

Movie Review - The Fighter

Written by {ga=mitch}

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“The Fighter” is in many ways a very difficult movie for me to review. It has a great script, incredibly talented actors playing extremely fascinating characters, and a good director keeping everything moving in the right direction.

On the other hand, the fight sequences are boring and predictable, secondary characters in the form of seven sisters are thrown together in a hodgepodge, and it turns out that once again we have a “biography” of a real person where the screenwriters continually disregard what really happened in the subject’s actual life.

On the final point, perhaps it’s just time for me to let it go. Anyone who has ever read any of my reviews of films “based on real events” or “based on a real story” (what’s the “real” difference?) knows that I just go nuts when I find out that the screenwriters have made a script about a real person and his real life...and then totally made crap up just so it would be more dramatic. No need to continually re-hash it; it happens, and that’s just the way it is. Personally, I’m glad I didn’t know much of the story of “Irish” Micky Ward prior to seeing the movie, which meant I could enjoy it without getting bent out of shape regarding the discrepancies until later, once I did

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some research.

In fairness, it seems that 90% of it was correct, so let's just focus on that.

The strength of this film is the characters, NOT the fact that the main character was a boxer. Micky Ward (Mark Wahlberg) was the prototypical lovable loser boxer that we've seen so many times before. Poor guy has more heart than talent; lives in near poverty, but is still trying to be a good man; meets up with the right girl who sets him straight; and then gets his Big Chance.

Pretty standard stuff, eh? But what makes this all work so well are the characters around Micky. First and foremost is his older half-brother Dicky Eklund, played in award winning fashion by Christian Bale. Dicky was a local hero in the working class town of Lowell, Massachusetts; a boxer who once went toe-to-toe with Sugar Ray Leonard, going the distance while knocking down the superstar fighter.

That was then. Now, Dicky is a crack-head, spending more time in drug houses with his equally scummy "friends" than he does helping Micky train.

Bale's portrayal of this man is just incredible. Once again, as with "The Mechanic", Bale has physically transformed himself into an emaciated shell of his former self. He truly does look like someone who has been a serious drug addict for years. Dicky is a 90 mph train wreck at all times, bouncing from one stupid scheme to another until he winds up in jail. He is an absolutely loathsome individual...but Bale still manages to portray him in a sympathetic manner to the point that you are rooting for him in spite of yourself.

On the other hand, you'll never really be rooting for the other astounding actor in this film; Melissa Leo as Micky's mother Alice, who is also his manager. And I must say that I have not seen such a horribly callous and manipulative woman since Lady Macbeth. You truly do question whether Alice has one iota of love for Micky, as apparently he's just the family meal ticket, and she has so much love (and blindness) for Dicky that there just isn't any more available to give to her youngest son. Leo's performance is stunning in its stark selfishness, cluelessness, and cruelty...but she also gives just enough of a hint of compassion that you almost feel sorry for her at times.

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Not often, though...and especially not when she's having any confrontation scenes with Micky's new girlfriend Charlene. Another surprising performance in this role, as Amy Adams steps far away from the delicate, beautiful, princess like roles she often plays. Charlene is a college dropout (which still puts her education far above any of the Ward family, to the disgust of Micky's sisters), now working as a barmaid who has no problem outdrinking her customers. Director David O. Russell convinced Adams to not be concerned about her body appearance, and therefore break away from the normal Hollywood stick-figure of a woman. In other words, Charlene has a bit of a gut. A brave move on Adams' part, and one that I was glad to see. This is how real people in this country look, and Adams' authenticity added to the tone of the film.

This leaves Wahlberg in the middle of all of this acting talent, in a role that threatened to overshadow him.

At first glance, I wasn't that impressed. Micky just seemed to be an introverted sap; lacking the backbone to stand up for himself. But the more I saw and the more I thought about it, the more impressed I was by Wahlberg's portrayal. Here was a man stuck in the worst possible position; knowing deep down inside that his family was ruining him, but unable to shake his foundation beliefs that "family comes first" and he must always try to take care of them. That type of internal pressure is awful, and once I saw that this was the angle Wahlberg was going for, I spent more time watching his facial expressions during these confrontation scenes, and could see the deep pain and conflict he was feeling...even if he was being passive. You could also see the same type of reactions from Jack McGee as Alice's browbeaten husband George.

The only bad thing about the interactions with the family was the inclusion of all seven of Micky's sisters as a White Trash group of Harpies. They all seemed to be of one voice, tagging along with Alice wherever she went, and echoing every thought in her mind. There was not a single one of them that stood out as an individual. Maybe this was intentional...but it ended up being a near comic misfire.

This really was a great movie to watch for the family and personal dynamics, and this is why the film has received the accolades that it has.

However (and surprisingly for the genre), the boxing sequences hurt this film. In a nutshell; they were as pedestrian as I've ever seen. Totally predictable, with no real level of drama, nor any

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true suspense that sucked you into the action even when you know what the final result would be. It's not Wahlberg's fault. He looks the part of a boxer, and moves quite well in the ring. The failure comes with the direction and editing, along with having opponents that are merely one dimensional characters; men who don't have enough personality to be worthy adversaries.

It's a shame that they decided to end the film with "The Big Fight", and I was actually a bit surprised that they did, as it almost came off as anti-climatic. It would have been far better to have had at least fifteen minutes after the fight to dive back into the relationships, rather than to leave it off with the feel-good, kumbaya moment of everyone hugging each other after the fight.

Look for the nominations to keep racking up for this film; and awards to come to Bale and Leo for their performances. It "couda been a contenda" for a great film, but instead it will just have to settle for being a very good film. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Especially in 2010, given the mediocrity of so many movies this year.

My Rating – Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).