Remake of The Champ is a winner


By Joel West

Perhaps I'm sentimental, but I find The Champ a sincere, touching film. Ricky Schroder as T.J. Flynn steals the show, playing the eight-year-old boy about whom revolves the lives of Jon Voight and Faye Dunaway.

Voight is the proud 37-year-old Billy Flynn, an Irish boxer who gave up his title seven years ago to raise his son. If Voight merely acted tough and sweated his fists well, there would be little to say about his performance: one might say that he's a better boxer than Sylvester Stallone, or that he does a convincing imitation of being an ex-boxer. But Voight contrasts the different sides of Flynn — the drinking, gambling has-been versus the blue-eyed father who has little room for anything outside his daughter's life. He now makes his first American film. Much of the success of the movie is due to the efforts of director Franco Zeffirelli, who here makes his first American film. Schroder obviously lacks the acting experience of Voight or Dunaway and thus must have required expert direction to bring off his scenes. Also, the Italian director expanded the role played by Dunaway from the fleeting figure of the 1931 version of the movie.

The supporting cast is flawless. Arthur Hill does a good job with the limited role of Mike Phillips, Dunaway's rich husband. Jack Warden is endearing as Flynn's manager, especially in the scene after the boxer comes back. Mary Jo Catlett shows promise beyond her shallow role of Josie, Flynn's concerned coworker.

Music by Dave Grusin is perfect throughout. From the gorgeous opening scene to the dramatic reunion of father and son, from the Caribbean melodies of the racetrack to the jazz for yacht-bound set-sitters, Academy Award nominee Grusin displays the subtle touch the used in Heaven Can Wait, and once again demonstrates that there are film composers who can do more than write Star Wars tunes.

This is a small movie, not one with anything new to say. But The Champ is a worthy remake of a timeless fantasy, a movie, unlike most remakes, that has as much validity as the original. Perhaps it will also serve as a vehicle for young Ricky Schroder, who then would be emulating his counterpart of the 1931 version, Jackie Cooper.

Jon Voight plays Billy Flynn, an ex-boxing champion who attempts a comeback for the sake of his idling son, T.J.

T.J. (Ricky Schroder) refuses to believe that Annie (Faye Dunaway) is his mother in The Champ.