

“Million Dollar Baby” (Clint Eastwood’s Boxing Movie)

Written by Robert Ecksel
Sunday, 30 January 2005 19:00

There’s nothing new about women’s boxing. Flipping through my copy of *Boxiana: Sketches of Pugilism*, a collection of Pierce Egan’s boxing journalism from the years 1812-1824, I came upon this morsel about ladies who fight:

FEMALE PUGILISM

“To shew the nationality of BOXING, and that it was not confined to heroes, we have extracted the following copy of an advertisement, which appeared in a diurnal print, in June, 1722, upwards of ninety years since, when even HEROINES panted for the honours of pugilistic glory!

CHALLENGE.

I, ELIZABETH WILKINSON, of Clerkenwell, having had some words with HANNAH HYFIELD, and requiring satisfaction, do invite her to meet me upon the stage, and box me for three guineas ; each woman holding half-a-crown in each hand, and the first woman that drops the money to lose the battle.

ANSWER.

I, HANNAH HYFIELD, of Newgate Market, hearing of the resoluteness of ELIZABETH WILKINSON, will not fail, God willing, to give her more blows than words—desiring home blows, and from her, no favor : she may expect a good thumping !”

Clint Eastwood’s new movie is about a woman boxer and is called “Million Dollar Baby.” The screenplay by Paul Haggis is based on a book of short stories called *Rope Burns* (2000) by F.X. Toole. Toole was the pen name for the late cutman and fight manager Jerry Boyd. Although the book is fantastical in a literary sort of way, it is full of gritty integrity, has a lived-in feel, an uncompromising character which seems right up Eastwood’s alley. And the film, like all major minor films, has a fine story to tell.

“I liked the story very much,” Eastwood said in a recent interview. “Al Ruddy sent me the book *Rope Burns* about three and a half to four years ago and I read all six stories and this particular story was the one that I and everybody thought had potential. Then I didn’t hear from him for a while. And then all of the sudden he came back with a finished script on it. The script was really good, so I said, ‘Yeah, I’ll do this.’”

Eastwood described what “Million Dollar Baby” is about.

“On the surface, it’s about a woman who wants to become a boxer. But below that it becomes

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about people with dreams and aspirations that are a real long shot to come through. It’s also about searching for family, and deep regrets with prior relationships, and forming relationships: a surrogate father-daughter love story. It’s a love thing.”

Clint plays a crusty old gym owner/trainer in the film.

“It was just very appealing,” Eastwood said of the role of Frankie Dunn. “In the first place it’s in my age bracket. It’s a subject I knew a little bit about. I was on my way to retirement, as far as being in front of the camera. On ‘Mystic River,’ I felt just very comfortable being behind the camera and watching younger people out there performing, and it was a very satisfying experience. So I thought, that will be the end of that. But then this thing came along and I said ‘Well, this is a good role.’ I don’t know whether I was inspired by the enthusiasm all those people had on ‘Mystic River,’ but I just thought maybe I’ll just jump back in the fray here. So I did this role, but I figured I’d also direct it. It wasn’t a hard picture to do technically, and it wasn’t hard in the sense that I had Morgan Freeman, who is solid as a rock. We worked together once before and I was always thinking about a project where we could work together again. And then (there was) Hilary Swank, who I’ve always admired, but never worked with.”

Hilary Swank plays the boxer in the film and the demands on her were huge.

“There was always a question in my mind as to whether she - or any actress - would be able to put forth this kind of thing,” Eastwood said. “It’s a tremendous job, because you really have to dedicate yourself to it. You always hear stories about people training for physical roles, but they go in and run around the block and say ‘I’m trained up.’ But we needed to bulk her up a little bit . . . and we also needed to train her boxing and teach her about boxing.”

About a year ago I heard through the grapevine that Hilary Swank was training at Gleason’s Gym in Brooklyn. I asked the gym’s owner, Bruce Silverglade, in his office, when Hilary Swank was working out. There’s no one in boxing less starry-eyed than Silverglade, so he waved his hand in the direction of the gym and said “I think she’s out there somewhere. You can’t miss her. She’s a skinny girl in black tights.”

I thanked him and walked into the gym, looking for Hilary Swank. There were, as usual, dozens of fighters hard at work. People were hitting speed bags and pounding heavy bags. They were skipping rope, doing calisthenics, sparring, grunting, snorting and spitting. Cornermen were imploring and shouting instructions. It was pandemonium. I looked for a skinny girl in black tights and noticed that there were several of them. With gloves on their hands, headgear covering their heads, with mouthpieces distorting their faces, I couldn’t tell which of the skinny girls in black tights, or if any of the skinny girls in black tights, was Hilary Swank.

