Re-Viewing the Past: *Cinderella Man*

Cinderella Man (2005) opens with a knockout. Boxer James J. Braddock (Russell Crowe) raises his hands in triumph. The crowd roars and a jazz band blares. After the match, Braddock's agent peels off a wad of bills—$8,000— Braddock's winnings.

When Braddock arrives home, his wife, Mae (Renée Zellweger) leaps into his arms. Three children race out of the house and mob their father. Later, as Braddock prepares for bed, he sets his gold watch and thick wallet onto a polished wood dresser. The year is 1928.

Abruptly, the scene dissolves. Braddock, unshaven, looks wearily around a squalid hovel. The watch and wallet are gone. The children, on mattresses in shadows, cough and wheeze. The year is 1933. Braddock, like much of the nation, has fallen on hard times, his savings wiped out by the Depression. Worse, he has broken his powerful right hand and resumes boxing before it has healed. During a bout in Mount Vernon, Braddock again breaks his hand and the boxing commission revokes his license. He seeks work at the dockyards but often finds none. The grocer refuses credit. The milkman stops deliveries. The power company shuts off the gas and electricity. His children, underfed and cold, become sick. Braddock, hat in hand, begs for money. He also applies and receives federal assistance—welfare—at $6.40 a week.

Then Braddock's agent, an unlikely fairy godmother, pro- poses that Braddock fight the leading contender for the heavy- weight title—"Corn" Griffin. Madison Square Garden offers Braddock $250 to stand in as Griffin's opponent, who has can- celled at the last minute. Braddock accepts.

What happens the next day—June 14, 1934—is the stuff of fairy tales. After the opening bell, Griffin charges Braddock and pounds him mercilessly. Braddock, sustained only by raw courage—and a tough chin—survives the first two rounds. Then, in the third, he surprises Griffin with a thunderous hook, knocking the giant out cold.

Because Griffin was the top contender, Braddock himself is placed on the list of contenders. He proceeds to score one upset after another until he's next in line to face Max Baer (Craig Bierko), the heavyweight champion whose fearsome right has killed two boxers. The manager of Madison Square Garden requires Braddock to sign a waiver absolving it of responsibility should Braddock also perish at Baer's hands.

On June 13, 1935, the night of the fight, the betting odds against Braddock are the worst in memory. But after fifteen har- rowing rounds, Braddock wins a unanimous decision. In 364 days, he has gone from impoverished "bum" to heavyweight champion of the world.

"This is a true story," declared director Ron Howard. Yet fairy tales, by definition, are make-believe; and Hollywood, by reputation, believes in nothing as fervently as the dollar. Thus viewers are entitled to ask: Does *Cinderella Man* tell the actual story of James J. Braddock?

The surprising answer, given the implausibility of the plot, is yes, up to a point. And that point begins with the Baer-Braddock fight: Madison Square Garden did not warn Braddock of the danger of fighting Baer or oblige him to sign a waiver. Also, the fight was no slugfest and Baer was no unfeeling

monster. He never gloated over killing two fighters in the ring. Most interesting, the movie makes no mention of the fact that Baer proudly trumpeted his Jewish ancestry and had a large Star of David stitched onto his trunks, an image that appears in the movie once, briefly and from a distance.

Why did director Ron Howard shade the truth about Max Baer? The likely answer is that fairy tales require villains as well as heroes. Braddock looms larger for slaying the Big Bad Baer, although Braddock's real enemy was the Great Depression, not Baer. Braddock understood this. When asked how he managed to turn his career around, he explained, "I was fighting for milk."

The movie sidesteps another crucial point. Many ethnic groups in 1930s America had their own boxing champions. After Braddock upset Griffin, he fought Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber. Although the movie rightly shows Irish Americans praying for Braddock, it neglects the millions of African Americans who gathered around radios, praying for Louis. Jewish fans, similarly, identified with Baer, cherishing his 1933 defeat of the German boxer Max Schmeling, Hitler's favorite. When Braddock defeated Baer, many Jews were devastated. Three years later, when Louis defeated Braddock to win the heavyweight title, the fight at Chicago's Comiskey Park attracted the largest mixed crowd of blacks and whites in boxing history.

Madison Square Garden, keenly aware of the ethnic appeal of boxing, worked hard to ensure that nearly every immigrant group had someone to cheer for on fight night. Boxing promoters were among the first to learn that in sports, as in entertainment more generally, segregation did not pay.

Cinderella Man depicts, with considerable accuracy, a good man's triumph over adversity. But in its earnest attempt to universalize Braddock's appeal, the movie obscures the ethnic divisions that characterized so much of American life during the first half of the twentieth century.

Source: Carnes, Mark C. *The American Nation (15th Ed.)* (pages 593-594). Pearson Education, 2016.