

## Thriller In Manilla - DVD

### Fight night!

by Neil Queen published on 21 November 2008

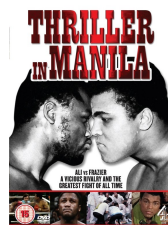
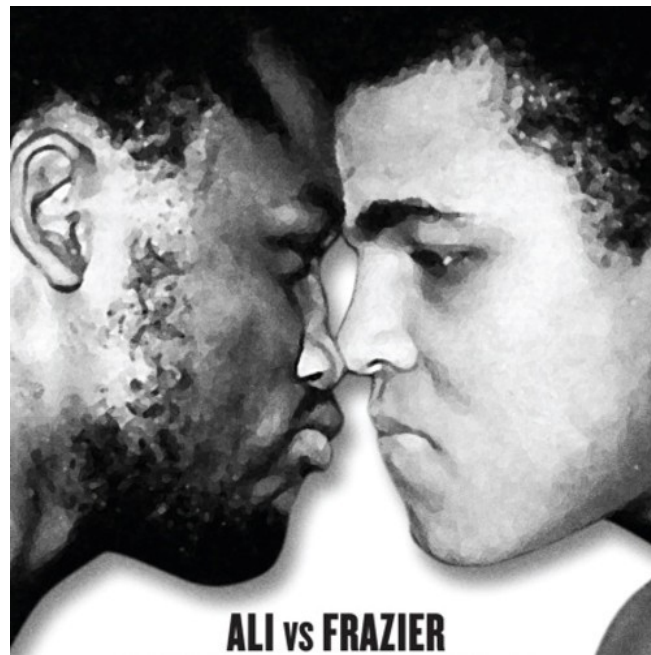
Muhammad Ali was an arsehole. It's not something that you ever hear, but that's the unavoidable conclusion of John Dower's cracking documentary. Long a sporting icon, a role model to millions and a symbol of man's ability to overcome the greatest of obstacles, here he's portrayed as a treacherous ego-maniac philanderer, willing to stop at nothing, to stoop to any depth, to achieve his aims, and a man who allowed himself to be used and manipulated for other people's political agendas.

Covering his feud with Joe Frazier leading up to the pair's legendary and brutal 1975 fight in the Phillippines, Thriller In Manilla interweaves the pair's stories with the simmering racial politics of the time in a dramatic and mesmerising documentary. It's a story that needs little in the way of dramatising, as it already has the narrative arc and protagonists of any blockbuster, as Dower reflects on the events with Frazier, revealing the devastating toll it took on both men.

During Ali's exile from boxing, brought on by his refusal to fight in Vietnam, one of the few people to stand by him was Frazier, who offered him financial support and petitioned President Nixon to overturn the ban. Once cleared to fight, the path was cleared for The Greatest to face then -world champ Frazier.

Keen to level out Frazier's arguably superior fight skills, Ali used his legendary verbosity to psyche out Frazier. But egged on by the Nation of Islam, Ali turns the feud into a race war, using the fact that his former friend had white sponsors to drive a wedge between the unassuming Frazier and his people, literally making it a black and white issue.

Their first two fights failed to clearly decide who the better man was, increasing the stakes of their third and final battle, itself booked as a ploy by General Marcos' government to paper over the



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ongoing strife in the crisis-ravaged Philippines. With Ali in his pomp and Frazier on the wane, there seemed only one outcome. Again, Ali was pulling no punches before the fight even started, continuing to degrade and destroy Frazier on a personal level. What followed was an almighty endgame of vengeance and redemption.

History is written by the winners, they say, but here Frazier gets the opportunity to put his story over. Smokin' Joe watches the fight here with Dower for the first time in his modest gym in the badlands of Philadelphia, where he lives out a modest life, and what comes across is his undimmed hatred for Ali and what he did to him.

Having set the main event up perfectly, the fight takes on truly epic proportions, as both men basically try to kill each other. It's brutally raw and takes on an almost Hollywood scale. Which probably explains why Stallone took so many liberties with Frazier's story for Rocky.

## VERDICT

Though clear in its agenda, Thriller In Manilla ensures it doesn't sensationalise or slant the material in its favour; it doesn't need to skew things to plead its case - Ali does the damage by himself via the ample archive footage, which though it's sad to see the darker side of his character, it does showcase why Ali remains such an enduring figure. Members of Ali's entourage validate the docu, as do the neutrals who were in the thick of it, while it's only Ali's ironic refusal to ever talk about the feud leaves us with a few unturned stones.

Harrowing, harsh and brutal, but compelling from start to finish. Frazier's story is a remarkable one, which is done justice by Dower's smart film, one that brings history vividly to life.

Rating: 15

Starring: Joe Frazier, Muhammad Ali

Directed by: John Dower

Extras: deleted scenes

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## At a glance

### What is it?

Documentary

### Good

An incredible story that transcends any negative feelings you may have for boxing

### Bad

The absence of Ali's take on the situation

### Verdict

Harrowing, harsh and brutal, but compelling from start to finish

**Price** £19.99

**Our score**

**8/10**

**Your score**

**?/10**