

## TWO FIGHTERS ON FILM

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As I watched Muhammad Ali regain his championship for the third time in that history-making fight with Leon Spinks, a number of thoughts went through my mind. Just the night before Ali's fight, my feature film *Ali, the Fighter* was shown on television to my great surprise. The film had been made a number of years ago but apparently is on its way to becoming a classic.

When Jerry Perenchio and Robin French offered me the opportunity to do a feature film based on the Ali-Frazier championship fight back in 1971, I leapt at the chance. I had always wanted to do a fight film, and here was the fight of fights, starring the superstar of stars, Muhammad Ali, and the reigning champion, Joe Frazier; not just a fictional story, but a real-life drama. Ali had lost his title for a variety of political reasons, and so this was not only a contest of physical strength and valor between two very different kinds of men but it was a contest drenched in controversy, an ideal basis for a highly dramatic film. Though all the critical reaction thus far has been extremely favorable, some critics have had difficulty pinpointing the style of this film. Is it a dramatic film or a documentary? Actually, it is neither. It is what a friend of mine and I call a docudrama. That is, it catches people in actual dialogue in real life, in highly dramatic situations. It is a new form and one that is especially suited to certain types of events. "The Fight of the Champions" was such an event.

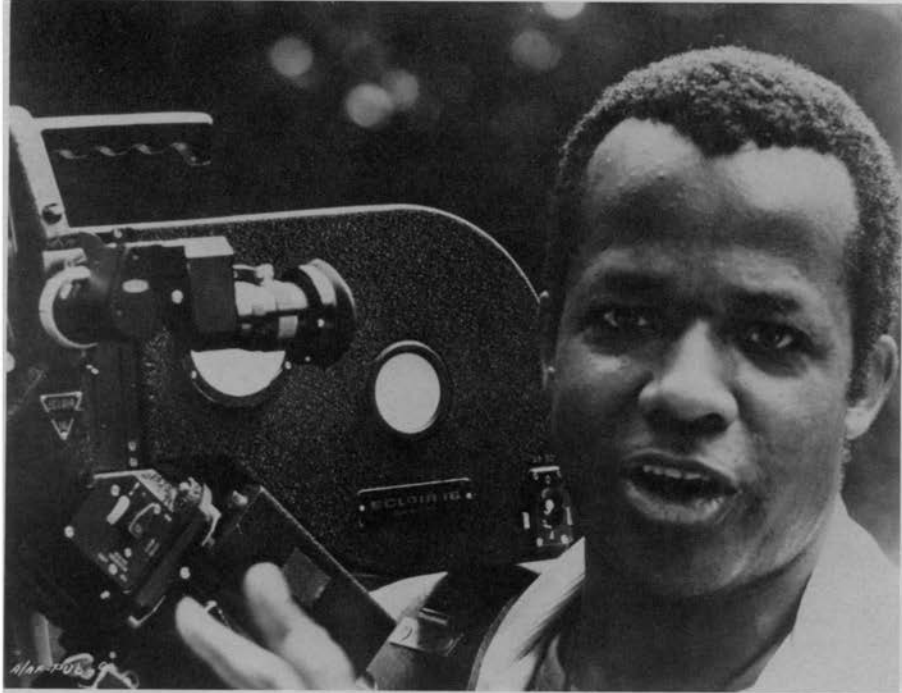
My long experience with both traditional filmmaking and cinema vérité had prepared me to do an in-depth study of the two fighters as well as a blow-by-blow record of the fight itself. Within a week of signing the contract we had camera crews shuttling about the country and in Europe covering all the pre-fight events: the business and closed-circuit communications arrangements, the promotion, the training camps, the people on the street, and their reactions to the coming event. It was no small job just to keep on top of the incredible pace set by Jerry Perenchio, the promoter. The fight itself was covered by twelve camera crews using twelve 16mm Eclair cameras, strategically located to make certain we obtained a good view of every move the fighters made. Not even the judges could have seen the fight the way the cameras did. And as it turned out, they didn't. In my opinion, as an amateur boxer, the fight as recorded on film is at the very least a draw, if not an Ali victory. In the editing room, my son David and I actually counted 680 clear Ali shots vs. 330 for Frazier. But that's another story.

