

12-25-2001

"Ali" The Film: A Review

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "'Ali" The Film: A Review" (2001). *On Sport and Society*. 177.

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
DECEMBER 25, 2001

Across the world in this century there is no other sports figure better known and more admired than Muhammad Ali. In the United States there may be no sports figure more admired and reviled in any century than Muhammad Ali. For these and other reasons the opening of the film "Ali" today is a much-anticipated event.

Beginning his boxing career as Cassius Clay this remarkable athlete came to symbolize many of the forces loose in America in his time. His popularity and infamy as well as the transformation of his persona over several decades are signposts in the history of America in the second half of the twentieth century.

To say that Muhammad Ali was a charismatic figure, to say that he had an overpowering presence wherever he went, or to say that he was larger than life, equally understates his impact. At so many levels, in so many ways, for so many people, Muhammad Ali personified what was right or wrong with America during his time.

Any attempt to capture a figure of this magnitude on film is no doubt doomed to fail. It is one thing to put a life on film, but it is quite another to capture a life this complex and this significant at so many levels. Director Michael Mann has made a very good attempt with "Ali" but in the end he has fallen short. However he, and a very talented cast and crew, have not failed. "Ali" does some things very well.

As a piece of art "Ali" has much to commend itself. The creation of the ring action is impressive. Here the use of angles of vision, the choice of what to show, and the mastering of sound are done with great skill. Filmmakers have seldom achieved the unmistakable and jarring sound of glove hitting flesh and bone, but Mann has brought that unforgettable muted crunch for all in the theater to hear.

The use of music throughout is superb. Mann draws on the great Sam Cooke, much other popular soul music of the time, and the music of Zaire the trendsetter of pop music on the African Continent. The opening montage of "Ali" which I would estimate runs eight to ten minutes, is marvelously cut around a double axis with the young boxer doing road work and Sam Cooke in concert. A visual montage is woven around these two events producing an effect that is both energizing and mesmerizing.

The juggling of all the forces loose in American life from the early Sixties to the mid-Seventies and weaving them through the complexities of this life is done with some considerable skill. The Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the divisions in both the white and black worlds, and the currents running in so many directions are not easy to keep straight but that has been accomplished by director and screenwriter.

Many have wondered how anyone would dare to play Muhammad Ali and how they could possibly capture this larger than life figure. Will Smith has managed to become a credible Ali, convincing in the ring, displaying the right body language, and with nearly perfect intonation and rhythm in his voice.

As anticipated by the naysayers he has not fully captured the man. Smith does not project the energy and charisma of Ali. He delivers the humor and the rhyming verse quite well, but he misses the hard edge that often accompanied Ali's humor and boasting. Archie Moore once said of Ali, "He has this twentieth-century exuberance but there's a bitterness in him somewhere. . . ." What Will Smith misses is precisely this bitterness, this hard edge that could be quite menacing to friend and foe alike.

The exploration of the relationship between Ali and Howard Cosell, who is played by John Voight, is nicely done but it should have been taken further. Cosell threw the hypocrisy of Americans back in their face and it added to the drama being played out in both the life of Ali and the life of America.

In part the film fails because Director Mann seems to be unable to decide what the focus should be. In trying to do too many things "Ali" loses its potential force and power which after all flows out of its main character. Muhammad Ali should be the fulcrum of the film but at times he seems almost background.

The film also fails to give a full account of the centrality of Muhammad Ali for so many different people and groups both positive and negative. For young black males caught in the vice grip of the American racial and economic nexus he was at times a hope and at times the means to strike back. For young Americans of the counter-culture, the anti-war movement, or who were just tired of Fifties conformity, Ali was a guru, a messiah, while to some he was just a breathe of fresh air.

The sheer hatred generated by Ali's attitude, his religion, his name, his politics, and his mouth are never quite captured in

their full intensity and meaning. He redefined sport, race, and politics in ways that we are still discovering. This film fails to capture enough of this significant social and political reality.

Despite all of these qualifications "Ali" is a film worth seeing and experiencing. If it is your first real contact with this remarkable person and personage of the 20th century, it can not be the last. There is too much more to Muhammad Ali and his times. To take this film as the whole truth would be to shortchange both Ali and you.

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

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An extended version of this review can be found at www.PopPolitics.com