

THE FILMS OF DAVID O. RUSSELL

January 9–February 6, 2011

THE FIGHTER

Screening followed by a Pinewood Dialogue with David O. Russell moderated by Spike Jonze

Wednesday, January 19, 7:00 p.m.

2010, 115 mins. Digital Cinema Projection courtesy Paramount Pictures.

Directed by David O. Russell. Produced by David Hoberman, Todd Lieberman, Ryan Kavanaugh, Mark Wahlberg, Dorothy Aufiero, Paul Tamasy. Written by Scott Silver, Paul Tamasy, Eric Johnson. Photographed by Hoyte Van Hoytema. Edited by Pamela Martin. Production design by Judy Becker. Costume design by Mark Bridges. Music by Michael Brook.

Principal cast: Mark Wahlberg (Micky Ward), Christian Bale (Dickie Eklund), Amy Adams (Charlene Fleming), Melissa Leo (Alice Ward), and Jack McGee (George Ward).

Review by Joe Morgenstern, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 2010:

Fans of boxing movies follow the rankings just as closely as boxing fans do. Whenever a new one comes along, they want to know where it ranks, if at all, in the pantheon that includes such classics as *Raging Bull*, *Rocky* and *The Champ*. In the case of *The Fighter*, a perfectly remarkable movie directed by David O. Russell, I'd suggest a different pantheon, one that's reserved for the sort of spectacularly toxic families dramatized by Eugene O'Neill. While the film handles itself well in the ring, it's brilliant in the arena of a blue-collar family that brutalizes its younger son and best hope for worldly success in the name of sustaining him.

A single image bespeaks both venues—recurrent, almost robotic spasms of sparring between Micky Ward, who is played by Mark Wahlberg, and his half brother Dicky Eklund, played by Christian Bale. (These are two phenomenal performances in

fundamentally different styles.) It's the familiar image of a boxer working with his trainer, yet the two men are locked in another kind of combat as well. Dicky, the trainer, was once a promising fighter who went the distance with Sugar Ray Leonard. (In a film based on a true story, it remains a matter of dispute whether he knocked Sugar Ray down, or whether his opponent simply slipped.) Now he's a wild-eyed, crack-addicted caricature of his former self. Dicky may have taught his younger brother everything he knows about boxing, but his continued presence as Micky's trainer has turned imprisoning. Instead of winning fights and moving up, Micky stumbles from one seedy bout to another, serving as a stepping stone for other fighters.

Mr. Russell directed *The Fighter* with furious energy—the overlapping dialogue out-Altman Robert Altman—and an exuberant sense of place (Lowell, Mass., in the 1990s). The director has an unerring feel for his working-class characters, and

he's generous toward most of them, though what he does with the brothers' six sisters, a kind of slatternly Greek chorus, is hilariously grotesque. The script, episodic but never uninteresting, was written by Scott Silver, Paul Tamasy and Eric Johnson. Hoyte Van Hoytema did the gritty cinematography, a far cry from the cool, formal beauty of his work in *Let the Right One In*.

The production does all of its participants proud. Mr. Wahlberg, who had long championed a feature film about the brothers, chose to play the role that's initially distinguished by its passivity. His performance is truly distinguished, and deeply affecting. Micky has become more of a punching bag than anything else. He supports his family by absorbing physical punishment. The flamboyant role belongs to Mr. Bale. At the outset he seems to be playing it for crackpot grandiosity—Dicky sees himself as the star of a documentary that's being made about his career—but the documentary proves to be anything but admiring, and Mr. Bale's performance grows into a chilling study of deterioration and rage. (In one brief but frightening moment, his little son imitates him by taking a punch at a locker door.)

Family is the film's central issue, and a flinty conundrum: when do familial ties become shackles and chains? Micky's family isn't dysfunctional, it's ruthlessly functional in destructive ways. According to its matriarch and business manager, Alice—a formidable performance by Melissa Leo—

Dicky still knows what's best for his brother's dwindling career. But Alice's steely authority meets its unlikely match in the person of Micky's new girlfriend, Charlene, a college dropout who's tending bar in a local tavern. (She's played by Amy Adams, who is as tough, tender, smart and funny as she was ethereal and delightful in "Enchanted." What an actress, and what range!) Once Charlene enters the fray, the plot takes a few arbitrary lurches, but also some thrilling turns. Against all odds, *The Fighter* snatches hope, and then elation, from the jaws of grinding defeat.

About David O. Russell:

New York native David O. Russell's first feature, *Spanking the Monkey* (which he wrote, directed and produced) won the audience award at the 1994 Sundance film festival. He went on to write and direct the independent film *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), critically acclaimed *Three Kings* (1999), and off-beat audience favorite *I Heart Huckabees* (2004). *The Fighter* is his most recent film.

About Spike Jonze:

Spike Jonze began his career directing music and skateboarding videos. He directed the feature films *Being John Malkovich* (1999), which earned him Academy Award nomination for Best Director, *Adaptation* (2002), and *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009). Jonze has also acted in movies, notably in David O. Russell's *Three Kings*.

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