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The Babe: Flim Review

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If you like scatological humor, overdone caricature, stupidity masking as innocence, then you might well enjoy *The Babe*, the overhyped, overpromoted new film from Universal Pictures starring John Goodman as the Bambino. If you go to this film in search of the definitive life of George Herman Ruth, as is promised by Director Arthur Hiller and writer-producer John Fusco, you will be greatly disappointed.

To paraphrase Thorstein Veblen: *The Babe* is to biography, as bullfighting is to agriculture.

One saving feature of the movie is John Goodman. There are times when you look at Goodman, and you are sure that you are looking at Babe Ruth. Goodman very convincingly conveys the wild side of Ruth's personality, the crudity, and the genuine tenderness that the Bambino had for children. But in the end limits of script and direction are too much to overcome.

Goodman offers a convincing portrait of the man-child Ruth chasing women to excess, drinking to excess, and racing through life without regard to any rules. Ruth's crudity, which is legend, is conveyed through his ability to fart at will, which he does in delicate social settings. But to reveal this is to reveal no more than did a Yankee insider who when asked what he remembered of Babe Ruth, said simply, "He didn't flush the toilet."

From the moment George Herman Ruth leaves St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys at age 19 to enter the world of professional baseball he is pictured as an overweight slob. Goodman's first appearance on camera is nearly disastrous. This actor in his thirties, is dressed to look like a boy of 19, and he doesn't. He looks instead like a man in his thirties, dressing like a boy in his teens. The effect is comic and ridiculous.

The entire handling of the St. Mary's episode in Ruth's life is distorted. He was not abandoned by his family. He was put in St. Mary's because as the Babe himself said, "I was a bad kid." He was in and out of the School several times, but was always sent back, as Babe's father tried to overcome the boy's upbringing in a Baltimore waterfront saloon. At St. Mary's Brother Mathias recognized the baseball talent in Ruth, and used it to try to give some direction to boy's life. Brother Mathias

offered discipline and order to Ruth, had a genuine interest in the boy, and the two remained lifelong friends.

Trini Alvarado plays Helen Woodford, the first Mrs. Ruth, and is a bit too understated in the role. It is true that Babe met her at the cafe where he ate in Boston, and it would seem that he was attracted to her almost instantly. They were probably both to young and inexperienced for marriage. Helen had a great deal of difficulty dealing with life in the fast lane of celebrity, not to mention the Babe's insatiable appetite for sex with any woman who would, and there were plenty.

Ruth's second wife, Claire Merritt Hodgson, is played convincingly by Kelly McGillis. Claire Hodgson was a showgirl who had ambitions to acting, but never realized them. She was a beautiful young widow who moved easily in New York society. Unfortunately the details of the relationship between Claire and the Babe are scrambled and distorted, and again much is lost.

Bruce Boxleitner is entertaining as Joe Dugan, Ronald Cates is sufficiently evil as Yankee owner Col. Jake Ruppert the beer Baron, and Joe Rayner is an adequate Miller Huggins. Mike McGrady as Gehrig is one-dimensional, and The Babe fails miserably in developing the relationship between these two great Yankee stars.

The worst features of the film center on the cartoonlike character that is given to the baseball action, which cheapens the achievements of Ruth as a great athlete. He was a baseball player of immense athletic skills, with a great talent for the game, who seldom made a mental error. He was not some fool, fat slob, who stumbled his way to all those records.

The Babe fails to show what a tremendous heroic figure the Bambino was. He dominated his times. He was known throughout the world. He was a symbol of the energy and anxiety of the new urban industrial order of the 20th Century. He was a great celebrity of the new consumer culture, and he exploited the opportunities that were presented to him by that culture with the guidance of Claire and Christy Walsh, his agent, who is not depicted in the film.

Unfortunately The Babe trivializes the man it seeks to reveal, and for that, Arthur Hiller and John Fusco, must carry most of the blame. The Babe will join a long list of sports films that failed. Perhaps it's not as bad as the 1948 Babe Ruth Story starring William Benedix, but its close.

At the end when the credits roll, the Sultan of Swat's season and career home run records are noted, along with the fact that Roger Maris and Hank Aaron broke them but over more games than Ruth needed. This gratuitous insult to Maris and Aaron further cheapens The Babe.

One wonders if anyone will ever get it right.

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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