The producer/director's role in such a project is compounded by the problems of logistics which cinema vérité shooting inevitably creates. Unlike a traditional Hollywood production, which is carefully scripted and often carefully rehearsed, the cinema

vérité production enjoys no such security. To begin with, the filmmaker cannot know what the final production will look like since he has no control over the real life events unfolding before him. He is frequently not clear on what it is he will be shooting. He seldom ever knows what will be happening next in any given location, and this bedevils what little planning he has been able to make. He must be on his toes at all times just like a professional fighter or, better still, a guerilla fighter. His crew must be capable of dealing with any contingency that may develop from moment to moment during the filming. His camera and sound men must be absolute marksmen. He and his crew do not enjoy the luxury of carefully planned shots, exposures, focus, equipment choices, etc., like those afforded the Hollywood director, cameraman, and sound man.

In a split second a cinema vérité cameraman must compose a shot, focus it, compensate his lighting, and film a frequently rapidly moving scene to its dramatic conclusion all in one take. In this kind of production, sometimes the director himself must be behind the camera in order to assure that he is extracting the essential elements of any given sequence that is spontaneously unfolding. The only certainty that the filmmaker has in the cinema vérité production is the firm knowledge that nothing is certain, or predictable. The intuitive sense of the director and the crew and the vast storehouse of experience that filmmakers have amassed over the years are the only insurance that they have against total disaster. Besides curiosity and considerable adaptability to the demands of the moment, paradoxically they must have total innocence as they approach each new situation. My task as director/producer was that of shuttling back and forth between the locations, strategizing, guessing, anticipating, and filming. In some instances the directing was done by telephone, in which I would work out with my cameramen sequences that they could manage without me because my presence was needed elsewhere. The filming pace of a vérité production is back-breaking. I guess I can honestly say that when I'm making my other films in more traditional fashion, I feel like I'm taking a rest.

It was almost twenty-five years ago that I decided, as a young featured actor on the stage and in films, that filmmaking would be a much more useful and satisfying way of life. Actually I had what seemed to be a promising career, parts in two feature films on Broadway and a featured role in a stage play, all of these running simultaneously. Also, I had been accepted as a full member of the Actors Studio in 1948. Trouble was that as a young black actor, the Uncle Tom parts I was sometimes asked to play revolted me, and I invariably turned down this kind of role. Moreover I was continually assaulted by images



**Bill Greaves hand-holding his Eclair**

of black people on the movie screens of America that were not only unacceptable but insulting. I saw what was happening to older black actors like Canada Lee, Paul Robeson, and Ethel Waters, the games that were being played with their careers, and I decided to get behind the cameras where I could control what appeared on the screen. I was determined and full of energy, and despite assertions that it was a ludicrous idea for a black man to pursue a production career in motion pictures, I was fairly confident that I would succeed.

At about that time a friend of mine brought a young man over to my house so that we could rap about our mutual interest, filmmaking. Apparently our mutual friend felt that my experience would be of some value to this fellow as he moved into this highly competitive field. The young man was about my age. We talked at some length about our hopes for the future and more specifically about our aspirations to become film directors. His father owned a photographic shop of some sort, and he had been doing a lot of still camera work. But as far as I can remember, that was about as

close to film work as he had come. I was studying film production at the time under Hans Richter at the Film Institute of the City College of New York. I had been assured by a couple of close friends whose opinions I highly regarded that the path I was following, that of serious study and training to become a documentary film producer, was the right one and that in the end talent, experience, and my socially oriented goals would lead to success. So I felt fairly smug about the various bits and pieces of "advice" I gave him. He, on the other hand, seemed anxious to get on with the business of making films, and, ready or not from a technical point of view, he set out to find the money to make a feature picture. His name was Stanley Kubrick.

Maybe my choice of the documentary field as opposed to the feature film that Stanley Kubrick decided on, can be explained by the fact that at the time I was more interested in documentaries. But this would probably be a rationalization. The simple fact was that Kubrick was white and I was black. As a consequence, twenty-eight years ago, he had more

options available to him than I did. Then as now, the motion picture field was one of the most fiercely competitive of human enterprises. Maybe the talented Kubrick could take a gamble and hope to succeed; I couldn't. What I and other young black theater artists were confronted with was a wall of racism in the motion picture industry that was totally impenetrable, except for a little crack in that wall managed by a pioneer of American documentary films, Louis de Rochemont. At de Rochemont Associates I managed to get a few good glimpses of the inner workings of a production studio before I left for Canada in 1952.

