

Interview: ‘The Wrestler’ Director Darren Aronofsky on Mickey Rourke’s Comeback

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CHICAGO – In his excellent new film “The Wrestler,” director Darren Aronofsky brings back the heyday and underbelly of the 1980s professional wrestling world in the character of Randy “The Ram” Robinson.



Portraying The Ram is another 1980s refugee, Mickey Rourke, who seems to showcase his own trials through the aging showman character, parallel to the ups and downs of his film career.

In an interview with HollywoodChicago.com, Aronofsky (“Requiem for a Dream,” “The Fountain” and “Pi”) spoke about the fascinating elements in the film’s subject matter and what he wants the audience to see, the gritty and intuitive performance of Mickey Rourke.



“That became a big reason why I wanted to make the film, the forgotten talent of Mickey Rourke,” the director said. “No one had gotten to see him be sympathetic and lovable in a role for a number of years.”



Marisa Tomei as Cassidy in “The Wrestler”
Photo credit: Protozoa Pictures

The Ram is a pro wrestler in the present day, outside his glory years of the 1980s, forced to keep plying his trade in the back alley end of the sport. Through a haze of steroids and cheap theatrics in “Mad Max” style exhibition halls, The Ram still gives it his all, so much so that he suffers a heart attack.

Forced to find a new career, The Ram cannot connect to the real world. He tries to make up with a long-lost daughter (Evan Rachel Wood) and even attempts a romance with a friendly stripper (Marisa Tomei, in a revealing performance).

“To Marisa’s credit,” Aronofsky said, “she was brave and bold. She went for it.”

“The more you think about about it, the more connections between wrestling and stripping there are,” he further observed. “They both go through a curtain to the stage, they both create a fantasy for the audience, they have stage names, they dress up in costumes and they both use their bodies for commerce.”



Mickey Rourke in “The Wrestler”.
Photo credit: Niko Tavernise

Aronofsky’s interest in the nature of professional wrestling came from an idea he had in film school.

“It came out of the observation that there are so many boxing movies made it’s almost its own genre, but few have done wrestling pictures,” he said. “I realized it was an actual sport, but more based in performance. I found that line between real and fake very intriguing.”

He added: "When we first started thinking about the movie, its started with a single image, which I knew would be the ending, of the wrestler jumping from the top rope. The producer and I developed the story from there and then we hired screenwriter Rob Siegel, who worked three years on it and breathed all the life into the script."

When The Ram is asked to fight an old nemesis, "The Ayatollah," it could be the match-up that makes him again or breaks him permanently. Rourke the actor approaches the challenge within the role with his unique gifts.

"Between action and cut, there was no one I've ever met who was as natural, and he was in complete control," Aronofsky said. "He was aware of what was going on and was always fully there as the character."

Aronofsky commented additionally on Rourke's comeback within the context of the actor's big initial splash and leaner years later – which mirrors The Ram.

"He talks a lot about his career elsewhere," he said, "but I think fame happened to him when he was young and he didn't have the tools to deal with it."

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"It was undiscussed but understood. But until we were done he never admitted the connections he felt between himself and the character," he added. "There is a hard time between where he ends and the character begins but I think that is his method."

Seeming again to speak of his leading man's journey, Darren Aronofsky concluded with a description of Rourke's triumphant performance.

"The Ram is a very complex individual. Mickey plays him as a very tragic character with a good heart and a good soul. He loves what he does, but he can't distinguish between what is real and what is fake. His life in the ring is as real for him as his life out of the ring. That's his tragedy."

"The Wrestler" opens December 25, 2008, in Chicago at AMC River East 21 and Evanston at CineArts 6, and features Mickey Rourke, Marisa Tomei, Evan Rachel Wood and is directed by Darren Aronofsky.



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