

A Review of Warner Brother's 300

By Jacob Aillet

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This is a movie about courage in the face of tyranny. It is a movie about pride and honour and the radiant clash of forces of freedom and forces of oppression. The transaction between these forces takes place in the battlefield and the instruments for negotiation are swords and spears, blood and sweat, fear and courage and yes, death.

300 is based on the Graphic novel by Frank Miller. It lacks historical details but because the protagonist King Leonidas (acted by Gerard Butler) was a historical figure, one can place it sometime in 482BCE when a small Spartan unit under King Leonidas staged a legendary battle against a massive, invading Persian army at the Battle of Thermopylae. The title is derived from the number of warriors who accompanied King Leonidas.

If you liked movies like *Alexander*, *Troy* and *Gladiator*, you will definitely enjoy this film. It opens in a scene where a new-born Spartan boy is being inspected for any deformities, and whether he is the right weight. Down below is a pit full of skulls of discarded Spartan boys. His crying mother is relieved when he is handed back to her. She knows she only has his first six years with him. The audience are taken through the brutish training Spartan boys went through from the age of 7 years, away from home, snatched from the arms of their crying mothers.

They were taught to fight and withstand pain and hardship and never to back down from an enemy irrespective of the might and size of the enemy. They were taught about defending land, freedom, reason, justice, glory and duty to Sparta. In Sparta, there was no room for softness, no room for weakness and only the hard and strong were able to call themselves Spartans.

A flamboyant messenger from the marauding Persian empire arrives on a horseback with a message from their God-King Xerxes, who wants the Spartan land and water with a promise to spare the Spartans if they can submit to him. "Submission" is one word that rubs Leonidas the wrong way.

King Leonidas breaks tradition and commits blasphemy by killing the messenger and his emissaries for threatening his people with slavery and death. He Kicks the messenger into a well with the classic "This is my turf!" scream. As is required by Spartan law, he has to seek blessing from the Oracle and the Council's permission before they can go for war. The Oracle, a pubescent Spartan girl handled by deformed old priests, says in her drug-induced trance that Sparta should not go to war. And the council also opposes going to war.

Torn between his pride and Spartan law, the queen (acted by Lena Headey) tells her troubled King to ask himself, "What should a free man do under such



circumstances?" Leonidas decides to defy the law and go to war with a group of Spartan 300 warriors. Because death was almost certain, all of them had to have sons who would carry on their names in case they died in battle.

After the decision is made to go to war, the rest of the movie is a well-choreographed display of Spartan courage, might and fighting spirit. Butler plays a strong, uncompromising, decisive and caring King who was ready to die for his ideals and for his men. The 300 Spartan warriors are joined by some Akkadians and they fight against a massive Persian army of over one million fighters, who are armed with explosives, massive mammals and mythical creatures. This army is so vast that people say that it drinks the rivers dry and is so massive that the earth shakes under its march. The Persians also have a contingent of deformed men in masks with superior fighting skills that are believed to be immortals. They are feared to be Persian ghosts, hunters of men's souls. Rather than back down or waver, King Leonidas declares that they will put their immortality to the test.

The King approaches the battle with unwavering single mindedness and to him, all his forty years are like a straight road to one gleaming moment in destiny. That moment is one radiant clash of shield and spear and bone and flesh and sweat and blood. His burning intensity and manic demeanour see him devour one contingent after another of Persian army until he finds himself face to face with Persian man-god, Xerxes.

Xerxes congratulates Leonidas for his courage in the face of annihilation and defiance in the face of a god. He offers to make Leonidas rich and promises to make Leonidas' enemies kneel before Leonidas if only Leonidas can kneel before him. Leonidas refuses and Xerxes swears that he will see to it that there will be no Glory in Leonidas' sacrifice. He swears that he will erase the memory of Sparta in all history and that to burn every piece of Greek parchment and to gouge out the eye and cut off the tongue of every Greek historian and scribe and put to death anyone who will utter the name Sparta or Leonidas. "The world will never know you existed at all!" He promises Leonidas.

Leonidas responds, "The world will know that a free man stood before a tyrant. That few stood against many and, before this battle is over, the world will know that even a god-king can bleed"

This is followed by a bloody battle that has the Spartans outnumbered, surrounded and overpowered by the Persian army. But their valor, their honor and their superior fighting skills and strength of spirit shines through the dark cloud arrows released by thousands of Persian archers.

As Leonidas drops, bloodied and skewered by spears, his last thoughts are on his wife and son. The music and the wheat fields are reminiscent of scenes in *Gladiator*. The fight sequences are well done and the Spartan spirit comes out quite clearly. They don't ride horses to the battlefield and only warriors go to war. The movie's focus is not whether the Spartans won or lost the war, but their fighting spirit and their courage and what they were willing to give up to defend their ideals. Historically, Leonidas' battle was the ignition that started the Greko-Persian war that the Greeks won.

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