

Everyone's hope is no one's hope

By David Walsh
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Cinderella Man, directed by Ron Howard, screenplay by Cliff Hollingsworth and Akiva Goldsman

The “Cinderella Man” in the title of Ron Howard’s new film was the boxer James J. Braddock (1905-74), who scored an extraordinary upset when he wrung the heavyweight crown in 1935 from reigning champion Max Baer.

Two years earlier Braddock, a promising light heavyweight in the late 1920s, had fallen out of boxing altogether, due to injuries and other woes. He was destitute, having lost in the Wall Street Crash whatever he had earned with his fists. Due to a last-minute cancellation, Braddock was given a chance to meet (and unexpectedly defeat) a promising contender in 1934. So began a winning streak that culminated in the famed Baer fight the following June; Braddock lost the heavyweight title to Joe Louis two years later.

In *Cinderella Man* Howard intends to offer an inspiring tale of a family’s and a nation’s victory over the terrible circumstances of the Great Depression through perseverance and grit, with an obvious eye to the present situation in the US.

Much of the film is devoted to depicting the poverty and deprivation that Braddock (Russell Crowe), his wife Mae (Renée Zellweger) and their three children undergo before his surprising comeback and rise to the top of the boxing world. After he apparently quits boxing, with an injured right hand and irregular work on the docks at the best of times, Braddock is barely able to put food on the table.

When the heat and electricity are cut off in the family’s dingy and threadbare northern New Jersey tenement in wintertime, Braddock’s wife sends the children off to live with relatives. The boxer, however, has sworn to his older son that breaking up the family is the one course of action he will never take. He goes on relief and even passes the hat among his old boxing confreres, including his manager, Joe Gould (Paul Giamatti), in order to get the power restored in the family’s apartment and his children back. Later in the film, after regaining his financial balance, Braddock repays the government its emergency assistance money.

His fictional friend and co-worker, Mike Wilson (Paddy Considine), is a foil to the boxer’s family-oriented steadfastness. Wilson, something of a radical, tells Braddock in a barroom scene that the downtrodden must “organize ... unionize.” In reply, the boxer questions whether it is possible to fight “things you can’t see,” such as greed and drought. He believes in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. To the hotheaded Wilson, Roosevelt and former president Herbert Hoover are “all the same.”

The Wilson character is not demonized by the filmmakers, despite his tendency to drink too much and his abuse of his wife

(played by Braddock’s granddaughter, Rosemarie DeWitt) in one scene, but he is clearly not up to the level of Braddock’s single-minded devotion to wife and children. Wilson meets a bad end, in a riot in a “Hooverville” (shanty towns named after the president), and while the audience is intended to sympathize, one also harbors the suspicion that he partly brought this fate upon himself.

This contrast between the well-intentioned but irresponsible ‘agitator’ and the devoted family man is the intellectual high point of *Cinderella Man*. The spectator is apparently meant to draw the conclusion that the American population vanquished the Depression through individualism, hard work and family values, complemented by appropriate but modest government intervention.

Howard, in an interview with the *New York Times*, noted, “I’ve always been fascinated by the Depression.” The father of the filmmaker and former child star grew up in humble circumstances on a small farm in Depression-era Oklahoma. Howard told the *Times* that in his latest work “I wanted to remind people that the working poor existed then, and we have it today. While the economy is mostly up and then sometimes down—the Internet bubble bursting felt a little bit like ‘29, where people had overextended and fallen into that trap again—we’re anxious. Our population is anxious. We’re not in a depression, thank God, but I think it’s crossing our minds that something could happen, things could change, and not for the better, for the worse.”

Some of this is no doubt true, but the newspaper then suggests that Braddock’s political outlook, “like much of Mr. Howard’s work, hews close to an idealized American middle ground.” Speaking of the relief money Braddock received and then returned, the director commented, “As much as it ate at him, it saved his family. It’s this kind of harmony, in a way, between a governmental system that would offer support, and a population that wouldn’t exploit it.”

An “idealized” middle ground, or perhaps a “fantasized” middle ground? Just about anything goes in contemporary cinema and no one bothers too much with what actually took place in the past, so it will be considered bad form to point out that the most active elements of the American working population did not spend the Depression years merely crowding boxing arenas, bars and other public places to listen to the exploits of their sports heroes.

In Howard’s film and the recent *Seabiscuit*, Hollywood imagines America of the 1930s as a quaintly and picturesquely impoverished land peopled for the most part by gutsy underdogs and their devoted supporters. The apparently outmatched “little guys,” by their refusal to surrender in the face of overwhelming

odds, manage to inspire wide layers of the suffering population and more or less carry the latter on their backs out of the Slough of Despond. Thus Braddock is termed “the hope of the oppressed,” and later told that “You’re everyone’s hope.” And Howard, not overly fond of subtlety, backs up these claims with images of large numbers of ill-clothed, ill-fed men and women, eagerly following Braddock’s every punch.

