

FILM

The Greatest is only the 'pretty-goodest'

THE GREATEST

Screenplay by Ring Lardner Jr.
Directed by Tom Gries
Produced by John Marshall
Starring Muhammad Ali, Ernest Borgnine, John Marley

Very early in the film version of Muhammad Ali's autobiography, *The Greatest*, the young boxer is given a piece of advice by a backer: don't make waves—advice that he would ignore for the rest of his life.

Ali is one of America's true folk heroes—Billy the Kid and Horatio Alger rolled into one. He will probably be treated more kindly as a legend than he is regarded today; for despite his rags-to-riches rise to become heavyweight champion of the world and an even more spectacular comeback in the face of overwhelming odds, his name is anathema to a lot of people.

Ali is hated for the same reasons he is loved—because he's a loud-mouth egomaniac who defied the government by resisting the draft, who joined what many thought of as a crackpot religion, and who was the wrong color to be pulling off all these stunts with such style. But, as the p.r. blurb states, that's only the story you think you know.

As a gold medal Olympic boxing champ in Louisville, the young Cassius Clay was fair game for local enterprising white financiers. In the film these are mostly decrepit old women who admonish him not to get his odor on their dogs and that sort of thing. The disgusted kid chucks his medal in the river when he

realizes that a dozen medals won't blind the racist residents to his skin pigment. He begins training with Angelo Dundee (solidly performed by Ernest Borgnine), the only non-despicable white guy in the place.

Then one day while in hot pursuit of a sleazy white hooker, Clay is intercepted by some brothers of Islam and is coerced into hearing Malcolm X speak.

As a Baptist, Clay is puzzled over the charge that Christianity is the white man's religion. "Give Jesus a haircut and a shave, and he's just like the cop bustin' your head on the street," one of his companions explains. Ali understands.

The rest of the film is a fairly straightforward chronicle of Ali's big bouts and his courtship of Belinda Boyd (subtly and skillfully played by Annazette Chase.) Between-fight scenes tend to bog down, but the actual film clips of Ali in the ring with Liston, Norton and Foreman make *Rocky* look like kid stuff.

The point of keenest interest seems to be how well the champ plays himself. Some people have played themselves in bit roles in movies, but an entire film biography is breaking new ground. As an actor, Ali is no heavyweight, but since his persona has always been so artificially constructed, he does very well at recreating famous scenes of bravado and blowhardism.

One problem with the film is its treatment of racism—the extremes of which are all embodied by females. There are plenty of



Muhammed Ali being chewed out by trainer Ernest Borgnine.

corporate bigots and redneck crackers around as well, but their obnoxiousness is impersonal, unlike the women's. From scuzzy prostitute to old bats to snotty teenagers, these are all some honky bitches! By contrast the modest, downcast-eyed Muslim women seem doubly appealing.

Ring Lardner Jr. adapted the screenplay from Muhammad Ali's autobiography, and one might have hoped for a bit more selectivity on this point. Since

this is Ali's story, it could be that's just the way things seemed to him. When making a film, however, those involved must accept responsibility for choosing which "truth" they tell. Regardless of their degree of resemblance to reality, stereotypes are still cheap shots.

The film is dedicated to its late director, Tom Gries, who did a competent, if uninspired job. James Earl Jones and Robert Duval make cameo appearances

that will do more for the box office than for their Curriculae Vitae, but their considerable talents provide some needed moments of added punch.

The Greatest isn't really the greatest. But I guess "Pretty Good" would have looked silly on a marquee.

—P. Hertel

P. Hertel writes film reviews regularly for *In These Times*.

Radicalism and its repression among Finnish Americans

CHILDREN OF LABOR

Produced by Al Gedicks, Noel Bruckner, Mary Dore and Richard Broadman

Children of Labor is possibly the best film about the American working class produced in recent years, but you may have a hard time getting to see it.

A history of the Finnish-American community in the U.S. from the turn of the century to the present, the film is a beautifully constructed collage of old photographs, rare documentary film strips, television news spots, business promotional and interviews with midwestern Finnish-Americans. It is unique in that it takes its structure from the stories of these people. The documentary materials provide—documentation.

The journey through 20th century America has been a frustrating one for the Finns. As the film shows, it was political radicalism that played the crucial role in forming Finnish-American culture. The first immigrants brought with them revolutionary goals and many joined the IWW and the Communist party. Yet the daily struggle was for short-term goals, and when these were in great part achieved, the revolutionary vision appears to have lost its relevance.

The subsequent disparity between goal and motive has not only frustrated hell out of the old Finns, but their children as well.

Thus, one of the most poignant scenes is an interview with a relatively affluent middle-class couple, standing on their marina, talking about the woman's IWW father and her own sense that something basic has been lost in their life.

In the post World War II era, there were problems within the Finnish community: divisions between old wobbles, Communists and non-political cooperators during the '30s led to irreparable breaks. *Children of Labor* permits the various factions to air their grievances.

At the beginning of the '30s, for example, the Communist party organized Finnish-American lumbermen to go to Russia to help put the lumber industry on a sure footing. They expected about 200, but it was the Depression and they had been claiming that Russia was a workers' paradise. So, when over 10,000 signed up, they sent them over.

Two old men talk about the experience over coffee cups. One says: "Work and good wages for the working man, that's heaven. I went. There was no wages and plenty work. Too damn much."

His friend, an old wobbly, chimes in: "I told you it wasn't run by workers. It was state capitalism. But you wouldn't listen."

A cooperator says, "The Communists wanted to take over the co-op. They heard the clink of the cash register. They wanted to

use the surplus for political organization and propaganda... We wanted the surplus returned to the consumers." A Communist answers: "We wanted to use the co-ops to build a people's movement, to bring the people together. The right-wing cooperators wanted a business on a business basis."

Subtitled, "Radicalism and its repression among the Finnish-Americans," the film shows that the repression was as much internal as external. Residues remain: old people with clenched fists sing the *Internationale* at mid-summer festival. But *Children of Labor* is not a hype for the glorious old days when reds were reds and the working class was heroic. More than any other film of its kind, it provides the viewer with an opportunity to join the men and women of a sector of the American working class in important and as yet unresolved debates.

Children of Labor is available from CD Film Workshop, 28 Fisher Ave., Roxbury, MA 02120

—John Grady

John Grady teaches at Framingham State College in Massachusetts.

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SWEET HOME CHICAGO

Photographs by *In These Times*' Ken Firestone will be shown at the Soho Gallery, 34 W. 13 St., New York, from June 7 to 28. Pictures in the exhibit were taken in and around Chicago, the photographer's home for the last 9 years. Firestone's pictures have appeared in several publications; he has exhibited in Chicago and Washington, D.C. Gallery hours are: Sat. and Sun., 1 to 6 p.m. and Tues. 7 to 9 p.m. *In These Times*' readers are invited to the opening reception Tues., June 7, from 5 to 9 p.m.

