

TEMPUS OMNIA REVELAT

A historical perspective.

BY TIAN LI

“Hey, Geek-boy, what’s the new episode of *Rome* like?” My roommate Scott strolls into the sitting room and flops beside me on the couch. He leans over to get a clearer view of my laptop.

“It’s only the raw cut, but I’d say it’s as good as the earlier ones,” I reply.

I’m lucky. Thanks to my language and history studies I get privileged access to the undubbed episodes of *Rome* at least 24 hours before the edit is broadcast.

Scott shrugs. I think he’s losing interest in my favourite series. When *Rome* first started, he watched the undubbed episodes with me, listening to my rapid translation of the dialogue. He even boasted to his new girlfriend that he could understand all the Latin emanating from the screen — although his confidence got a bit dented when I told him that some of the time they were speaking Greek.

But over these past few weeks, his eagerness has subsided. First he stopped watching the show with me, waiting instead for the English dubbed version to become available. And last week, I even caught him watching the old series of the same name that was made back in 2005.

“I didn’t like last week’s episode,” Scott says, confirming my fears. “When I saw Cleopatra I was shocked. I mean, how could such a woman have charmed both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony? Let’s face it, she was no Elizabeth Taylor or Vivien Leigh.”

I sigh. I’d heard other people say the same thing, and the audience reports I’d seen echoed Scott’s sentiments. Even though some viewers were impressed by Cleopatra’s wisdom or were captivated by her splendid jewels and robes, almost everyone agreed that she wasn’t the Cleopatra of their imagination. Clearly the face of the world was indifferent to the length of her nose.

Maybe that was why ratings had slumped, with last week’s episode earning pretty much the lowest score possible.

“Well, you won’t have to see her any more,” I say, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice. “*Rome* has been cancelled.”

Scott’s eyes widen a little. “You’re kidding! Why?”

Maybe he’s feigning regret to make me feel better, but I appreciate it anyway. “Because it just didn’t

work,” I say with a shrug. “Not enough people were watching it.”

The fact that *Rome* had to be broadcast in unfashionable 2D hadn’t helped — but what could the audience expect? It isn’t easy to get a clean signal from 2,200 years ago.



But I knew that wasn’t the only reason for the programme’s failure. Many viewers found the gladiatorial games and the images of slave torture revolting. Scenes that the producers had expected to be ratings gold had turned out to last too long and be far too gory.

I’d even seen viewer complaints about Caesar, arguing that the series should show more about his ‘teenage years and personal life’, so that they could tap into ‘the other side of Caesar’. But that’s not how real life works — it is what it is.

“Too bad,” Scott mutters. “I thought there would be a second season.”

I glance at him, surprised. “I didn’t think you were a fan.”

He smiles. “Well, it might be a touch wayward, but at least it tells the truth — and it gives us a chance to resolve a few historical mysteries. I actually wanted to find out why Cleopatra left Antony at the Battle of Actium. I mean, think of *The White Queen*, basically we watched season 2 to find out what really happened to Edward V.”

I grin. It was true that the unfortunate young king had saved that programme’s ratings.

“But do you really want *the truth*?” I ask. “Let’s face it, the truth tends to be very

different from what you imagine — look at Cleopatra.”

Scott nods. “Maybe you’re right.”

It’s a shame: these historical documentaries are more than mere entertainment. They disclose truths long-hidden by the veil of the past. I know that one day they will be acclaimed and valued, although maybe not today.

Suddenly, Scott turns to me. “Hey, you’ve just watched the next episode of *Rome* online! So it exists, which means it *will* be on TV, right?”

I shake my head. “*Rome*’s been cancelled. There will be no more episodes on TV.” I pause. “But maybe it can be saved . . .”

Scott shoots me a questioning glance.

“Well,” I say, warming to my theme, “the costs for the series are relatively low: no fees for actors, no money needed for costumes or scenery. HBO could air the rest of the episodes online — we could still see Caesar, Antony and Gaius Octavius. You may yet find out what *really* happened during the battle of Actium.”

Scott’s eyes light up. “You mean we could get season 2?”

“I guess. But the online episodes will be just the raw versions. No overdubs or official English subtitles.”

“Could you translate the dialogue?” Scott looks at me and I see in his eyes the same excitement that was there when he watched the first episode.

“Better than that. I will subtitle them in English online,” I grin.

Subtitling episodes is the least I can do for the people of this era. The myriad tongues I know would make no sense to them — after all, to them I’m just another language geek. But I have the right connections at HBO. And if I do the translations, at least some viewers will learn something. And watching Scott discover more about *Rome* — well, that will be entertainment in itself.

I hope the ratings of my show, *Adventures of a History Geek*, are better than those for *Rome*. I need to pay off the loan for my hovership when I get back to my time.

Tomorrow, I’ll persuade Scott to buy a nice new shirt. If he continues to look good, his popularity can only increase. Even though he’ll never know that he’s on TV, I’m going to make him a star. ■

Tian Li lives in China, and received her master’s degree in biology at Tsinghua University in 2012. She loves detective and science-fiction novels.

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