

MILLION DOLLAR BABY:

Someone once called boxing the “beautiful game” because of its simplicity and in its basic element of survival.

It is hardly depicted as such in director Clint Eastwood's harrowing grim new movie. The film is not a boxing movie per se, but rather a movie about a boxer.

Director Clint Eastwood, whose previous film was “Mystic River,” has looked inwards to find inspiration for his movies. No longer the shoot-em-up cowboy of his younger days, he has mellowed in his work. But that “mellowing” is really just a façade for him as he delves into the darker side of human nature through his latest works.

If his 1992 Oscar winning film “Unforgiven” was a step through the door of emotional underpinning in his works rather than brute force, then “Mystic River” and “Million Dollar Baby” are a staggering leap into a new realm. To be sure, he is an assured craftsman leaving his baby steps of macho bravado behind.

The film, in its most basic level, is about Maggie (Hilary Swank) who wants to be a boxer. Maggie is exuberant. There is nobility in her determination. Boxing is her only way out of a life she is leading now—a waitress counting her every penny to survive.

She is “appropriately” a by-product of a white, lower class, trailer trash family, and is ridiculed because of her boxing career.

Frankie (Clint Eastwood) is the owner of this run down gym. It looks, feels and smells like the last vestige civilization for its inhabitants. There is nowhere else to go. Not even the streets. Frankie doesn't want to take on any more projects, especially a “girlie.”

Frankie is full of self-pity and remorse because he had “mismanaged” two of his fighters in the past. He writes letters to his daughter, but the letters come back “Return to Sender.” He is beaten and hardened, and, only the Grinch has a smaller heart. Yet, he loves to read classic works of literature and hasn't missed a day of church in 24 years.

He gets much needed advice from a young priest. At least Eastwood has stayed away from the current practice of belittling the Catholic Church at every opportunity.

Eddie (Morgan Freeman) is a loner, world-weary but philosophical. He sees Maggie's potential and perhaps an extension of his missed opportunity. “Boxing is backwards,” Eddie says in a voice over narration. Eddie is the heart and soul of the movie.

The chemistry between the characters is real. You can see the soft side of Maggie, even though she is a ruthless boxer. Frankie takes Maggie under his wings as he would his own daughter because she believes in him, and he has little else. Eddie is the glue that keeps the gym running and understands everyone's motives. The three become one.

The film reminds me of “On The Waterfront” with its theme of “I could have been a contender” running throughout. “You have to defend yourself first,” as spoken by Eddie, is its other major theme. In the end, the film melds both into a much more personal and tragic topic.

The cinematography is filmed in a very gritty, dark manner with a blue hue throughout. This film de-glamorizes the sport of boxing. In fact, one gets the impression that Eastwood seems to condemn boxing in its brutality, while ironically it is also pro feminist in allowing Maggie the right to follow her only dream. Ultimately, the sport of boxing is just a set-up.

It leaves one cold watching two people fighting for “glory” while fans in the audience are screaming for blood. And, they'll have it.

The screenplay by Paul Haggis is admirable as he pulls no punches here. What he gives the actors to work with is direct, forceful and believable.

This is a remarkable achievement if sometimes a difficult film to watch. It is lean with little thrown in as excess. The rating reflects my own abhorrence at this “sport,” while I admire the underlying issue it bravely represents near the end. What price “glory,” indeed.

133 Minutes

MPAA Rating: PG-13 (for violence, some disturbing images, thematic material and language)

RATING: B+