

## CREATING THE WILL TO BECOME ALI

Who's the man that would make a Hollywood studio commit US\$100 million to film his life story? A story that has already been made into a movie that starred...him, an athlete? What's the appeal for a top director to spend two years of his life making a motion picture that would take him to unglamorous venues around the world and pay extensively out of his own pocket for the privilege?

Why would a leading actor take on a role that would require gruelling physical training, definite pain, and the possibility of a career-making disaster? How does that popular performer bring his own well-known persona and personal experiences and embody such a famous icon whose image is already very familiar to the world?

The answers are to be found in *Ali*, the new movie directed by Michael Mann and starring Will Smith as Muhammad Ali. "It's an awesome task to try and take on Ali", says Mann, "but it's also a very exciting challenge, which is why Will and I wanted to do it", reveals the director of *The Insider*, *Last of the Mohicans* and television's *Miami Vice* series, "You do it because it gets your blood running, because you love the material. You love Ali. You love what the man represents - today and 30 years ago".

Though the boxer's road to becoming an international icon began with his gold medal performance at the Games of the XVII Olympiad in Rome in 1960, the director narrowed the focus of this motion picture to cover a ten-year period. "It begins in 1964 and ends in

by Randy Williams\*



1974", explains the director, "On one level, the story is simple: a man wins the heavyweight championship; his title is unfairly taken from him. He struggles to overturn his conviction, and he begins his quest to regain his crown and bring about justice. However he discovers that time has taken its toll and robbed him of his prowess as he's

about to contest a younger, stronger George Foreman in Kinshasa, in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo)". Mann was drawn to Ali's willingness to sacrifice his career for his beliefs that had not gone unnoticed around the world. From his humble beginnings in Louisville, Kentucky, Cassius Clay, now Muhammad Ali had become a universal symbol for the power of one man's belief in himself. Both Smith and Mann were so passionate about the project that they put their salaries up against any cost overruns on the film, something the actor said cost him 'millions'. "This whole project was not so much about money and awards as it was about being able to be at your absolute best, to be at the top of your game", states Smith, "It's essentially, 'How much of your money would you pay to be the starting guard alongside



Will Smith as Muhammad Ali

*Michael Jordan in a championship game?' It's like, of course, I'll do that for free!"*

*"We did it for reasons that had nothing to do with personal reward – except for the kind of reward that only comes along once or twice in a career, if you're lucky", adds Mann, "Now and then there were moments during the shooting, usually late at night, when Will and I would be looking at each other and both be thinking, 'Man, do you believe we get to be here, doing this?'"*

This is not the first time Muhammad Ali has been the subject of a motion picture. The former champ portrayed himself in the 1977 film, *The Greatest* and his enlightening trip to Africa for his fight with George Foreman was well documented in *When We Were Kings* in 1996.

*Ali*, though, is the first movie about the man involving a huge budget and a well-known, massive supporting cast. Will Smith, the rapper and television's *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, has also starred in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *The Wild, Wild West*, and *Men in Black* among other feature films. Academy-Award winner Jon Voight (*Coming Home*, *Midnight Cowboy*) plays legendary sportscaster, Howard Cosell. Ron Silver is Ali's trainer, Angelo Dundee. Jamie Foxx plays Drew 'Bundini' Brown, Ali's funny cornerman. Smith's real life wife, actress Jada Pinkett Smith, portrays Sonji Roi, Ali's first wife.

One of the critical challenges for the accomplished cast and crew was that so much of Muhammad Ali's life and many of the key events of the sixties and seventies were things that many people worldwide remember seeing vividly - Martin Luther King's assassination on a hotel balcony, student

uprisings, Robert Kennedy's murder, race riots, Ali's announcement refusing to enter the draft, his rapping pre-fight comments with Howard Cosell on television, his rope-a-dope strategy in Zaire, these are indelible images for countless people. So what is the approach in recreating events that many have witnessed?

