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Film Review

Cinderella Man by Ron Howard

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Cinderella Man, 2005, directed by Ron Howard and based on a true story, uses the standard format of the boxing film genre to feature a proletarian hero and celebrate his successful rise from grim poverty. The main character, Jimmy Braddock, offspring of Irish immigrants, played by Russell Crowe, is an underdog, whose rise is classic. The story is rife with lump-in-the-throat moments, as this ordinary man with extraordinary decency lives through the Great Depression, a period when the popular refrain was "Brother Can You Spare a Dime." The film is rich with stylized images of America in the 30's: vintage cars, cheering sports crowds, day workers desperate for shift work, and rough tired homeless men in the improvised tent cities called, after the President then in office, Hoovervilles.

The first two sequences in the film set forth the essence of the story. First, it's 1928. We get a street scene outside Madison Square Garden arena in New York, then inside quick cuts of a boxing match with traditional low angle shots, and just a few crushing blows revealing our central character, Jimmy Braddock. Next, he's returned home to his small ground level apartment in New Jersey, where he breaks the good news of his win to wife Mae and his three little children; affectionate cute repartee between the couple ends the sequence.

Next, fast forward five years. The depression is in full swing, and in an almost Dickensian way, the family is shown as sound, sensitive, and strong in suffering, characteristics which in American oral tradition are said to mark that generation. Braddock asks Mae "Where's my socks?" and she says she washed them as soon as he took them off. They've received a notice that the gas and electric bills are overdue. He goes to the door to pick up the milk delivery and finds instead a past due notice. She waters down the milk that is remaining and pours it for the children. Little daughter Rosie asks for some more breakfast, but Mae must save it for her brothers. Braddock tells a story about dreaming he ate steak and mashed potatoes at the Ritz, and so he's stuffed, and moves his breakfast on to Rosie's plate.

These two elements, Braddock's battles in the ring and his battles with poverty, escalate in intensity and interest. He stands in a shape up of day laborers desperate for a shift on the loading docks. A newspaper headline, trampled on the wet ground, tells of record unemployment. His young son Jay steals meat from the store, and we watch through the window as Jimmy silently has him hand it back to the butcher. "We don't steal, no matter what happens...You got me?" Jay reveals his reason: his friend had to be sent away when his parents didn't have enough food. Jimmy promises never to send him away.

Jimmy fights with a broken hand, loses badly, and loses his license. He is out of credit at the grocery. He colors his hand cast with shoe polish so it will not be apparent as he seeks a job at the Hoboken docks. He goes for meager public assistance, relief, which he sees as an embarrassment, far from an entitlement. The heat and electric are turned off. Mae and the children break wooden sticks from a public billboard for fuel. Unknown to Jimmy, Mae sends the children, sickly and cold, off to her family, and when he learns this, Jimmy goes to the fight managers at Madison Square Garden, tells of his needs, and collects money from them, in his hat. The poignancy of this scene, lies in the need of a good man go so far to do the right thing. A similar response, more on the feel good side, occurs when he later returns to the public relief line, this time to return the public funds he received. Desperation and brutality characterize the boxing sequences that follow, as Braddock seems to fight beyond his ability.

Braddock's purposeful wholesomeness and dignity stand against some contrasting characters. His friend and neighbor Mike Wilson, impoverished, gives in to drink, and violence towards his wife, leaving for a Hooverville in Central Park where he meets a violent end. The only indirect hints of political activism are in some of his remarks. The champion fighter Max Baer, Braddock's nemesis played by Craig Bierko, is egotistical and provocative, snide and suggestive. We want him to be a loser. He threatens to refuse to fight Braddock in a match for the championship because Braddock is a "chump." The film caricatures and villainizes Baer, showing footage of him enjoying the death of an opponent in the ring. In fact, that opponent did later die as a result of the fight, but not in the ring.

Braddock's manager, Joe Gould, seems initially self interested. He seems to have evaded poverty until we see his lush apartment is empty, furniture sold to support Braddock's family while he trained. The performance of Paul Giamatti as Gould is outstanding, the perfect foil for Russell Crowe. Renee Zellweger as Mae is the essence of loving fidelity, down-home mother model.

Like most fight genre films, the sound-enhanced ring scenes are brutal, but Braddock seems spiritually to transcend what he physically must take. His folk-hero image flourishes in the final scenes, with mass audiences cheering and the populace praying, as his move from low to high estate is assured.

Cinderella Man is thematically no *Million Dollar Baby"* In that 2004 film directed by Clint Eastwood, Maggie's motive to become a fight champion is self fulfillment, escape from a caricatured passel of low down family members. Braddock is more like the title character in Gary Wood's 2003 racing story *Seabiscuit,* which is also set in the Great Depression. Through the story of this suffering family man, the director has been able to focus on the personal challenge as well as presenting the social tragedy of the Great Depression.