

## Media

*The Babe* (1991), Dir. Arthur Hiller, MCA, 115 min., color.

If you like scatological humor, overdone caricature, stupidity masking as innocence, then you might well enjoy *The Babe*, the overhyped, overpromoted film from Universal Pictures starring John Goodman as the Bambino. If you go to this film in search of the definitive life of George Herman Ruth, as is promised by Director Arthur Hiller and writer-producer John Fusco, you will be greatly disappointed. To paraphrase Thorstein

Veblen: *The Babe* is to biography as bullfighting is to agriculture. It is a distortion of the historical record by people who mistakenly think they can create a more interesting life than Babe Ruth lived.

George Herman Ruth was one of the most colorful and improbable figures in the history of American sport, and maybe in all of American history. His life was unbelievable, hilarious, and beyond all credulity. He was as Warren Susman said, "Our National Exaggeration," wilder and more fantastic than could be invented. And yet when history meets myth in Hollywood and the subject is Babe Ruth, history somehow isn't good enough.

One saving feature of the movie is John Goodman. There are times when you look at Goodman, and you are sure that you are looking at Babe Ruth. Goodman very convincingly conveys the wild side of Ruth's personality, the crudity, and the genuine tenderness that the Bambino had for children. But in the end, limits of script and direction are too much to overcome.

Goodman offers a convincing portrait of the man-child Ruth chasing women to excess, drinking to excess, and racing through life without regard to any rules. Ruth's crudity, which is legend, is conveyed through his ability to fart at will, which he does in delicate social settings. He was a master of the *faux pas*. He ate to excess, and was often overweight. But to reveal this is to reveal no more than did a Yankee insider who, when asked what he remembered of Babe Ruth, said simply, "He didn't flush the toilet."

The entire handling of Ruth's childhood is distorted. Ruth was not abandoned by his family to spend 14 lonely years at St. Mary's Industrial School. He was actually in and out of St. Mary's several times because his mother missed having him at home. In addition, Brother Mathias, with whom Ruth had a lifelong relationship, helped give the Babe some direction and structure to his world which had been shaped in his parents' waterfront saloon. The film offers little sense of this.

From the moment George Herman Ruth leaves St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys at age 19 to enter the world of professional baseball he is pictured as an overweight slob. Goodman's first appearance on camera is nearly disastrous. This actor, in his thirties, is dressed to look like a boy of 19 and he doesn't. He looks instead like a man in his thirties dressing like a boy in his teens. The effect is comic and ridiculous.

Trini Alvarado plays Helen Woodford, the first Mrs. Ruth, and is a bit too understated in the role. Ruth's second wife, Claire Merritt Hodgson, is played convincingly by Kelly McGillis. Claire was both a showgirl who had unfulfilled ambitions to acting and a beautiful young widow who moved easily in New York society.

Claire might recognize her husband in this film, but she would be puzzled by several changes in her relationship with him. Babe and Claire did not meet in Boston, and there is no evidence that Claire socialized with mob figures such as Al Capone. They met in New York in May of 1923 after Ruth

was with the Yankees. Within a few months they had developed an intimate relationship which did not result in marriage until April of 1929.

The reason for the delay, as suggested in the film, was that Babe and Helen, Ruth's first wife, were both Catholic, and divorce was prohibited by the Church. Babe and Claire did not marry until three months after Helen was killed in a fire. Although the film acknowledges Babe's religious feelings, the marriage is shown taking place prior to Helen's death by some four years. This is not only inaccurate, but it made no sense whatsoever in the continuity of the film.

There is also a jumbling of time in dealing with Ruth's suspensions and the events surrounding them. The film has the suspension episode set in 1925, and there was a suspension in that year. However the incident with the umpire at second base which is followed by the confrontation with the Yankee Stadium crowd took place in 1922 following an earlier suspension.

The relationship between Ruth and Gehrig was always slightly strained as suggested in *The Babe*, but in fact the two socialized together, hunted and fished together, and the Bambino frequently visited Gehrig's mother. The Ruth-Gehrig break came in the early '30s over comments that "Mom Gehrig" made about the wardrobe of Ruth's daughter Dorothy. These comments angered Claire, and this angered the Babe, who suggested to Gehrig that his mother mind her own business. The two did not speak to each other again, except on the diamond, until near Gehrig's death.

It is true that Ruth and Miller Huggins, his first Yankee manager, had a rocky and volatile relationship, that Ruth was out of hand, ignoring the rules and regulations of the team. It is not true that Ruth dangled Huggins by the ankles off the back of a moving train. Ruth could be cruel, but not that cruel.

The worst features of the film center on the cartoonlike character that is given to the baseball action, which cheapens the achievements of Ruth as a great athlete. He was a baseball player of immense athletic skills, with a great talent for the game, who seldom made a mental error. He was not some fool, fat slob, who stumbled his way to all those records. The notion that Babe could not run the bases for his last home runs and that another player was allowed to take up the home run trot at first base is ludicrous. The rules of the game were never suspended for the Bambino, even though it seemed like the laws of nature often were. Despite that the infield pop-up home run which would require a suspension of the laws of physics did not take place.

As to the called shot in the 1932 World Series, which is depicted in the film, there is still considerable debate. Personally I have concluded that it did happen, while other historians have concluded it did not.

Home runs to cure sick children are also a part of the Ruthian legend. and the Johnny Silvestri hospital scene may be close to the truth. However, Johnny was not in Pittsburgh to see Ruth hit his final three home runs. Nor did the Babe end his career that day in the dramatic fashion of the film. All three of the home runs hit that day did not leave the stadium, only the third

one, although it was one of the longest in the history of Forbes Field. Actually, Ruth's career ended a couple of weeks later when he was fired by the Braves' owner for leaving the club to go to New York for the gala arrival of the oceanliner *Normandie*. The dramatic confrontation with Emil Fuchs in Pittsburgh did not happen.

As to the supporting cast of characters, Bruce Boxleitner is entertaining as Joe Dugan, Ronald Cates is sufficiently evil as Yankee owner Col. Jake Ruppert the beer Baron, and Joe Rayner is an adequate Miller Huggins. Mike McGrady as Gehrig is one-dimensional, due more to the script than McGrady's acting capabilities.

In the end, *The Babe* fails to show what a tremendous heroic figure the Bambino was. He dominated his teams. He was known throughout the world. He was a symbol of the energy and anxiety of the new urban industrial order of the twentieth century. He was a great celebrity of the new consumer culture, and he exploited the opportunities that were presented to him by that culture with the guidance of Claire and Christy Walsh, his agent, who is not depicted in the film.

At the end when the credits roll, the Sultan of Swat's season and career home run records are noted, along with the fact that Roger Maris and Hank Aaron broke them but over more games than Ruth needed. This gratuitous insult to Maris and Aaron further cheapens *The Babe*.

Unfortunately, *The Babe* trivializes the man it seeks to reveal, and for that, Arthur Hiller and John Fusco must carry most of the blame. *The Babe* joins a long list of sports films that failed. Perhaps it's not as bad as the 1948 *Babe Ruth Story* starring William Bendix, but it's close. And it is not as good as *The Babe: His Life and Legend*, the made-for-TV movie that aired on NBC in the fall of 1991 (See Review *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 19, no. 2), which for all of its faults is the best film effort yet on the Sultan of Swat.

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