The director was not compelled by the prospect of making a movie about a historical figure per se, *"I wasn't interested in telling this story as a docu-drama or an idealisation of Ali"*, states Mann, *"To idealise Ali is to diminish his humanity It would rob him of the inconsistencies and errors that make us who we are, as well as the true courage and commitment to excel as a man and an athlete"*.

*"This was about taking people inside his world"*, continues the director and co-writer, *"During that period, Ali's search for identity was quite extraordinary. As he strove to define himself, he defied those who would project their own pre-conceptions onto him. He first decided he was Muhammad Ali, then decided who Muhammad Ali was"*.

In striving to capture the essence of Ali, the film sets out to provide audiences with a uniquely personal perspective of the former champion. As Will Smith describes, *"You are in the hotel room, after Ali has decided that he wasn't going to step forward at the draft board. You see the night he met his first wife. You see Ali sitting in the gas station in Chicago watching the 1968 Olympics on television. You see the rise and fall, not through the headlines, but through his friends' eyes and his own eyes"*.

To achieve his vision, Mann's overriding mandate was absolute adherence to realism. That was evident in all

manners of the filmmaking process and it began with research. Mann, Smith, and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki had access to thousands of photos of Ali taken by his close friend Howard Bingham through the years. The filmmakers studied them to help reproduce those famous moments in detail to capture the right framing, lighting, and composition. The result is a more authentic look and feel of the movie as opposed to a nostalgic texture that romanticises the past.

Perhaps the single most critical aspect of this heightened realism hinged on the successful transformation of actor Will Smith, last seen as a mellow, metaphysically speaking golf caddy in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. Smith's transformation required a lot more than a physical change from a 185-pound actor to a 220-pound athlete. This was to be a metamorphosis of the soul and would include addressing life-changing events like the champ's multiple marriages and change of religious beliefs. Over a year before the cameras started to roll, Smith began the arduous process of absorbing Ali's speech patterns, mannerisms, and idiosyncrasies. Just as difficult as climbing into the ring against real fighters, Smith had to enter Ali's head. The Fresh Prince had a fresh challenge taking on a myriad of persons - troublemaker, diplomat, loudmouth braggart, original rapper, and champion. To aid in his absorption of the character, Smith spoke with as many people who knew Ali during those years that he could find. He also met the champ himself. *"The first time Will met Ali, Will started imitating him, right to his face"*, recalls Howard Bingham, the film's executive producer. *"Will broke right*

into his Ali routine. He was very good. After a minute or so of watching Will do Ali, Ali turned to me and asked, 'Was I really that crazy?'"

Evidently the actor's potential to pull it off led to the former champ giving his endorsement of the project, "This is the only film that will tell it like it is", says Muhammad Ali, "I'm the only one that knows the real story of my life, and Will Smith and Michael Mann are the only people I wanted to bring that story to the screen. I stand by them".

The emotional transformation was paralleled by the very physical act of becoming a boxer. "Mann and Smith's vision was that in this movie you wouldn't fake punches", says Darrell Foster who worked with Smith and was the trainer for Sugar Ray Leonard. "In order to live Muhammad Ali's life, Will needed to experience what it was like to be hit for real".

Mann brought in a consultant, James Puffer, Chief of the Sports Medicine Division at University of California of Los Angeles (UCLA) and a former US Olympic team physician. Puffer worked on improving Smith's hand/eye reflexes as they studied endless hours of Ali's unique style and moves on tape.

The director also converted a garage into a full-blown boxing gymnasium complete with all the equipment, trainers and fighters that a real world-class boxer would have. For nearly half a year, Smith learned to become a boxer. First came the fundamentals and getting fit, then came the light



Muhammad Ali. Olympic champion in Rome in 1960

sparring followed by full-on boxing. He undertook a five day-per-week, six-hours-per-day schedule that incorporated weightlifting and alpine running in combat boots through the thin air of Aspen, Colorado. Then more boxing.

