

# ROMAN



WITH A BIG BUDGET AND A HEAVYWEIGHT CAST, IT WAS SET TO BE A HUGE HOLLYWOOD EPIC. BEHIND THE SCENES, THOUGH, WAS A PRODUCER WHO HAD MORE X-RATED AMBITIONS. WITH A WHOLE NEW CUT ON THE WAY, WE REVISIT THE UTTERLY UNHINGED

## CALIGULA

WORDS ADAM SMITH



# BURNING

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Sometime in the winter of 1976, in the smoky dining room of London's Penthouse Club in Mayfair, Gore Vidal chatted, over the remains of lunch, with Malcolm McDowell. The meeting would have struck anyone — or at least those not distracted by the 'Penthouse Pets' dressed in sexy chambermaid uniforms, the magazine's response to Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* Bunnies — to be a significant one. Here were two of the cultural titans of the age, and the project they were discussing, a mooted big-budget Hollywood epic about the rise and downfall of the Roman Emperor Caligula, was, on paper at least, destined to be one of the cinematic events of the decade.

After the success of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, McDowell was at the height of his stardom, primed to be one of the biggest British movie exports of the time. Vidal was one of the undisputed giants of the literary scene: the waspish author of *Myra Breckinridge*, famed for his scabrous journalism, liberal politics and epic literary feuds. "It was all quite unusual," McDowell tells *Empire* of the strange encounter. "Gore had phoned me up and said he wanted to talk to me about something. It didn't come via an agent or anything like that. He invited me to the Penthouse Club, which I didn't even know existed."

Ruling between 37 and 41 CE, Caligula had, among other eccentricities, declared himself a god. He had slept with his sister, tried to make his horse a consul and burned through vast sums of imperial cash in mere months. On one notable occasion, having run out of prisoners to throw to the beasts of the arena, he had the spectators thrown in instead, giving a new and literal meaning to the phrase "audience participation". In 41 CE he was finally assassinated by a group of nobles. "I live!" were, quixotically enough, his last words. For the subsequent 2,000 years, his name has been an avatar of chaos, madness, betrayal, weird sex and financial ruin. He was made, then, for Hollywood.

"He proceeded to talk me into doing this movie," McDowell remembers. "He was an extraordinary man, and he'd really researched it. He told me the story and I was quite fascinated. Then I asked him who was going to pay for it. He said, 'Bob Guccione.'" Suddenly the unorthodox venue made sense. "I said, 'The pornographer?' And he said to me, 'Malcolm, just think of him as one of the Warner brothers.' I thought, 'Okaaay...'"

Bob Guccione was indeed a pornographer, and a stratospherically successful one. Born in Brooklyn in 1930 to devoutly Catholic parents, he had pondered the priesthood before wandering Europe for a decade working as a street artist, finally winding up in London, where he ran a chain of laundrettes. In 1965, spotting a gap in the market, he launched *Penthouse*, which swiftly became one of the most successful magazines in publishing history. By the mid-1970s he had already dabbled in the movie business: *Penthouse* had put money into *Chinatown* and *The Day Of The Locust*. But Guccione had higher ambitions. The problem with smut, he reasoned, was that it was fundamentally not respectable. However much you spent on quality, it remained locked in its grubby niche.

*Caligula* would change all that. It would be a kind of cultural Trojan horse: outwardly it would be a respectable Hollywood epic boasting the biggest and most respectable stars — Peter O'Toole, Sir John Gielgud and Helen Mirren had been seduced by Guccione's promise of his name not above, but actually *in* the title: 'Gore Vidal's Caligula'. And now, in turn, Vidal had hooked one of the hottest stars in the firmament in Malcolm McDowell.



But it would be stuffed with the kind of hardcore raunch Guccione believed mainstream audiences secretly craved. What neither Vidal nor McDowell knew, then, was that they had both been recruited to what Guccione intended to be the biggest, most lavish hardcore porn movie ever made.

**M**alcolm McDowell began to realise that *Caligula* was not going to be a conventional production on the flight to Rome to meet with Guccione: the plane was packed with Guccione's famous *Penthouse* Pets. And his disquiet only grew when he met Guccione for the first time. "His shirts only seemed to have one button," says McDowell. "And he was festooned with all these huge gold chains. Quite revolting, really." He was more reassured when he met Tinto Brass, the director Guccione had settled on after his overtures to the likes of Federico Fellini and John Huston had, inexplicably, been rejected. "I loved Tinto," he says. "He was an extraordinary director, extremely intelligent. He was very liberal, very left-wing. And, I mean, he despised Guccione, certainly by the end of it all." Shooting began at DEAR (now RAI) studios in August 1976, with sets occupying 22 soundstages. Italian productions, polyglot

by nature, had a reputation for a certain chaos, and *Caligula* was no exception. "Half the cast were wandering around wearing four-foot rubber phalluses," Peter O'Toole, who had recently forsworn the bottle on doctor's orders, remembered. Recalling that Brass' sole direction seemed to involve saying, "Turn over," to the camera crew and, "Are you finished?" to the actors, he added that he and John Gielgud had started out looking at all the naked bodies and had wound up comparing appendectomy scars.

