

The Wrestler: Why This Film Appeals to Some Italian-Americans

Marc Edward DiPaolo (April 01, 2009)



While not as great as people say, Darren Aronofsky's latest film has a lot in it that speaks to Italian-Americans. At least, some my age from NY and NJ, that is.



I know a cool Italian-American fellow named Lou who saw the recent film *The Wrestler* 13 times in the movie theater. If one assumes that he merely bought a movie ticket, he spent roughly \$130 on that film in its initial run. If he bought a soda and popcorn each time, he may have spent twice that.

Why? What's so great about *The Wrestler*?

I must admit to having mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I think that there is something viscerally appealing about the film, especially for someone of Italian descent from the land of New Jersey, where the film takes place, or Staten Island, where I came from. SI isn't NJ, but it is close, in many ways, culturally – especially to the NJ of *The Wrestler*. And the hero of the film is not technically Italian, but he might well be considered an honorary paisan. He's a lot like Italian guys I grew up with, for sure. It is also nice to see a realistic, independent movie about an alpha-male figure who is intended to be likeable despite his flaws – none of which are glossed over. Usually alpha male characters are unambiguously heroic in mainstream action movies that play like modern-day versions of *Triumph of the Will*, or they are completely reprehensible domestic villains of gritty indie flicks. To see a complex portrayal of such a character in a movie about “real people” in the “real world” is truly refreshing.

And there's the appeal of Marisa Tomei, who has been a favorite ever since *My Cousin Vinny*, and who is still beautiful, even if the character she plays is supposed to be washed-up. (She's not. In any way.)

On the other hand, there is something about the film that is ultimately a little disappointing. It feels more like 3 or 3 ½ stars than the 4 stars it keeps getting, and it makes sense to me that it was nominated for several Oscars but didn't really get any of note.

Something about the film is unsatisfying. Can't put my finger on it exactly. Still...

I would argue that director Darren Aronofsky's latest effort is a film made by Gen-Xers for Gen-Xers. It is an attempt to redeem the public's perception of wrestling by focusing on previously under acknowledged suffering endured by the performers in a stagey and theatrical “sport.” The film also evokes sympathy for has-been 80s wrestlers who have fallen on hard times since the end of an entertainment era, much the way that *Galaxy Quest* was a nostalgic nod to *Star Trek* in the years when its popularity had waned and *Ed Wood* was a tribute to the Bela Lugosi of the Universal horror films after he had been supplanted in popular memory by slasher movie villains.

The title character of *The Wrestler* is washed up wrestling superstar Randy “The Ram” Robinson (Mickey Rourke), a lovable brute that the audience is asked to sympathize with even as the film dwells on his shortcomings. The central conflict, the Ram's desire to remain a wrestler despite doctor's warnings to stay out of the ring, is reminiscent of *Rocky Balboa*, Sylvester Stallone's recent attempt to revitalize both his own career and *Rocky's*, but screenwriter Robert D. Siegel wants audience members to recall instead Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ*. Several scenes depict the Ram as a suffering Christ figure, most notably a segment in which the Ram fights in an underground match and is grievously injured by razor wire and a staple gun – modern equivalents of the crown of thorns and the nails that pierced Christ's flesh. The camera focuses on these wounds, and the Ram's impressive muscles, throughout the film, just as it explores the aging-but-still beautiful body of his girlfriend, a stripper named Cassidy (Tomei).



Another key theme is the jarring difference between the “real” world of the family and the world of “entertainment,” which celebrates and brutalizes the bodies of both central characters. The Ram sees the ring as his “real” world, while Cassidy sees her son as her only reality. Consequently, Cassidy does not know where her romance with the Ram – a strip club customer – would factor comfortably into her life, and the Ram is dreadful at being a father. Both leads were nominated for Oscars for their performances, which are genuinely excellent, but one wonders how much of the power of the film comes, not from the acting or the script, but from the direction, editing, and camera work that repeatedly foregrounds violent imagery.

In addition to striving to redeem wrestling, *The Wrestler* is a love letter to 1980s kitsch, and includes a segment in which hair metal is praised and 1990s grunge music dismissed. 1980s nostalgia is not likely to register high with Baby-Boomers, who associate much of the products of the decade that younger generations fondly remember (ie: Transformers, Cabbage Patch Kids, Madonna CDs, and WWF merchandise) as opportunistic attempts to sell trash to kids in the wake of President Reagan’s deregulation of advertising aimed at children. Ultimately, despite its emotional effectiveness, the film seems, at times, as shallow as the 80s kitsch it celebrates, but wrestling fans of my generation – especially those who grew up, as I did, in New Jersey and Staten Island – might be forgiven for loving it.

After all, aren’t Italian-Americans, Staten Islanders, and folks from New Jersey as teased, maligned, and generally considered as disreputable as wrestlers, and the questionable pastime of wrestling itself?

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