

TV Review: 'Spartacus: Gods of the Arena' Delivers Bloody Goods

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 21, 2011 - 9:50am

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CHICAGO – It's mere minutes into "Spartacus: Gods the Arena" before men are being decapitated and women are flashing their breasts. With all the self-serious junk on right now, it's nice to have Starz's biggest hit back. Sometimes we need something mindless like "Gods of the Arena." The prequel premiere doesn't quite live up to "Blood and Sand" standards, but it will do until that series returns next year.



Television Rating: **3.5/5.0**

There have been hundreds of guilty pleasure B-movies to garner so-bad-it's-good critical acclaim, but B-TV rarely gets the same credit. "Spartacus: Blood and Sand" was a surprisingly enjoyable series that found a way to mix pretentious dialogue, elaborate fight scenes, and ludicrous amounts of gore and nudity into a bona fide hit. One of the biggest strengths of that show was the amazing screen presence of potential star Andy Whitfield in the title role. At the end of "Blood and Sand," it seemed like Whitfield could drive the show for years and possibly become a star.



Spartacus: Gods of the Arena

Photo credit: Starz

Sadly, Whitfield contracted Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma between seasons one and two and so Starz was looking at a long delay, the kiss of death in today's 15-minute pop culture cycle. With Whitfield sidelined and several of their most interesting other characters killed at the end of season one of "Blood and Sand," what's a network to do? Prequel!

By going back to years before the action of “Blood and Sand,” the writers of “Gods of the Arena” allow themselves the freedom to play with already-defined characters like Batiatus (John Hannah), Lucretia (Lucy Lawless), Oenomaus (Peter Mensah), and Crixus (Manu Bennett). The 6-episode series focuses on Batiatus rising to power through the support of his best gladiator, Gannicus (Dustin Clare).



Spartacus: Gods of the Arena
Photo credit: Starz

The first episode introduces viewers to Gannicus through two key fights, the one that opens the episode and sets up that he may be a great fighter but he’s not getting the “primetime” fight slots for the House of Batiatus to rise in prominence and one in which the man is forced to fight blindfolded. Clearly, Gannicus is set up as a force of nature, a true fighter with deadly strength and killer instincts.

Meanwhile, Batiatus continues to connive and work his way up the power chain. The lovely Jaime Murray of season two of “Dexter” also stars as Gaia, a social climber and friend of Lucretia’s who returns to find a new sugar daddy. At this point in the “Spartacus” mythology, Oenomaus (Peter Mensah) is struggling to return to glory as a fighter himself but watching Gannicus climb the ladder over him.

Of course, all the plotting and scheming is merely an excuse for blood sprays and slo-mo sex scenes. More than once in the premiere of “Gods of the Arena,” audiences are treated to that lovely combination in which a scene of violence is intercut with some old-fashioned soft core porn. The producers of “Gods of the Arena” know how to please their audience. On a production level, this is enjoyable escapism, the perfect fit for a Friday night after a long week at work.

The problem with “Gods of the Arena” is where you might expect it to be — the absence of Andy Whitfield. After watching only one episode, it’s hard to tell if the blame should lie at the feet of Mr. Clare or at the writers who have given him little to work with but Gannicus is simply not an interesting character. Hannah, Lawless, Murray, and Mensah all deliver the goods but the show falls flat in its center. After one episode — and the mini-series is only six long — I just didn’t care about Gannicus. It seems that Clare doesn’t have the natural charisma of Whitfield.

For the most part, it won’t matter. This is just a sampler season to tide viewers over until next year when “Blood and Sand” returns with a new actor playing Spartacus (Liam McIntyre of “The Pacific”) and a full slate of episodes. “Gods of the Arena” doesn’t quite live up to “Blood and Sand” (and it’s hard to say if the new lead actor will next season either) but it’s still better than most of the junk on this lackluster mid-season. It’s nice to have this guilty pleasure back.

“Spartacus: Gods of the Arena” stars Dustin Clare, John Hannah, Lucy Lawless, Peter Mensah, Manu Bennett, and Jaime Murray. It will premiere on Starz on January 21st, 2011 at 9pm CST.



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