



Working Class Hero

From underdog to champ

CINDERELLA MAN: Directed by Ron Howard. Story by Cliff Hollingsworth. Written by Hollingsworth and Akiva Goldsman. Produced by Brian Grazer, Ron Howard, Penny Marshall. Executive producer, Todd Halliwell. Music, Thomas Newman. Cinematography, Salvatore Totino. Editors, Daniel P. Hanley, Mike Hill. Production design, Wynn Thomas. Sound design, John J. Thomson. Costumes, Daniel Orlandi. Starring Russell Crowe and Renée Zellweger, with Paul Giamatti, Craig Bierko, Connor Price, Tim Eddis, Bruce McGill, Darrin Brown, Mike Wilson and Rosemarie DeWitt. Universal Pictures, 2005. PG-13. 144 minutes.

Watching Russell Crowe in the fight scenes of *Cinderella Man*, I thought again how he has it all as an actor — intelligence, passion, good looks, naturalistic style and athleticism. This winning combination makes Crowe the most watchable actor now working in films. As the Depression Era boxer James J. Braddock, Crowe employs his gifts to turn an admirable but forgotten historical boxer into a complicated, focused and courageous fighter. Braddock not only fights in the ring but also closer to home, as he and his wife, Mae (Renée Zellweger), struggle to keep their family together despite the country's widespread, crippling poverty and record unemployment.

A member of the press once asks Braddock why he fights. "For milk," he replies. "To keep the lights and heat on" or "Food" or "Shoes for the kids" would have been as true. While the story of Braddock's surprise comeback as a boxer is the central narrative of the film, its heart is his straightforward respect and love for his family. No sentimental tear-jerker, *Cinderella Man* speaks to sacrifice and determination from one generation to another as the essence of what used to be called the American way of life.

The fight sequences are varied enough in texture to not run together in memory. Through unfortunate timing this excellent fight film follows on the heels of Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*, to which it is related only through the specificity of the ring. The films are dramatically and cinematically unlike.

When *Cinderella Man* opens, James and Mae Braddock live in a lovely middle class home, with a lantern-lit patio for fight-night's late homecomings. Like millions of other people, including Jim's friend Mike Wilson (Paddy Considine, *In America*), a former stock-broker, Braddock loses his investments when the stock market crashes. Jim and Mae sell everything of value but end up living in a one-room apartment in a New Jersey tenement, struggling to put food on

the table for three growing kids. Fighting injured one night, Braddock's right hand breaks in several places with a sickening sound. His license to fight is revoked. He joins Mike and the other men looking for work at the docks.

I love working-class films, which are increasingly rare in America, just as blue-collar workers are absent in greater numbers from the service-dominated American work force. Boxing has always been a sport within which new immigrants had a fighting chance for the main prize. Director Ron Howard emphasizes the sport's class distinctions in the scenes between the scrappy New Jersey fighter and Johnny Johnston (Bruce McGill), the well-heeled matchmaker at Madison Square Gardens. Braddock's own trainer and promoter, Joe Gould (Paul Giamatti), presents an upper-class image that is all smoke and mirrors. Giamatti's abilities undergird the film, as he again demonstrates his acting versatility.

I loved Howard's *Apollo 13*, and *A Beautiful Mind* was a sterling portrait of a troubled man. *Backdraft* was a terrific take on the lure and danger of fire-fighting. I missed *The Missing*, but I can see why Jim Braddock's story attracted Howard. Like many of the director's previous heroes, Braddock is a self-made man, an American original, a working-class hero.

But I don't think Howard does justice to the feminine side of the picture. Zellweger makes the best of questionable dialogue in some scenes with Crowe, especially Mae's baby-talking babble when she greets Jim after a fight and recites his accomplishments. But like many directors, Howard's weakness is directing heroic women with the same fervor he lavishes on men.

Crowe trained for the film with Angelo Dundee, Muhammad Ali's trainer for 21 years. Dundee watched Braddock fight in person and knew that fighters of that era were not the bulked up muscle machines they are today. From a starting weight of 228, Crowe reached Braddock's fighting weight of 178, earning muscles through kayaking, swimming, running, biking, hiking, skipping rope and working with a punching bag. This transformation follows Braddock through his undernourished, injured time away from the ring to the fighting fitness he achieved from heavy lifting on the docks and his prize — a left-hand punch as strong as his right.

Cinderella Man opens Friday, June 3 at Cinemark and Cinema World. Very highest recommendations; don't miss this one. **CW**

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9:15, 12:35, 3:55, 7:20, 10:35

LORDS OF DOGTOWN PG13
10:30, 1:15, 4:10, 7:25, 10:15

SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS PG
10:25, 1:20, 4:15, 7:35, 10:30

MADAGASCAR PG
9:20, 9:55, 10:05, 10:55, 11:45, 12:15, 12:20, 1:30, 2:10, 2:30, 2:45, 4:00, 4:35, 4:40, 5:10, 7:00, 7:10, 7:30, 9:25, 9:35, 10:00

LONGEST YARD PG13
9:50, 10:50, 12:40, 1:45, 3:30, 4:30, 7:00, 7:40, 8:00, 9:45, 10:25, 10:45

STAR WARS III PG13
9:00, 9:25, 10:00, 11:00, 11:30, 11:55, 12:25, 12:45, 1:25, 2:25, 2:55, 3:20, 3:50, 4:05, 4:50, 5:50,

6:25, 6:45, 7:15, 7:30, 8:30, 9:15, 9:55, 10:10, 10:40

MONSTER IN LAW PG13
12:30, 6:55

KICKING AND SCREAMING PG
9:05, 2:20, 7:55

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN R
9:10, 3:10, 9:40

CRASH R
11:40, 4:55, 10:30

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THE INTERPRETER PG13
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HITCH PG13
11:05, 1:55, 4:50, 7:40, 10:30

ARE WE THERE YET? PG
11:10, 2:00, 4:20

THE AMITYVILLE HORROR R
7:10, 10:20

ICE PRINCESS PG
11:20, 2:15, 4:35, 6:55, 9:35

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11:45, 2:25, 5:05, 7:50, 10:35

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11:25, 2:05, 4:55, 7:45, 10:25

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