

WAS BILLED THE Rumble in the Jungle. In Zaire, in October 1974, Muhammad Ali challenged the invincible George Foreman for the heavyweight crown. It became known simply as *The Fight*. And for both men, that epic drama on the banks of the former Congo River became a strange passage into their own elemental moments of darkness.

Such moments of personal revelation in the arena are the very stuff of sport. The reason the great compete. The essential motive of the rest who watch.

Leon Gast's stunning new film, *When We Were Kings*, captures that moment in time, in context to its time, with a power and poetic punch rarely seen in sports documentary. Last March, Ali and Foreman were reunited on stage when Gast collected the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature and received the ovation of the night.

*When We Were Kings* took two months to shoot and 23 years to complete. "Originally the film was conceived as a black Woodstock," says the 60-year-old New Yorker, whose initial subject was the three day music festival preceding the fight. On the bill were many heavyweights of the '70s black music scene including BB King, James Brown and the Spinners, as well as numerous African acts. But as interesting as that might have been, it didn't compare to a film centering on the incomparable Muhammad Ali," he explains.

"But everything that could possibly go wrong has gone wrong. Maybe I crossed a witchdoctor while I was over there and he put some kind of hex on me," he laughs.

The post production budget which was to come from the festival gate receipts, simply vanished when President Mobutu declared it a free concert. Although the dictator had put up the \$10million purse to bring the event (and its attendant publicity) to Zaire, few of his impoverished subjects could afford tickets.

Then came a mixed blessing. The fight was postponed for six weeks when Foreman's eye was cut badly in sparring. And while the boxers, promoters and world's press fretted and sweated in the heart of Africa, Gast kept his cameras rolling, amassing 300,000 feet of film - returning to the States flat broke.

The Liberian government, which was backing the film, was overthrown and the director was left without finance for his labour of love. By 1989, Gast joined forces with his former attorney David Sonnenberg, a music business manager who came aboard as executive producer. After turning down a \$1million offer for Gast's voluminous footage from Chris Blackwell of Island Records, the pair edited eight different versions of the film.

Having shifted the focus, they tracked down additional fight footage and archival clips to compose what Gast now calls his 'Love Poem to Muhammad Ali'.

But something was still missing. In 1995, Hollywood director, Taylor Hackford completed the picture. He explains: "I really think it's one of the seminal athletic events of this century, because it had theatre. It was right in the 70s, right at the peak of the black power movement. But you want voices that can

explain the historical context." Hackford shot and intercut new interview footage with writers Norman Mailer and George Plimpton (who had both covered the fight in 1974), filmmaker Spike Lee and Ali biographer Thomas Hauser. Their narrative and passionate memories provide an uplifting Greek chorus to Gast's visual drama.

Reviewers in the States have commented on how Mailer and Plimpton still enthuse on the Rumble in the Jungle as if it happened last night. Yet, during the film, Spike Lee saliently observes the collective amnesia on the part of young black Americans who simply didn't know about men like Ali and Martin Luther King.

"Although it is every generation's penance to sit through past tales of deriding-do, we are spared the usual pitfall of athletes looking back. The commentators set the scene. Ali speaks only from the height of his powers and the editing evokes a past drama, that is still present in the fight footage. The memory of one of sport's greatest hours is not just preserved for posterity, but brought to life again.

Producer Sonnenberg echoes Lee's point: "Many of my young rap artists had no idea who Ali was. "So, to connect with the younger generation, Ali is recognised as "The Original Rapper".

*"I have wrestled with an alligator, I have tussled with a whale, I have handcuffed lightning. Thrown thunder in jail. Only last week I hospitalised a brick, I'm so mean, I make medicine sick."*

In a strange twist, what was to have been a "Black Woodstock" ends up prefiguring the future of Afro-American music.

Such unknown forces abound out of Africa. Plimpton recalls an African witchdoctor's intriguing premonition of the fight which also sets the supernatural tone for the destiny of George Foreman.

The seedy history of boxing promotion is littered with 'days of destiny', but October 30 1974, transcended such cliché. Foreman, the unbeaten, seemingly unbeatable champion, was in Hauser's words: "This hostile ominous presence," who seemed to defy the laws of human physics. He said little, but spoke forcefully when he did. He kept his hands, like weapons, encased in his pockets. Ali, at 32, had lost three years of his career after refusing induction into the US army and was given no chance of outdancing this formidable hitter. Indeed, fears for his life were very real. Foreman's cornerman, Archie Moore admitted that he prayed Ali would not die in the ring. A plane was kept ready in Kinshasa airport to fly him to hospital in Madrid. This was, after all, the Third World.

But this epic event was also a victory return to the dark continent, the homecoming of two Afro-Americans in a contest to find the King of Africa. David Sonnenberg explains: "Ali was a king amongst kings - from Mobutu, the resident King of Zaire, to James Brown, the King of Soul, to Don King. But Ali, he was on a whole different level... Ali was King of the World." Certainly, he won the heart of all Africans. He praised their bilingualism: "Ain't that something? We in America are the savages."

He used the extended build-up to become the people's choice, masterfully

night. We watch as Ali prepares his body for Foreman's thunderous blows: "We watch him steel his will, rapping jabs at the pretender's psyche."

*"He's the bull, I'm the matador. He's scared to death."*

The great psyche-out began. Ali's trick was to channel his fear into others and you can almost hear it leaving as he mocks the pervasive awe that Foreman inspires:

*"Scared a what, scared a what?"* He studiously avoids the fearsome sight of his opponent's battered punch bag.

magnificent musing on what goes on in a great athlete's soul at such a moment does justice to one of the most compelling moments in the history of sport.

