

Unanimous Decision: Shadow Box Film Festival Was A Winner

Written by Chris Wheat

Monday, 10 December 2012 22:59



The panel of L-R: Ron Scott Stevens, Leon Gast, and Barbara Kopple spoke about how and why boxing works in cinema at the first annual Shadow Box Film Festival in NYC.

From the classic lines, “I could have been a contender,” to “Yo Adrian, we did it,” the sport of boxing and the world of film have been devoted partners for decades.

The stirring themes and characters boxing provides to celluloid came together last weekend at

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The Shadow Box Film Festival, the first and only film festival to devote its entire program to films about the sweet science.

Held over two days (11/30 & 12/1) at The School of Visual Arts Theater in Manhattan, the festival showcased thirty films shot in eight different countries. The SVA's two theaters screened an interesting collection of short and feature films. Each day culminated with a panel discussion.

A labor of love from festival director David Schuster (Winner Take All Productions) and an advisory board that included former world champions, award winning film makers, acclaimed writers/producers, as well as prominent members of the broadcast media world, The Shadow Box Film Festival is a brilliant idea long overdue.

The festival kicked off on Friday afternoon with the feature "A Fighting Chance," by noted journalist and author Bobby Cassidy Jr.

The story of Cuban boxing before and after the revolution, "A Fighting Chance" spanned several decades as it told of the triumphs and disappointments of Cuba's legendary boxers. The lives of Cuban heroes such as Kid Chocolate, Kid Gavilan, Florentino Fernandez, Teofilio Stevenson, and Joel Casamayor were all recounted in rich detail. Most moving perhaps was the tale of "Puppy" Garcia, a celebrated and idolized boxer who decided to remain on the island in spite of the revolution. Identified as part of the resistance movement against Castro, Garcia was imprisoned and tortured for nine years. A smashed ankle delivered at the hands of his captors prevented him from ever boxing again.

A collection of twelve short films from various countries (Canada, Spain, Germany, England, and the U.S.) followed.

Standouts from the dozen included "Jeffery," the emotional tale of former fighter Jeff Leggett, directed by Nathaniel Hansen, "Shadow Boxers," portraits of boxers Seamus McDonagh, Maureen Shea, and John Duddy, by Sandi Bachom, and "Tiger," the story of affable "Tiger" Ted Lowry directed by Chris Cassidy.

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“Joe Frazier: When the Smoke Clears,” written and directed by Mike Todd, provided an intimate look at the life of the heavyweight legend and his son Marvis. The two were captured as they struggled to keep Joe Frazier’s gym open and the great fighter’s legacy alive.

Prior to the evening’s final screening (“The Good Son”), Showtime’s Steve Farhood moderated a panel discussion on why boxing makes great drama. Panelists included 15-time Emmy winning writer/producer Aaron Cohen, former WBO heavyweight champion and current actor Michael Bentt, director Chris Kenneally of the well received film “Side by Side,” former world-ranked junior middleweight contender (and honorary festival chairman) Mark McPherson, director Jesse James Miller (“The Good Son”), and former WBA lightweight champion Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini, himself the subject of the evening’s final film.

A lively and interesting discussion followed as panel members recounted their favorite boxing films (On the Waterfront, Body & Soul, Rocky), what drew them to boxing, and why the fight game makes for great drama.

Among the common themes mentioned were fathers and sons in boxing, with Mancini fighting to please his father, while Bentt fought out of resentment towards his.

The first day of the festival concluded with a screening of “The Good Son,” about the life and career of Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini, based on the book of the same name by Mark Kreigel, and directed by Jesse James Miller.

The powerful film told the story of Mancini’s childhood in Youngstown, Ohio through his rise to the top of the boxing game and the world championship belt that eluded his father (the original “Boom Boom”). That quest inspired and motivated Mancini’s desire to be the best.

The film built up to the fateful night in 1982 when Mancini stepped into the ring with Deuk – Koo Kim, but along the way details real life events such as his father’s excessive drinking, and the shooting death of beloved older brother Lenny Jr. Mancini even states that Lenny Jr. was the more talented boxer of the two, but he could not stay in the gym and drifted towards the call of the wild.

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The events of the Kim fight have been well chronicled, but Mancini's mature insights into the fight itself, as well as its aftermath, remain riveting.

The film concluded on a highly emotional note as Mancini, now a father himself, meets Kim's widow and the son she was pregnant with at the time of the bout.

The exceptional grace and humanity of Mancini shines through as he welcomes mother and son into his home and later hosts them at a dinner attended by his children.

Day two of the festival started off with "Bobby Cassidy: Counterpuncher," directed by Bruno De Almedia, and chronicling the life and times of charismatic "Irish" Bobby Cassidy.

A former No.1 light heavyweight contender from Levittown, NY, the colorful Cassidy lived just as exciting a life outside the ring as he did in it.

Gravitating to loan sharking and bookmaking during idle periods in his long boxing career, Cassidy captivates in the film with wild tales of dust ups with rival loan shark crews, and a subsequent conviction and prison term for his nefarious activities.

Not lost in the narrative of his life is the story of a talented, courageous boxer who would fight anyone, anywhere, anytime. Unfortunately he never managed to secure the title shot that every fighter dreams of.

A scene near the close of the film in which Cassidy, who credits an acting class with redirecting his life, recites a monologue from "Requiem for a Heavyweight" is devastating.

"Shadow Boxers," a feature film directed by Katya Bankowsky, offered an inside look at the world of women's professional boxing.

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Detailing some of the barriers faced by women boxer's, the film featured several talented New York Golden Glove's finalists, as well as focusing on pro boxer Lucia Rijker. Once dubbed "the most dangerous woman in the world," director Bankowsky's cameras follow Rijker as she begins the climb toward a world championship.

The collection of short films was screened again on Saturday afternoon, this time with a jury panel in place to pick the winner for best short film.

The honor went to Sandi Bachom's "Shadow Boxers," which featured an emotional reading of the lyrics to Paul Simon's "The Boxer" by former heavyweight contender Seamus McDonagh.

Other winners included: "The Good Son" directed by Jesse James Miller for Best Feature, and "Buffalo Girls" directed by Todd Kellstein for Best Cinematography.

Throughout the weekend a variety of actors, fighters, and media bigwigs were at the screenings and seen conversing between films. Some included John Slattery (Mad Men), Holt McCallany (Light's Out), welterweight champion Paulie Malignaggi, DeMarcus "Chop Chop" Corley, Seamus McDonagh, and Showtime's Steve Farhood, Brian Kenny, Jim Gray, and Mauro Ranallo.

Festival Director David Schuster stated, "We are very pleased with the quality of films screened at our inaugural festival. We wish these filmmakers the best of luck. Their work was an inspiration to us and those who attended over the weekend."

The festival concluded with a panel discussion featuring Oscar winners Leon Gast (When We Were Kings) and Barbara Kopple (Fallen Champ: The Untold Story of Mike Tyson). The panel was moderated by former New York State Athletic Chairman Ron Scott Stevens.

Both directors detailed the trials and tribulations of getting their films made and released, as well as the joy they experienced when recognition and accolades poured in.

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In a Q&A with audience members that followed the panel discussion and a highlight reel from each, both Gast and Kopple were extremely supportive towards the film makers in attendance. They both essentially stated the same message of “Get your film made and worry about the rest later.” Recounting their own early experiences, Gast and Kopple urged the neophyte directors to never give up.

That was a fitting theme for a festival focused on life in the squared circle.

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