

David O. Russell's *The Fighter*: “Big-hearted” people treated seriously

By Joanne Laurier
11 January 2011

Directed by David O. Russell, screenplay by Scott Silver, Paul Tamasy and Eric Johnson

Writer Jack Kerouac (1922-69), born in Lowell, Massachusetts to French-Canadian parents, poetically described the town in his 1959 novel *Doctor Sax*:

“[T]he Lowell of mad midnights under gaunt pines by the lickety ticky moon, blowing with a shroud, a lantern, a burying of dirt, a digging up of dirt, gnomes, axles full of grease lying in the river water and the moon glinting in a rat's eye—the Lowell, the World, you find...”

Social conditions were bleak for many working class families at the time Kerouac penned those words. In the past several decades, unemployment and poverty have ravaged the former manufacturing center of approximately 100,000. Located along the rapids of the Merrimack River, 30 miles northwest of Boston, Lowell, the first planned textile town in the US, was one of the cradles of the American industrial revolution.

Set in the already collapsed town in the early 1990s, David O. Russell's new film, *The Fighter*, brings to the fore certain absorbing features about Lowell—in particular, the city's disenfranchised working class population. This alone makes it stand out in present-day cinema.

The movie chronicles the true story of “Irish” Micky Ward (Mark Wahlberg), a light welterweight boxing champ. When the film opens, Micky's career is failing, and his older half-brother Dicky Eklund (Christian Bale), a former boxer who once fought Sugar Ray Leonard and now trains Micky, is a serious drug addict.

“I started boxing when I was 12 years old,” says Dicky to a crew filming him. He relishes the attention, thinking his glory days as the “Pride of Lowell” have earned him an HBO documentary on an imminent comeback. In reality, he is the subject of a project on drug addiction. The filmmakers follow a gaunt and wired Dicky through Lowell's neglected streets and dilapidated housing. It is

evident that the city has a substantial Cambodian immigrant population.

Micky, like his brother before him, is managed by his mother Alice Ward (Melissa Leo), a chain-smoking, domineering force of nature who keeps her brood tightly lassoed. Besides Micky and Dicky, the family includes husband George and a teased-hair gaggle of seven daughters. Home movies show the brothers as young boys already serious about the sport. While Dicky has blown his chances, the family has much riding on Micky.

When his mother arranges a fight in Atlantic City, Micky nearly loses his life to a fighter who is brought in as a last-minute substitute. Micky's new girlfriend Charlene (Amy Adams), a no-nonsense barmaid and college drop-out, challenges the wisdom of his sticking professionally with his family.

Despite being physically wasted from narcotics, Dicky still retains some athletic skill, including the ability to outrun the cops. Sadly, Micky's fortunes are boosted when Dicky gets sent to prison, clearing the way for the former to get professional training and management. After Micky's desertion, the Ward-Eklund family suffers another blow when the HBO documentary is aired—*High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell*—featuring Dicky, not as a comeback boxer, but a junkie in a tailspin.

Nonetheless, Dicky's boxing instincts remain intact and he is instrumental in the outcome of Micky's bid for the title.

The Fighter is a truly emotional work that shows concern for its characters. It is sympathetic to the difficult condition of their lives, at the same time depicting them as resilient, free from self-pity and straightforward. Social trauma produced a crack epidemic in Lowell effectively dramatized by the film-within-a-film production of the HBO documentary [broadcast in 1995]. Moreover, Micky's day job as a road paver is shown in all of its tar-suffused harshness. To underscore this reality, the city

is filmed in an unflattering, dull light. Refreshingly, the fight sequences are choreographed without resorting to excessive violence.

The story of Micky Ward has been of long-term interest to Massachusetts-born Mark Wahlberg. The actor trained for several years to play the boxer, and the commitment is evident. Christian Bale as Dicky undergoes a severe physical transformation, conveying the extent of the havoc wreaked by his character's demons.

In an interview, director Russell was asked how he avoided moralizing about drug use and crime, he answered:

"I think the tone is really set by the real people themselves, because the way they take that stuff in stride is how the film needed to take it in stride. Meaning it's been part and parcel of their lives for a long time, going back to their uncles and their fathers, they're all in and out of jail. Micky Ward's dad was in jail with Mark's [Wahlberg] dad. That's how they are. They're beautiful, big-hearted people, you would think they were venal in some way and they're not. They talk about it in an unflinching way just the way they take a punch."

Russell's statement is also "big-hearted," to his credit, but at the same time it reveals some of *The Fighter's* limitations: for example, that the film is too accepting of the current state of affairs, it makes too much of a virtue out of necessity.

While much effort has been devoted to reproducing the look and feel of everyday life, including the local accent, a deep feeling for the social dynamics of American life is still missing. This is difficult for contemporary artists.

To know a social class or even a portion of a social class is not simply a matter of rubbing shoulders with its members, or getting down pat all their mannerisms and language. It has something to do also with understanding the class as an objective historical factor, a phenomenon that goes beyond the level of individual consciousness and self-awareness.

Russell's somewhat naïve depictions of his characters, which don't take them much beyond the way they see themselves, at times cloud the more essential reality of their social position and, in the end, their inner lives. In striving for merely surface expressiveness, some of his performers, particularly Melissa Leo as Alice, run the risk of creating caricatures.

The Fighter makes clear that the fate of the Ward-Eklund clan is completely dependent on the success or failure of Micky's career. So too, an end to Charlene's dead-end existence demands that Micky make it to the

top. On this score, the filmmaker does not maintain enough of a critical distance from the sport and his human subjects.

Hollywood films of an earlier period treated boxing as a largely corrupt enterprise, controlled or influenced by ruthless businessmen or mobsters. Granted that Micky Ward's circumstances were unusual, in that his career was something of a family franchise, Russell could still have infused *The Fighter* with more of a protest against conditions that force working class kids to become gladiators—at constant risk of serious mental and physical impairment—in order to lift themselves out of poverty. Even Alice succumbs to the pressure of financial need, despite the threat to life and limb of her own offspring.

The Fighter is something of a departure for Russell, who is best known for offbeat works displaying a certain anti-establishment coloring and sentiment. He has written and directed *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), *Three Kings* (1999), and *I Heart Huckabees* (2004).

Of these, the latter is probably his most interesting film. With an active and energetic intuition, it struggles to communicate in a confused and chaotic manner something about a very troubled world. As the WSWS wrote about the film: "Russell has demonstrated a keen and critical eye for various aspects of contemporary American culture, or lack thereof."

While *The Fighter* is in some ways more conventional than the filmmaker's previous efforts, its heart lies, as Russell puts it, with the "tough people" of Lowell, who are also "kind people when you reach down inside into who they are." The attitude is genuinely valuable.

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