

Two Old Stars Roast Their Images in ‘Grudge Match’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sylvester Stallone and Robert De Niro – between them they have over 150 film credits in careers stretching back to the 1960s. Two of their most famous roles, boxers Rocky and the Raging Bull, get the full make-fun-of treatment in the Christmas Day Film “Grudge Match.”

There are decent laughs in this film – with a bit of scene stealing from the hot comic Kevin Hart – but the film doesn’t reach the contender potential it could have had because Sly Stallone wouldn’t go too far in lacerating his iconic boxing image. However, the film is fun enough and epic enough – the climatic fight scene is given proper gravitas and reverence – to make it a good choice for, as they say, the whole family. Stallone and De Niro are comfortable enough to have a good time, and trained enough as boxers to make it plausible. It’s a film that metaphorically is a perfect stocking stuffer – a small gift that with the right timing can be the most treasured.

Henry “Razor” Sharp (Stallone) and Billy “The Kid” McDonnen (De Niro) were light heavyweight rivals in Pittsburgh during the 1970s and ‘80s. They each had one win against the other, but never met for the ultimate third match because of a romantic rivalry involving Sally (Kim Basinger). Sharp dropped out of the fight game, and McDonnen eventually owned some car dealerships.



Sharp (Sylvester Stallone), McDonnen (Robert De Niro) and Slate (Kevin Hart) in ‘Grudge Match’
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

While Sharp labors at a working class job on the docks, his old trainer Louis “Lightning” Conlon (Alan Arkin) is being kicked out of his care facility. Needing money, Sharp accepts an offer from frenetic agent Dante Slate (Kevin Hart) to work on a videogame, recreating the historic earlier fights with McDonnen. Their rivalry becomes renewed, so much so that they’re willing to step into the ring again as old men – in addition to opening old wounds with Sally and her son B.J.(Jon Berthal) – for the final “grudge match.”

As described above, the plot has too much going on for the goal of the film, which is to get the old pugilists into the ring to settle the score. The romantic subplot involving Kim Basinger – who seems to be flexing ardently to maintain her glamor girl looks – gums up the story machine like overworked motor oil. At first, the laughs are fairly significant, just riffing on the old images of Stallone and De Niro in opposition to their senior citizen stage. But along comes the over-explanation of romantic liaisons with Sally, and the appearance of her son B.J., and suddenly it’s a frigging soap opera.

Thank goodness for Kevin Hart, who has had a fiery 2013 with his comedy concert film and his strong performance here. He is let go from any confines of script and just seems to riffing like a one-man greek chorus. His scenes with veteran Alan Arkin are a stitch, and he stands up to all the monumental movie men with a bravado that refreshes the film. For a Christmas Day movie that features the overwhelming presence of two legends, to steal scenes as Hart did was pretty impressive.

Stallone is developing a cottage industry gathering and pairing the dinosaur stars (the “Expendables” series and “Escape Plan” come to mind), but he still only goes so far in skewering his outsized movie ego. Even though he’s a working class stiff – which in our sports redemptive world seems impossible – he still must flash his Hollywood white teeth and romance the 60-year-old-who-looks-39 Kim Basinger. Sly is the poster child for male menopause.



Old Dogs: Sharp and Trainer Lightning Conlon (Alan Arkin) in ‘Grudge Match’
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

How about Bobby De Niro? He’s fairly loose in a comedic mode, and is much more willing to go after the inner Raging Bull, probably because he only did it once long ago, as opposed to Stallone’s 500 Rocky pictures (the digital re-creations of Sharp and McDonnen’s first fights are cool because of the availability of those earlier roles). De Niro goes deep into the well, including a comic Jake LaMotta pose during the action. Stallone, in contrast, clings to the notion that he is a real boxer, and still has to play that stud.

Oops, got a bit “grinchy” there. This is candy cane treat for film fans, and admirers of Stallone and De Niro – who are vast in number. Ultimately, we wanted Rocky and the Bull to square off, and even though this film is lighter than the imagined air, the match-up still yields satisfaction when unwrapped.

‘Grudge Match’ opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Sylvester Stallone, Robert De Niro, Kevin Hart, Alan Arkin, Kim Basinger, Jon Bernthal and LL Cool J. Screenplay by Tim Kelleher and Rodney Rothman. Directed by Peter Segal. Rated “PG-13”



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