

Foxcatcher: Under the thumb of a wealthy madman

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Directed by Bennett Miller; screenplay by E. Max Frye and Dan Futterman

Bennett Miller's *Foxcatcher* is based on events that culminated in the shocking 1996 murder of an Olympic wrestling champion by the multimillionaire scion, John Eleuthère du Pont, of the American chemical dynasty. As in his previous efforts, *Capote* (2005) and *Moneyball* (2011), Miller has conscientiously striven here to trace out the truth of the circumstances. The movie is unusual in its sharp portrayal of the American aristocracy's sense of entitlement almost to the point of madness.

The story begins in 1987. Despite having won a gold medal in wrestling at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles and the World Championship in Budapest the following year, Mark Schultz (Channing Tatum) is leading an isolated and depressing existence. He lives in a rundown apartment, subsisting on dried noodles and honorariums (\$20) for speaking to bored elementary school kids. At the gym, he practices with a stuffed dummy that he crushes and violently throws about. His older brother Dave (Mark Ruffalo), upon whom Mark relies emotionally, is also an Olympic gold medal-winning wrestler.

Dave is something of a surrogate father to Mark, his sparring partner and coach, but the latter's life is a case of arrested development, which expresses itself in a chronic moroseness and pent-up anger. When frustrated, Mark is prone to hitting himself in the face with rapid-fire punches. Dave, on the other hand, is comfortable in his own skin, has a loving family and is heading to Colorado to begin a coaching job.

Mark seemingly gets the chance of a lifetime when he receives a phone-call from a representative of John du Pont (Steve Carell), who flies the athlete to the millionaire's expansive estate in southeastern Pennsylvania. Mark is offered a dream job: he will be handsomely paid and elegantly housed as he attempts to build a world-class wrestling team, Team Foxcatcher—named after the racing stable owned by du Pont's father.

Mark soon learns that du Pont's support comes with a heavy price-tag: eccentric, unsavory demands from the psychologically damaged heir ("Call me 'Eagle' or 'Golden Eagle'"). The young wrestler is obliged to kowtow to the millionaire, whose relationship with his icy-cold, elderly

mother (Vanessa Redgrave) is deeply problematic. Du Pont uses cocaine, drinks too much and resorts to noxious patriotism. All in all, Team Foxcatcher—despite its luxurious training facilities—is as doomed as its bloodless benefactor. On du Pont's part, the vanity enterprise is an attempt to fill his own emptiness—to bring some life to someone who scarcely feels alive.

Predictably, when Mark begins to unravel as an athlete-peon, Coach "Golden Eagle" viciously turns on him ("You ungrateful ape"). In Mark's eyes, the ultimate slap in the face comes when du Pont persuades Dave to become the team's head coach. Mark's territory is now being invaded by his brother. At the 1988 Olympic trials, Mark goes on an eating binge after losing a match. In a remarkable scene, Dave forces Mark to lose 12 pounds in 90 minutes, thus allowing him to qualify.

Despite Mark's great talent, however, du Pont cripples him. Mark leaves Foxcatcher Farm while his brother arranges a deal that insures he will be taken care of as long as Dave continues to coach for the patrician. Increasingly unhinged after the death of his mother, du Pont watches a video depicting his glory days with Mark. (Du Pont had a videographer on hand to create works that fabricated the desired image.) In the end, John du Pont, who paid huge sums for his own trophies and those of others who possessed the skills he sorely lacked, develops a deadly rage.

The creators of *Foxcatcher* took the real-life story seriously. Years of research and preparation went into the making of the film. Miller's work is one of the few in recent years that deliberately sets out to explore the psychology of the super-rich and their baleful impact on the population. Carell, physically transformed, chills to the bone, yet brings out the doleful character of Du Pont's shadow of a life. Ruffalo and Tatum were also deeply invested in the project, which finds expression in their convincing performances. Both had to undergo extensive and arduous training in wrestling.

