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FILM REVIEW: Chuck (Falardeau, 2016): USA

Description

Viewed by Larry Gleeson at the Venice Film Festival.

Philippe Falardeau, the acclaimed director of *The Good Lie* and the Oscar nominated *Monsieur Lazhar* comes forth with a period piece of New Jersey in the 1970â??s with a new film, *Chuck, The Chuck Wepner Story*, a drama, starring Liev Schreiber, known for his television role as Ray Donovan in the Showtime series â??Ray Donovan,â?• and as Marty Baron in last yearâ??s Oscar-winning Best Picture, *Spotlight*. Schreiber portrays boxer Chuck Wepner, the heavyweight champion of New Jersey, and often known more colorfully as the Bayonne Bleeder.

When he wasnâ??t in the ring, Wepner was a liquor salesman on the mean streets of New Jersey who managed to last 15 rounds in a professional boxing match with the greatest fighter of all-time â?? Muhammad Ali. Legendary boxing promoter Don King wanted a race fight and sought out a white fighter to get into the ring with the Champ, Muhammad Ali.

Wepner seemed to be a good choice to be Aliâ??s punching bag. Wepner had a reputation for being able to take a punch. And, true to Kingâ??s intention, Wepner took a beating. Not as though it was anything new for Wepner. In his ten years as a boxer he had his nose broken eight times, had 133 stitches, suffered fourteen losses and two knockouts. He was once pummeled so badly by Sonny Liston suffering both a broken nose and a broken cheekbone that required extensive stitching to heal.

Yet, Wepner had managed to put together a string of good fights and began to believe and have faith that his dream of getting a title shot was in reach. While not a great fighter, Wepner was known for his big heart, his ability to take a beating and come back for more. As a matter of record, Wepner became the first man to knock Ali off his feet inside the ring during a title fight. A furious Ali got back up and pulverized Wepner without mercy culminating in the fight ending 19 seconds into the 15th round. Sylvester Stallone based his *Rocky* franchise on Wepnerâ??s life.

Director Falardeau exquisitely turns what might easily have been another boxing movie into a relationship piece illuminating Wepnerâ??s most difficult moments outside the ring. He depicts the 1970â??s much like Martin Scorceseâ??s *Taxi Driver â??* seedy, wild women, drugs, booze â?? along

with exceptional highs and disastrous lows.

After *Rocky* became the hit of 1976 garnering ten Oscar nominations and three wins for Best Picture, Best Director and Best Editing, Wepner began letting the world of New Jersey nightlife know he was the real life Rocky and to many he was. Jim Gaffigan plays Wepnerâ??s best friend John Stoehr and loyal steward who is shown as mostly living vicariously through Chuck. A most telling scene occurs when Cinematographer Nicolas Bolduc takes the audience down inside the clubbing world of the honkytonk, disco era of the 1970â??s with the fur coats, gold chains, silky rayon tops, sequined gowns, costume jewelry and the dance music of the Bee Geeâ??s. Here Wepner not only succumbs to the temptation of the drugs, booze and casual sex, he ultimately seems to confuse his own life with the screen life of Rocky Balboa while John looks on in giddy bewilderment.

Soon Wepner confronts Stallone about *Rocky*. Stallone, played by Morgan Spector, seems genuinely flattered and invites Wepner to audition for a real-life role in *Rocky II*. A drug infused, boozed up Wepner blows the audition as his life is now in a virulent downward spiral. Finally, after he shows up late and misses his 2nd grade daughterâ??s Parents Day, his wife, Phyllis, played by Elisabeth Moss calls it quits. Wepner knows heâ??s falling. Yet, he finds a glimpse of hope with a local bartender, Linda, played by Schreiberâ??s real-life wife, Naomi Watts. The two hit it off with some playful banter before the bottom drops out for Wepner and heâ??s sent to prison for drug trafficking. This becomes Stalloneâ??s impetus for his 1989 film *Lock Up.* Wepner is called upon to be a consultant and is shown in shackles and prison garb. Yet, when he sees Stallone staging the story, he realizes his life is not Stalloneâ??s version. This is the turning point of the film and for Chuck Wepner. He reconciles with his brother John, played sharply by Michael Rappaport and eventually marries Linda and the two spend the rest of their lives together in close relationship.

Chuck, full of rich costuming and fine cinematography, is at its core a period piece of the 1970â??s including the role boxing played in the public domain. It is also a strong narrative of the trials and tribulations of Chuck Wepnerâ??s life. Moreover, itâ??s a life affirming story as Wepner goes the distance and gets the girl in the end. Warmly recommended.

(Featured photo courtesy of ASAC Images/Biennale Cinema di Venezia)

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