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After God made Ali he broke the mould

Hollywood's homage to a boxing genius

"FORGET what you think you know", blusters the promotional tagline as "Ali" fever grips the globe. Will Smith's reincarnation of the boxing icon, that peerless embodiment of magnetic athletic, cultural and even sexual reverence. The imperishable hero. Cassius Marcellus Clay aka Muhammad Ali.

The knowledge that really matters, though, can never be forgotten: that sublime boxing artistry, indelibly imprinted on the consciousness of every privileged spectator.

Sure, you might well forget the ugly politics, Ali's vilification and ostracism by the American establishment for speaking his mind about civil rights, fraternising with Malcolm X, and refusing the draft: "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong. No Vietnamese ever called me nigger."

Awesome

Sure, you might also forget some of that rampantly egotistical pseudo-poetical posturing of the Louisville Lip, however amusing it was at the time: "Here I predict, Sonny Liston's dismemberment, I'll hit him so hard he'll forget where October-November went... It's gonna be a thrilla, a chilla, and a killa; when I get the gorilla in Manila".

But you couldn't possibly forget the supremely elevated talent. Ali was the man who single-handedly transformed boxing into ballet as he floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee in the ring. The first man at his weight to fight with his legs, as Georges Carpentier shrewdly observed. Sadly the Will Smith homage focuses on just two Ali bouts, the 1964 Liston victory, and the Foreman comeback ten years later, "from Slave-ship to Championship".

It glosses over that definitively awesome night of November 14, 1966, in Houston, Texas, when Ali's art arguably aspired to flawless perfection. In a mere three rounds against Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams he rewrote the script. In a single night boxing as we knew it changed for ever.

That night his mesmerised opponent resembled an accomplice with whom he had choreographed the performance in advance.



AWESOME: Muhammad Ali stands over Sonny Liston, one of two fights featured in Will Smith's portrayal of t

Ali connected with over 100 punches. Hapless Williams, no mean scrapper, could respond with only three. At the demise there was barely a scratch on Ali; Williams looked as if he had been in a car smash. "Ali was like a God," noted Joe O'Brian memorably, "with a custard pie up his sleeve." His mastery of the pugilist's art was complete.

"I am the only astronaut of boxing," he later vaunted. "Joe Louis and Jack Dempsey were just jet pilots." He wasn't wrong.

The world and his brother will doubtless flock to see "Ali". Not so much a biopic as a must-see cultural event. Yet for all its admirable boxing choreography, for all Will Smith's impressive De Niro "Raging Bull" method acting embracing of the charismatic Ali persona - 5-1 at Coral's for Best Actor gong - it can never really capture the most

important reality of all - the incandescent boxing skill. Genius at fight. Log on instead to Leon Gast's emotive documentary archive footage of *The Rumble in the Jungle*, "When We Were Kings". Utterly awe-inspiring.

It remains the cruellest of boxing's many dark ironies that the courage which creates its greatest protagonists is also that which in the end damns them. Ali should have quit after that savage 1977 Frazier encounter.

But there was no one to tell him. That obscene coterie of hangers-on were demanding still more of their poignantly depleted hero. Yet those marvellous, life-enhancing memories of supreme genius will live on. For ever. "Just look in his eyes," urges Angelo Dundee. "The mystique don't never go nowhere." After God created Clay, he broke the mould.

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