



The Cinematic Life of Boxing

Ali

Ali

Director: Michael Mann
©: Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.
Production Companies: Peters Entertainment, Forward Pass Productions
In association with: Lee Caplin, Picture Entertainment Corporation, Overbrook Films
Presented by: Initial Entertainment Group
In association with: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Executive Producers: Howard Bingham, Graham King
Producers: Jon Peters, Paul Ardaji, A. Kitman Ho, Michael Mann
Producer: James Lassiter *
Co-producers: Michael Waxman, John Schofield
Associate Producers: Gusmano Cesaretti, Kathleen M. Shea
Production Associate: Lydia Cedrone
Unit Production Manager: Kevin W. de la Noy
Production Supervisor: Thomas Hayslip
Production Co-ordinator: Mitchell Bell
Location Manager: Janice Polley
Post-production Supervisor: Michael Tinger
Production Consultant: Gary Gross
Research: Todd Lubin
Character Research: Damon Bingham
1st Assistant Director: Michael Waxman
2nd Assistant Director: Julie Herrin
2nd 2nd Assistant Directors: Wayne Witherspoon, Jody Spilkoman
Script Supervisor: Julie Pitkanen
Casting: Victoria Thomas
Scenario Co-ordinator: Susan Hollander
Screenplay: Stephen J. Rivele, Christopher Wilkinson, Eric Roth, Michael Mann
Story: Gregory Allen Howard
Director of Photography: Emmanuel Lubezki
A Camera Operator: Gary Jay
B Camera/Steadicam Operator: Jim McConkey
Visual Effects Co-ordinator: Kent Johnson
Visual Effects Producer: Robert Stadd
Visual Effects: Cinesite Inc
Additional Visual Effects: Creo, Asylum
Special Effects Co-ordinator: David H. Watkins Sr
Editors: William Goldenberg, Stephen Rivkin, Lynzee Klingman
Additional Editing: Stuart Waks
Production Designer: John Myhre
Art Directors: Bill Rea, Tomás Voth
Set Designers: Marcos Alvarez, Lynn Christopher, William T. Law III, Sloane U'ren
Costume Designer: Marlene Stewart
Costume Supervisor: John C. Casey
Make-up Department Head: Beverly Jo Pryor
Key Make-up Artist: Joseph Regina
Special Make-up Effects Created by: Greg Cannom
Hair Department Head: Vera Mitchell
Title Design: Robert Dawson
Music: Lisa Gerrard, Pieter Bourke
Orchestrator/Conductor: Steven Scott Smalley
Supervising Music Editor: Kenneth Karman
Music Consultant/Research: Sonnet H. Retman
Dance Choreographer: Fatima Robinson
Sound Design: Sound Dogs Inc
Production Sound Mixer: Lee Orloff
Re-recording Mixers: Andy Nelson, Anna Behlmer
Supervising Sound Editor: Gregory King
Stunt Co-ordinator: Joel Kramer
Cast:
Will Smith (*Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali*)
Jamie Foxx (*Drew 'Bundini' Brown*)
Jon Voight (*Howard Cosell*)
Mario Van Peebles (*Malcolm X*)

Chicago 1964. Soul singer Sam Cooke is belting out an ecstatic medley of his most popular songs to an excited crowd in a nightclub; outside, the young boxer then known as Cassius Clay is doing roadwork alone on the night streets. As the film *Ali* intercuts between these locations, we see a patrol car check out Clay and then drive off, then more scenes are mixed in: a slo-mo dream or flashback of two boxers in the ring; Clay as a small boy watching his father light a candle to an image of a very blonde Christ; the small boy boarding a segregated bus and looking at a newspaper report of a Chicago lynch mob murder. The film's key characters are soon added in one by one: Malcolm X preaching to a Nation of Islam audience about not turning the other cheek with the grown-up Clay looking on, white trainer Angelo Dundee taking notice of Ali, and Ali's talismanic cut man Bundini Brown tagging along. Finally we cut back to the club to see the climax of the medley, Cooke's anthem 'Bring It on Home to Me'. These are the opening moments of Michael Mann's film and they constitute a bravura cinematic precis. In a few minutes we know this is a movie about boxing, civil rights and popular culture in America.

In establishing so rapidly the film's co-ordinates, Mann also tries to deliver the equivalent of Ali's boxing shuffle, dancing around the ring of preconceptions and collective memories that surround the myth of the world's greatest ever athlete while avoiding sucker-punch cliches and redundant exposition. Many people know and agree that the boxer who changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali is arguably the greatest sporting icon of the last century, winner of a record three World Heavyweight Championships over a period of 14 years. Many people will also know something about Ali's Islamic religious beliefs, that the name Muhammad Ali was given to him by Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Nation of Islam, and that his life was bound up in the tumultuous Black civil-rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war protests of the 60s and 70s in America. The intent of *Ali* is to bring together the different strands of this story to present a cohesive portrait that throws into sharp relief the primarily public and political circumstances that made the boxer so significant. If this is not clear enough from the film's opening, it's spelled out by the marketing strapline 'Forget what you think you know.'

Boxing was a popular subject from the very early days of cinema, with films of bouts providing one of the first movie-house staples. Fiction soon followed (even Hitchcock made a fight drama, *The Ring*, in the silent era) and boxing movies became a subgenre within both the sports movie and the *noir* melodrama. It's the latter that provides probably the most enjoyable and successful films, especially during the 40s and 50s when a terrific run of iconic boxing movies included Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (1947), Robert Wise's *The Set-Up* (1949), Mark Robson's *The Harder They Fall* (1956) and Wise's second bite, *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956). Some of these had factual origins, but for the most part they stuck to straightforward fictional plot themes such as the transformation from chump to champ, the fruitless struggle against gangster pressure (usually incorporating the 'will he take a dive?' theme) and the need to choose between the fight game and the love of a good woman.

