



eye on the oscars the screenplay

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PAUL HAGGIS 'Million Dollar Baby'

Studio: Warner Bros. (released Dec. 15)

Category: Adapted from short stories by F.X. Toole.

Storyline: A grizzled trainer of prizefighters (Clint Eastwood) gains an unlikely title prospect in a tough, eager white female from the sticks (Hilary Swank), who develops a legendary knockout punch, launching them on a path to glory until fate sends them both on a very different journey.

About the script: Based on short fiction by a former boxing trainer, the script is being talked about for the brutal left hook it delivers in its sudden departure from genre expectations, and for the depth and truth of its character work. Says Haggis of finding the material, "I was driving down the freeway from Santa Monica to Sony, where I was doing a TV show, and they were talking about this book on (the radio). I immediately asked my development person to track down the rights." Toole, the 72-year-old author, wanted \$50,000 for the story "Million Dollar Baby" and another. Haggis put up the funds with a partner. He wrote the script on spec, with Hilary Swank in mind. Lakeshore



came aboard to produce, and Swank and Eastwood quickly signed on. Haggis says he nervously offered to make any changes Eastwood might need; "Clint said, 'Script's fine.'"

Biggest challenge: "To create a world that surrounded Frankie (Eastwood) that allowed the simple truths of this story that F.X. Toole had written to come to light. Much of the story (by Toole) was internal, and there was just Frankie and Maggie

(Swank). He didn't own a gym; he didn't have a daughter that he was estranged from. There was no narration in the letters, no sin that he couldn't forgive himself for. I had to fabricate quite a bit to find actions that brought their inner feelings to light."

Breakthrough idea: "When I created the relationship between Frankie and Scrap (Morgan Freeman), this friendship that went back so many years.

That led into the narration — when I realized who was talking and why they were talking, which you don't find out until the very end. When I figured that out, I knew I could tie the whole thing together."

Standout scene: Frankie and Scrap have a back-and-forth in the gym's office over the holey socks worn by Scrap, who has his feet propped up on the desk. The grouching and affectionate nagging seems so organic to



HAGGIS

their spousal-feeling relationship that, Haggis says, "Everyone thinks they ad-libbed, that it was constructed in the moment, but every

line is written. I take that as a great compliment."

Choice line: "Fly there, drive back." Maggie's decision on how she and Frankie will make the trip from L.A. to Vegas for the title fight, a line she repeats later to illustrate the irony of circumstances neither could have anticipated.

Writer's bio: A longtime writer for television, Haggis recently directed the indie feature "Crash," about race relations in Los Angeles, from a script he co-wrote with Bobby Moresco. It premiered at the Toronto film festival and was acquired by Lions Gate for spring 2005 release. Three additional features he's written on assignment are in pre-production, including another that Clint Eastwood plans to direct, the WWII epic "Flags of My Fathers."

— Amy Dawes