That was all I needed to know and left the gym.

In “Million Dollar Baby” Hilary Swank plays Maggie Fitzgerald, a thirty-one-year woman boxer from Missouri who is in LA looking for a trainer. (“I want a trainer,” she says. “I don’t want pity. And I don’t want favors.”) An ill wind blew her into the Hit Pit Gym, a rundown place owned and run by curmudgeonly Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood) and his best friend Eddie Durpis, aka

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Scamp, played by Morgan Freeman. Those two go way back, all the way back to Scamp’s fighting days, all the way back to that night when Scamp lost his right eye during a bout . . . while Frankie was in his corner.

Maggie’s country girl enthusiasm, her plucky underdog-ism, lightens up the joint, but she doesn’t know the first thing about boxing, so she pesters Frankie to take her on. Frankie has seen and done it all and doesn’t have time for Maggie’s nonsense. “I don’t train girls,” he tells her. Maggie won’t take no for an answer and tries to persuade Frankie by telling him she’s tough. “Girly,” he replies with a raspy voice, “tough ain’t enough.” He asks how old she is. Maggie says “I’m 32, Mr. Dunn . . . my brother’s in jail, my sister cheats on welfare by pretending one of her babies is still alive, my daddy’s dead, and my momma weighs 312 pounds. If I was thinking straight I’d go back home and buy a used trailer and get a deep fryer and some Oreos. Probably this (boxing) is the only thing I ever felt good doing. If I’m too old for this, then I got nothing.”

It’s a beautiful appeal, genuine and real, but Frankie is not impressed.

Scamp has also seen and done it all, but his heart, unlike Frankie’s, is still open. “She grew up knowing one thing,” Scamp says about Maggie in the narration. “That she was trash.” Scamp takes Maggie under his wing and begins secretly tutoring her on the fundamentals at night. Frankie sees what’s going on and has doubts about women’s boxing - “It’s the latest freak show out there” – but even he starts pitching in.

Maggie becomes Frankie’s pet project. Maggie’s dream becomes Frankie’s dream. Her belief in herself ignites something genuine in Frankie which was shut down for years. Frankie’s hard exterior melts away as Maggie starts winning her bouts on her way to a shot at the title.

Unbeknownst to Maggie and Frankie, Fate is setting them up to knock them down.

Frankie Dunn is a man of contradictions. He is wizened old gym rat who reads Yeats in the original Gaelic, a good man pockmarked by original sin, someone who grapples with God and the value of faith in a world of broken noses. He is, in other words, like many men in and around the fight game, where brutality and humanity, ignorance and intelligence, damnation and salvation go hand in hand.

Dunn is latest in a long line of Eastwood antiheroes. Independent freethinkers beholden to no one and nothing, these men are as distrustful of authority as they are of their own feelings. They find comfort in isolation, solace in solitude, peace in flawed awareness. They come to terms, such as those terms are, on their own terms, without compromise or conceit.

Eastwood’s film is a sympathetic, compassionate, benign meditation on mentor-student/father-daughter/trainer-boxer relationships. This is chamber cinema by an old master.

Despite the accolades being heaped on Eastwood, which seem less for this film than for his lifetime of achievement, “Million Dollar Baby” is not a perfect movie. The archetypal main

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characters flirt with cliché. The transitions between scenes are sometimes awkward, due more to the source material - the shorthand of a short story, as opposed to the intricacies of a novel - than to the director’s limitations. And boxing is revealed, at least in the last third of the film, in the worst possible light - however plausible, however dramatic, that light might be.

“In the case of ‘Million Dollar Baby,’ these people are all living on the periphery of society,” Eastwood said. “A lot of people don’t get to meet these kinds of people. But there are a lot of people like this. You go down to some of the gyms - and I’ve done this when I was doing the film - you meet an awful lot of people - you go in those gyms and there are a lot of young kids in there. They all have these dreams and aspirations of becoming something. And you know the odds are tremendous that it’s not going to happen. But they’re people with dreams. And you don’t know where their life is at. A lot of them are minorities or people who’ve come from economic backgrounds that they never have a chance, or educational backgrounds where they really don’t have a good shot at it - and here’s the shot to be something.”

Clint Eastwood, seconded by F.X. Toole, aka Jerry Boyd, reveals something essential about boxing, something essential about the human spirit, in his new film “Million Dollar Baby.”