

Hollywood, Etc.: A great deal rings true in this sportswriter's tale

by Don Norcross

I cast the blame on Jack Klugman. Ever since Klugman's portrayal of Oscar Madison in the 1970's sitcom "The Odd Couple," sportswriters have been routinely depicted on TV and the big screen as cigar-chomping, beer-guzzling, pear-shaped hacks in search of the next buffet.

STEREOTYPE - Jack Klugman as Oscar Madison on 'The Odd Couple' is many people's vision of a sportswriter. CNS Photo courtesy of ABC. Bad dressers, too. The brush is far too broad to represent the lot as a whole.

To its credit, the film "Resurrecting the Champ" paints a far more accurate image of the modern sportswriter. Josh Hartnett plays Erik Kernan, a Denver Times sportswriter overly eager to show his boss (Alan Alda) that he's got the chops to be a top-shelf writer.

When Hartnett complains about a boxing story getting buried inside the sports section, Alda bluntly tells the writer what he thinks of his copy. "I appreciate what you're doing, filling my pages," Alda says. "... But your copy, it's unimpressive. A lot of typing, not much writing. The truth is, I forget your pieces while I'm reading 'em."

Little wonder that Hartnett goes behind Alda's back to pitch ideas for the paper's magazine edition.

One story grabs an editor's attention. Just the night before, in an alley after covering a fight, Hartnett stumbled across a homeless man as the senior citizen is being pummeled by drunken punks. Turns out the homeless man, played by Samuel L. Jackson, is a former boxer who calls himself Champ and says he was once the world's No.3-ranked heavyweight.

The magazine editors start salivating for the story. The battered pugilist. Hero to homeless.

Hartnett's convincing representation has nothing to do with the fact he bears no resemblance to Oscar Madison. What makes Hartnett's performance real is his palpable hunger to break the story and make a name for himself. "Champ," says Hartnett, "this article is my title shot."

When trying to convince Jackson to cooperate, Hartnett plays loose with the facts, telling the boxer that he's on the ropes at the paper, that his job's in jeopardy. "All right, son," says Jackson. "You ask the questions, I'll answer 'em."

It's hardly stunning that a writer would stretch the truth to land an interview. Sadly, as the insipid journalistic bromide "never let the facts get in the way of the story" goes, some writers resort to fiction to embellish their work.

In "Resurrecting the Champ," Hartnett doesn't intentionally fabricate anything in retelling Jackson's story. He does, however, commit an egregious error. In his haste to land the magazine cover story and catapult his career, Hartnett ignores warning signs.

And there are many.

Turns out, as an inexperienced journalist might do, he's too trusting of Jackson. "I gave you the man you wanted," Jackson says. "You said you wanted your shot. That's what you said to me, remember?" Hartnett's credible portrayal extends beyond demonstrating a writer's eagerness. It's the details that make travel, fashion - and good journalism - fascinating, and Hartnett captures newspaper nuances.

When covering a fight at ringside, Hartnett is unemotional, detached, the paid observer taking in and

capturing the scene. Wanting the anecdotal details, he asks if he can look inside Jackson's roving shopping cart to recount a homeless man's possessions. Jackson's reply is biting. Unable to wait until the magazine piece hits his front porch, Hartnett heads to the pressroom for his first copy. All believable, particularly for a young writer.

There are aspects of the movie that will leave print journalists shaking their heads, however. When pitching the story to the magazine editor, Hartnett lies and says Alda's character rejected the idea. Newspapers may not be the best at communicating from within, but it's a reach to believe one editor wouldn't talk to another about utilizing a staffer and checking the boxing details.

Days after the story's out, Hartnett's star shines so bright that Showtime is on the phone and he's whisked to Las Vegas as a reporter. Call it cinematic creative license. But the biggest eyebrow-raiser deals with the lie Jackson tells and Hartnett swallows. When Hartnett produces a videotape of one of Jackson's decades-ago fights, Jackson asks where he got the tape. "Well, Champ," says Hartnett, "I'm a world-class investigative journalist. This is what I do."

A world-class investigative journalist wouldn't commit Hartnett's blunder, one that a Google search could have avoided.

For the viewer, maybe that's excess newspaper analysis. Bottom line, the film is excellent. Jackson is the undeniable star, his portrayal poignant and real. His mannerisms - from the bobbing, yet hobbled gait to his high-pitched, slurred speech - speak of a punch-drunk but proud boxer. The understated Hartnett holds his own. He is flawed, as a writer/husband/father. Translated, unlike many who have played sportswriters in the past, he's believable.

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