

M e d i a

“Babe Ruth.” (NBC) Frank Pace, Producer; Fall 1991; 100 minutes.

A made for TV movie, “Babe Ruth,” starring Stephen Lang as the Babe had a wonderful feel for time and place, and offered a film version of the Bambino that far surpassed that given by William Bendix in the late 1940s in “The Babe Ruth Story,” a version loathed by Claire Ruth Hodgson. The screenplay by Michael de Guzman was based on Karl Wagenheim’s *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend*

and Robert W. Creamer's *Babe Ruth: The Legend Comes to Life*. The director was Mark Tinker. Also starring in the film were Bruce Weitz, Brian Doyle-Murray, Yvonne Suhor in an excellent performance as Babe's wife Claire, and Lisa Zane who played the Babe's first wife, Helen. Pete Rose gave a credible performance as Ty Cobb, although it could be argued that it was simply a case of type casting. The baseball scenes were generally well done, and the settings of the 1920s and 1930s were both attractive and historically accurate.

Stephen Lang's portrayal of the Babe was that of a slim trim ballplayer and a good athlete who gained weight as he aged. Indeed this was faithful to the Babe who in his youth was slim, and by all accounts an excellent athlete, an impeccable outfielder, and a very good baserunner. Ruth was also one of the best pitchers of his day, setting a World Series record for consecutive scoreless innings which stood until broken by Whitey Ford.

Lang was equally impressive as Ruth at bat, doing his own scenes, with tutoring from Rod Carew. Lang had the famous Ruth home-run trot with the thin legs and pigeon-toed steps down to a tee. He looked like Ruth, and you had the feeling very quickly into the film that you were watching Babe Ruth, not just some actor playing Babe Ruth. He also captured some of the complexity of Ruth's personality.

The portrait of Claire Hodgson, Ruth's lover and eventual second wife, was extremely well done. A showgirl and actress, Claire provided a steadying influence on the man-child Ruth while tolerating and seeking to control his massive appetites for all the pleasures of life.

Of interest as well was the treatment given Helen, Ruth's first wife, whom he met when he arrived in Boston to play for the Red Sox. They were both young, and it is clear that she did not share the Babe's appetites and pleasures, although she did provide the Babe with a home which was very important to him. The marriage did not survive the Ruthian lifestyle, the two separated, and Helen was eventually killed in a fire.

Despite technical and historical accuracy, "Babe Ruth" still fails in certain respects. First, the portrait of Ruth lacked the full flare of his personality. Ruth was a crude and unpolished person, his language reflected that, but this film did not. Certainly there are limitations on language imposed by television, but this film did not come anywhere near those limits, and thus missed one aspect of the Ruth persona.

Second, Ruth was a national and international hero, who was recognized on the streets of New York, London, or Tokyo. The film offered no real sense of the world-wide dimensions of his appeal. Even Ruth's hero status in the United States was not adequately developed. Repeated scenes of Ruth signing autographs for boys on the street is simply not enough to make the point. This man was a legend in his own time, a larger than life figure. Babe Ruth was the best known and most widely recognized personality of his day. His fame went well beyond the diamond, and as an icon his significance went well beyond home runs. The depth and breadth of that reality was not captured in this film.

One of the major figures missing was Ruth's business manager Christy

Walsh, who along with Claire, brought needed stability to Ruth's life, and helped him become and stay an extremely rich man. Walsh guided Ruth's endorsements, investments, movie and theater contracts, and other public affairs.

Also missing was a sufficient examination of Ruth's relationship with his legendary teammate Lou Gehrig. The two men went through a period of several years when they did not speak to one another because of some comments Ruth made about Gehrig's attachment to his mother. Unfortunately no mention was made of this strain in their relationship.

Even the called shot in the 1932 World Series, Ruth's most famous home run, when he was alleged to have pointed to center field before hitting the ball to that spot, lacked the kind of drama it should have been given. The heckling of Ruth by the Chicago fans and players, and the circumstances stemming from the trade of Mark Koenig and the failure of the Cub players to vote Koenig a full World Series share, were not developed for the full impact of the scene. The fact that lemons were rolled toward home plate from the Cub dugout, could have added to the drama of the moment if it had been in the film.

Technically there was one point of irritation. During some of the game scenes a narrator's voice called the action. There was no indication of the source of that voice, and the style was very much like television play-by-play, but the play-by-play of the '20s and '30s was that of radio. A small point, no doubt, but great films get the small points right.

Despite the shortcomings, this film was worth viewing as a period piece and was an improvement over "The Babe Ruth Story." But the kind of total portrait that the Babe deserves is yet to be done. I would recommend "Babe Ruth" if it is shown again on NBC, or when it appears in the local video stores, and it might be useful for classroom use as a starting point for an examination of Babe Ruth and his times.

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