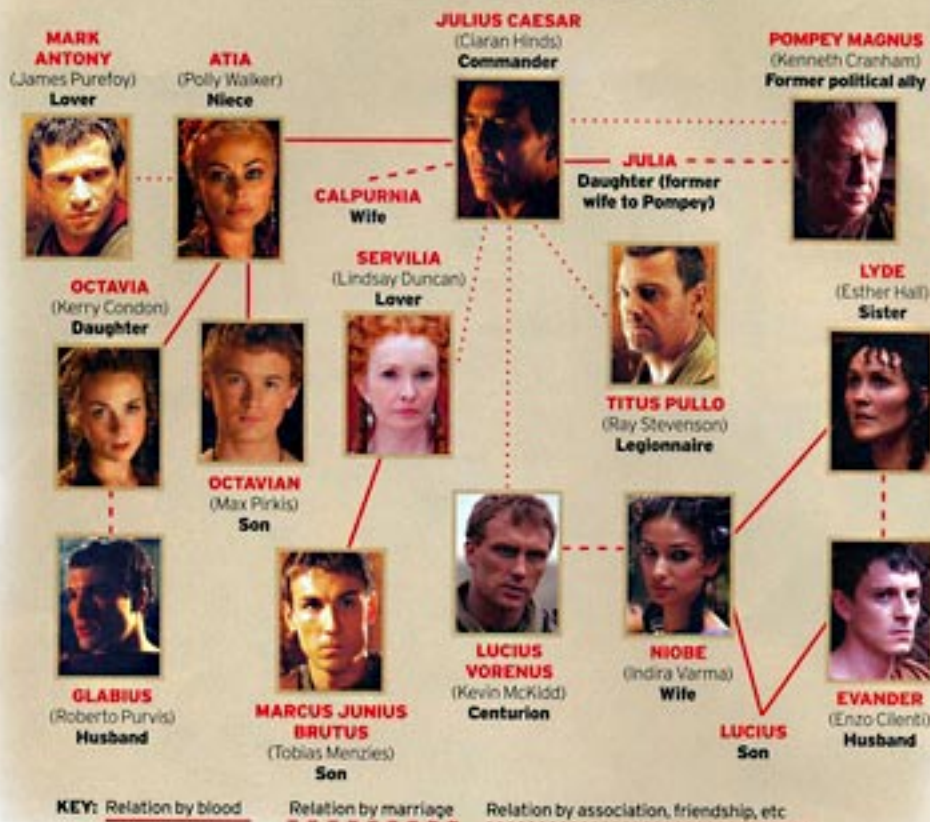
"I don't know anywhere else in the world where I could find the kind of leather working and metalworking skills that are on offer here," says *Rome's* costume designer April Ferry, admiring the ranks of brass-and-leather breastplates that are hanging on her rails. "And if you want Roman noses in your crowd shots then, boy, is this the place to be!"

Ask around the set, and it turns out that age-old Roman skills survive here in their legions: everything from pillar-sculpting to coin-minting. >

**THE STREETS ARE PAVED WITH ...** Our 360° sweep of the set (continued overleaf) shows streets that were covered in decaying rubbish for extra realism >



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE



◀ What's more, the Cinecittà Studios are part of movie history themselves; it was here that the Italian master Fellini created *La Dolce Vita*, and (more recently) that Mel Gibson made *The Passion of the Christ*, and Martin Scorsese filmed *Gangs of New York* (a bit of the Bronx remains, just behind the House of the Vestal Virgins).

So that's the reason they came to Rome to film *Rome*. The other big question is why, when the majority of the \$100 million production budget is coming from US giants HBO (the rest is from the BBC), did they decide to cast Brits in all the leading roles?

"We felt that British actors offered us significant advantages," says Frank Doelger, brought in to re-think the project after three episodes had been filmed. "American actors are for the most part perceived as contemporary performers, so when they're in a period drama, they don't come over convincingly to a US audience. It's also something of an HBO tradition to use actors who don't bring their previous work to a project; pretty much no-one knew who Jim Gandolfini was, for example, before he was in *The Sopranos*. And quite a few of our British cast won't be familiar to US audiences, either.

"The other key factor, I have to say, is cost. It only takes two hours to fly a British actor in to Rome, but it takes nine hours to get here from the States. And that's a lot of air fares saved."

Roughly translated, then, the Brits have got the job because (a) they're cheap, and (b) with the exception of Ciaran Hinds and Lindsay Duncan (who plays his lover Servilia), they're largely unknown across the Atlantic. Plus, of course, there's that something indefinable about us that means we can do timeless and classy, whereas the Yanks can only do here and now.

Speaking of timeless and classy, the UK contingent have, it seems, made the most of their stay in this historic

location. "I just adore this city," sighs Ciaran Hinds, in his soft Irish brogue. "When you go out for a walk, you're endlessly coming across the most glorious sights – though I'm saving the Sistine Chapel till last!"

During the 12-month shoot, each of the Brits has made a little bit of the city his or her own. (Lucky, that, as a second series is already being planned.) Props master Arthur Wicks has got himself an apartment off the lively Piazza Navona, while military trainer Billy Budd has found a home from home at the Drunken Ship pub in Campo dei Fiori, and Kevin McKidd has developed a taste for spaghetti

*alle vongole*, as made by a restaurant near his flat in the old ghetto quarter.

Plus, when they've got tired of Rome AD 2005, they've been able to slip off and commune with the spirits of Rome circa 52 BC. "Every so often it hits you," says Hinds. "The other day I was doing a scene in which Caesar was addressing the Senate. I found myself standing in front of 250 men in white togas all hanging on my every word, and I thought, 'This is what it must have been like for the man himself.' When that sort of thing comes into your head, you just have to take a deep breath, not lose your bottle, and try as best you

can not to forget your lines."

It's not just the actors who want to do justice to their subject, either – it's the whole production, from the toga-spatterers to the temple-builders. "Our instructions have been very clear," says Joseph Bennett. "We've been asked to put together not just a few bits of scenery, but a working metropolis that will last for at least another five years." In a world where film sets are here today and dismantled tomorrow, that really does qualify Rome for the title of Eternal City.

### LINKS

[www.hbo.com/rome/](http://www.hbo.com/rome/)

"British actors offered us advantages; American actors are perceived as contemporary performers"

◀ ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE FORUM The stunning centrepiece (see opening spread)

