

POMPEII

THE LAST DAY

Adapted by Kathy Wilmore from the
Discovery Channel/BBC screenplay

CHARACTERS

Narrators A-E

*Julius Polybius (*puh-LIB-ee-us*), a wealthy businessman

Epidia (*uh-PID-ee-uh*), his wife
Julia, their daughter

Sabinus (*suh-BY-nus*), Julia's husband

#Artist, a man hired by Polybius

Stephanus (*STEFF-uh-nus*), a businessman

#Fortunata (*for-choo-NAH-tah*), his wife

#Africanus (*ah-free-KAH-nus*), a famous gladiator

*#Celadus (*KEL-uh-dos*), a famous gladiator

*Pliny the Elder (*PLIN-ee*), a scholar, scientist,
and Roman admiral

Pliny the Younger, Pliny the Elder's teenage
nephew

#Crispus, a slave in the house of Stephanus

#Messenger

Sailor

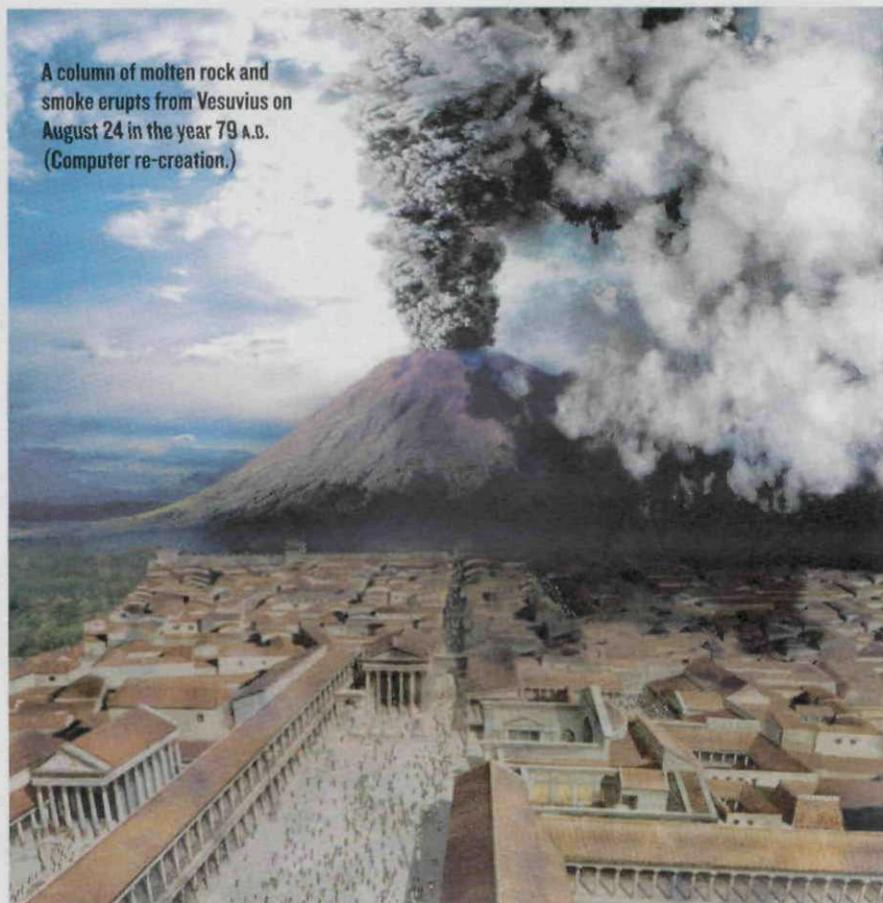
Plinia (*PLIN-ee-uh*), Pliny the Elder's sister, Pliny
the Younger's mother

* Indicates major character. # Indicates fictitious character. Other characters, based on written accounts of the day as well as skeletons found, were real people.

Victims of Vesuvius. When archaeologists excavated Pompeii and its neighboring towns, embedded in the hardened ash they found skeletons and the outlines of full bodies—preserved in the exact positions people died.

One August afternoon, a mountain's rumblings caught the people of Pompeii by surprise. What would you do if a volcano erupted, and you had nowhere to run?

A column of molten rock and smoke erupts from Vesuvius on August 24 in the year 79 A.D. (Computer re-creation.)



I N T R O D U C T I O N

Nearly 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire was hit by the worst natural disaster to strike the ancient world. In less than 24 hours, the city of Pompeii (*pom-PAY*) and at least 2,000 of its 20,000 people were wiped from the face of the earth. Their killer was a volcano called Vesuvius (*vuh-SOO-vee-us*). The mountain had been quiet for 1,500 years—so long that people living nearby had no idea what a volcano was. It suddenly roared to life—on the last day of Pompeii.

