



As one might suspect, "Battle of the Sexes," directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valeri Faris ("Gift" and "Little Miss Sunshine"), is much more than a sports underdog flick. The world already knows the outcome of this historical tennis match that proved that a 55 year old male champion athlete is not superior to a 29 year old female athlete in the same game. The purpose of this film is to take us deeper into the psychology of the characters to understand how the conflict continues today.

In one corner you have the clown Bobby Riggs, played riotously by comedian Steve Carell. He's a retired world tennis champion and devout male chauvinist who wallows in his physical prowess as a superior, self-adulating buffoon, who gets off on his own jokes about what he claims to be the weaker sex - women. While his own wife and son look away shamefully, a sideline of hired cheer leaders wiggle their fannies in support. They will always love him, even when the mad clown turns into a sad clown.

In the other corner we have the underdog, our heroine, Billy Jean King played righteously and humbly by Emma Stone. She is the reluctant warrior who had no choice but to stand up to this silly oppressive jerk in order to get her due respect, not just for herself, but for all women. And there is more for Billie Jean to discover in herself, outside of proving her self-worth in a man's world; she discovers her own sexuality with Marilyn Barnett (Andrea Riseborough), her hair stylist. In revealing close-ups cinematographer Linus Sandgren captures every twitch of the eye and lip, as her hair is lifted and clipped to discover the sensual woman inside. While this discovery distracts King from her game and her supportive husband, it does perhaps cause her to lose to her nemesis, Margaret Court, who then loses in a Mother's Day Massacre to Bobby Riggs. It is however this same self discovery that motivates King to win the real game in The Battle of The Sexes against Riggs.

There are many telling goose bump moments in this film that resonate with today's gender inequality in America. Like when Billy Jean corrects a male reporter for a sexist question, or challenges the kingpin of tennis, Jack Kramer (Bill Pullman), to remove himself as commentator, or in the sparring exchanges before the final match. But the most revealing moments come off as we realize how big a joke Bobby Riggs is. As an addicted gambler with a therapist who gambles with him and loses, a metaphor for Bobby's incurable idiocy, he claims he will "put the show back into chauvinism," completely unaware of how big a jerk he really is. No one can help him, not even his nutritionist who comes in to medicate with a tray of magic vitamins and "healthy" cocktails. His relationship with his wealthy wife who supports him through his gambling addiction, shows how tolerant and loving a woman can be, while their son lets dad sleep on the couch when mom kicks him out of the house. He's a joke that only realizes how laughable he really is when he loses to King.

In the end both King and Riggs retreat to their locker rooms. Riggs abandoned by everyone but his wife, and King alone, in tears, afraid she might not be able to enter the world she just changed. Will women's role in sports still be held in an unrelenting male grip on that arena? At one moment Billie Jean's wardrobe stylist, played touchingly by Alan Cumming, gives her a hug, admitting that in an unforgiving world all we can do is to know who we are and hope that someday the world, "the man's world," will change to give us the freedom to love whomever we choose to love. In one tennis match Billy Jean King changes that world, we hope.