

BEHIND THE SCENES

TELEVISION FROM THE INSIDE OUT

RadioTimes
**SNEAK
PREVIEW**

See gladiators battling in Bulgaria. Gasp at ships racked by storms in Malta. The action-packed new series of *Roman Mysteries* is children's television at its most ambitious...

Mini epic

If you want to see just how far children's TV has come over the past few years, take a look at CBBC's *Roman Mysteries* when it returns next week. Back in the 1970s, a Roman drama for kids might have involved a few white cotton sheets for costumes and a couple of days' filming at Hadrian's Wall.

Now things are different. *Roman Mysteries* (dramatised from the bestselling books by Caroline Lawrence) was filmed in Bulgaria, Malta and the UK, and had a £10 million budget. It was one of

the most successful British-made children's dramas of last year.

In series two, we catch up with our four heroes – Flavia (16-year-old Francesca Isherwood), Nubia (Rebekah Brookes-Murrell, 15), Jonathan (Eli Machover, 15) and Lupus (Harry Stott, 12) – as they pit their wits against murderers, kidnapers, gladiators, ghosts and even the odd dodgy politician in the

merciless world of AD 79 Rome. You may recognise Harry Stott (pictured far right) as one of the three boys who won BBC1's *I'd Do Anything* talent contest and will be sharing the role of Oliver in a West End revival of the musical *Oliver!* at the end of the year.

But it's not just about money and decent sets – Caroline Lawrence, a former classical art and archaeology scholar at

Cambridge with an MA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies, manages to n her stories educational *and* exciting. If only all history lessons were like this! **Danny Scott**

The first series of *Roman Mysteries* released on DVD on 7 July (Revelat Films), and Caroline Lawrence's latest book in the series, *The Scribe from Alexandria*, is out now (Orion Children's).

FACT FILE

WHAT IS IT?
Roman Mysteries

WHAT'S IT BASED ON?
Caroline Lawrence's bestselling kids' books

WHEN'S IT ON?
From Tuesday 8 July, (CBBC on) BBC1

LINKS For character and episode details, visit www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/romanmysteries



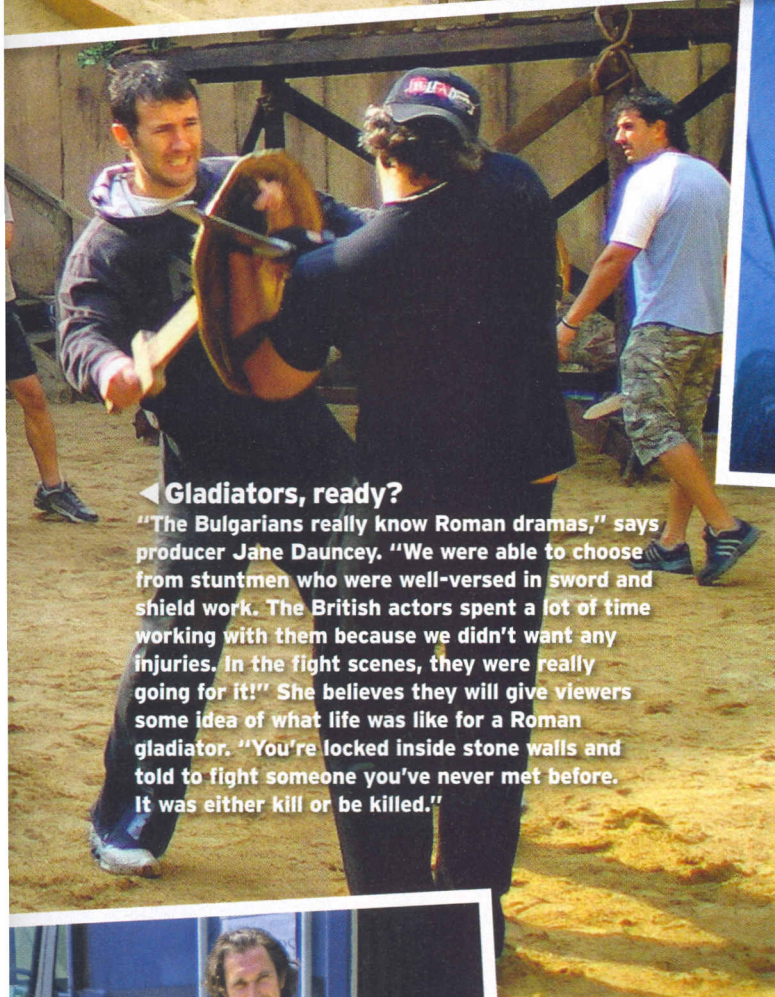
◀ Fight club

The amphitheatre scenes were shot at a studio near Sofia in Bulgaria that had an old set for the TV movie *Spartacus*. The set was five years old, but all it needed was a fresh lick of paint to bring it back to life. The amphitheatre itself is made out of nothing more than MDF, chipboard and timber.

"The brazier was added for dramatic effect," explains producer Jane Dauncey, "but that was what they would have used to light amphitheatres at the time. They were the spotlights of their day."

Brewing up a storm ▼

Most of *Roman Mysteries'* ocean-going scenes were filmed at Mediterranean Film Studios in Malta – also used for Hollywood movies including *Troy*. "The studio has a massive water tank that backs on to the Med," says Dauncey. "When you film there, it looks like you're right out at sea. For this storm scene, we're using wave-machines, hoses, wind-machines and dump-tanks – like massive children's slides that throw water against the side of the ship. There's also a rope tied to the top of the mast, so we can manually haul the boat from side to side. It was shot at night, which makes the whole thing more dramatic – especially when you put some blue spotlights behind the rain."



◀ Gladiators, ready?

"The Bulgarians really know Roman dramas," says producer Jane Dauncey. "We were able to choose from stuntmen who were well-versed in sword and shield work. The British actors spent a lot of time working with them because we didn't want any injuries. In the fight scenes, they were really going for it!" She believes they will give viewers some idea of what life was like for a Roman gladiator. "You're locked inside stone walls and told to fight someone you've never met before. It was either kill or be killed."



◀ Flat cat diary

No, this isn't the special-effects team trying to cut corners. Production designer Jason Carlin (left) came up with the idea to use this paper tiger for a scene where a real tiger is let loose in the amphitheatre. The mock-up gave the actors a position to focus on – their eyes were all looking in the right place. Later, the paper tiger was replaced by footage of the real animal moving along the same route. "Filming with big cats can be quite challenging," says Dauncey, "and not just because they're dangerous animals. They also get bored very easily. After doing more than a couple of takes of any scene, their attention will wander – unless they're plied with another slice of beef!"

▲ The perfect foil

Filming with children is subject to strict health-and-safety rules. The number of hours that 12-year-old Harry Stott (right, who plays Lupus) could work each day was limited, so he was often joined on set by his Maltese double, Peter Ebejer (also 12). "Filming can be a very repetitive business," says Dauncey, "and some of Harry's scenes involved him swimming long distances. Having a double meant we could split the work between the two. Peter does look incredibly like Harry. Actors love water scenes for the first couple of takes. They splash around and have a bit of a laugh. But after a few hours, and countless takes, the most important thing is keeping warm, even when you're in Malta. [Hence the foil blankets]."