Words to Know

- **molten**: in melted form
- **summit**: top of a mountain; the peak

SCENE 1

Narrator A: The day—August 24 in 79 A.D.—begins like any other. About 10 o'clock that morning...

Julius Polybius: How are you feeling, Julia?

Julia: Not well, Father. I couldn't sleep a wink.

Polybius: Well, that's natural—you're seven months pregnant.

Artist: Excuse me, sir. You wanted to see me?

Polybius: Yes. I'm running for office, so I want you to redecorate this room. Make it grand!

Artist: Before the election?

Polybius: Of course! I need to entertain my sponsors.

Narrator A: Meanwhile, at Stephanus's laundry...

Stephanus: I must run some errands. Don't let our slaves goof off!

Fortunata: Me? I can't control them!

Stephanus: Nonsense. You are the wife of Stephanus! When you speak, they will obey. I'll be back soon.

Narrator A: The ground is trembling, but no one notices.

SCENE 2

Narrator B: At about 1 p.m., people are startled by an immense roar from Vesuvius.

Africanus: A huge column of something is shooting out of the mountain! Is it smoke? It's churning so much, it almost looks alive.

Celadus: It's nothing. Besides, we have things to do.

Narrator B: Across the Bay of Naples in Misenum [*my-SEE-num*], Pliny the Elder is watching the mountain with a scientist's fascination.

Pliny the Elder: Incredible. That column of smoke is rising several miles high! I must go over there to get a closer look. Nephew, do you want to come with me?

Pliny the Younger: You gave me so

much to study, Uncle. I'd better stay and finish it.

Pliny the Elder: Very well. But you keep an eye on that cloud too!

Narrator B: That "cloud" is actually a foaming column of **molten** rock shooting into the sky. Eventually, the column reaches about 98,000 feet high. Winds drive the mass directly over Pompeii, making it dark as night.

SCENE 3

Narrator C: Around 1:30 p.m., people get another shock. The molten rock, now high in the sky, starts to cool. Once solid, chunks of it plummet earthward at about 100 miles per hour.

Africanus: Why is everyone running? Hey! *(Suddenly, he collapses.)*

Celadus: He's been hit! Africanus, are you OK?

Narrator C: Now larger, heavier chunks of rock are falling. At Stephanus's laundry...

Crispus: Mistress, I'm back.

Fortunata: Did you find my husband?

Crispus: No. The city gate is choked with people, carts, and animals. Bodies lie dead in the streets. All your other slaves have run for their lives.

Fortunata: But slaves are supposed to protect their masters' lives and property. For any slave who runs and is caught, the punishment is death!

Crispus: It doesn't matter, Mistress. The gods have decided to kill us all.

