From Anthony Quinn in Requiem for a Heavyweight through Sylvester Stallone as Philadelphian pug Rocky Balboa to Will Smith and Russell Crowe's respective impersonations of real champions Muhammad Ali and James J. Braddock, for more than half a century actors have been ducking between the ropes to perform as heavyweights. Sculpting their bodies to provide imitation of sport's toughest professionals, spending hours in gymnasiums creating believable jabs and digesting the harsh reality of life as a fighter.

None of those thespians invested more time and depth to their craft than Audley Harrison. A man who devoted five years to the role of heavyweight contender, misleading the great and the good in the sport along the way. Harrison's portrayal lacked the gritty realism of Rocky I or the sugar coating of Rocky IV but it deserved plaudits, critical acclaim and arguably a golden statue all the same. Opinions as informed as George Foreman, Lennox Lewis and our own Richie Woodhall all bought into the hype, believing Harrison had the tools and the connections to become a heavyweight champion. Foreman was even led to say Harrison would be a world champion in 2006. He fooled so many. The charade's only weakness, that eventually Harrison would have to have a fight to win one, came on Saturday night.

Finally, the 6-5, 250 pound southpaw looked across the ring at an opponent with the punch and ability to expose him. When the curtain went back, the spotlight lurched toward him and Harrison's moment of truth arrived, he got stage fright, and the carefully constructed ruse collapsed. It was reminiscent of Jim Carey in the Truman Show, except paradoxically Harrison had been the only one in on the secret.

So conservative, so cautious and so weak willed was Harrison, the 15,000 strong ringside audience booed unanimously from the third round onwards. Fighters can fool writers, they can fool a sycophantic entourage, they can even fool themselves, but the one guy Harrison has never really fooled is Joe Public.

The eight million viewers who tuned in either out of genuine or passing interest will have wondered what happened to the sport; had the politically correct European bureaucrats in Brussels intervened and outlawed punching? On the evidence of Harrison and Williams' soporific output on Saturday you couldn't discount the conclusion.

Not since Johnny Nelson's abject, safety-first tilts at the cruiserweight titles in 1989 and 1992 has a fighter delivered such a noncommittal performance in championship class. Adding insult to the terminal injury the display inflicted on his reputation as a contender of significance, is the irrefutable fact Danny Williams was, by his own admission, ill-prepared.

Williams, a fighter prone to public investigation of his neurosis and mental fragility with an honesty virtually unsurpassed in a sport where self-belief is key, revealed post fight that he'd conducted his training in isolation. His media workout in the days before the fight with long-time trainer and mentor Jim McDonnell had been another carefully directed subterfuge. For the

second time in his career Williams felt he no longer required McDonnell's services, stories of needing to pull gloves on with his teeth for sparring provide evidence of the naivety of the decision. In short, Williams implicitly conceded he was 'there for the taking' and expressed his own bemusement at Harrison's performances despite his pre-fight assertion that Harrison was no more than a "celebrity boxer" being proven astutely accurate.

Tipping the scales at 19stone 6lbs provided further indictment of Williams' shocking preparation. He may be naturally bulky of arm and chest, but the former WBC title challenger is only six feet one. It would be easy to forget the embarrassing figure Williams cut in the aftermath of Harrison's output on Saturday. To prepare so badly for a crossroads fight like this was inexplicable. Williams knew victory would once again open the door to world-title shots, Lamon Brewster the most likely target, or a money-spinning showdown with domestic rival Matt Skelton. He'd also craved a fight with Audley since the Sydney Olympian turned professional; acutely aware of the prospective purse and notoriety he would gain but also because he always suspected Audley lacked the "bottle" for the fight. Despite the split decision victory, as many questions remain about Williams' commitment to the sport in which he's repeatedly underachieved as Harrison's.

Mention of Harrison as a potential world-class title contender will be met with derision and laughter from here on in and at 34, even in the division where age and defeat appears to present little barrier to progression, it looks unlikely he can summon the missing qualities to succeed. A route back to contention is hard to fathom, such was Harrison's failure and apparent fear of taking punches; his reputation would have been less soiled by a first round knockout defeat. Harrison can hone technique, he can improve his stamina and work on his power – but the quintessential desire and the hunger every successful fighter has to feel cannot be trained. Audley Harrison simply doesn't possess this crucial attribute, whether the million pound cheque he received from the BBC to turn professional diluted it or whether it ever truly existed will never be known.

Perhaps veteran WBO cruiserweight champion Johnny Nelson's dogged return from his own championship nightmares all those years ago can offer Harrison hope of re-incarnation. Few promoters expressed interest in Nelson because of his equally cautious approach, despite his obvious physical gifts, and the Sheffield man was forced to fight above his weight class and around the globe. Germany, Brazil, South Africa, Belgium, Thailand, France and Australia – Nelson fought everywhere, rebuilding his confidence and reputation wherever he could. Eventually the British promoters relented, the public forgave him and he's enjoyed an Indian summer over the past six years.

The chances of Harrison swallowing his gargantuan pride and featuring in such boxing backwaters appears as likely as his quest for world-title opportunities. Offered the chance to appear on a future Sports Network under card by Frank Warren, Harrison grumbled his disquiet, claiming to be worth more than a mere supporting role.

Warren quipped: "I'm not being disrespectful. I'm just saying that that's how it is."

That stark reality hasn't quite registered with Harrison yet, in fact it may never, but if it does

perhaps Mountain Rivera could be Audley's comeback opponent.