

## Million Dollar Backlash

By Kat Ricker



Now that *Million Dollar Baby* has had its run, taken the crown at the Oscars and been digested, debated, reviewed and fallen out of the fickle spotlight of pop culture, I am relieved that I can coddle the film in peace, but troubled at its wake.

While the film was in production, I eagerly awaited its release. The project is significant to me for reasons not on the radar of the mainstream moviegoing public. One, this is a female boxing movie. I am a female boxing buff, so I am thrilled that a major film revolving around this fringe sport broke through to mainstream. Secondly, as a female boxing fan, I have my champions, and Lucia Rijker, dubbed the most dangerous woman in the world, is more than the ultimate boxing champion to me – she is one of my greatest heroes, an uberwoman of unparalleled eloquence, lucidity, discipline, strength, power, beauty and grace. I'm a fanatic; I know the documentary *Shadowboxers* by heart, own the soundtrack, and have a collection of Lucia Rijker fight tapes and postcards. She'd been trying to break into movies for years, and after my bitter disappointment that she was not cast from among three finalists as the robotic femme fatale in *Terminator III*, I was overjoyed that she had nailed a significant role not only in a mainstream movie but also one that raised awareness of her beloved sport. Third, Hilary Swank is my all-time favorite actress. I have long felt connected to Swank on a deep level, and her phenomenal performance in *Boys Don't Cry* permanently bound my loyalty to her. So you can imagine that all three of these factors coming together in one film was something of a Kismet moment for me.

The movie itself was good enough. It struck me as two different movies, split by Maggie's tragedy. I was much more engaged in the first half, the wannabe-come-champion, than the second, the drawn-out drama, but all in all, it was an engrossing couple of hours with stellar performances, and as movies go, that's good enough for me. Then all there was to do was settle back and watch the public react.

That's where the disappointment set in. All I heard about this movie, in reviews, commentaries, debates, etcetera, was that it was a sticky suicide issue film. I couldn't believe it. Nowhere did anyone talk about female boxing, athleticism, ethics in boxing, equality in boxing. Not once did I hear anyone but a boxing insider comment on Lucia Rijker's chilling and polished performance. And poor Hilary, sure she won the Oscar and recognition among her peers, but the wide range she displayed as an actress in the film was so overshadowed by the media's manhandling of her as a delivery tool for the suicide rights issue.

Where were the women, inspired by Maggie's rise to the top? Where were the women, inspired by seeing strong, determined, successful females triumphing over society's expectations? As Lucia once said, women can find strength in seeing other women fight. They can take something from that, even if they are not boxers.

In some ways, Million Dollar Baby is a sneaky success for female boxing. It crept the sport into mainstream so skillfully that most people appear not to notice. And as I go down the aisle at the videostore, I spot more and more films about female boxers on the shelves. I see it surfacing in the background of television dramas and sitcoms. And that does make me smile – the insidious rise of this sport, once considered fringe, into the public consciousness. They may not recognize Lucia yet, but they don't recognize anything unusual is going on, either. And that's the work of champions.

