In a scene depicted in “The Fighter, a fat-cat boxing promoter makes Micky Ward an offer that should have been hard to refuse: Come to Vegas. Train year-round, all expenses paid.

Implicit in this generous offer is that the promoter, who is plainly based on Bob Arum, can see what is obvious to everyone else, including the audience, save Irish Micky, which is that if he hopes to revive a boxing career now in tatters he needs to get himself out of Lowell, Massachusetts, and cut his ties with a family that includes a leech of a mother who functions as his “manager and a drug-addled buffoon of an older brother who purports to be his trainer.

“But what about my brother? frets Mark Wahlberg, who portrays Ward. “He’s taught me everything I know. I can’t do it without him.

* * *

Although it was shot in what may have been a modern-day record 33 days, “The Fighter was nearly five years in the making. Somewhere along the way Brad Pitt, who was to have portrayed Ward’s brother-cum-trainer Dickie Ecklund, opted out and was replaced by Christian (Batman) Bale. As what may be a further indication of the chaos attending the metamorphosis of “The Fighter, the credits include no fewer than 13 producers, executive producers, and co-producers, while five individuals are credited with the story and screenplay. The result of this screenplay-by-committee is a jumbled mélange of a film that can’t seem to decide whether it wants to be an updated retelling of “Rocky or a particularly ugly episode of “Intervention.

“The Fighter is described as “based on a true story, and any fears that the Hollywood treatment would sanitize or sugarcoat its subject matter are quickly disabused by a warts-and-all portrayal of a dysfunctional family with more warts than a nest full of horned toads.

Bales’ Dickie is a bug-eyed nincompoop, an ex-fighter who once scored a somewhat dubious knockdown of Sugar Ray Leonard, but whose vision of reality is now so distorted that he thinks an HBO crew has come to Lowell to film a documentary about his “comeback. (The HBO crew is actually making a series on Crack in America, with Dickie a cautionary example of what can happen when drugs have removed every trace of common sense from a deluded soul.)

Alice Ward (Melissa Leo) doesn’t come off much better. A mother no son (save perhaps Dickie) could love, Micky’s mother is presented as such a selfish, venal matriarch she could be Fagin in drag. When she’s not stage-mothering Micky and indulging Dickie, Alice presides over a flock of daughters – big-haired, gum-chewing, chain-smoking, foul-mothed small-town bimbos. This inseparable – and indistinguishable – gaggle of slovenly crones serves the approximate function of the witches in Macbeth.

His sensitivity notwithstanding, Wahlberg’s blindly obedient Micky is somehow too confused to realize that his family has become a millstone around his neck. His girlfriend Charlene (Amy

Adams) runs somewhat against type: She doesn't want Micky to quit boxing; she just wants him to do it without Alice and Dickie.

That the only remotely sympathetic character besides Micky and Charlene is Sgt. Mickey O'Keefe, the kind-hearted Lowell policeman who trains Micky whenever Dickie's off at the crack-house, is unsurprising, since he is played by Sgt. Mickey O'Keefe, apart from Sugar Ray Leonard (in a cameo) the only figure to portray himself in the film.

But the real problem with "The Fighter isn't so much that it couches itself the trappings of a reality TV series, but that, having established those parameters, it goes wildly off the rails with its willful misrepresentation of reality.

* * *

The offer from the promoter who is not Bob Arum serves as a dramatic device triggering a sequence of events in which the conflicted fraternal relationship (as well as the misunderstood Dickie's criminal career) are conveniently distilled into a single evening consuming less than five heavy-handed on-screen minutes.

