

Review: The Wrestler

Submitted by [KingoftheMods](#) on Tue, 12/23/2008 - 15:52.



Esoteric Aronofsky rough-houses with Rourke in *The Wrestler*. **Kimberly Gadette** wonders: is it a match?

The long blond mane, frizzed and fried – victim of decades of peroxide abuse – still swings with an innate sexuality.

The body, stuffed into skimpy spandex, heavily reliant on age-defying products, still struts with a well-toned muscularity. The star, tanned and exercised, still makes personal appearances, happy to pose for pictures and sign autographs. Still appearing for an admiring crowd that may be in attendance, please God. But after two decades and counting, the fight gets harder every day.

Who is it? An ex-starlet from an '80s sitcom? Some Grammy-laden 'best new artist' of yesteryear? A world-renowned dancer, a famous TV anchor, an ex-Olympian? And so goes the genius of this film: it's Mickey Rourke as professional wrestler Randy 'the Ram' Robinson, attempting to revive his glory days from two decades ago. It's Mickey Rourke the actor, doing the same. And ... it's us. Every last one of us who wrestles with our individual pasts, afraid that the best may have come and gone. Whether it's that once-glorious dream date, the final touchdown, the wedding, the promotion, whatever our personal apex may be, *The Wrestler* poses hard, dark questions: what are we made of, what defines our inner grace, and how will we integrate our past sense of self, however factual or fictitious, with our very real present?

After the camera tracks the timeline of Randy the Ram's career via large-lettered handbills visually braying out one match after another, our first introduction to this wrestling superstar is aural: we hear his hacking cough. This is followed by a faceless tease as he's photographed from behind, first in an empty elementary school classroom as he waits to get paid for his latest appearance, then as he lumbers up to his trailer home only to realize he's locked out, his rent long overdue. As he hunkers down to sleep in his van, we finally see his reflection in the windshield. More than just a pummeled hunk of shoe leather, his face is a virtual history, scars and pits representing every blow he's ever suffered.

When health issues force him to rethink his fighting career, where does he turn? Is it too late for him to start over?



Fascinated by the theatrical sphere of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), committed to filming an authentic portrayal rather than a send-up, director Darren Aronofsky (*The Fountain*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Pi*) shared his ideas with ex-*Onion* satirist/screenwriter Robert Siegel. Together they fashioned a film that puts us in the center of the ring, employing the WWE jargon, exaggerated costume and traditional antics (eg self-inflicting razor cuts to the forehead to amp up the drama, breaking furniture, taking staple guns to the opponent). Employing professional WWE wrestlers, Aronofsky filmed the fights without stunt men, in front of live audiences.

And yet into this faked world of theatrical wrestling comes one of the most real performances of the year. Fulfilling the promise of his earliest cinematic splashes, Rourke is a revelation. He melds the tough, blue-collar guy with a light humorous touch, all the while trying to deny the aching heart of a sentimental fool, embarrassed as he feels tears rolling down his worn face, and too proud to acknowledge them. Rourke seizes onto this role from the first frame forward, never letting up until the screen fades to black. His is a must-see performance.

Also notable are his two female co-stars. Marisa Tomei is a knock-out as the aging stripper, doing her best to win her own fight over gravity, intuitively surviving with a smarter head and heart than she gives herself credit for. As Randy's neglected daughter, Evan Rachel Wood walks the tightrope between clenched-fisted anger and sheer vulnerability. Their emotional scenes together work in perfect complement to the grittier realities of the ring and the strip club.

Shot with handheld cameras that give the rough and tumble world an appropriate rough and grainy look, *The Wrestler* is a testament to seamless directing, writing and acting. But does it have muscle? Like a serious weightlifter on steroids ...

Rating on a scale of 5 smackdowns: 4.5

– **Kimberly Gadette** on *The Wrestler*

Release dates: US: December 17, 2008; UK: January 16, 2009

Directed by: Darren Aronofsky

Screenplay by: Robert D Siegel

Cast: Mickey Rourke, Marisa Tomei, Evan Rachel Wood

Rating: US: R; UK: 12A

Running time: 105 minutes



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