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FILM

Interview

Raging bulls

Will Smith and Michael Mann go a few rounds with boxing's colorful KO champ in *Ali* By Ray Pride

Covering the most tumultuous decade in the life of heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, director Michael Mann's *Ali* is an elliptical biopic that avoids the sentimentality and self-pity that typifies the genre. In depicting Ali's struggles between 1964 and 1974—with boxing, Islam, the government and fidelity to his various loves—Will Smith fully inhabits the title role. What could be more timely than a movie about the soul-searching of a Muslim draft resister with coherent principles? Using a camera that indeed floats like a butterfly and an actor who stings like a bee, Mann (*Heat*, *The Insider*) may have made his most lyrical testosterone tone poem yet. **Time Out New York:** Will, what made you feel you had to play this role?

Will Smith: Muhammad Ali is just one of the most important theopolitical figures of the last century. There's such a wonderful strength in his commitment to his God. I always felt connected to that. I call it the "complex simplicity" of his devotion and his commitment. I think his story is timeless. Ali's life was too important to this country and to citizens of the world for an entire generation not to be aware of the depth of his commitment.

TONY: How important was it to you both to get it right?

Michael Mann: We don't know if we got it right—we make no assumptions. When you work on something like this as intensely as we all did, you don't know if you got it there or not. We knew going in that

to get 95 percent of the way there would be abject failure. We couldn't have had less than an entire year of preparation before we shot one foot of film. You can't fail. You can't. That's what you tell yourself. You can't fail.

TONY: Was getting Ali's endorsement essential?

Smith: This film doesn't move forward if Muhammad Ali and his family—

Mann:—weren't behind it. What they were averse to was the sentimentalized kind of Hallmark-greeting-card version of Muhammad Ali. What they did want and were very verbal about was not to see Muhammad as a religious icon that makes everyone all teary. What was profound to them about Ali's struggle is *struggle*. That is human. Struggle is filled with error, it's filled with missteps, it's filled with mistakes.

TONY: Michael, the visual style of the film doesn't seem as composed

as your other films. Ali, as a figure in the film, is always getting swept up in the crowd: People and cameras get in the way, preventing privileged glimpses of him. He's equal with the crowd.

Mann: I was asking myself in the preparation—and of course, in the making of the film—where do I want to position the audience? It's a fundamental question, and it affects everything that comes after. As much as possible, I wanted to position it to feel that this is an experience that's happening around me, and I'm around it. That decision also applies to the period. We wanted an audience to feel that they are here now as opposed to experiencing 1964 as something distant, which is something you get with nostalgia. I was looking for ways both to block action and to move the camera that felt like you're moving with newsmen, that this is actually happening, this is not something that's been staged.

TONY: Will, you were the first to be attached to the project. What did Michael say to convince you he should direct?

Smith: He said, "I will create the curriculum that will render you as Muhammad Ali. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to start with a three-tier course syllabus. First, we begin with the physical. We're going to train your body. However far Muhammad Ali ran every morning, that's how far you're going to run. However much Muhammad Ali sparred, that's how much you're going to spar. Then the physical elements will lead to mental and emotional. By physically doing what Muhammad Ali did on a daily basis, you will

understand where he was left on a daily basis. By understanding the fighting and being in fighting situations, you're going to understand what it feels like to stand on one side of that ring and when that bell rings, an animal is going to attack you. Then we're going to reverse-engineer his move into Islam. We're going to start with Sunni Islam, we're going to understand Orthodox Islam, and then we're going to reverse-engineer into the Nation of Islam and into his Baptist upbringing in Louisville, Kentucky."

Mann: We start in 1975 and work backward to where that came from.

Smith: When he said all of that, that was the first time I was able to see the road. I saw the road, I saw how I could become Muhammad Ali and—I mean, it was a jagged, nasty road up the side of a mountain in the rain—but I knew what I had to do. I am just profoundly changed after making this film. I have a greater understanding of greatness. I had the opportunity to break down, define, and quantify and ingest the parameters of greatness. It's really bittersweet, because I had the opportunity to be that close and to understand it and never really know if I will have the challenges to attain that level of greatness in my life.

Mann: Ali looms larger to me now two years after, maybe because we know about what he confronted, the depths from which he forced himself forward at the lowest points. The roadblocks he had are of such a gargantuan scale that no matter how hard we worked on this film—and this was not an easy film to make—they don't... they don't compare.

Ali opens Tuesday 25. See also Review.



HIT ME WITH YOUR BEST SHOT Director Mann explains to his lead how to be the Greatest; below, Smith transforms himself into an audacious Muhammad Ali.