Even while commenting on the fight, Harry Carpenter pondered the possibility that it just might be the greatest boxing match ever seen. You get the same sort of feeling watching Leo Gast's film.

One criticism, however, is Gast's fully acknowledged bias towards Ali, while the character of the other man in the ring that night remains an unexplored enigma.

Like a snake who sheds his skin in the jungle, Foreman underwent a metamorphosis after Zaire. Leaving behind the sullen, mean persona, he re-emerged years later, first as a preacher, then incredibly, in 1994, as the oldest man ever to win a heavyweight title.

But he acknowledges his past: "I wasn't putting on an act. I was a bad man. And I wanted to not only win but to hit those guys and hurt them." And is feelings on Ali? "I hated him, I wanted to kill him. But this man was more than your ordinary boxer. He was the greatest. Just an association of his name with mine pretty much made me outside the ring."

Foreman has since transmogrified into genial George, the burger-munching grandfather of the heavyweight division. He is now one of America's most popular sportsmen. Leon Gast thanked the fighter in his Oscar speech, "For what he is then and for the man he is today." But none can compete with Ali's charisma and sheer courage. It was part of his genius to reinvent the sport itself, even as he rewrote its history. He shocked the world with the rope-a-dope

*When We Were Kings* recalls a time when the Heavyweight Champion of the World was the single greatest accolade in sport. But it also captures the entrance into boxing of Don King, the man who would ultimately destroy the game. Much credit is given for his visionary staging of *The Fight* but it is tinged with bitterness at where his greed would later lead the sport.

Following Oliver McCall's astonishing mental breakdown in the ring in Las Vegas last March, Hugh McVeyne wrote that boxing had become the red light district of sport. *Kingvision*, the Don's pay-per-view peepshow, costs about \$50 a throw. Each Mike Tyson mismatch is now billed as the Fight of the Century. Before he lost to Evander Holyfield, most Tyson fights lasted about two minutes.

**"You have heard of me since you were young. You've been following me since you were a little boy. Now, prepare to meet our master!"**

His 1995 bout against Buster Mathis Junior was staged in Philadelphia because Las Vegas and Atlantic City didn't want it. The traditionally fanatical Phillies didn't want it much either. King was forced to full the arena with kids bussed in from the suburbs to hide the sorry state of boxing from the TV cameras. Bill Lyon, chief sportswriter with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, described the King of modern boxing promotion as: "The most reptilian man I've ever been near."

It's somewhat reminiscent of Norman Mailer's hilarious description of that other great "maker" of the Rumble in the Jungle, Mobutu Sese Seko. In 1975, he paid \$10million to put his country on the world map. These days, he hangs on grimly to his kingdom, under threat from rebel forces. Yet, like King, even if his domain fragments, his money will be safely offshore. He will live out his life in the South of France, with the best available treatment for his prostate cancer.

He could certainly afford a satellite for *Kingvision's* pay-per-view. These days we are all Kings. Or maybe he'd rather relive *When We Were Kings*: when Ali invented rap in the gym and improvised his poetry in motion within the ring.

**When We Were Kings opens at The Irish Film Centre on Friday 13th June**

# When we were Kings

BY JUSTIN KAVANAGH

A preview of the Oscar-winning documentary-film chronicling the *Rumble in the Jungle* in 1974, which will be released on June 13 at the IFC in Dublin

manipulating the press, loudly proclaiming himself Champion of the Oppressed. Outside the ring, he had earned this title with his unique ability to fuse politics and sport.

Unlike both King and Foreman, who evade such issues in the film, Ali had donated thousands of dollars to philanthropic causes. And he had famously refused to fight the white man's battle. There was, as ever, rhyme to his reason: *"On the war in Vietnam, I sing this song, I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong."*

But the heavyweight crown would be forged in that contest by the Congo, under an overcast sky, heavy with the threat of the imminent tropical downpour. Norman Mailer is cast as a modern Marlow - the protagonist in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* which was set in the Belgian Congo - leading us into the heart of both men's darkness that

Ali, the myth-maker, chides Foreman for fighting "in my country". And everywhere he goes he leads the crowds in the native mantra of "Ali boma ye, Ali boma ye", or "Ali kill him, Ali kill him."

In his book, *The Fight*, Mailer relates the final doubts that Ali pouted into Foreman's ear as the pair put the stare on each other just before the bout:

*"You have heard of me since you were young. You've been following me since you were a little boy. Now, prepare to meet our master!"*

And - as that hour begins to unfold at the end of round one, it is the crowd's mantra we hear, but it is Ali's private thoughts we try to read on the most photographed face on earth. At the heart of his darkest hour, he struggles to overcome the horror of "this huge black force" he is faced with. And as the intensity of Ali's stare illuminates the screen, Mailer's

tactics in Zaire: Instead of dancing, circling his opponent, avoiding that right hand. Ali went on the ropes, where the full weight of George's rage rained down on him. Leaning way back on the rigging, he invited disaster, taunting his foe: "Hit harder, George, is that the best you can do? You disappoint me George!"

For the elders, it is fascinating to ponder the fates of the players since *The Fight*: Ali, who spent his twenties telling the world he was the greatest, and his thirties proving it, now seems destined to spend his old age being told that, yes, he actually was. The Louisville Lip is now silenced by Parkinson's syndrome, but, with typical bravado, he refuses to hide from an adoring public.

"Everybody else sees a man that is suffering from a debilitating disease, but I know he's happy, that he's doing exactly what he wanted to do," says Leon Gast, "and that is go out and touch people."