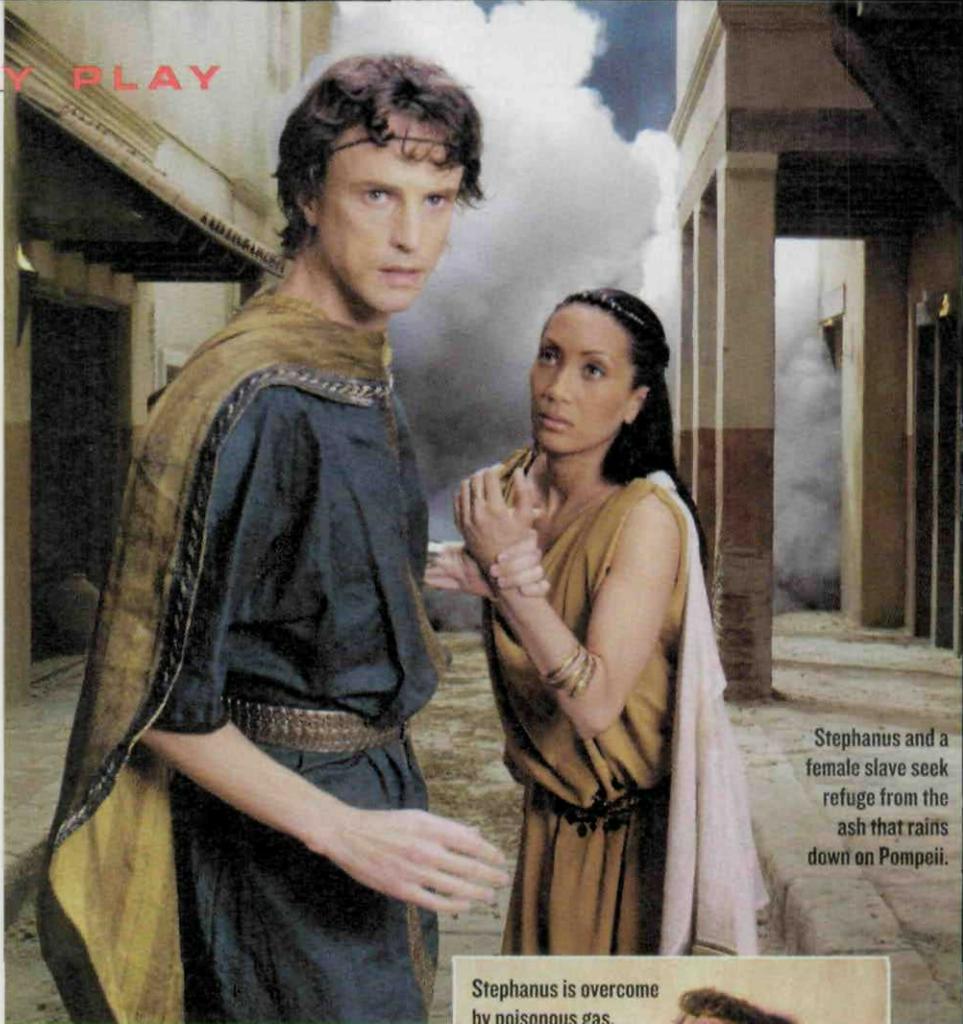
SCENE 4

Narrator D: By midafternoon, Vesuvius has gushed more than 100 million tons of rock onto the city. About 2:30 p.m., a messenger finds Pliny the Elder returning home.

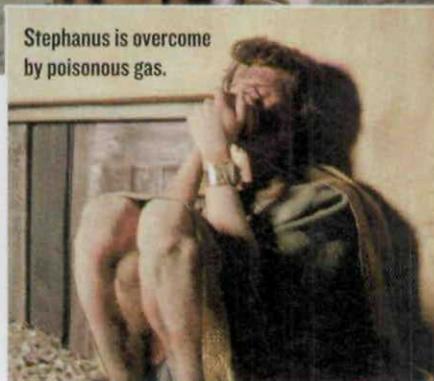
Messenger (rushing in): Sir, I have a message from your friends who live under Vesuvius.

Pliny the Elder: What is it?

Messenger: They fear for their lives.



Stephanus and a female slave seek refuge from the ash that rains down on Pompeii.



Stephanus is overcome by poisonous gas.

Their only hope is to escape by sea. People are crowding the shore but can go no farther.

Pliny the Elder: It looks as if Pliny the scientist must give way to Pliny the admiral. *(To a servant)* Call out as many ships as can be manned for a rescue mission. Have them follow me to Pompeii!

Narrator D: In Pompeii, rocks are still falling, piling up everywhere. At Polybius's house...

Epidia: Look at my garden. It's ruined!

Polybius: If this doesn't stop, we'll all be ruined! Just think of all the money I wasted on my election campaign!

Sabinus (helping Julia into the room): Julia fell off the bed!

Julia: I'm all right. Really!

Sabinus: What about our baby? Shouldn't we flee?

Polybius: Why? This house is strong.

Narrator D: But Pompeii's roofs were

not built to support anything heavier than rain.

