

REIN: "The Fighter" Catches Lightning In A Bottle

Written by Joe Rein

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Bogart will always have Paris, 'n Irish Micky Ward will ALWAYS have London, November 3, 2000, when the Lowell, Mass. journeyman/road-paver wrecked home-town favorite Shea Neary, winning the WBU 140-pound crown, spiking the blood pressure of fight fans 'round the globe.

As Churchill might've said, it was Ward's finest hour; though boxing purists feel it heresy that his epic wars with Arturo Gatti are overlooked in THE FIGHTER; director David O. Russell's tight lens on Ward's scabrous relationship with his glass-on-a-blackboard family 'n brutal slog to be champion.

To satisfy gym rats, there's not enough money in the treasury to cover parking for a movie that long, 'n a History Channel documentary doesn't sell tickets.

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THE FIGHTER is no more a niche picture for boxing fans than RAGING BULL. It's a fiercely compelling 115-minute labor of love, with a brilliant ensemble cast etching indelible characters striking sparks. Capra characters they're not, 'n Lowell's not Bedford Falls.

Mark Wahlberg, at the heart, as Micky Ward -- sans goatee -- has the mien, the muscles and Micky's trademark fight-ending left hooks to the head and liver.

When ya wanna shout, "COME ON, MICKY! PUNCH BACK! DON'T LET'EM HIT YA LIKE THAT," it's because Wahlberg's agonized everyman makes ya wanna root for him.

Christian Bale's mercurial turn as Dickie Eklund, Micky's delusional older step brother/come trainer, is an operatic tour de force. Melissa Leo doesn't shy from playing Micky's mother like the allies storming Normandy and Amy Adams, very much against type, is her match, as Charlene, Micky's feisty girlfriend, 'n rock, who's quick to say the king's naked 'n never shrinks from a fight.

Even the smallest bit parts are scrupulously cast; the topography of their faces saving pages of back-story. Stuntman Anthony Molanari looks the real deal as Shea Neary, making the crucial bout so exciting.

Russell's no paint-by-the-numbers storyboard director. Always with a firm grip on story, he's in the moment, tryin' to catch lightning in a bottle. His scenes crackle with life. Not hyperbolic Hollywood.

So, if you're looking for a riveting gristle-n-bone, raucous, entertaining movie-movie with heart, THE FIGHTER delivers.

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