"I loved him, he was an idol for my generation," remembers McDowell of O'Toole. "But he was chain-smoking pot for the whole shoot. Cannabis had replaced the booze. But this was before he went on the cocaine, so thank God for that, really." Gielgud, who had been cast as Nerva ("an old senator who cuts his veins in the bath and disapproves of everything", as he described the role) was equally bemused by the proceedings. He reported the alarming scene that met him when he arrived on set to his friend Cecil Beaton in a letter dated 12 August 1976: "Stark naked youths... nurses with huge, exposed breasts suckling tiny babies being coaxed with comforters that look like clay doves but turn out on closer inspection to be modelled on cocks and balls! I can't believe the Empire or Odeon will house it. The Curzon possibly?"

**Clockwise from top left:** Caligula (Malcolm McDowell) is in commanding position; The rise of Caligula; Behind the scenes with Guido Mannari, McDowell, Peter O'Toole and John Gielgud; Off with his head!; Director Tinto Brass in action.





McDowell, though he admired Brass, found his directorial style disconcerting. “He had a very unusual shooting method,” he remembers. “He had four cameras, all shooting at the same time and all with zoom lenses on them. You never knew where the damned shots were.”

From the very start, Vidal had been clear about how Rome was to be portrayed on screen: the dusty streets and sparse sets would reflect the moral bankruptcy of the Roman Empire. “The picture should be realistic, real, uncluttered rooms, real streets, sweat and dirty clothes. Above all, no fantasy, no Fellini,” he wrote in an early letter to Tinto Brass.

Brass had responded by promptly hiring Fellini’s favourite production designer, Danilo Donati. Famed for the opulence and loopiness of his designs — and for never, under any circumstances, reading the screenplay — Donati let his imagination run riot. He planned vast, fantastical sets including a gargantuan mechanical beheading device, a giant three-story elevator and a giant, gold-leafed brothel ship that occupied an entire soundstage and which, given he had not bothered to leave any room for the cameras, was impossible to get a full shot of.

On seeing some of the plans, Vidal had written to Brass again. In a memo dated June 1976 he praised a few of the more sober ideas, but added, “The room with the cocks coming out of the pillars is godawful.” When he finally turned up on set and saw what Donati and Brass had cooked up, he was incandescent. He had been proudly touting his *Caligula* as a realistic portrayal of Ancient Rome. “It looks like a hotel lobby in Miami Beach,” he raged before informing Guccione that either he fire Brass, or he would quit.

“The next thing I know, Gore’s off the movie,” says McDowell. “And that was all very well, but he got me *involved* in the bloody thing. I said, ‘Gore, now you’ve taken your name off it I’m lumbered. I’ve got to do it. I can’t take my name off because they’ll bloody sue me.’”

As shooting dragged on in Rome, Vidal fired jeremiads over the Atlantic. Referring to the director as “Tinto Zinc”, he announced that, “In a properly ordered world he would be a Venetian window cleaner” and that *Caligula* was in fact Latin for “turkey”. Brass responded by describing Vidal’s screenplay as “bourgeois” and “the work of an ageing arteriosclerotic”. “If I ever get really angry with Gore Vidal, I’ll publish his script,” he announced.



In Rome, Guccione’s concern over the way the movie was shaping up only grew as the weeks went by. The extras that Brass had hired — mostly real-life prostitutes, street criminals and vagrants — were a world away from the sexy, toga-shedding Romans Guccione had imagined. He funnelled his *Penthouse* Pets — flown in from New York and LA and, it was said, under the impression they were going to be in the latest Bond movie — onto the set, and demanded they be in the foreground.

And, in secret, he began auditions in the basement of DEAR studios for sequences of his own; special scenes that he had likely always wanted but that had never appeared in any version of the script.

**A**fter filming wrapped in December, Guccione abruptly fired Brass and enacted his plan. The groundwork had been laid when he had peppered Brass’ scenes with adult movie actors as extras. Now, using the same sets and costumes, he spent a week shooting the hardcore sex scenes he had always intended to feature in the movie.

While lawsuits raged, Guccione, who had no experience as a filmmaker, supervised the editing of *Caligula*, throwing together scenes haphazardly and inserting his beloved hardcore every 20 minutes or so. After almost two years of legal wrangling — with almost everybody involved suing each other — *Caligula* was released in 1980 to a chorus of eviscerating reviews. Its financial performance remains a matter of enduring mystery.

Guccione had stated that the budget was \$17.5 million. “It was half of what they claimed,” says McDowell. “But Guccione got exactly what he wanted. He got a porno movie with mainstream actors. He didn’t even make a pretence of it being part of the period. It’s just ‘70s porn with these girls with silicone tits. And it made him a fortune.”

