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Baseball Playoff - Best Babe Ruth Film

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The baseball playoffs are underway and the first two games in each league have been completed. In the American League the Minnesota Twins and Toronto Blue Jays split their two games in the Metrodome in Minneapolis. In both games the strength of the bullpens was critical. These look like two evenly matched teams and the little things like solid defense, good baserunning, and good fundamentals are likely to be the difference.

In the National League, the Championship Series opened with Doug Drabek pitching a superb game until leaving with a hamstring pull. Although close most of the way, this game really was settled early when Andy Van Slyke set the tone with a first inning homer off of Tom Glavine. In the second game Steve Avery pitched a masterpiece into the 9th inning and then Alejandro Pena came in to hold the 1-0 lead. So these two teams head back to what should be hysterical Atlanta tied at one game each.

It's hard to beat baseball like this.

Leaving the playoffs, "Babe Ruth" a made for TV film appeared on NBC last Sunday night. It starred Stephen Lang as the Babe in a screenplay by Michael de Guzman with direction by Mark Tinker. Also starring in the film were Bruce Weitz, Brian Doyle-Murray, and Yvonne Suhor as Babe's wife Claire, and Lisa Zane who played the Babe's first wife, Helen. Pete Rose gave a credible performance as Ty Cobb. The baseball scenes were well done, and the settings of the 1920s and 30s were accurate.

Stephen Lang's portrayal of the Babe was much more convincing than that of William Bendix in the late '40s. Lang's Babe was a slim trim ballplayer and a good athlete who gained weight as he aged. Indeed this was faithful to Ruth who in his youth was slim, and by all accounts an excellent athlete, an impeccable outfielder, and a very good baserunner. Ruth was also one of the best pitchers of his day.

Lang was equally impressive as Ruth at bat, as he did his own scenes, with tutoring from Rod Carew. Lang had the famous Ruth home-run trot with the thin legs and pigeon-toed steps down to a tee. He looked like Ruth, and you had the feeling very quickly into the film that you were watching Babe Ruth, not just some actor playing Babe Ruth. He also captured some of the complexity of Ruth's personality.

The portrait of Claire Hodgson, Ruth's lover and eventual second wife, was extremely well done. A showgirl and actress Claire provided a steading influence on the man-child Ruth while tolerating and seeking to control his massive appetites for all the pleasures of life. Of interest as well was the treatment given Helen, Ruth's first wife, whom he met when he arrived in Boston to play for the Red Sox. They were both young, and it is clear that she did not share the Babe's needs and pleasures. The marriage did not last, the two separated, and Helen was eventually killed in a fire.

One of the major figures missing was Ruth's business manager Christy Walsh, who along with Claire, helped Ruth become and stay an extremely rich man, guiding his endorsements and investments.

For as well as this film was done technically and historically it still failed in certain respects. First, the portrait of Ruth lacked the full flare of his personality. Ruth was a crude and unpolished person, his language reflected that, but this film did not.

Second, Ruth was a national and international hero, who was recognized on the streets of New York, London, or Tokyo. There as no real sense of the world-wide dimensions of his appeal conveyed here. Even Ruth's hero status in the United States was not adequately developed, as repeated scenes of Ruth signing autographs were simply not enough to make the point. This man was a legend in his own time, a larger than life figure. The depth and breadth of that reality was not captured.

Also missing was a sufficient examination of Ruth's relationship with legendary teammate Lou Gehrig. The two men went through a period of several years when they did not speak to one another, because of some comments Ruth made about Gehrig's attachment to his mother. No mention of this was made.

Even the called shot, the home run in the 1932 World Series, when Ruth pointed to center field before hitting the homer, lacked the kind of drama it should have been given.

Technically there was one point of irritation. During some of the game scenes a narrator's voice called the action. Where did that come from? The style was very much like TV play-by-play, but if there was play-by-play in the 20s and 30s it was radio. A small point, but great films get the small points right.

Despite the shortcomings, this film was worth viewing, and I would recommend it when it is shown again on NBC, or when it appears in the local video stores.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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