

‘The Trials of Muhammad Ali’ Captures Fascinating Man

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 6, 2013 - 5:29pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

“No matter what you think of Muhammad Ali’s religion, you certainly have to admire his courage.” — Martin Luther King

CHICAGO – We’ve come to expect so little of our athletes. When stories like the nonsense going down in the Miami Dolphins locker room or the drug scandals with A-Rod break, they’re starting to be greeted with a shrug. There was a time when there was an athlete who was the opposite, someone who was SO important to the history of religious freedom and human expression that his story is one that should be taught in every school. Yes, Muhammad Ali was that important. We learn about King, Malcolm X, and other leaders of the fight for human rights in classrooms. We should learn about Ali. And “The Trials of Muhammad Ali,” opening at the Music Box this weekend, would be a great place to start.

With so much story to tell — one could do a mini-series on Ali’s entire history — documentary filmmakers need to focus and it’s that sense of subject-shaping that’s the best aspect of “Trials.” Some filmmakers have tried to have it all with Ali but Bill Siegel takes an anecdotal approach, allowing the people who knew him well, from Louis Farrakhan to Khalilah Camacho-Ali, to tell his story and illuminate his historical importance. Consequently, the film never gets dry, feeling more like a conversation at a funeral, in which the people who still miss their friend remember why he mattered in their lives.



The Trials of Muhammad Ali

Photo credit: Kino Lorber

Of course, the title hints at the fact that the movie will be more about Ali’s out-of-the-ring impact than the sport of boxing. He faced trials in the ring but it was the reaction he received when he joined the Nation of Islam and refused to serve in the Vietnam War as a conscientious objector that serves as the centerpiece of “Trials.” As recently chronicled in HBO’s “Muhammad Ali’s Greatest Fight,” the battle Ali fought to stand by his religious right to not kill Viet Cong was amazingly important to not just the impression of the Vietnam War but the fight for civil

rights and religious freedom. HBO's film missed the mark by focusing on the Supreme Court justices and allowing archival footage of Ali to steal the flick. Here, the opposite is true. We see a lot of Ali and hear his story in his words and those who knew him.

"Trials" isn't just about that Supreme Court battle. In fact, the title made me think that it would be more so. Siegel covers a lot of ground in 90 minutes, hitting at his roots as a young boxer, his rise to fame, and the reason he went from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali. His ex-wife tells fantastic stories about meeting him and how clearly he was fascinated with her. His family and friends paint a picture of a man who wasn't always certain of what he believed in, but when he decided what he thought was right, he was unwavering. That's the admirable, remarkable quality of Ali. How many people would give in to the pressure he faced to conform and make a fortune as a boxer? He couldn't fight for four years. His career should have been over and he could have been in jail. But he didn't give in. With athletes in 2013 giving in to everything around them, Ali's strength feels even more palpable. He truly was the greatest.

"The Trials of Muhammad Ali" was directed by Bill Siegel. It will open at the Music Box Theatre in Chicago on Friday, Nov. 8, 2013 with director Bill Siegel and Khalilah Camacho-Ali at a post-screening Q&A on opening night. The film will also show at Chatham 14 and CE Lawndale 10 in Chicago.



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