

Boxing Loses Another Great: Budd Schulberg

Written by Ron Borges

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Death is a part of life and, sadly, too much a part of boxing these days. Fighters have been falling at an alarming rate for a month now and Wednesday a sport that so badly needs friends lost a great and good one as well with the passing of the novelist, dramatist and journalist, Budd Schulberg, who died at his home in New York at the age of 95.

Unlike the eight present and former boxers who passed away in the month of July, ranging from Hall of Famer Alexis Arguello by suicide to a relatively unknown 21-year-old kid from Laurel, Mississippi named Francisco "Pancho" Moncivais, who died 24 hours after being knocked out in a bout in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, Schulberg lived a long and full life. But just like Arguello, Arturo Gatti, Vernon Forrest, Moncivais, Marco Antonio Nazareth, Mark Leduc, Nicolas Cervera and William Morelo, Budd Schulberg was never happier than in those times when he was inside a boxing arena on fight night.

His fame came from writing the screenplay for "On The Waterfront" in 1954, for which he won an Academy Award, and for the novel "What Makes Sammy Run," which got him blacklisted in Hollywood for its harsh portrayal of naked ambition in the movie industry. But in 1947 Schulberg wrote a novel called "The Harder They Fall," a story loosely based on the sad life of one-time heavyweight champion Primo Carnera. It became a classic portrayal of boxing's ugly underbelly of exploitation and crass self-interests that too often swallow up a fighter and leave him bereft and broke when it's all over.

That book would be turned into Humphrey Bogart's last film in 1955 and be a precursor to Budd's many pieces of boxing journalism, which he penned over the next 60 years, nearly to the day he died. He was, like most fighters, never able to leave the arena for long. Boxing and his readers were both better for it.

In 2001, Schulberg, by then 87, began collaborating with Spike Lee on a screenplay based on the politically charged boxing matches between Joe Louis and the German Max Schmeling that so captured the country's interest in the years before World War II. It remains unfinished business but what should not be is recalling how much Budd Schulberg loved boxing and boxers and how much of his work was centered in that world.

Even in his greatest writing, "On The Waterfront," one of the most memorable moments comes when Marlon Brando, playing a longshoreman and former prize fighter named Terry Malloy, turns on his brother Charley for making him take a dive to satisfy the demands of the Mob, which in those days ran both the docks and the boxing rings.

While riding in a cab, Brando turns to his brother and speaks the lament of too many boxers of that Mob-infested era saying, "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?"

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"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.

Charley Malloy: "Oh I had some bets down for you. You saw some money.

Terry Malloy: "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."

For that brief exchange alone Budd Schulberg earned his entry into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, which he received in 2003, but that was only a few sentences in a lifetime spent writing about boxing. What Budd Schulberg might have written about the deadly month of July, which swept away the great warrior he loved, Arturo Gatti, under suspicious circumstances that remain unresolved, as well as three-time world champion Vernon Forrest to senseless street crime and a kid like Marco Antonio Nazareth, who died in Mexico at 23 from a brain hemorrhage after being knocked out in the fourth round on July 11 by Omar Chavez, a son of the great Mexican warrior Julio Cesar Chavez, can only be contemplated by those who knew his work.

To be sure, what it would have been was haunting and poignant and to the point. It would have been an elegy, an ode to fallen gladiators and a sad, smoky blues riff on the boxer's often sad ending. It would have somewhere reminded us all too of what the boxer too often really symbolizes.

He's the little guy up against the long odds, the fighter who stands alone against vast powers massed against his efforts to succeed by force of his own will and skill. In a video interview on the New York Times website which did not appear until after his passing, Schulberg said, "It's the writer's responsibility to stand up against that power (of the corrupt system against the little guy). The writers are really almost the only ones, except for the very honest politicians, who can make any dent on that system."

Budd Schulberg stood up for what he believed and wrote about what he saw: the great, the good and the gruesome. He stood up in prose for many people who couldn't stand up for themselves. He stood up for boxers too.

He stood up to cheer them and to write about the difficulties that are common among them. Most of all, he wrote to say he loved them and their sport. After such a long and tragic month, it's a message everyone in boxing needs to be reminded of.