

I've Written About Cars for Over 30 Years. Here's Why 'Ferrari' Is the First Great Car Movie

Dan Neil

IT'S 1957 AND ENZO FERRARI (Adam Driver) is running late. The founder of the famed Italian racing and sports-car manufacturer rises from his mistress's bed, steps into his trousers and tiptoes out the door, pushing his Peugeot 403 down the driveway before starting the engine. Another day of lies begins.

Director Michael Mann's concours-quality "Ferrari," opening in December, finds the 59-year-old Il Commendatore in midlife crisis. The Great Engineer has a second family—including an illegitimate son, Piero—an empty bank account and an estranged wife/business partner, Laura (Penélope Cruz). She's waiting at home with a Beretta.

I was invited to a screening at the New York Film Festival last Friday on the grounds that I knew something about Ferrari. [The cars, sure.](#) I've been to Maranello many times to test the latest hardware. Ferraristi will recognize the company gates on Via Abetone and the colonnaded streets of Modena, where Ferrari lived. I've also interviewed Piero Ferrari, now vice chairman of the company and multibillionaire, which is nice for him.

But, like most enthusiasts, what I knew of the man behind the sunglasses came from two books: Brock Yates' magisterial "Ferrari: The Man and the Machine"; and Ferrari's own "My Terrible Joys." These books nail down the established facts of the man who built the greatest team in the history of motor sports and the most valuable luxury brand in the world.

Also established: Ferrari was a well-dressed, fastidiously groomed maniac, a tyrant, obsessed with winning, indifferent to death and suffering and generally scornful of the rules that bind others. Ferrari admits as much.

So not an easy guy to live with. Troy Kennedy Martin's screenplay puts a glass to the couple's bedroom door, reconstructing the private drama behind this very public name, drawing on months of research in Emilia-Romagna and interviews with everyone they could find who knew them personally. Interiors included his son Dino's mausoleum and Laura's bedroom, a shuttered space decorated in funereal blacks and browns.

In many ways the film belongs to the other Ferrari, Laura. After all, Enzo doesn't really have an emotional arc—racers typically don't. He doesn't change, doesn't learn, doesn't grow except to become more inscrutable, his froggy eyes hidden behind trademark sunglasses.

Laura is distraught when she learns of Piero—a living heir to the kingdom she was building for Dino. At that moment she has the power to bankrupt Enzo and every reason to do so. But she doesn't. She can't. It's her company too. As the only condition for bailing him out, Laura insists that Piero not be given the Ferrari name until after her death. Needless to say if there were a Constructor's Championship for faces, Cruz would win easily.

Aficionados know that the real Laura Garelo later provoked the great walkout of 1961, when Enzo lost some of his most talented people. But that's inadmissible cinematic evidence.

All events lead to the 1957 Mille Miglia, a bloodthirsty 1,000-mile road race around Italy. Ferrari's accountants have told him he must win. The factory team, Scuderia Ferrari, enters five cars, including a 335 S driven by Marquess Alfonso de Portago (Gabriel Leon), a 28-year-old Spanish sportsman.

Thirty miles from the finish, a front tire of De Portago's Ferrari explodes, sending the car scything into spectators at more than 150 mph. Nine are killed, including five children, and 20 more injured. Co-driver Edmund Nelson and De Portago are also killed, the latter cut in half at the waist. Mann's camera moves slowly over, if not dwells on, this slaughter, the human wreckage typical of what we now think of as the golden age of motor sports.

In Brescia, Ferrari's Piero Taruffi (Patrick Dempsey) takes the checkered flag with teammate Von Trips coming in second. But there is no joy in Modena. Amid public outrage and calls for Ferrari himself to be jailed, Italian authorities ban racing on public roads.

Every frame of this film will make car-lovers want to roll around like a cat on catnip. Scaglietti-bodied Testarossas, Fantuzzi-bodied Maseratis, Jaguar D-Types, Mercedes 300 SLs, all glowing in the rich, reddening light of Emilia-Romagna. According to Mann, the stunt cars were all exact replicas with the exception of Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason's Maserati 450 S, which was the real thing, worth tens of millions.

Stirling Moss's stringback gloves, Taruffi's shock-white hair, carburetors by Weber, gauges by Jaeger—all period correct. The filmmakers even re-create the famous "Kiss of Death" moment, when De Portago's celebrity-girlfriend Linda Christian was photographed kissing him for good luck.

Going in I was skeptical whether any racing film could attract a general audience. Few movies set in a racing milieu hold up as cinema. Actually, most of them are ridiculous. Mickey Rooney in "The Big Wheel," Sly Stallone in "Driven." Fuhgettaboutit. Steve McQueen's beloved "Le Mans" is just stupid, a petulant farce wrapped around racing footage.

I am now prepared to declare "Ferrari" the best car movie ever made—maybe even the first great car movie. It's a spectacular piece of filmmaking, worthy of the legend.

I do have one note. That tall, broad-shouldered man with the gorgeous brown eyes and wandering Italian accent, he's supposed to be Enzo? Because, well, Enzo was not a handsome man—bulging eyes, droopy lids, bad teeth, a schnoz like Cosimo de Medici. And a half-foot shorter.

For a production otherwise devoted to looking-glass verisimilitude, the presence of the tall, dark and bankable Driver fairly reeks of commercial considerations. I suppose it's to be expected—cinema and racing are both necessarily expedient—but it took me out of the dramatic moment. Apparently both Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale were previously attached to the project.

They don't look much like Enzo, either.

Corrections & Amplifications

The Ferrari driver who was in a fatal accident in the 1957 Mille Miglia, a 1,000-mile road race in Italy, was Marquess Alfonso de Portago. A previous version of this article mistakenly identified him as Count Alfonso de Portago.

Copyright ©2023 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
87990cbe856818d5eddac44c7b1cdeb8

Appeared in the October 21, 2023, print edition as 'Enzo Ferrari's Dramatic Life Makes for Cinematic Catnip'.