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Review

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Cinderella Man (2005). Directed by Ron Howard. Produced by Brian Grazer, Ron Howard, and Penny Marshall. Written by Cliff Hollingsworth and Akiva Goldsman. Universal Pictures. 144 mins. Internet: <<http://www.cinderellamanmovie.com/index.php>> [12 March 2006].

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Universal Pictures may continue to re-release *Cinderella Man* every few months for years to come, expecting that any minute now audiences will come to their senses and flock to see it. I can see why the unenthusiastic response to an apparently failure-proof movie has proven difficult for its makers to accept. The true-life *Rocky* (1976) story on which it is based offers copious drama as Jim Braddock, a boxer and stevedore laid low by the Great Depression and barely able to feed his kids, picks himself up, battles back, and eventually wins the heavyweight title. The bankable Russell Crowe, bulging with decency and determination like Henry Fonda on the juice, stars as Braddock. Paul Giamatti plays his manager, Joe Gould. As Braddock's wife, Mae, the appealingly occluded-looking Renée Zellweger does what she can with a role in which, when she's not tending to a coughing child or worshipfully emoting at a radio, she must constantly tell the star how great he is. The movie's official tag line, "When America was on its knees, he brought us to our feet," with its built-in confusion of past and present, vaguely promises to make us feel better about . . . you know . . . *things*. The heroically inoffensive Ron Howard directed *Cinderella Man*. Howard makes movies that people tend to like, perhaps because to dislike them would entail departing too sharply from the path of least resistance.

But people didn't like *Cinderella Man*. There wasn't enough to the movie to nourish real hate, so they didn't hate it, but they just didn't like it. Various explanations have been floated, including the much repeated truism that nobody likes boxing movies. (Oh, really? Did I mention *Rocky*? How about *Million Dollar Baby* [2004]?) But there's no need to bother with any explanation more elaborate than this one: *Cinderella Man* tanked because it is a uniquely bad movie, so bad that it exuded a stink that warned off most of its potential audience.

I don't mean just that it is tedious to look at and listen to; after all, poorly made movies win over audiences all the time. The quality that separates *Cinderella Man* from the pack of merely lame movies is the near-complete lack of affect produced by its literal-mindedness. "The Jim Braddock story is so great," they probably told themselves over at Universal, "that all we have to do is tell it." They were wrong. The plot advances with barely a trace of dramatic theme, emotional texture, or historical resonance attached to anything that happens, nor does any appreciable narrative momentum develop as the sequence of events unfolds. The dialogue is singularly without music or shading; characters simply say things to advance the plot, fill in the backstory, or explain what's happening.

If *Cinderella Man* was visually compelling, none of this would be a problem. You could just sit back and enjoy the spectacle. But there is no spectacle. The boxing sequences,

which take a middle path between the faux-verisimilitude of *Ali* (2001) and the comic-book thrills of *Rocky*, have a dispiriting paint-by-numbers sameness. And you can't take refuge in enjoying the movie's lush period detail, because its sterile rendition of the 1930s barely manages to suggest the past at all. The cars are different; men wear suspenders and hats; there are no cell phones. That's about it. A smattering of directorial gimmicks, like the x-ray shots of bone-breaking blows that Howard borrowed from martial arts movies via the *CSI* television franchise, only serve to accentuate the movie's lack of imagination. I was so beaten down by the pervasive blandness that I felt a surge of grateful sympathy when the camera tilted to show Braddock's point of view as he stepped through the ropes. If it's an achievement to make a boxing movie that's not about anything *and* a chore to look at, Howard has achieved something.

Cinderella Man isn't just a bad movie, it's a bad boxing movie—more specifically, a bad historical boxing drama. I don't ask such movies to be historically accurate, but I do think they should be penalized for maliciously misrepresenting a fighter who has done nothing to deserve such treatment. *Hurricane* (1999), for instance, makes it seem as if Rubin "Hurricane" Carter drubbed Joey Giardello but was robbed by the judges—another example of our hero getting a raw deal from The Man—when in fact Giardello handily outboxed Carter and the decision was a fair one.* *Cinderella Man* doesn't even have *Hurricane's* thematic excuse for the gratuitous hatchet job it does on Max Baer, Braddock's opponent in the climactic title fight. Among Baer's many gifts was a right that ranks among the hardest punches of all time. He killed two opponents, which is all the movie wants viewers to know about him. Imposing Mike Tyson's fanciful bogeyman persona on Baer, *Cinderella Man* presents him as a brooding psycho who wants nothing more than to kill Braddock too, then ravish his widow and perhaps cap off the evening by eating their children.

This is an insult to Baer, who at his best was a better fighter than both Braddock and Tyson—and a better actor than Craig Bierko, who plays him in *Cinderella Man*. Baer was a charismatic, brutally playful, terrifically athletic bruiser who was blessed and cursed with a lethal right and a granite chin. He lost by decision to Braddock mostly because he fooled around in the ring, throwing away rounds while Braddock soldiered on. Baer's seeming disinterest may have masked gun-shyness: his own power, not his opponent's, may have intimidated him. But *Cinderella Man* doesn't care about any of that. Since it isn't about anything, it can offer no compelling reason for stripping Baer of any complexity as a character—no reason, that is, other than laziness or fear of interrupting the plane-flat simplicity of its moral landscape.

I feel obliged to say a word about the injustice the movie does to Baer's punching form. I'm no stickler for fistic realism at the movies—if you want to see a real fight, go to the fights and don't waste your time watching actors pretend—but at a certain point

*Giardello strenuously objected to *Hurricane's* rewriting of history, knowing its account of the fight would persist in popular memory. Quaintly believing that there were more than a handful of viewers left in America who would recognize the sight of one guy outboxing another when they saw it, he streamed a film of the fight on a website and invited all to judge for themselves. His web site was <www.joeygiardello.com>. For more on Giardello's response to the film, see "Ring of Truth," *Sports Illustrated*, 28 February 2000, p. 26.

license crosses the line into libel. The movie reduces Baer's stupendous right to a petulant, flailing gesture that resembles an attempt to dislodge a clinging gob of mucus from his glove by slinging it into the crowd. Watching Bierko throw Baer's right is like watching Tony Danza, playing Michelangelo, paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel from the floor with a Super Soaker.

Jim Braddock held the heavyweight title when boxing and baseball were the sports that really mattered, and when the heavyweight champion stood at the pinnacle of the sporting world. Until our own era of competing sanctioning bodies, fragmented titles, and proliferating champions, Braddock was one of the weakest heavyweight champions of all time. A competent, brave, not particularly gifted or skilled pro with a good chin who faced extraordinarily thin opposition on the way to his title shot, Braddock was lucky enough to encounter Baer when Baer held the title and wasn't inclined to give his all to defend it. Having decisioned Baer, Braddock held onto the title for two years by not defending it; he finally met Joe Louis in his first defense, and you can probably guess how that turned out. Braddock fought once more, retired from the ring, served in the military during World War II, and went back to work. All of this actually makes his story potentially more engaging, especially if you think of it as the story of a regular working guy, good with his hands, who just happened to get a chance to support his family in a way that commanded the nation's attention. But *Cinderella Man* is so dull-witted and zombie-like, lobotomized by its own smug confidence that you're going to love it, that it almost entirely fails to exploit this story's obvious cinematic possibilities.

