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WRESTLMANIA 28 – NON-PC, BUT SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE?

Professional wrestling should not be expected to be “politically correct” nor should it be PC. The aim of professional wrestling is to entertain the audience; the goal of wrestling promotions is to be profitable; presenting non-PC “story-lines” is one of the draws that, for better or worse, serve both of those purposes.

Nonetheless, many wrestling promotions, large and small, have endeavored to be socially responsible outside of the squared circle – holding benefit programs, supporting the Armed Forces, WWE’s recent anti-bullying PSA’s, etc.

Wrestlemania 28, April 1, 2012 will highlight a match between CM Punk and Chris Jericho, fighting for the self-proclaimed title of “The Best Wrestler in the World.” There is no argument from this quarter that if not *the* best, these two men are truly among the few *very best* “at what they do.”

For the uninitiated, in brief, CM Punk has branded himself as “straight-edged” carrying a strong anti-substance abuse message. The promotion for this match has Jericho mocking Punk, to the point of “exposing” substance abuse problems in Punk’s family. The interchanges between the two have been raw and emotional with Jericho portraying a sadistic, bullying heel and Punk standing up for his integrity and his beliefs with an apparent emotional sincerity that few beyond these two extremely talented individuals could convey. The match itself promises to be a classic.

At the same time, from the point of view of a psychiatrist who has worked with thousands of persons with personal and/or family substance abuse issues, this story-line provides a unique opportunity for social responsibility. Unfortunately, I feel that CM Punk’s “straight-edge” message became lost and diluted during a previous story-line when his character was “turned heel” and the fans (and especially parents with children

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in the audience) were left in the uncomfortable, paradoxical and in my opinion, socially *irresponsible* position of being prompted to root *against* the anti-drug spokesman.

It does not seem that WWE is on track to make that mistake again, nor does it seem that CM Punk will allow that to happen again via his ring character. I do not know CM Punk's actually personal or family history, nor do I want to, nor is it any of my business. All good performers understand now that the characters they inhabit must be informed by aspects of their own personality *and* by aspects of their "shadow" personality, moderated for dramatic purpose – whether the character portrayed is autobiographical, fictional, historical or a living person. I know of no two wrestlers who appear more skilled in this respect than CM Punk and Chris Jericho.

I am not suggesting professional wrestling is a "good" venue for people seeking to work through family substance abuse issues. There is a "dark side" to all forms of entertainment which use violence to entertain or glorify violence. Yet one cannot minimize the popularity and immense audience that professional wrestling commands. Further, as I have discussed in previous writings, since professional wrestlers are not actually trying to inflict serious injury upon each other, professional wrestling has a very different psychological dynamic (for both participants and fans) from other forms of combatant athletic competition (or even the New Orleans Saints reported "bounty" program).

This particular storyline provides an opportunity for CM Punk, using Chris Jericho as his foil, to give voice to truly useful and empowering statements regarding coping with substance abuse issues (as occurred on Monday Night Raw, March 19th). Without any loss of attention to the actual ring action, I strongly urge and support WWE, Chris Jericho and CM Punk to take this storyline forward in a (non-PC but) socially responsible manner of which all can be proud, and which will truly elevate these men as transformational figures within professional wrestling who, without doubt, are "The Best at What they Do."