*Caligula* had, then, been an expensive fiasco. It had put an end to Guccione’s dreams of movie moguldom; damaged, perhaps fatally, the careers of both Brass and McDowell; and ended the notion that hardcore had any place in Hollywood. But over the

**Clockwise from top left:** Helen Mirren, as Empress Caesonia surveys a shot with the director nearby; Caesonia is a feast for the eyes; Caligula certainly knows how to throw a party; Passions are roused for Caligula and Caesonia; Special effects add to the sense of the surreal; Caligula finds himself in yet another scantily clad scene.



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years, fuelled by a small band of obsessives, a different narrative began to take shape. *Caligula* was, according to them, a ruined masterpiece. Like Welles’ *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which had been mutilated by the studio and the original cut lost, the existing film was a terrible desecration of what could once have been a towering artistic achievement. But with the original negatives apparently permanently vanished, either during the endless legal wrangling or *Penthouse*’s many subsequent bankruptcies, or destroyed by the lab in Rome which had never been paid, any chance of seeing what it could have been had gone forever.

And then, one day in 2020, Thomas Negovan, an art historian who had been hired by the new owners of *Penthouse*’s assets, walked into an anonymous warehouse in Chatsworth, LA, to be greeted with the sight of pile upon pile of boxes, and in the boxes hundreds of film cans. *Caligula* was about to get a wholly unexpected third act.

“It was like the end of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*,” Negovan tells *Empire* of discovering what turned out to be nearly 100 hours of previously unseen footage. “Looking at the warehouse with these crates in it. Then I started opening stuff and I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.”

What he was seeing was pretty much every frame Tinto Brass had shot. Loaded into boxes, and apparently deliberately mislabelled, the entire lot had been spirited out of Italy by Guccione and then hidden from the prying eyes of *Penthouse*’s creditors. “The boxes were all dirty cardboard, some collapsed from the weight of boxes above, most in stacks that hadn’t been touched for decades,” remembers Negovan. “Some held cans of magnetic tape that had turned to reddish iron dust. But through a miracle of chemistry, the original negatives that rolled through the cameras were immaculate.”

Was there enough to reconstruct the movie? Though the original negative was in pristine condition, it turned out to present other, more unusual difficulties to the restoration team. “I don’t want to be disparaging about Tinto, but there are pubic hairs and bugs in the camera,” he says. “They never checked the gate. There’s one shot where you can see a dead bug in one corner of the frame, and as the film rolls up the bug goes into all these different contortions. I was like, ‘Tinto! You’re not helping me defend you...’”

After three years of work, what Negovan has achieved is pretty much a first in movie history: a restoration of a film that doesn’t include a single frame from the original release. And in his epic reimagining, Negovan used McDowell’s astonishing performance as his creative lodestar. “I think Malcolm put his heart and soul into it. I think he saw what a shitshow it was, but he said to himself, ‘I’m going to make this work.’ And then nobody ever saw it. Like painting a beautiful painting and then someone takes a flamethrower to it. As I watched the footage, you could see him throwing everything at it. And [in] some takes, that were never used, he’s just spectacular.”

For McDowell, the re-emergence of the movie is a source of mixed feelings. “I had felt betrayed by it in the end,” he says of the original release. “I couldn’t even watch it back then. I think Tom has done a fantastic job. Is it a masterpiece? No. But it’s interesting. It’s a whole different movie now. It’s very watchable.”

If Negovan’s plans for a cinema release pan out, UK audiences will get a chance to see *Caligula: The Ultimate Cut* soon. *Caligula*, it turns out, lives. 🍷

FOR MORE ON CALIGULA: THE ULTIMATE CUT, GO TO CALIGULAUULTIMATECUT.COM

## CUT SHORT

CALIGULA ISN’T THE ONLY FILM TO HAVE A GRANDER VERSION OUT THERE SOMEWHERE...



### THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS

(1942)

Orson Welles oversaw a rough cut of the sprawling family saga, which tested badly — studio RKO recut the film, deleting 40 minutes and reshooting the ending. The original version is still the holy grail of lost films.



### EVENT HORIZON

(1997)

Paul W.S. Anderson’s ‘*The Shining* in space’ originally ran for two-and-a-half hours and included sequences set in hell. Paramount ordered a reduced running time. They later asked for a director’s cut but by then the footage had gone AWOL.



### GREED

(1924)

Erich von Stroheim’s epic originally ran for nearly eight hours. MGM wunderkind Irving Thalberg demanded cuts, Stroheim reduced it to four hours, Thalberg hacked out another hour and 40 minutes. The original cut remains lost.



### PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES

(1987)

Rivalling *Ambersons* for the title of most tragically missed lost cut is John Hughes’ *three-and-a-half-hour* version of his 1987 comedy. Since the negative is still MIA, fans will have to make do with the 75 mins of deleted scenes on the 2022 4K DVD.