In an apparently earnest attempt to match the offer from the promoter who is not Arum, Dickie first unsuccessfully tries to assemble a consortium of investors from among the Cambodian immigrant relations of Karen, his crack-house girlfriend. Rebuffed in his efforts to raise the money honorably, Dickie resorts to a goofy shakedown scheme: Togged out as a streetwalker, Karen (portrayed by the aptly-named Chantyl Sok) gets herself picked up by a john, whom she is in the process of servicing in the front seat of his car when Dickie and another crackhead show up, lights flashing, identify themselves as policemen, and over the owner's vague protests, announce their intention to impound his vehicle. The junkie masterminds are in the process of toting up the contents of the citizen's wallet (which Ms. Sok has managed to filch between gulps) when, announced by more flashing lights, the real cops arrive.

Dickle takes off, leading the constabulary on a high-speed foot chase across Lowell, straight to the restaurant where Micky and Charlene are dining. When he sees the cops beating the stuffing out of Dickie, Micky attempts to intervene but is quickly overpowered. One of the policemen, recognizing him as a fighter, deliberately smashes his right hand with a nightstick. The brothers spend the night in jail. The next morning Micky is released on his own recognizance while Dickie, by virtue of his 27 previous arrests, is packed off to a prison cell. With Dickie safely on ice, Micky's career blossoms anew.

In real life, the episode with the nightstick did happen, pretty much as described, but it took place well before the mid-90s chronological time-frame of the film. And while Ecklund was a guest of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on several occasions during this period, the eight months of a 10-to-15 year stretch (for armed robbery) at the Billerica House of Correction depicted in "The Fighter occurred in 1999.

More to the point, beyond allowing Micky to hoist his bandaged paw and should "is this what I should thank you for? as Dickie is led out of the courthouse in chains, the nightstick episode

serves utterly no dramatic purpose in the plot. (It can't, since the three-year hiatus from the ring it produced occurred before the events dubiously depicted in "The Fighter even took place.

* * *

In production notes distributed at a New York screening this week, one of the film's producers, Ryan Kavanaugh, summarizes his brief to director David Russell: "We told him to keep the heart and soul, but that we needed some 'Rocky' out of it.

Therein lies the rub. The legacy of the real Micky Ward is that of a blue-collar boxer who achieved enduring respect despite never having won a world title. His trilogy of bouts against Arturo Gatti may eventually put him in the Hall of Fame, even though he lost the last two of them (after winning a split decision in the first.)

In the Hollywood treatment, Ward's stunning, come-from-behind knockout victory (with a body shot) over previously unbeaten Alfonso Sanchez in 1996 leads to an immediate title world title shot against Shea Neary in London in what the production notes describe as "the shot of a lifetime. A decisive underdog, Micky once again gets hopelessly outboxed for seven rounds before scoring an 8th-round KO and riding off into the sunset. The Gatti fights are alluded to only in a scripted crawl just before the credits roll.

In actuality, the win over Sanchez (on the Oscar De La Hoya-Pernell Whitaker undercard) did lead to an immediate title shot for Ward, who in 1997 fought Vince Phillips for the WBA junior welterweight title in Boston, and was stopped (on cuts) inside three rounds.

Micky's bout against Neary came three years, eight fights, and one Dick Edklund prison stretch, later, and the only "title involved – the WBU 140 pound belt – was so lightly regarded that its legitimacy was recognized only in certain boroughs of London. (Micky himself put much stock in the WBU title, which he never bothered defending.) And while Neary was undefeated at the time, the result was not much of an upset to anyone who knew anything about boxing. For no apparent reason beyond sheer obstinacy, the film makes that 140-lb. fight a welterweight title bout and announces both fighters at 146. (Ward weighed 140, Neary 139.) Micky's record going in is listed as 20-7. It was actually 34-9.

But it is neither The Fighter's blatant disregard of the facts nor its hokey Hollywood ending that will baffle audiences, but rather, the mixed message implicit in the denouement, a warm and fuzzy Micky-and-Dickie moment.

"I don't get it, the filmgoer will be scratching his head on his way out the door. "Are they saying Micky Ward won that fight because his scumbag brother was back in his corner? Or in spite of it?

(George Kimball's column on "The Fighter originally appeared in the December 2 edition of The Irish Times. Copyright © 2010 by The Irish Times Newspaper.