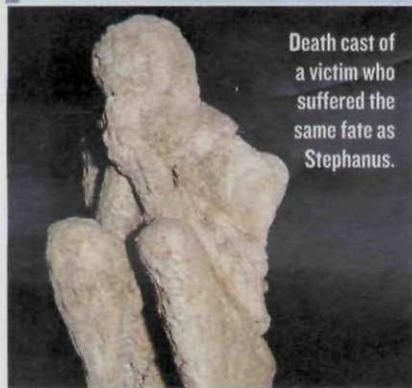
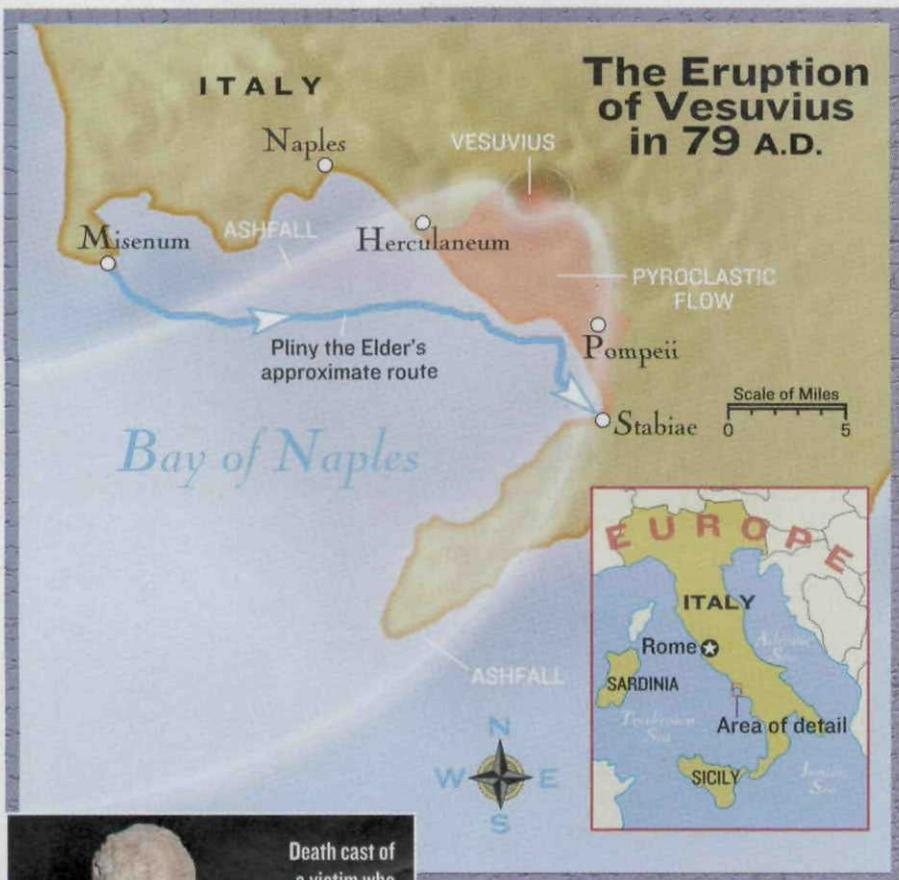
Epidia: Listen! The roof is groaning with the weight of the stones.

Polybius: Oh, great god Jupiter! Please forgive us! *(To Epidia)* Where can we go that's safer?

SCENE 5

Narrator E: Around 5 p.m., Pliny the Elder's rescue fleet is passing Herculaneum [*hur-kyuh-LAY-nee-um*], another town near the mountain.

Pliny the Elder: Hold your course, men—toward Pompeii!



Death cast of a victim who suffered the same fate as Stephanus.

The Eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D.

ture from the air. We're so thirsty! Yet each sip turns the ash in our throats to a thick, suffocating paste. We are doomed!

AFTERWORD

Pompeii and Stabiae were buried in about 23 feet of ash and rock; Herculaneum, by mudflow. Other towns near Vesuvius were also destroyed. That day, at Pompeii alone, about 2,000 people died, including the family of Julius Polybius. Poisonous gases at Stabiae killed Pliny the Elder.

Much of what we know about the disaster comes from two letters written by Pliny the Younger. For many years, people thought his descriptions had been exaggerated. They believed that all volcanic eruptions were lava flows. Today, however, scientists know that Pliny's accounts were accurate. He had witnessed a **pyroclastic surge**—a volcanic explosion resulting in a downpour of rocks and ash. It is also known as a Plinian eruption.

The ruins of Pompeii tell a story, too. Found in 1748 they are still being unearthed. The hot, dry volcanic ash preserved buildings and the shapes of human and animal remains.

Since that August day, Vesuvius has erupted many times. The most recent eruption, in 1944, destroyed two towns and parts of a third.

Today, more than 2 million people live near the volcano. When will the next disaster occur? Some people say an eruption at Vesuvius is overdue. **JS**

Your Turn

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why didn't Pompeiians realize that Vesuvius could be dangerous?
2. Why do people still live near, and visit, Vesuvius? Would you? Why or why not?

Sailor: Admiral, the air is too thick and dark. We can't see!

Pliny the Elder: We can't turn around, so steer toward the light. Let's head for the town of Stabiae [*STAB-ee-eye*] and seek shelter there.

Narrator E: The rock storm continues. Around 1 a.m., from Misenum, young Pliny witnesses a strange and sudden change.

Pliny the Younger: The mountain is shooting flames! The whole **summit** is alight! Every home on the bay is in danger now—including ours. Mother, we must leave!

Plinia: Not until your uncle returns!

Pliny the Younger: If he is anywhere near that horror, we'll never see him again. The column of smoke just collapsed and is rushing down the mountain!

Narrator E: The column's molten rock, hot gases, mud, and ash come tumbling down the mountainside. Five times hotter than boiling water, the wave wipes out people on the beach at Herculaneum. The rock flow stops before reaching Pompeii, but not the ash and poisonous gases. Fortunata is running through the streets, terrified. She meets Celadus.

Celadus: What are you doing here?

Fortunata: Seeking my husband! You?

Celadus: Seeking water. My friend is hurt. Come, hide with us.

Narrator E: In the gladiators' barracks, Africanus lies wounded. Everyone is gasping for air.

Celadus: The ash is sucking all mois-