

# The Private Lives of Pompeii

Channel 4, 30 September 2002

90 minute drama-documentary

Director: Richard Curson Smith

Producer: John Wyver & Sebastian Grant

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With the possible exception of the pyramids, Pompeii is arguably the foremost archaeological site in the consciousness of a European television audience. So how would you make a new programme about this Roman city that could be termed truly innovative without compromising the integrity of the archaeology?

*The Private Lives of Pompeii* concentrated on the people that lived and worked in Pompeii at the time of its destruction, as depicted in the archaeology of their houses, their tombs and the surviving documents that relate to them. Rather than use a presenter, the programme uses three story-lines plaited together to form a clever multivocal commentary. A female narrator (voiceover) introduces us to the themes and ideas that lie behind the structure of the Roman society of Pompeii, themes which are then played out by actors illustrating the private lives of four key characters. A third commentary endorses what the viewer has seen and heard by relaying evidence through interviews with historians and archaeologists.

The drama unfolds in the years between the earthquake of AD62 and the eruption of Vesuvius in AD79, a time, we are told, of uncertainty and change. An intense atmosphere is created through the re-enactments which are staged in the surviving streets and houses of Pompeii itself;

thus curiosity about the private individuals elegantly leads us at the same time to the structure of Pompeian society and to many of the town's most important buildings. The digital effects only make their presence fully felt near the end of the programme when they are used to illustrate the work of the Pompeii Forum Project. Digital enhancement is used throughout the programme and is now extremely subtle: for archaeological viewers a clear distinction between the virtual and the real is likely to become an increasingly important issue.

This was a complex and intelligent programme which stretched the medium and chivvied the televisually slothful viewer to keep up, while striking a deal with the more informed members of the audience. Producers have endeavoured to reach as wide an audience as possible in recent years, and one might argue that the results of this well intentioned aim have not always served our subject well. As programme-makers come to terms with the complexities of their audience, however, commissioners may need to rely less on tried and tested formats. Following the ideas of multiple commentary evident in this programme, perhaps we can look forward to a renaissance of still braver and more inventive ways of broadcasting current issues of archaeological research.

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*Agreed 24 January 2003*