This is not to say, of course, that such passivity is purely an invention, or that vicariously living through sports heroes is still not with us. Hardly. But there was a time, even in American filmmaking, where such a state of affairs might have raised questions or even drawn criticism. *Cinderella Man*, however, presents the hero and his legion of working class admirers in such a breathless, manipulative fashion as to exclude any other possible way out of the predicament of the Depression.

As a film, *Cinderella Man* is terribly weak, thoroughly sentimental and predictable. Braddock’s descent into poverty is so clearly nothing more than a detour on his route to redemption and ultimate triumph that it’s not to be taken seriously. The film has no real interest in how the poor lived, it is merely gearing up in these schematically grim scenes for something dramatically different. None of this comes under the heading of the terribly surprising. Generally in a Howard film (*Backdraft*, *Far and Away*, *Apollo 13*, *Ransom*, *A Beautiful Mind*) the spectator has to have his hands over his eyes, or be lying face-down on the cinema floor, not to see what’s coming next.

Crowe is perfectly likable in the lead role, but there is nothing complicated or deeply-felt in what he does. In any event, there is a significant difference between Braddock the historical figure of the Depression and the Howard-Crowe version of him, to the inevitable detriment of the latter. The real fighter was a man like many, many others in the 1930s, economically desperate, who took whatever avenue was open to him to feed his family. By all accounts, he was a decent fellow.

But the film seeks to make a virtue, a positive program, out of Braddock’s necessity. It offers as a model, presumably to be emulated, a character who conspicuously chooses to ignore the greater social and political issues of the day to concentrate on his and his family’s immediate welfare. “Keep your nose to the grindstone, don’t worry about the big questions, sheer doggedness will see you through the toughest times.” This is perhaps how Howard sincerely sees things, and Crowe at least pretends to, but why should spectators who face the same type of moral-political choices today borrow their thinking from wealthy film personalities?

Zellwegger, unfortunately, reprises her ‘proletarian’ persona, this time with a Jersey accent, that we first saw in *Cold Mountain*. The talented performer is not to blame for the roles or direction available, but there is something distinctly condescending and inauthentic about these characterizations that must speak to the wide gap separating the film industry and its personnel from the population at large. Actors in a different era would not have so misconceived their imitations of working class types, nor would directors have allowed such distortions.

In its zeal to focus the attention of the filmgoer on Braddock’s individual encounters in the ring, and to channel as much of the

audience’s emotional energy as possible in that direction, *Cinderella Man* (like Clint Eastwood’s *Million Dollar Baby*, although for somewhat different purposes) is obliged to demonize its protagonist’s ring opponents in an especially unpleasant fashion. Along these lines, the filmmakers pick on John “Corn” Griffin and, more particularly, Max Baer, the partly Jewish boxer whom Braddock defeats for the title in the film’s climactic sequence.

The film makes Baer out to be a monster, who enjoys beating and even killing his rivals in the ring. In a passing nod to “family values,” Howard and company also portray the reigning champion—with obvious disapproval—as a notorious womanizer, who has the audacity to be entertaining two girlfriends in his hotel room at once.

Cinderella Man depicts Baer knocking out boxer Frankie Campbell in 1930 and essentially relishing the latter’s death agony. In fact, Campbell collapsed and died after the fight of head injuries and the episode so disturbed Baer that he considered dropping out of boxing altogether. Shaken badly, he lost four of his next six fights. He gave purses from the succeeding bouts to Campbell’s family.

Isn’t this type of cheap “piling on” enough to suggest that this is a work looking for the line of least resistance? Before we are told that this is a film in the “classical Hollywood mold,” someone had better remind us of a film from the 1930s or 1940s, which was taken seriously at the time, that offered such a lazy, mediocre and unnuanced view of reality.

There is something deeply unconvincing about lavishly paid performers like Crowe (who earned \$15 million for *A Beautiful Mind*) publicly extolling the virtues of the simple, hard-working life. In Crowe’s case, the fraud was dealt something of a blow earlier this month by an incident at a New York City hotel. The actor—ironically, engaged in a publicity tour for *Cinderella Man*—developed a temper tantrum after having difficulty making a call to Australia and allegedly threw a telephone at Mercer Hotel employee Nestor Estrada, 28. Something about the actual distance—indeed, the antagonistic relationship—that exists between the present film industry and broad layers of the population showed itself in the incident.

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