

“Battle of the Sexes”

By Helen Lutz

Hollywood loves to make movies about ‘actual’ events which can be both entertaining and enlightening. Although I hate to admit it, many of these historical events were current events to me. When the film “Secretariat” hit the big screen, even though I knew that the horse won the Triple Crown – I watched it live on the TV, the movie was still thrilling. “All the President’s Men” was pretty intriguing as Redford and Hoffman retold the story of the Watergate break in and, of course, the Titanic still sunk. However, having lived through an event (nope even I wasn’t around for the Titanic) casts a different shadow on the Hollywood portrayal of the story.



The latest film inspired by true life to hit the silver screen is “Battle of the Sexes” starring Emma Stone as the great tennis player Billie Jean King and Steve Carell as Bobby Riggs. The 1970’s were an interesting time. Our country had endured the civil rights movement of the 1960’s and was turning toward the women’s lib movement. When I started college in 1971 I was permitted to wear a dress, skirt & blouse or a formal pant suit to class – that was the dress code. The guys could wear anything they wanted. No, I didn’t attend a private university, I attended the University of Missouri at Kansas City – ladies had to dress up for class.

The glass ceiling was only about one story high at that point. Women didn’t ‘need’ equal pay for equal work because men had to support a family. It didn’t matter that my mom was widowed at an early age and had to raise four daughters on her own – she did the work of a magazine editor while receiving secretarial pay. This was also true in the world of professional tennis. Ladies are inferior athletes who belong in the bedroom or kitchen, not the labor market, even though the tennis ladies drew larger crowds than their male counterparts.

“Battle of the Sexes” highlights a 1973 tennis match. The 50 something year old tennis has-been Bobby Riggs is always looking for a hustle. Why not pit the top rated women’s tennis champion against him proving that male chauvinism reigns supreme?

Billie Jean has other things on her mind besides playing to Bobby’s tune. Going against all odds she fights the system and Jack Kramer (Bill Pullman), creator of the tennis ‘Opens’, and starts her own tennis circuit. Most of the lady players follow her and proudly show their first pay – each received a single dollar bill, but they were paid and therefore pros. King was instrumental in the fight for equal pay for equal work while sorting through personal demons.

As I said earlier, it’s interesting to see the Hollywood entertainment version of a story. I remember talking with my mother when all this was going on. She thought it was atrocious. Riggs was a buffoon, and women truly weren’t the equal of men especially in sports. She also had some overly conservative views about Billy Jean King’s lifestyle choices which were just whispered innuendos in the tabloids (mind you, tabloids were the main source of ‘fake news’ at the time). I appreciate all that women have done in the fight for gender equality over the years, but still the pre-women’s lib times haunt us; just look at the current fight being waged by the ladies’ U.S. Soccer Team. Even though I own my business, I still find myself chipping away at the glass ceiling. Perhaps one of these days businesses, politicians and consumers will stop looking at one’s gender, color, religion and so on when making selections and choose (and pay for) the best person, company and organization for the job. On a scale of one to four Hart Beats ... I give “Battle of the Sexes” TWO 1/2. The movie takes a lot of liberties with the facts in its storytelling, but Steve Carell becomes a remarkable Bobby Riggs.