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## Allegory of the Ring [A Review of Grudge Match]

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## **“Allegory of the Ring”**

***A Review of Grudge Match* (2013). Dir. Peter Segal. Prod. Gerber Pictures.**

**By Walter Metz**

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*Grudge Match*, Peter Segal’s boxing comedy, relies on the contrasts between Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky* (1976) and Robert DeNiro in *Raging Bull* (1980) to produce a battle of popular Hollywood movies versus art house cinema. However, when *Grudge Match* pairs these two iconic actors—playing geriatric rivals reunited for one final confrontation—it forwards an understanding of what film historians seem to have forgotten. Stallone’s character was based on Rocky Marciano, the celebrated heavyweight who held the world’s championship from 1952-1956. DeNiro’s character in the biopic *Raging Bull* was directly based on the real Jake LaMotta. But as historical figures, Marciano and LaMotta share far more in common than the disparate films would indicate.

Like Stallone’s *Rocky*, Marciano was known for his tremendous hitting power. He successfully defended the heavyweight title six times. Indeed, he never lost a professional match. After his retirement from the ring, Marciano became a media celebrity, hosting a boxing show on television, appearing in the ABC series *Combat!* (1962-1967), and helping with *The Superfight: Marciano vs. Ali* (1969), a filmed computer simulation which tried to decide whether Marciano could have won a fight against Muhammad Ali. Tragically, Marciano died in a plane crash in 1969.

Like Marciano, LaMotta was a highly physical fighter known for his viciousness in the ring and tendency to stalk and bully opponents. While Marciano’s punching power was his great strength, the middleweight LaMotta’s was his herculean ability to absorb punishment to his head, chin, and body, a characteristic as true of Stallone’s *Rocky* as it is of DeNiro’s *LaMotta*. However, LaMotta was far less successful in the ring than Marciano. “The Bronx Bull,” for instance, lost five of his six fights with Sugar Ray Robinson.

Also like Marciano, LaMotta aggressively sought media celebrity after boxing by developing a stand-up comedy act. The key difference might be that LaMotta survived into the present. He has just recently produced a sequel to *Raging Bull*, over the legal objections of copyright owner MGM Studios. *LaMotta: The Bronx Bull* (2014) stars William Forsythe as LaMotta. The boxer himself developed the film’s story in concert with professional screenwriters. In short, despite their differences in the ring and divergent life spans, Marciano and LaMotta share commonalities that would not be apparent by only watching *Rocky* and *Raging Bull*.

Armed with this new information, when we watch *Grudge Match* in anything other than derisive mode, we are not just watching a mildly funny film about two elderly actors clowning around with the conventions of the boxing film. Instead, we are witnessing a deeply important allegory about what American cinema culture has been, and what it could be. And, against all expectations, *Grudge Match* finds the

beautiful sweet spot between frivolous popular and heady art cinema. Of all things, this middle ground is realized not by Stallone and DeNiro, who represent the opposing poles, but the actress Kim Basinger.

Basinger's star intertext comes from yet a third film, one about a completely different American sport: *The Natural* (1984), Robert Redford's popular adaptation of Bernard Malamud's novel about the death of the American Dream on the baseball field. In Malamud's depressing novel, hero Roy Hobbs strikes out. In Redford's film, Hobbs hits a redemptive home run that shatters the lights in the stadium to bathe the film's ending in transcendent luminescence. The contrast between Malamud and Redford recapitulates *Raging Bull*'s pessimistic art versus *Rocky*'s populist triumphalism.

In *The Natural*, Basinger plays Memo, a femme fatale who seduces Roy Hobbs for gangsters so that he will throw the final game of the season. In Malamud's novel, Hobbs decides to swing away to win the game, but, because of his crippling injuries, fails while trying his best. In *Grudge Match*, Basinger plays Sally, a woman with whom Stallone's character Razor Sharp was deeply in love. Because he trained non-stop for years to beat DeNiro's Billy the Kid, he effectively abandoned her.

In a fit of pique, she sleeps with Billy and gets pregnant. This revelation causes Razor to cancel the rubber match between the two boxers and end their series with each having won one fight (a direct echo of the Rocky Balboa/Apollo Creed rivalry in the *Rocky* films). As the old men return to the ring to prepare for the deciding bout decades later, Sally makes contact with Razor and apologizes. Their reconciliation results in the allegorical resolution of the conflict between DeNiro and Stallone. Via *The Natural*, *Grudge Match* proposes to use conventional Hollywood film style to express both the character complexity of *Raging Bull* and the emotional energy of *Rocky*.

A quiet film, *Grudge Match* manages to deliver the subtleties of art cinema while not sacrificing its emotional tenderness. It is not a great film like *Raging Bull*, but it leaves viewers with the optimistic possibility that people can change for the better. But neither is *Grudge Match* a simplistic hero story like *Rocky*. It understands that every one of its characters is defined by such demons as those that haunt Jake LaMotta. In short, the only seemingly silly *Grudge Match* is an engagingly intelligent film that demands its audience understand both boxing and film history. The comedy reconciles modes of American culture that foolishly separate film audiences. This is especially productive since those generic divisions never pertained to the actual boxers from whose lives the films were extracted.