

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Raging Bull technical knockout, but says nothing

by Martin Cohn

Director Martin Scorsese has taken a third-rate book about the third-rate life of a about-rate boxer and transformed it into a gripping, convulsive cinematic effort.

But **Raging Bull** remains, in spite of all, just a third-rate story.

Just why this movie was made at all remains a mystery. **Raging Bull** tells the uninspiring tale of Jake LaMotta, a struggling New York boxer determined to be champion at any cost. Based on LaMotta's autobiography, the film chronicles a life of sleazy, obsessive violence.

But beyond an obsessively faithful portrayal of one misfit's sorry existence, the film says nothing. It contributes no insights, enhances no one's understanding, and offers no worthwhile comment.

Nor does it elucidate the human condition. The film delves into the brutish existence of an animal, and this it does with obsessive attention to detail. Its mainstay is a gruesome choreography of ritual boxing-ring beatings.

Here is celluloid realism verging on the nauseating: boxing gore replete with extreme close-ups — in slow motion — of pummeled eyebrows exploding in torrents of blood. Then cut to ringside spectators being splattered by the carnage.

(Mercifully, the film — including the blood — is in black

and white only; no vivid, technical depiction of the gore)

Violence of another kind permeates the movie and the lives it portrays — a far more sinister, but equally senseless barbarity. It is the violence of a man likened to a beast — the Raging Bull — who abuses his wife, bullies his brother, and destroys himself in the process. It is a detestable spectacle, evil, wicked and grim.

It is also unpleasant to watch. There is an accumulated toll on the viewer akin to battle fatigue.

Still, **Raging Bull** is a superbly made movie, probably one of the year's best; and brilliant acting from Robert DeNiro and meticulously crafted direction from Scorsese redeem a flawed product.

DeNiro is a good bet for an Oscar. He has carried artistic dedication to the realm of bodily punishment, and he parlays his peculiar mania into a mesmerizing performance.

Obsessively. Prior to shooting, DeNiro spent months slugging it out with professional sparring partners in countless training bouts. Then he abandoned fighting trim and put on 50 pounds so he could portray LaMotta in retirement. DeNiro transforms himself into an unsightly, obese pig; and he is hideous. There is a sense of revulsion when you recognize the faint outlines of DeNiro's face through the layers of fat creased into a double chin.

To what end? **Raging Bull** confuses the portrayal of what

is pathetic, with the notion of pathos. That is the missing element: an artistic raison d'être. We are left, in short,

with a wasted movie about a wasted life.

This is lamentable. As cinema, Scorsese has come as

close to perfection as would seem possible with **Raging Bull**.

But it is squandered talent.

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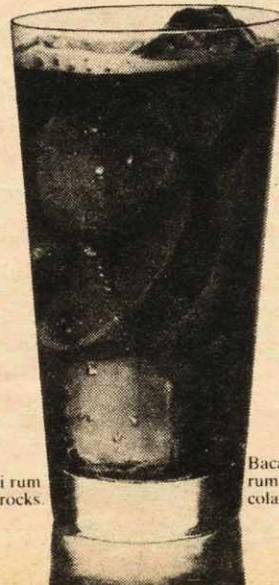
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