



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on October 8, 2011

Futuristic Underdog Film “Real Steel”: Emotion, Action, Redemption

Real Steel is an engaging film about the world of boxing in the year 2020, when the sport no longer permits human fighters. Instead, the boxing industry features bouts between 1,000-pound robots, leaving pugilists such as Charlie Kenton (Hugh Jackman) in the lurch. The movie — reportedly inspired by a 1963 episode of *Twilight Zone*, and adapted to the big screen by John Gatins — ranges from action-packed boxing scenes to the emotional drama of paternal relationships. It’s an underdog story that’s virtually a cross between *Rocky* and *Cinderella Man*.



Charlie Kenton is an experienced loser, always seemingly out of luck. In a stark scene depicting the hole he’s dug for himself, at the beginning of the movie he awakes with a hangover, surrounded by empty beer bottles — and his first compulsion is to take another sip of beer.

Forced out of the work he loves by the new boxing rules, Charlie takes a menial job transporting robots and pieces in an 18-wheeler. Meanwhile, he’s compulsively gambling — and consistently losing.

Just when Charlie thinks things could get no worse, he learns that his ex-girlfriend has died, leaving him the sole guardian of their 11-year-old son Max (Dakota Goyo), whom he had forgotten about. The boy’s Aunt Debra (Hope Davis) wants custody of him, but her wealthy new husband Marvin (James Rebhorn) is more interested in a child-free trip to Europe. And Charlie is much more focused on making quick money than in establishing a relationship with his son.

When Marvin and Debra offer Charlie \$50,000 to sign over his parental rights to them, Charlie believes he’s found himself a pretty sweet deal. The only stipulation is that he watch Max for the summer while the couple take their European vacation. Charlie figures he can handle a short summer with his son, planning for his new girlfriend to take care of the boy as often as possible.

However, Max is no doormat. He’s aware of the deal with his father, and expects to get a cut of the money Charlie will receive.

Things begin to change when Max discovers an old robot, Atom, in a garbage dump, and decides to transform it and enter it in a boxing match. Charlie — intrigued by the idea, as well as his son’s passion and skill with the robot — begins to spend more time with his son, growing increasingly tolerant of his company. Charlie sees a bit of himself in Max, notably his stubbornness and toughness.

Much of the film focuses on this softening of Charlie’s exterior toward his son. He soon discovers his own better qualities in his son — qualities which Charlie unfortunately has lost over time. The relationship between father and son undergoes a transformation, with Charlie ultimately apologizing to



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Max for not being there for him throughout his life. He even admits, “You deserve better than me.”

In a poignant moment, Max tells his father, “I want you to fight for me! That’s all I ever wanted.”

These realistic and moving conversations between father and son are some of the best scenes in the movie, and both actors deliver warm and engaging performances.

Meanwhile, because of his growing relationship with his son, Charlie finds he can be more vulnerable with others, most notably his longtime friend Bailey (Evangeline Lilly).

It’s worth noting that Charlie is not the greatest role model, as he and Max regularly engage in betting on the robot battles, as well as breaking into a junkyard to steal spare robot parts.

Real Steel, though certainly not a spiritual film, does explore significant moral questions such as the importance of parents’ guidance and presence in the lives of their children. Additionally, Charlie recommends prayer at one point, just as he and Max are about to enter their robot in its first official fight.

Real Steel has enough elements to appeal to a variety of moviegoers. Besides the dramatic undertones in the film, it features incredible robotic battles. In fact, some reports are that boxing legend Sugar Ray Leonard played a significant role in the motion-capture mix.

Most of the movie’s violence is made more tolerable by the fact that it is between robots. However, there are some savage scenes when Charlie’s creditors turn up looking for the money he owes them and he doesn’t have it.

As far as the acting, all of the cast delivered performances that — while not necessarily Oscar-worthy — were nevertheless skillful and entertaining. Overall, *Real Steel*’s winsome underdog story will likely captivate audiences from start to finish.



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