In developing my craft, I couldn't trust to chance; the odds were too stacked against guys like me at the time. My strategy had to be to gain all the knowledge and experience I could from the ground up. My goal was not only to direct and produce films, but to change the direction of films. I saw films as an unparalleled opportunity to do some consciousness raising in the repressive and racially uptight America of 1949. My intention was and still is to correct not only stereotyped representations of black Americans, but the stereotyped representations of white Americans as well. It seemed to me that this could be accomplished in two ways—directly through documentary film or indirectly through the feature film. For me, the documentary film route offered the only realistic method of achieving my goals.

When I first arrived in Canada at the NFB I was completely broke. I had applied to a foundation for a grant to study there, and even though Kazan, de Rochemont, Reuben Mammouliau, and Don Mulholland of NFB wrote letters of recommendation on my behalf, I was turned down. So I went to Canada on my own. I hung around NFB studios, poking my nose into editing rooms and asking questions; finally they offered me a job as an apprentice in an editing room at \$2,800 a year. During my eight-year stay at NFB I became, in turn, assistant editor, sound editor, location manager, chief editor, writer, and director. Concurrent with my production work in Canada I began teaching acting for stage and films. It was a hobby which gave me the opportunity of exercising my directorial talents. I ended up teaching classes in studios I had formed in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa and directing and producing stage shows in those cities. It's a hobby that I still pursue today at the Lee Strasberg Institute and occasionally at the Actors Studio.

My decision to go into documentary motion pictures was a happy one because this area of the motion picture industry is most conducive not only to intellectual growth but to technical craftsmanship. It demands of a filmmaker a hard-nosed respect for research, reality, and a sensitivity to human behavior. The sheer volume of my work in Canada provided me with the experience I needed. When the thaw in the racial climate of America began to occur in the late '50s and early '60s I decided to return home. Here I produced and directed for UN television, then turned independent in 1964 and have been functioning as a producer-director ever since. However it was always

my intention to produce and direct features and with *The Fighters* I finally did so.

When the picture opened in Harlem, it was a sentimental event for me, as I was born and grew up there. The warm and often excited response of the audience confirmed me in my determination to stick to feature production. The picture was praised by critics, including Canby of *The New York Times*, Winston of the *Post*, Murray Merrill, and others. It was suspenseful and dramatic. The twelve Eclairs caught the action in a continuous flow and flurry of gloves and bodies and, in between rounds, photographed the colorful audience and its sometimes violent response to the battle in the ring.

I had my disappointments too. The opening at the Apollo had not been adequately promoted or advertised and the box office take was meager. We tried desperately to publicize the showing, but we had to face the special agony of the independent filmmaker whose film is not properly promoted and advertised and who suffers financial losses as a consequence. Also, our film was in danger of becoming dated as it was based on an event that had already taken place and was part of the historical record of the past. Its virtue lay in its completeness of the documentary progression of the promotion, the actual fight, the personalities involved in a multi-million-dollar enterprise that flashes and disappears before your eyes in a couple of hours, the physical agony of the fighters—all this as opposed to the fight film itself, taken at the scene bareboned and rushed to public view the next day. With film of the second Ali-Frazier fight judiciously added to my film of the first, the whole enterprise assumes the aura of timelessness, a final statement on the incredible championship extravaganza of the century. After all, Muhammed Ali is the only living ring performer who can command an audience of close to half a billion people all over the world. He is a whole drama in himself.

As far as I am concerned, a new life in feature motion pictures seems to have just begun. I now find myself caught up in that crazy jungle of telephone wires, letter writing, luncheon dates, and conferences where the packaging of feature films takes place. I think I've learned a few things about the market place. I now know what Kubrick knew way back there when he did his first film: if you want to make a film, you've got to package the whole deal—bring the idea, the money, the talent, and the distribution together.

Foremost among these activities has been a production deal in which I have been involved with MCA New Ventures and Universal Pictures. The project was a basketball story called *Heaven Is a Playground*. However we lost the option to this property and the project blew up in our faces. Fortunately my work in the project has encouraged Universal Pictures to sign a non-exclusive contract with me to develop and produce feature films for that company. Hopefully, a suitable project will be found shortly, and we will be able to achieve one of the long overdue goals of my life, to make high-powered entertainment films for a major Hollywood studio.