Review: Antoine Bertrand carries Louis Cyr biopic

But he wouldn’t have had to if other characters were stronger

BY BRENDAN KELLY, THE GAZETTE   JULY 12, 2013

Antoine Bertrand portrays Louis Cyr in a new biopic. Below: Bertrand and co-star Amélie Grenier.

Photograph by: Seville Pictures

Louis Cyr: L'homme le plus fort du monde (Louis Cyr: The Strongest Man In The World)

Rating: 3 stars

Starring: Antoine Bertrand, Guillaume Cyr, Rose-Maité Erkoreka, Amélie Grenier, Gil Bellows

Directed by: Daniel Roby

Running time: 130 minutes

Parental guidance: For all

Playing in French with English subtitles at: Brossard, Forum and Sphèretech cinemas.

Playing in French at: Angrignon, Beaubien, Boucherville, Brossard, Cinéma Carnaval, Colossus, Deux Montagnes, Dorion, Lacordaire, LaSalle, Longueuil, Marché Central, Pont Viau, Quartier Latin, St. Bruno, St. Eustache, StarCité and Taschereau cinemas.

Louis Cyr: L'homme le plus fort du monde rests on Antoine Bertrand's broad shoulders, and fortunately,

the popular actor has the muscles, charisma and chops to bring this legendary Quebec strongman back to life. Bertrand is very good, and that's a good thing because he's front and centre throughout this engaging biopic.

The Quebec film, the biggest release so far this year, is similar to the 2005 hit Maurice Richard in that it takes a noted homegrown hero and uses his life story to capture a key slice of our history. In fact, the two films share a thematic focus — they cast these iconic figures as examples of Québécois folk heroes who made a name for themselves far beyond Quebec's borders and made "leur peuple" proud.

Ken Scott's screenplay for Maurice Richard had a more political slant to it, positing the notion that The Rocket was also fighting for the right to speak en français in the National Hockey League. Louis Cyr is more about an old-fashioned success story, but with screenwriter Sylvain Guy underlining that Cyr never tried to hide his French-Canadian roots.

Bertrand's Cyr is a compelling figure, but I just wish Guy and director Daniel Roby had spent more time developing the other characters, like his wife, Mélina Comtois-Cyr (Rose-Maité Erkoreka), and his longtime strongman brother-in-arms Horace Barré (Guillaume Cyr). It's a solid flick, but it would have benefited from a stronger dramatic arc that played on more than just his quest to be considered the strongest man in the world.

Cyr's story starts in Lowell, Mass., in 1878. Like so many Quebecers at the time, the family had headed south to the U.S. to work in the New England mills, and one of the intriguing wrinkles here is that the filmmakers portray the Quebec immigrants as really being at loggerheads with the local Irish working in the same mills. This is in sharp contrast to the common wisdom/mythology that has always held that the franco Québécois and the Irish were the best of buddies.

But Louis Cyr soon leaves his day job to make much more money breaking records with his extraordinary strength. When he's offered $25 a week instead of the mill wage of $5, Cyr immediately signs on the dotted line. But he has one worry.

"I'm not sure about the costume," he says.

Next thing you know he has a table with eight people weighing some 2,700 pounds on his back and shortly thereafter there are four horses attached to him trying to rip him apart at the seams. In short order, he becomes the strongest man in the world.

That's where the film kind of stumbles. There are a few too many scenes of him lifting large objects, and I found it hard to care much about the whole section in London where he's trying to force other strongmen to compete with him. But the film comes back to life in the final reel as it explores in more depth his relationship with his wife and daughter.

So is this inspirational true-life tale just what the doctor ordered to rekindle the local audience's enthusiasm for Quebec film after a dismal 18 months at the box office? We'll soon find out.

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