Redgrave's brief moments on screen as Jean du Pont, John's mother, suggest something quite appalling and inhuman about this milieu without apparent redeeming features. One has the impression that many inanimate objects have more warmth than this well-heeled creature. In fact, *Foxcatcher* establishes clearly

that she preferred her prize-winning horses to her son and was disdainful of John's pathetic attempts to gain her approval. (In two memorable scenes, Jean, in an emasculating manner, disparages John's passion for what she terms the "low sport." One has the impression that John craves the intense physical contact of wrestling both as an outlet for a repressed sexuality and also because he was rarely embraced by his mother.) On the whole, Miller takes considerable pains to capture the feel and look of life as it must have been led at Foxcatcher Farm.

Says Miller in the movie's production notes: "It's fact to fiction as a vehicle back to truth. Some months after *Capote* [his film about the American writer Truman Capote] was released I received a letter from Harper Lee [the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who was a friend of Capote's and was portrayed in the film]. She said the film was a demonstration of fiction as a means towards truth. There was, as she pointed out, a great deal in the film that we had invented, but that 'The film told the truth about Truman.' That's what I have tried to do with *Foxcatcher*." The director told an interviewer that "there are essential truths to this story" and that his aim was "to get to that without violating the essence of who these people were, and what happened." A commitment to the truth is rare enough in contemporary filmmaking.

It is telling how the real Mark Schultz describes his ill-fated encounter with du Pont. In his autobiography, *Foxcatcher: The True Story of My Brother's Murder, John du Pont's Madness and the Quest for Olympic Gold*, Schultz writes: "Ours had all the makings of a rags-to-riches tale. From poor beginnings, we fought our way through life and the world of wrestling to win a combined four National Collegiate Athletic Association championships, two Olympic gold medals, and three World Championship titles. But the riches never came. We won plenty of gold, but never found the brass ring that would allow us to compete without having to rely on the likes of John du Pont, a credibility-craving, controlling misfit of a multimillionaire I never would have associated with if USA Wrestling had provided better financial support for its most successful wrestlers." Schultz was forced to deal with a madman because of the wretched state of amateur sports in America.

As the production notes explain, the du Pont family traces its origins to France in the late eighteenth century. "Eleuthère Irénée du Pont, was an apprentice to Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, a man considered to be the father of modern chemistry ... [T]he French Revolution cut short Eleuthère Irénée's apprenticeship, and he fled France for America with Pierre and the rest of the du Pont family in October of 1799."

Du Pont opened a black gunpowder mill in Wilmington, Delaware in 1802. The firm was later "able to capitalize on the huge demand for [its] munitions resulting from the Civil War, as well as the railroad expansion in the American West. DuPont would go on to be the largest supplier of military explosives for the U.S. in the First World War and later become the creator of Nylon, Teflon, Mylar, Kevlar and Lycra ... The DuPont

Company is currently valued at fifty billion dollars and serves more than seventy countries around the world."

John du Pont, who died in prison in 2010, was the great-great-grandson of Eleuthère Irénée du Pont. Unlike his forebears who were products of capitalism's ascendancy, he contributed little or nothing to society. *Foxcatcher* portrays him and his ilk as parasitic and destructive social forces.

At the same time, the film is entirely within its rights to point to the tragic element in du Pont's own destiny. The unhappy lot of the rich is not the primary concern of socialists, but it is, in its own way, a further condemnation of a system that chews up human beings in the interests of profit. One of American cinema's greatest achievements, after all, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, is centrally-concerned with that problem.

The writer Oscar Wilde was quite sensitive to this. In his extraordinary essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), Wilde noted that "The possession of private property is very often extremely demoralising, and that is, of course, one of the reasons why Socialism wants to get rid of the institution ... If property had simply pleasures, we could stand it; but its duties make it unbearable. In the interest of the rich we must get rid of it." The Irish writer went on to observe that with "the abolition of private property ... Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things."

There is a final point, and it is not an insignificant one. One wonders how conscious the makers of *Foxcatcher* were in hinting, in microcosm, at the disastrous fate of people, or *a people*, who are dependent on the whims of billionaires. The film points to the hazards of the "aristocratic principle," i.e., a condition in which the population finds itself subordinated to the dictates of an increasingly unhinged ruling elite.

The personal dilemma of the Schultzes is a particularly sharp, individual expression of this problem. But the danger extends to a population in any way tied to Washington's wars and its economic policies. *Foxcatcher* at least implies something along these lines when it highlights du Pont's flag-waving and nationalism, and, after all, he was the descendant of munitions suppliers once dubbed "the merchants of death."



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