

# Raging Bull: Power, purgatory

by Michael McCarthy

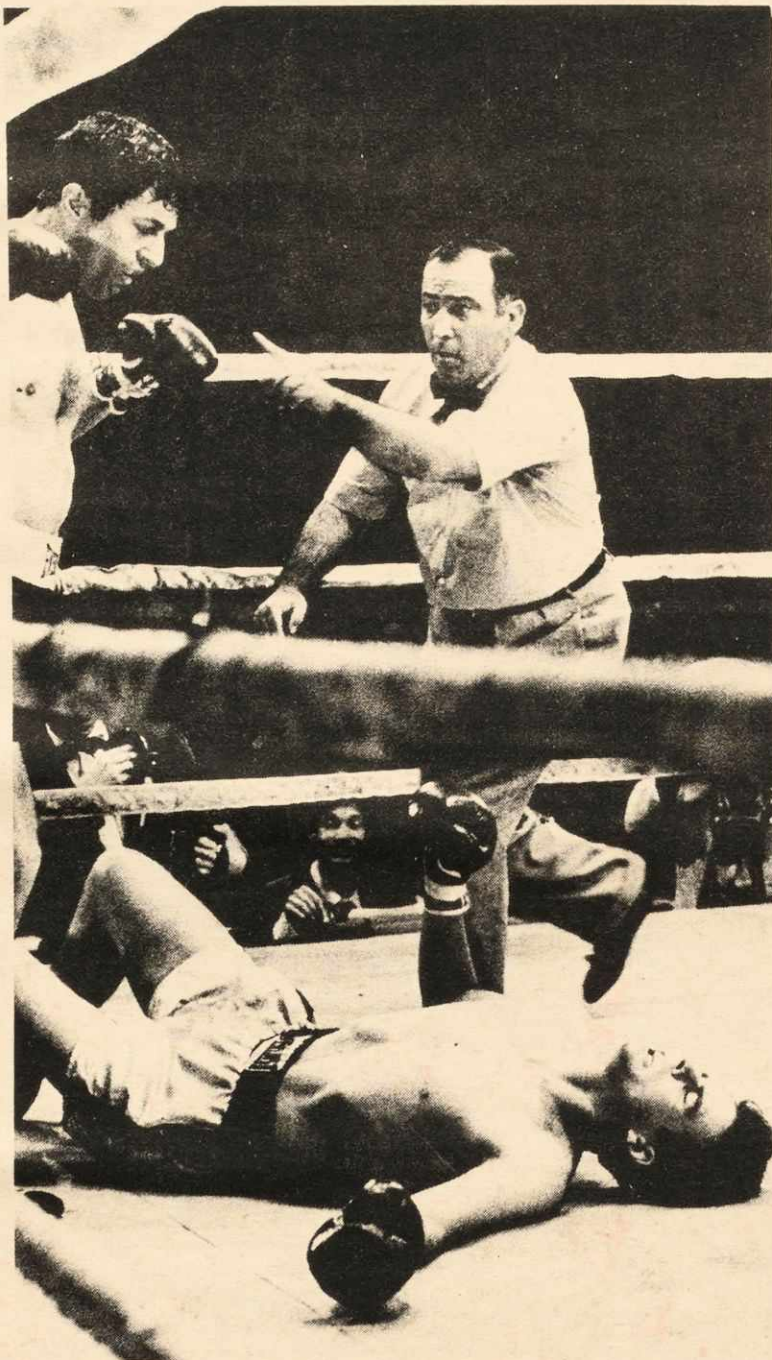
Movie Review — *Raging Bull*

Martin Scorsese is rapidly establishing himself as one of the premier directors in the history of film. *Raging Bull* is another in an amazing string of masterpieces by the director from New York's Little Italy section, again centered around his familiar theme of the individual at odds with society, the pressures he undergoes, and the intense frequently violent responses he is forced to make to exist as a separate and integral human being.

This time, the particular focus of Scorsese's incisive lens is the primal bestiality of the professional fighter; what makes this man batter another, and risk being battered, in front of half-crazed mobs of people, how he lives out of the ring, how he survives once his fists have been silenced, what animal force keeps driving him onward. The understanding of the unleashed rage of the fighter gives us a deeper understanding of the pressures which flail at all of us, and the repressed anger roiling beneath our surfaces; a clearer picture of the raw bestial rage which erupts from most of us at one time or another.

As in *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese utilizes Robert DeNiro as his protagonist. DeNiro responds in typical zealous, impeccable style, portraying Jake La Motta, a mulish tough from the Bronx, obsessed with making it on his own, his way, who slugs his way out of the slums to the middleweight championship and millions of dollars in the fifties, and then loses it through the very reckless, unthinking, self-centered, berserker fire which got it for him in the first place.

La Motta rejects the usual idols of his generation. "Big shots", he says. "Put 'em in a room and slap 'em around, and they ain't big shots no more." He erects himself as an idol instead. He's the boss, in the ring and out. Anyone who gets in his way, he butchers; the pretty boy boxer who looks better, his wife if she looks at another guy ... even his brother/manager, whom his wife more than looks at. No one can get through to La Motta, not his opponents, not his enemies, not his friends. The end result: total isolation. No one can take anything from him, but no one can give him anything or help him keep it, either. Only when he has sunk to the very bottom, jailed for encouraging a young girl to take up the kind of life he beat up his now estranged wife for, does he realize his obstinate stupidity. He tries to eschew the ceaseless, alienating lashing out which has ruled, and ruined, his life; to interact with people, give and take a little. To stand by his guns and not go under, but to reach out a hand and help the other guy keep his feet as well.



De Niro gives an awesome performance as La Motta. Aside from the physical work he had to perform to enable him to look and fight like a professional, and the incredible change he effects by gaining 50 pounds to portray the older La Motta, De Niro brings an emotional intensity to the part which is stunning. From the grotesque alacrity with which he pummels his opponents in the ring, to the brutal treatment of his wife and brother, to the moment in his jail cell when he batters himself against the stone walls, cursing his stupidity, he is "The Raging Bull". The climactic self-assertion when he is brutally demolished against the ropes by arch-foe Sugar Ray Robinson near the end of his career, but still manages to stagger to the victor's corner, face crushed and bleeding, to taunt "you never got me down, Ray. I never went down." carries more character revelation than most actors achieve in their accumulated life-work. The way in which he shows the more mature La Motta, wiser and calmer, but still with same animal drive lurking beneath the veneer, is an accomplishment few could carry off with credibility.

*Raging Bull* dissects the jumble of frustration, fear, self-hate, and rage which turn a human being into a vicious

battler, blindly fighting everything around him. It follows the glory, and the ignominy, such berserker force can lead a man to. Scorsese ends the film with a personal message which ends "I was blind but now I can see. Now I understand". After seeing *Raging Bull*, so will we all.

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