



Re-creating ancient Rome — amid a savage rebellion — requires new-wave thinking and twenty-first-century tools. The designers of Starz's *Spartacus* built their empire in New Zealand, where the drama stayed strictly indoors. BY LIBBY SLATE

No Place Like

The third season of *Spartacus* — currently airing on Starz — includes, as you might expect, plenty of bloody battles. After all, this final season — dubbed *War of the Damned* — depicts the massive slave rebellion led by warrior-turned-slave Spartacus (Liam McIntyre) against the Roman Republic from 73 to 71 B.C. Those battles featured a lot of horses — and therefore, much attention was paid to, well, dirt.

"We required a ground treatment sympathetic to the horses running around," says production designer Iain Aitken. "They needed at least six inches of dirt, compacted on top of concrete. We ended up sculpting a lot of dirt, to match the illustrations we'd done. And there was a lot of testing of the dirt — too much silica in it would create too much dust, which was dan-

gerous to breathe." The dirt that passed muster was then dressed with fine sand or soft pebbles, to look as natural as possible.

The season's epic fight against oppression plays out over those bloody battlefields but also encompasses such settings as an Italian coastal

town, a Roman villa and a ship, as Spartacus and his followers advance toward their fate.

But for all the encampments, mountainous backdrops and brooding skies, not one frame of the series was shot outdoors. All of the action took place inside five buildings converted into stages in Mount Wellington,



Rome

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In the opening scenes of season three, Spartacus (Liam McIntyre, center) and his rebel warriors advance upon — and defeat — the more powerful Romans. With the entire series filmed indoors, creating an outdoor environment via production design and visual effects was crucial. During the shooting of this battle, green screen (right) stands in for a threatening sky (above), which is added in postproduction.





Again, the sky sets the mood for conflict, as do dark clouds of smoke as Spartacus rides into action. Production designer Iain Aitken avoided using a straight edge as a battlefield border so that the finished scene (below) — in this case, incorporating an image of rolling hills — could be extended more naturally by the VFX team.





At dock in Sinuessa, on the Tyrrhenian Sea, slaves stock a swan-themed boat designed by Aitken. The green screen at top-left stands in for a continuation of the rock built as part of his set; the screen at top-right is replaced by water, sky and a setting sun.





In the season's opening battle, the rebels' advancing army is augmented with a computer software program called Massive, which creates 3D crowds of extras; each extra has its own unique set of movements.

near Auckland, New Zealand, using more than 185,000 square feet of studio space — and more than 5,500 square feet of green screen to bring the outdoors in.

"It's evolved from the first season," Aitken says. "In season two, there were a greater number of green-screen shots, and in season three there were even more, going from village to village and battle to battle."

Green rather than blue screen was chosen for financial reasons; green requires "considerably less light for keying," Aitken explains, referring to the visual effects team's digital removal of the screen and replacement with the desired background image.

But that meant that the color could not be featured in any set foreground. Consequently, notes executive producer Rob Tapert, the designer created "quite a Spartan world, very muted, not rococo or Baroque. It was very barren. There was something harsh about it."

With such ground-level bleakness, Aitken says, the sky "became an

important part of the look — we had to know the look of the sky before filming. With each episode, we would sit down with the director of photography, and then have to come back with a match for the lighting. It emphasized the mood and ultimately was an area where we introduced color as well."

For battlefield and camp scenes, the green screen was transformed into overcast skies and billowing clouds of smoke. In the coastal town of Sinuessa, which Spartacus and his army seize this season, "You have the sky to give a sense of visual relief and a sense of style," Aitken says. "The show needs that. If you spend all your time within four walls, it becomes claustrophobic in terms of the look."

The use of green screen also called for greater attention on the battlefields. "One of the key things was resolving the edge of the set in such a way that the visual effects people could extend it," Aitken says. "With a straight edge, it would be more difficult for them to do so without showing the edge. We always tried to give it a treatment: a leaf, broken up bits of black bark,



products we applied to the top of the dirt. Or we'd have dust coming off people's feet, but not in front of the green screen."

To differentiate one battleground from another, the designer used geographical cues, such as mountain ranges, to anchor the landscape.

For the Sinuessa scenes, Aitken designed the coastline and ships, but left the water to VFX. "You design it in such a way that you don't see the water directly," he says.

Indeed, the use of green screen has changed the dynamics of production design, Tapert notes. "The more green screen there is, the more the world is created by the production design team in coordination with the visual effects department. You have the pre-visualization and the hand-off: here's what we need to do to make the integration seamless, so that the audience will never know where the practical set ends and the green screen begins."

Aitken spent more time working with his illustrator, Daniel Lloyd, because of the green-screen presence; they and other team members used such

software programs as SketchUp and Cinema 4D (a 3D program) to draft sets and sculpt landscapes before turning over the set design in rough form to the visual effects team. "Our relationship with visual effects supervisor Charlie McClellan and art director Peter Baustaedter was crucial," Aitken says.

There are generally 200 to 500 visual effects shots per episode, with bigger battle sequences using several hundred more. Aitken's design elements varied, depending on the episode's director and director of photography. "The art department certainly originated the mood from beginning to end — that was critical for each episode," he says. "But we did not do it alone. We went to Rob Tapert."

For his part, Tapert applauds both teams, noting that Aitken must have "a very firm idea of what he wants in a scene, and communicate that in such a way that the practical world and virtual world are seamless.

"We decided we were never going to leave our stages," he adds. "We made our world, and created every little detail of it." ©





(Below left) Roman commanders Cossinius (John Wraight) and Furius (Jared Turner) beat a hasty horseback retreat when they realize that Spartacus is vanquishing their army. During the shoot (near left), the production team used specially formulated dirt that would be safe to breathe and easy on horses' hooves.



Marcus Crassus (Simon Merrells, above center), newly appointed leader of the Roman army, prepares to do battle with Spartacus. Once again, green screen (top) gives way to a background of hills and a brooding sky.