Since the 50s the popularity of boxing movies has waxed and waned, but the themes haven't really changed. The measure of a good modern boxing movie

Ron Silver (*Angelo Dundee*)
 Jeffrey Wright (*Howard Bingham*)
 Mykelti Williamson (*Don King*)
 Jada Pinkett Smith (*Sonji Roi*)
 Nona Gaye (*Belinda*)
 Michael Michele (*Veronica Porsche*)
 Joe Morton (*Chauncy Eskridge*)
 Paul Rodriguez (*Ferdie Pacheco, M.D.*)
 Bruce McGill (*Bradley*)
 Barry Shabaka Henley (*Herbert Muhammad*)
 Giancarlo Esposito (*Cassius Clay Sr*)
 Laurence Mason (*Luis Sarria*)
 LeVar Burton (*Martin Luther King Jr*)
 Albert Hall (*Elijah Muhammad*)
 David Cubitt (*Robert Lipsyte*)
 Ted Levine (*Joe Smiley*)
 Candy Brown Houston (*Odessa Clay*)
 David Elliott (*Sam Cooke*)
 Shari Watson (*woman mobut*)
 Malick Bowens (*Joseph Mobutu*)
 Michael Bentt (*Sonny Liston*)
 James N. Toney (*Joe Frazier*)
 Alfred Cole (*Ernie Terrell*)
 Charles Shufford (*George Foreman*)
 Rufus Dorsey (*Floyd Patterson*)
 Robert Sale (*Jerry Quarry*)
 Vincent Cook (*Jimmy Ellis*)
 Damien 'Bolo' Wills (*Ken Norton*)
 David Haines (*Rudy Clay/Rahaman Ali*)
 Victoria Dillard (*Betty Shabazz*)
 Brad Greenquist (*Marlin Thomas*)
 Morgana Van Peebles (*Malcolm X's daughter 1*)
 Maya Van Peebles (*Malcolm X's daughter 2*)
 Maestro Harrell (*young Cassius Clay*)
 William Utay (*the doctor*)
 Kim Robillard (*Jimmy Cannon*)
 David Purdham (*MSG announcer*)
 Gailard Sartain (*Gordon Davidson*)
 Wade Andrew Williams
 (*Lieutenant Jerome Claridge*)
 Guy Van Swearingen (*induction FBI man*)
 Doug Hale (*Judge Ingraham*)
 LaDonna Tittle (*Bundini's landlady*)
 Marc Grapey (*Bob Arum*)
 Herb Mitchell (*boxing commissioner*)
 Eddie Bo Smith Jr (*Malcolm's bodyguard*)
 Bob Stuart (*Thomas 15X Johnson*)
 Patrick New (*room service guy*)
 Ron OJ Parson (*death newsmen*)
 Ellis E. Williams (*family photo man*)
 Bokyun Chun (*Asian cosmetologist*)
 John G. Connolly (*assistant director*)
 Warner Saunders (*customer*)
 Jack Reiss (*referee Arthur Mercante*)
 Marty Denkin (*Frazier fight II announcer*)
 Tamara Lynch (*flight attendant*)
 Theron Benymon (*Hampton House announcer*)
 Bill Plaschke (*Miami weigh-in reporter*)
 Robert Byrd (*Willie Reddick*)
 USA 2001©
 159 mins
 35mm

is often simply how successfully a director breathes new life into his or her new challenger. Of course the standard over the last 20 years has been set by Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), which fuses the factually correct biopic (the life of middleweight champ Jake La Motta) and the boxing film *noir* into something operatic and magnificent.

Ali would have to work very hard to stand the comparison with *Raging Bull*, but in fact it doesn't fit in the same category at all. Mann and his scriptwriters focus on politics and social history rather than on organised crime and boxing's tawdry image. Without particularly evading the issues, *Ali* simply excises the reference points, dropping both the *noir* and the melo out of the drama. For instance, the film clearly isn't interested in the controversy over Ali's second championship fight with Mob-enmeshed challenger Sonny Liston but goes instead for the sporting and political events that made Ali great in contemporary culture terms.

This is where the re-presentation of Ali comes in: the film wants you to know both more and less about him in order to reinforce his cultural significance. It wants you to experience at first hand his sense of exclusion when the US government tried to force him to enlist for Vietnam and his World Championship title was stripped from him when he refused. Considering Mann's career immersion in crime thrillers such as *Heat* (1995), this avoidance of plot conventions is both impressive and surprising. In thriller terms Mann restricts himself to a couple of brief scenes showing the FBI surveillance of Ali and Malcolm X which recall his whistle-blowing film *The Insider* (1999). Otherwise, he underplays scenes of violence: the assassination of Malcolm X is shown from Malcolm's very interior point of view as a distant and blurry intrusion on his speechifying and the shooting of Martin Luther King is registered as an oblique genuflection to tragedy. Mann has also proved his capacity to inject new levels of naturalism and contemporary energy into historical subjects, as in his Nazis-encounter-the-supernatural movie *The Keep* (1983) and most notably his adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's classic American novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), which set new technical standards for re-imagining the violent past on screen. *Ali* is in this sense very much a Michael Mann movie, one that's simultaneously modern and mythological.

Adrian Wootton, *Sight and Sound*, March 2002

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