Under the watchful eye of Angelo Dundee, Ali's long time trainer, Smith made steady progress learning the sweet science. His sparring partners were not actors but real professional boxers including former cruiserweight champion Al Cole, former middleweight champ James Toney, Michael Bentt an ex-WBO heavyweight titleholder as well as current world-ranked heavyweight, Charles Sufford. "Beyond looking like a fighter, my goal was to learn to think like a

fighter", says Smith, "To do that I had to eat like a fighter; sleep like a fighter, assess situations in life like a fighter....become a fighter".

The actor was taking and giving shots with the pro pugilists. "Will does not have a stunt double in this film", points out the director, "He's taken the hits, he's taken the punches. And he can hit, too". Charles Shufford, the professional heavyweight, took his role as George Foreman seriously, "I was hitting Will pretty good. I mean Michael (Mann) wanted it to look real. Will told me 'Go ahead and bring it on. Don't fake the punches in there.' We went at each other. Will's in good shape and knows how to box".

"Many fans wonder why boxers waste a lot of time and energy in punching the body", notes Smith, "I figure it's only

about one out of ten body shots that get in, but when you do get hit with a clean body shot, you wish to God sometimes he would have punched you in the nose. You get hit with a clean body shot, it shuts everything down. The worst part is, you can't let on to your opponent that he hurt you. I had about six or seven of those, now that's acting!" Despite the heavy pounding throughout the whole shoot, Smith only suffered a broken thumb and a bruised rib.

The director's quest for realism extended everywhere. Before shooting anything, Mann and Lubezki spent weeks on intensive camera tests, plotting out the best way to choreograph the camera for the boxers' performances. They also watched videotape

of Smith's boxing lessons to generate ideas for the fight scenes presented in the movie.

Mann wanted the audience to be a part of the action. His techniques were aimed at going beyond the proverbial 'ringside seat'. The director wanted viewers inside the ropes, being a part of the action. not passively watching. This was done with the extensive use

of roving hand held cameras which provided a better sense of being there in the middle of the action and doing it in a more spontaneous way. Tiny lip-stick cameras, about the size of a matchbox, were also employed to get extreme close ups of the fighters' faces. At varying times these microscopic cameras were placed over a fighter's shoulder, on his hip, on his

glove, and behind their ear. You can see the pores of their skin. minute beads of sweat, and blood.

Rather than build sets of gyms, hotels and lounges on a movie studio lot, Mann's drive for realism drove him to the seedy sides of Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles to where most of the old gyms were to be found. The film's production designer illustrates how

## Ali Time Capsule

**17 January 1942** : born Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. in Louisville, Kentucky.

**1960** : Wins gold medal as light heavy-weight at the Games of the XVII Olympiad in Rome.

**1964** : Wins heavyweight title from Sonny Liston.

Converts to the Nation of Islam and becomes Muhammad Ali.

**1966** : Defends his crown five times, the last against Cleveland Williams at the Houston Astrodome, a fight Howard Cosell called, "*The greatest Ali ever was as a fighter*".

**1967** : Refuses to join the armed forces ("*I ain't got no quarrel against the Viet Cong*").

Ali's decision results in his being stripped of his boxing license. He is sentenced to five years in jail and fined US\$10,000 for draft dodging. Barred from fighting in the US and unable to go abroad, Ali's boxing career was effectively ended at his physical prime. Gets married to his second wife, Melinda Boyd.

**1971** : Appeals finally end up overturning his conviction. Loses world title that was taken from him in a 15-round gruelling fight against Joe Frazier that ended up sending both to hospital.

**1974** : Defeats George Foreman in the 'Rumble in the Jungle' in Zaire.

**1975** : Is victorious over Joe Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila'.

**1978** : Marries his third wife, Veronica Porsche. Loses his crown to Leon Spinks but wins it back in a rematch later the same year.

**1981** : Hangs up the gloves for good after losing a 10-rounder to Trevor Berbick and is later diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

**1986** : Marries his fourth wife, Lonnie. (now, he is a father of nine children with six grandchildren).

**1937** : Elected to the boxing Hall of Fame.

**1990** : Visits Iraq just before the Persian Gulf War and successfully negotiates with Saddam Hussein for the release of fifteen hostages.

**1996** : Lights the Olympic Cauldron at the Opening Ceremony of the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta.

