



CINEMA FOR ALL

**Director**

Darren Aronofsky

**Cast**

Mickey Rourke

Marisa Tomei

Evan Rachel Wood

**Certificate 15**

USA 2008, 1h49m



Embittered, lonely and surviving on past glories, an ageing professional wrestler has found the only thing he was ever good at torn from him by both a mammoth corporate machine he cannot comprehend, and his own excesses and transgressions. His wife long gone, he consumes drugs to ease the pain of poverty and a daughter who loathes the sight of him. It is only in the wrestling rings of small town America that he is truly alive. A synopsis of Darren Aronofsky's film *The Wrestler*, yes, and with some liberties taken, the life of its star, Mickey Rourke. The aforementioned plot can also summarise the life of Jake "The Snake" Roberts, a key figure in the "Second Golden Age" of professional wrestling (the first being the 1950s heyday of "Gorgeous" George Wagner), and the unacknowledged but undeniable influence for Randy "The Ram" Robinson.

Roberts was one subject of Barry W. Blaustein's insightful, affectionate but heartbreaking documentary *Beyond the Mat* (1999), a film which dared to take the world of wrestling seriously and incurred the wrath of WWE Chairman Vince McMahon in the process. With its characterisations and behind the scenes insights, *The Wrestler* owes a clear debt to Blaustein's film. That said, the history of wrestling pictures is hardly ripe with classics: aside from the Mexican Lucha Libre films, the likes of *No Holds Barred*, *Body Slam* and *Paradise Alley* failed to make any real impact.

One of the ironies *Beyond the Mat* explored was how an overtly theatrical, billion dollar multimedia industry, geared shamelessly towards our basest desires, could be so beset by personal and economic tragedy. For every Hulk Hogan, Roddy Piper, Steve Austin or Dwayne Johnson, there is a Sherri Martel, Elizabeth Ann Hulette, Owen Hart, Curt Hennig or Kerry Von Erich. The number of drug related deaths and suicides is devastating, and many wrestlers like Roberts have found themselves chewed up and spat out by the industry. The most high profile catastrophe was that of wrestler Chris Benoit, who in 2007 shot his wife and son dead before turning the gun on himself.

While Aronofsky's film never plumbs these depths, it is unflinching in its portrayal of a man on society's lowest rung. After a Quiet Riot backed titles sequence establishing Randy's silver circle successes, we hard cut to a wide angle of the wrestler, his back to us, coughing unhealthily in the grotty dressing room of a dilapidated gym. Randy spends all available hours working in a supermarket to keep his place in a trailer park home he cannot afford. His few moments of solace are found in the company of Cassidy (Marisa Tomei), a stripper with a frat-boy clientele. One grim scene finds him selling his own merchandise in a community centre surrounded by fellow wrestlers unable to control their bodily functions. The director explored similar territory with *Requiem For A Dream*, but formally the two films have little in common.

Discarding the mannered, expressive and at times hallucinatory style of his previous work, Aronofsky here shoots on hand held super 16, using only available light, real locations, long takes and a musical score so minimal you would never believe it was performed by Guns N' Roses guitar legend, Saul "Slash" Hudson. This realist approach may seem obvious for a low-budget film set in blue collar New Jersey, yet the gritty form juxtaposes neatly with the vibrant colours of wrestling, whether it be the bleached hairstyles, spandex costumes or the glittering fetish wear of the film's pole dancers. The director's gaze remains supposedly "neutral"

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throughout, never creating a spectacle of the violence (there is one unexpectedly brutal but nervously comic sequence involving staple guns and barbed wire) or eroticising the strippers. That wrestling and stripping, performance art at its most primal, are two sides of the same coin is one of the film's most significant themes. Nonetheless, the film's trump card and beating, damaged heart is unquestionably its leading man: Mickey Rourke.

In his Golden Globe acceptance speech for the film, Rourke firstly thanked his agent David Unger for "having the balls" to represent him. The last decade saw the actor at his lowest ebb. *Rumble Fish*, *Diner*, *9 & ½ Weeks* and *Angel Heart* made the handsome and charismatic former boxer a star, but his arrogance, aggression and refusal to play the Hollywood game (not to mention some seriously misjudged comments about the IRA conflict) forced him into exile. This man who had rejected *The Untouchables*, *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Pulp Fiction* would find himself in the likes of *Wild Orchid*, *Exit In Red* and *Double Team*. A brutal return to the boxing ring and more than a few sessions of plastic surgery would damage those once irresistible good looks. Rourke was a changed man, and his health, his confidence and his career had failed him.

The parallels between Rourke and Randy are palpable, then, but the wrestler's comeback (a fight against old adversary The Ayatollah: Aronofsky and Robert Siegel addressing the rampant jingoism and borderline racism of American wrestling seen in the likes of *The Iron Shiek*, *Colonel Mustafa*, *The Bolsheviks* and *Bad News Brown*) also echoes Rourke's. His new agent, old industry friends and edgy young indie kids would find him character parts in *The Rainmaker*, *Buffalo '66*, *Animal Factory* (in drag!), *The Pledge* and *Spun*. It would be popular filmmakers such as Tony Scott and Robert Rodriguez, however, who would take full advantage of Rourke's battered features and grizzled manner in *Man On Fire*, *Domino* and *Sin City*, although Rourke has always cited Sylvester Stallone as his saviour for casting him in the *Get Carter* remake (apparently Stallone wanted an actor "who looks like he could have a piece of me.")

Aronofsky keeps his camera close to Rourke, at times uncomfortably so. We are never far from his weathered face and move along with only the pace his bulky frame will allow. This is truly soul bearing stuff, but it is far from depressing. Siegel's comedy background shines through in moments of warm humour, and the final face off the film has promised is both remarkably underplayed and overwhelmingly beautiful. Aronofsky here proves himself to be a subtle and masterful director, Rourke makes his triumphant return to the big league (he will soon be seen in the *Iron Man* sequel and returning Stallone's favour in the all-star *The Expendables*) and Randy transcends all that is wrong with himself and his world.

### **Michael Gillespie**

The Skinny