

‘Creed’ is a Champion in the Rocky Balboa Legacy

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – This is what happens when passionate filmmakers come into a known movie project – with an obvious love for the previous stories and characters – and create a new chapter that both evolves and honors its source. “Creed” does all of that, and gives the beloved Rocky Balboa one more time in the spotlight.

Writer/director Ryan Coogler – with screenwriter Aaron Covington – are the creators, taking the universe of Rocky Balboa (the opening scene of the first film takes place 40 years ago today, on November 25th, 1975, and includes six previous films) and expanding it with the story of Adonis Creed, the son of Rocky’s first opponent, heavyweight champion Apollo Creed. The approach is straightforward and clean, borrowing from Sylvester Stallone’s last outing as the Rocky character, “Rocky Balboa,” and adding the Adonis situation to the mix. Director Coogler also used some unexpected tools in his filmmaker’s arsenal to generate his own mark on the series, while venerating what came before in an almost perfect tribute.

Adonis Johnson (portrayed as an adult by Michael B. Jordan) is first introduced as a foster child, whose anger is realized in constant fighting. He is rescued from this circumstance by Mary Anne Creed (Phylicia Rashad), the widow of heavyweight champ Apollo Creed, who died in the ring. Johnson is the illegitimate son of Apollo, but the widow adopts and raises him as her own.



Adonis (Michael B. Jordan) and Rocky (Sylvester Stallone) in 'Creed'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Even as an adult, the fighting spirit never leaves Adonis, and he becomes a boxer to seek connection to Apollo. He quits a high level job, and moves from Los Angeles to Philadelphia to find Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), to solicit him as a trainer. The reluctant ex-champion is guilty about Apollo's death, and at first doesn't want to do it. But there is a redemption necessary for both men, as they come together to try to eradicate past sins within the confines of the boxing ring, and resurrect the newly minted Adonis Creed.

What is most impressive about this "new" Rocky film is how neatly it fits into the Rocky universe, with a knowledge about the past stories that uplifts the present. Adonis knows everything about the Rocky legend, and those secrets are what gets the attention of the reticent Balboa. Stallone is much more careful with his most famous character in this outing as well, never pushing him into absurdity or unlikeliness, using Coogler's script to deepen his character development.

Another strength in the film is how it uses boxing as a metaphor for redemption, while also getting inside what it takes to have the knowledge and fitness to participate in the sport. Some of the best scenes involve the inside world of the sweaty training gyms, familiar to Rocky and introduced to Adonis. Michael B. Jordan is shown doing the gymnastics of boxing, and Stallone uses his vast knowledge to give advice on a level that makes sense. It's a small but vital link to what these men authentically do, and adds a real spice to a whole new legacy.

There are cinematic elements that director Coogler also adds, including a "life flashes before the eyes" segment that deeply defines the soul of the Adonis struggle, despite the rescue from his mother. The two main characters are also the most honestly drawn, although Michael B. Jordan could use some training in outer expression, he tends to have a blank look. Stallone is heavily in buzz about the Best Supporting Actor Oscar, and the performance is worthy. In this outing, Rocky is all heart and inner conflict, and he's not so much training Adonis as coming to terms with his entire life.



Gonna Fly Now: Rocky Balboa Gives Advice to a New Generation in ‘Creed’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

There is a love story, between Adonis and a singer named Bianca (Tessa Thompson), and that is the weakest part of the film. Maybe she is set up to be Creed’s “Adrian” character, but once the film kicks into the last act she is almost forgotten. Adding this subplots puts 20 minutes onto the movie that it doesn’t need – especially on the front end – as it’s a bit stuck in first gear. This is wiped out by the adrenalized ending, but still could have been more of a contender.

The truth is that those who love movies can’t help but love Rocky Balboa. It’s lucky that Stallone has lived long enough to come to this full circle with his creation, and that there are filmmakers who still care about a lovable palooka with the struggles to overcome, and the victories to share.

“Creed” opens everywhere on November 25th. Featuring Michael B. Jordan, Sylvester Stallone, Tessa Thompson, Phylicia Rashad and Tony Bellew. Screenplay by Ryan Coogler and Aaron Covington. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Rated “PG-13”



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