



The Stuff In the Basement

A Reflection on **Rocky Balboa**

He's been part of Philly's landscape, part of us for so long, reflecting both our stubborn spirit and our embarrassments that he's become something of a cliché we haul out on occasion and sheepishly hide the rest of the time. But few here would join in the savagery with which the world greeted the news last year that Rocky Balboa was returning for a proper swansong. Charges of overwrought ego and overstayed welcomes mingled with geriatrics jokes as nearly every would-be screen scribe gleefully set in on the impending ship-Rock. A few, like Newsweek's reviewer, did see the big picture and got it right. And in the end, Rocky Balboa - our Rocky- couldn't have been better served. Neither could we. Now we all know it.

As much as anyone or anything Rocky sounded the wake-up call for an entire generation to shed the stupor of mere existence and grab life by the short ones: take a shot. Far more than codifying the greeting "Yo," leading countless youngsters to abuse raw eggs, and immortalizing the steps of Philly's Art Museum for millions worldwide who couldn't care less about the stuff inside the building, the oaf-savant in the grimy grey sweats reviewed for us some useful lessons. The circumstances of our births aren't decrees by the Almighty for matching life-scripts. Believers ultimately have more fun than doubters. Ultimate struggles are worth the pain regardless the outcome. It ain't over til it's over. Right now is as fine a starting point as any.

Thirty years later, many of us who came of age with the Italian Stallion are also getting long in the tooth, sharing his angst about unfulfilled hopes and the encroaching twilight. This is happening at time when "sixty is the new forty" challenges F. Scott Fitzgerald's bleak reminder "there are no second acts in American lives," so perhaps we might have expected more respect and less ridicule greeting the Stallone/Rocky resurrection. On the other hand, for such a skeptic-smasher to have maximum impact, this real-world scorn couldn't be more appropriate, mirroring as it does, the incredulousness of the film's population.

The improbability of a sixty year-old fighting the world champ -much less surviving the experience- doesn't matter. Nor does the questionable viability of that crazed strongman/bodybuilding pre-fight regimen (as much as it might wean countless thousands from their treadmills and elliptical trainers to the weight room). There's been enough similar magic in real life - Ali vs. Forman, Wepner vs. Ali, Forman vs antiquity- to allow us some believing room. And even if you can't believe in the magic, we have one very visi-

ble and immediately relevant truth here: at sixty, Stallone, in his burly and chiseled glory, not only looks infinitely more impressive than his adversary, he makes his original 1976 incarnation look like a lump. You don't have to care about boxing, about Rocky, or even about physiques for that to matter. It's about possibility, redemption, and the glow from whatever stuff we might still have in the basement. Even as the door closes gracefully and gratefully on the Rocky saga, that stuff is ours to keep. Thanks, Rock...