**2000** : Named an International Ambassador of Jubilee 2000, a global organisation dedicated to relieving debt in developing nations.

**2001** : Kicks off the Torch Relay in America for the XIX Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

## 12 Round Title Shot - The Best Boxing Movies of All Time

*Requiem for a Heavyweight* by Ralph Nelson, with Anthony Quinn (1962).

*The Set Up* by Robert Wise, with Robert Ryan (1949).

*City for Conquest* by Anatole Litvak, with James Cagney (1940).

*Rocky* by John G. Avildsen, with Sylvester Stallone (1976).

*Raging Bull* by Martin Scorsese, with Robert DeNiro (1980).

*Champion* by Mark Robson, with Kirk Douglas (1949).

*When We Were Kings* by Leon Gast, with Muhammad Ali (1996).

*Body and Soul* by Robert Rossen, with John Garfield (1947).

*The Harder They Fall* by Mark Robson, with Humphrey Bogart (1956).

*Here Comes Mr Jordan* by Alexander Hall, with Robert Montgomery (1941).

*Gentleman Jim* by Raoul Walsh, with Errol Flynn (1942).

*Somebody Up There Likes Me* by Robert Wise, with Paul Newman (1956).

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# Cinema

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Mann's philosophy was put into play, "*The Tiger Lounge in Chicago was the perfect example of how Michael likes to use locations to get a feel for the history there,*" says John Myhre. "*It was where Muhammad used to go dancing and hang out with his friends. It was also where he had his first date with his first wife, Sonji. Unfortunately when we got there, we found out it had been closed for 20 years*",

continues the designer, "*It had been turned into a furniture store but still had some of the distinctive walls and light fixtures in one section, so the owner let us use that part, we assembled some walls of our own and the resulting restoration, as opposed to recreation, is a good example of how Michael's focus on how ambiance affects mood and performance*".

The final act of *Ali* ends in 1974 and centres on his trip to Africa and the bout with George Foreman in Kinshasa (Zaire). Mann's zealous



*Will Smith in action.*

efforts to keep that realism took the operation to Africa for the 'Rumble in the Jungle' sequence. However, it would have to be filmed in Maputo (Mozambique) because 27 years later, Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, is currently one of the most politically unstable countries in the world and therefore impossible to shoot a movie in. Overcoming the challenges of real flood dangers and malaria-bearing mosquitoes, the filmmakers, with the help of many of the

local citizens, filled Machava Stadium for the titanic fight between Ali and Foreman (won by Ali). The director recalls the palpable feeling when Smith made his entrance into the stadium, "*When he entered, it was to the spontaneous eruption of 30,000 people reacting en masse to Will's charisma and to that of Ali. That energy comes through in the film. You can see the impact on*

*Will's face and feel the authenticity of that moment in his performance*".

A performance that has the seal of approval of Muhammad Ali and those who knew the champ best, "*People are going to be very happy with what they're going to see from Will,*" declares the man who was instrumental in making Ali a three-time world champion, Angelo Dundee.

\*Journalist; Member of the International Sports Press Association (AIPS).

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# Sport Sciences

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The IOC and Pfizer will conduct nine research projects at the XIX Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City. The athlete research will focus on nutrition and health, as well as natural performance improvement and injury reduction. These research studies will be conducted in the following areas:

Health and Nutrition: Anorexia and low body weight in ski jumping; Nutrition issues and inadequate diets during preparation for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games in speed skating, skiing and bobsleigh; Prevalence of menstrual dysfunction in elite athletes preparing for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games.

Biomechanics: Pacing patterns in speed skating; Klapskate hinge position in speed skating; Quadruple revolutions in figure skating jumps; Double and triple twists in figure skating; Success in competitive figure skating performances; Flight trajectories and take-off features of ski jumpers. The 2002 IOC/Pfizer Olympic

Research focuses on nutrition, performance and training to uncover valuable health and fitness insights for all members of society. By studying elite athletes in the height of competition, researchers can better learn how the body moves (biomechanics), how to prevent injury and how to improve natural performance.