

Save Us Spike Lee, Budd Schulberg and Joe Louis

Written by Robert Ecksel

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I'm a tough nut to crack. I don't like "Rocky," love "Raging Bull," must be a dark side of the moon kind of guy. I remember drifting through Michael Mann's "Ali" almost half asleep, seemingly narcotized by the reverence. When Mario Van Peebles appeared as Malcolm X in "Ali" like a bronze angel from on high, I flashed on Denzel Washington's pulsating portrayal of Malcolm in Spike Lee's "X" – and that's when it hit me: "Ali" had all the right ingredients but one. It had the wrong director. What "Ali" needed was Spike Lee. So when I heard that the always controversial but all the more fascinating for it Spike Lee was developing a film on former heavyweight champion of the world Joe Louis, called "Save Us Joe Louis," I was pleased as punch.

In the May 5, 2005 Variety, Army Archerd reported that "Lee and Budd Schulberg have been working (writing) the Joe Louis project for five years. It's the story of the two Louis-Max Schmeling championship bouts (1936 and 1938) and the global ramifications. Lee says characters involved in the pic will include FDR, Hitler, Mussolini and Sugar Ray Robinson for starters, adding Schulberg was on hand for the 1938 fight. Lee tells me, 'Bud (93) is going strong. This is a David Lean caliber film.'"

The film called "Save Us Joe Louis" (the working title was "The War to Come") will focus on the rivalry and eventual friendship between heavyweight champions Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. Their lives and fights intersected while Europe was at war and the rest of the world was about to join in (World War II, 1939-1945), and Joe the American and Max the German became proxies for their rival nations. When Louis visited the White House at the President's request, FDR told him, "Joe, we need muscles like yours to beat the Nazis." Joseph Goebbels, one of Hitler's henchmen, wrote to Schmeling after he won the first fight with Louis on June 19, 1936, "I know you fought for Germany, that it was a German victory. We are proud of you. Heil Hitler!" Such was the heated atmosphere of the Louis and Schmeling fights.

After the climactic Louis-Schmeling rematch on June 22, 1938 in Yankee Stadium, the film "Save Us Joe Louis" will follow the fighters into their postwar and post-boxing lives. Max becomes a Coca-Cola magnate in Germany and lives to a ripe old age, but never shakes the Nazi stigma. Joe loses everything but his shirt and dignity and becomes a greeter at a Vegas casino.

Although the film is not yet in production, funding is where things stand, many big names, in addition to Spike Lee and Budd Schulberg, have been mentioned as possible players in "Save Us Joe Louis." Terrence Howard, of "Crash" and "Hustle & Flow" fame, is rumored to be interested in playing the champ, even though Vin Diesel was in the early running. Danny Glover has shown an interest in portraying Joe in his later years, while Samuel L. Jackson sees himself in several roles. Hugh Jackman has been penciled in as a maybe Max Schmeling, with Maximilian Schell possibly playing the German champ in his dotage. There has even been talk of Jodie Foster playing Max's movie star wife Anny Ondra.

With so many of Hollywood's heavy hitters warming up in the batter's box for what to these ears

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sounds like the best boxing movie since Scorsese's "Raging Bull," I wanted to get the latest scoop and asked Budd Schulberg, Spike Lee's co-screenwriter on "Save Us Joe Louis," for an update.

Budd Schulberg has been around. He was born in New York City on March 27, 1914. His father, B.P. Schulberg, was a film pioneer, a Hollywood insider. Budd went to L.A. High, Deerfield Academy and Dartmouth College. He worked briefly as a screenwriter in Hollywood, before serving in the U.S. Navy during WW II. At war's end, he was in charge the photographic evidence at the Nuremberg Trials. Schulberg got mired in the HUAC mess, but paid penance with some of the greatest screenplays ever written (and greatest films ever made): "The Harder They Fall" (1956), a thinly disguised account of the career of one-time heavyweight champion Primo Carnera (1933-1934), starring Humphrey Bogart as sleazy Eddie Willis, a down on his luck ex-sportswriter hired to shill for a promoter and his latest harebrained scheme, a clumsy giant named Toro Moreno; "A Face in the Crowd" (1957), a redemptive political object lesson starring Andy Griffith as "Lonesome" Rhodes, an Arkansas hillbilly with the gift of gab who plays the guitar and carries a mean tune, a good old boy who slimes his way to the top of the tower of power to become one of the worst bad old boys of all time; and of course the seminal "On the Waterfront" (1954), that twilight tale of love and regret, complacency and the mob, the dockside parable of broken promises, broken dreams and broken noses, a timeless noir flush with indelible lines like those spoken by ex-pug Terry Molloy, played to Academy Award winning perfection by Marlon Brando, lines written by screenwriting's poet laureate, Budd Schulberg:

"It wasn't him, Charley, it was you. Remember that night in the Garden you came down to my dressing room and you said, 'Kid, this ain't your night. We're going for the price on Wilson.' You remember that? 'This ain't your night!' My night! I coulda taken Wilson apart! So what happens? He gets the title shot outdoors on the ballpark and what do I get? A one-way ticket to Palooka-ville! You was my brother, Charley, you shoulda looked out for me a little bit. You shoulda taken care of me just a little bit so I wouldn't have to take them dives for the short-end money... You don't understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it. It was you, Charley."

I spoke with Schulberg at the Hammerstein Ballroom at the Manhattan Center in New York City where he was attending a recent Broadway Boxing show and asked about the genesis of the Spike Lee/Budd Schulberg Joe Louis film project.

"It began actually at one of those pre-fight dinners at the Garden where we were both were and got to talking about Joe Louis and the Joe Louis film that had never been made," said Schulberg. "We met again after that dinner and decided to do it. We did extensive research for three or four months. We did nothing but read about Joe Louis, Max Schmeling and so forth. Then for a year we worked on several different drafts."

For Spike Lee, the director and race man, the life and career of Joe Louis, the anti-Jack Johnson by temperament and design, but no less heroic for it, must have been nothing less than manna from heaven.

"When Joe Louis started to make a name for himself in New York after beating Carnera and

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Baer,” Schulberg told me, “Time magazine had him on the cover with the words: ‘THE BLACK MOSES’ – and that’s the line we take.”

The title of the film “Save Us Joe Louis” has an interesting origin.

“That is based on the story of a young black kid that’s being executed,” explained Schulberg. “When they strapped him down, attaching all the things to him, he actually cried out, ‘Save me Joe Louis!’ In fact we have that scene in the film. Joe Louis was like a god really.”

“Save Us Joe Louis” has been five long years in the making, but has not really begun. “One of our problems is that this is a much more costly film than Spike had been in the habit of making. His films have been about \$35 to \$40 million, and this would be almost twice as much. It’s a huge canvas,” Schulberg said. “Disney likes it and has offered about \$35 million, roughly half of what we would need. So we’re looking for someone to match Disney.”

I asked Schulberg if he and Spike Lee had decided on a leading man, someone to play the singular “Brown Bomber.”

“Spike has talked to Terrence Howard about playing Joe Louis. We both agree he would be ideal. We’re aware of the fact that the new generation isn’t aware of Joe Louis in the way they are of Ali,” said Schulberg, “and we’re hoping the chemistry of an upcoming star like Terrence Howard will help us overcome that problem.”