

**Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1998. pp. Xi + 191, US\$ 18, paperback.**

These days the World Wrestling Federation describes its product as 'sports entertainment'. There is no longer any need to maintain the pretence - as those in the business were for many years required to do - that professional wrestling, as contest, is 'real'. The transition from sport to entertainment dates back to at least the 1920s in the United States; but why wrestling, rather than, say, boxing, should have undergone this transformation remains something of a conundrum. It is not the purpose of Sharon Mazer's book to address such historical issues: but it does explore the complexities of what is 'real' and what is 'fake', and it has much to teach us about the inherited folklore and culture of the world of American professional wrestling.

Mazer's analysis of contemporary wrestling locates itself - some would say appropriately - in performance studies. She relates how, one day, taking time off from reading Middle English drama, she turned on the television and was confronted by Ravishing Rick Rude erotically swivelling his hips over his defeated foe and then insolently kissing a female fan in what he called 'the Rude Awakening'. Mazer saw, as others such as Roland Barthes have before her, the medieval morality play of vice and virtue being played out in extravagant modern form. But her analysis goes much further than press this kind of dramatic analogy.

Mazer's research took her to Johnny Rodz' Unpredictable School of Professional Wrestling in Brooklyn, New York. Here she spent several months talking to the wrestlers and watching them learn their craft. Gleason's Gym, where the School hangs out, represents the grass roots reality of professional wrestling, a far cry from the glitzy glamour of the WWF; but that television wonderland, of course, is the dream of Johnny Rodz' students, even if it is one they are unlikely to realise.

Professional wrestling has its own language. The hero is a 'face', the villain a 'heel'. In a match it is their shared aim to generate 'heat' or audience involvement. A 'jobber' is a wrestler who, like a supporting actor, 'works' to make the star opponent look good. To 'shoot' is engage in a genuine contest, while to 'work' a bout is to follow some kind of script, however improvised it might be in its execution. The fan who is taken in by what she sees is a 'mark', while the fan who is not, and whose enjoyment in part derives from trying to predict the future development

of the 'stories' being acted out by the wrestlers, is a 'smart'.

Part of the fascination of professional wrestling for Mazer stems from its cooperative, consensual nature. 'Professional wrestlers learn to create their performances in collusion with each other implicitly and with the audience explicitly' (4). It is always a three-way dialogue, and in the gym Mazer finds she cannot be the invisible observer, but is drawn into the drama, appealed to by the wrestlers as they rehearse the parts allotted to them, and offering the occasional 'Kill him!' as required.

The necessary bond between 'face' and 'heel' as they trade blows and exchange holds has implications for wrestling's representation of masculinity. As Mazer points out, 'these male bodies in performance are seen to touch and embrace, to make a show but not a reality of hurting another man, to dominate and submit to one another in ways that resemble nothing so much as the clichés of sexual engagement. Fiercely heterosexual and heterosexist in its discourse, professional wrestling thus converges on the homoerotic in its semiotics' (6). Mazer quotes Laurence de Garis – himself a sports sociologist as well as a wrestler – identifying the basic element of trust involved: 'If I give you my body, you'd better respect it' (110).

Mazer also demonstrates that the distinction between 'real' and 'fake' is not always clear to the informed observer, and, at times, not even to the wrestlers themselves. Many professionals are skilled technicians: de Garis is not alone among the fraternity when he claims an amateur wouldn't last 'two minutes' in the ring with him (63). In the improvisation that is part of any bout some 'real' action may occur; and there are occasions when, if a wrestler has stepped out of line, he may be disciplined by his opponent. And to 'shoot' a match is not unknown, though such a contest is unlikely to be a crowd pleaser. Professional wrestling is a competitive, macho business, yet its success depends on the containment and regulation of violence.

Mazer's *Professional Wrestling* is just about the most subtle and discerning analysis of the sport I have come across. Her teasing out of the complexities of the performance could have much to say to the interpreters of sports which take their 'reality' for granted. One only has to notice how footballers are learning to dramatise their performances, literally playing to the crowd, conscious of the need to project emotion to the farthest fan in the grandstand. For once a game acquires spectators, and even more so when the players begin to be paid, the transition to

performance is underway.

If I have a criticism it is that Mazer's work, focusing as it does on Gleason's Gym and the WWF, lacks a sense of context. There is little awareness of the history of professional wrestling, which has undergone a series of transformations since the advent of television. It is by no means a uniform scene, even in America. And in other countries the sport can take on a very different appearance: in England, for example, it is much more localised in its culture, and often promoting lighter weight wrestlers and a much grittier style.

In 1998 I followed in Sharon Mazer's footsteps to Gleason's Gym for an evening of mayhem with the students of Johnny Rodz' School of Wrestling strutting their stuff before an audience of family and friends. There was plenty of noise and action, even some wrestling now and then, and 'heat' was certainly generated. These young guys, some of them no more than kids, had no doubt that they were performing!

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