

STYLE SPECIAL



Esquire

EIGHT FIGHTS
SIX DOGS
THREE FACES
TWO MARRIAGES
BUT ONLY ONE...

MICKEY ROURKE

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

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MICKEY ROURKE I'M GIVING THEM GOLD!

Like a great film, Mickey Rourke's life has played out in three acts. But now, having escaped the abyss, the greatest actor of his generation is aiming to become the greatest actor of this generation — and not kill himself (or anyone else) along the way

Words by Michael Holden
Photographs by Amelia Troubridge



FORTY-SEVEN DAYS since his last cigarette, Mickey Rourke is anxious to reacquaint himself with tobacco on almost any terms. As a man whose battles with his darker instincts are well documented and ongoing, it seems wrong to offer — but with an actor's eye for posture he can tell that you have got some and are uncomfortable about playing a role in any form of relapse. So he puts you at ease, announces to the room that, "I ain't gonna smoke it." He then takes a cigarette, smells it like a good cigar, and sticks it up his nose — a nose rebuilt using cartilage from his ear. For the next half-hour he puts the cigarette in his mouth while he is talking and picks at it with hands that look as though they too have been broken and reformed, until it falls apart. At which point he takes another and the ritual is repeated. At no time does he light up. It is an apposite analogy, it transpires, for his present state of mind. Never far from the point of ignition, these days he is careful with his fuse.

Any screenwriting manual will tell you that most movies consist of three acts: set-up, conflict and resolution. It's a pattern you can apply to Rourke's life as well as to the films that made him famous, the ones that rendered him ridiculous, or those that have lately seen him regain his status. The great story, though, is undoubtedly his own. Ask him who would play him in the movie of his life and he answers, "To be real honest, they'd have to get three people, 'cos two of 'em would drop dead." He is smiling when he says it, but it's no joke.

ACT ONE SEES him born in upstate New York in 1952. His parents split when he is seven and he moves with his mother to Miami, where he and his siblings suffer a tyrannical stepfather whose actions to this day the actor will not dignify with discussion. He takes refuge in sports, chiefly boxing, enjoying a promising amateur career until serious concussions prompt him to retire. He turns to acting and The Actors' Studio in New York, whose founder, Elia Kazan, said Rourke's audition was the best he'd ever seen since the studio began in 1947. A comparison

that by implication includes James Dean, Brando, De Niro and Pacino.

Between 1980 and 1987 a fistful of films, *Body Heat*, *Diner*, *Rumble Fish*, *Angel Heart*, *The Pope Of Greenwich Village* and *Barfly*, confirm to the world what Kazan felt about his talent. By the second half of the decade he is a movie star, as big as they come. Handsome and gifted, alluring to men and women alike, and redolent of a kind of danger, which it will soon transpire is not an act, but an extension of a troubled personality that will prove perilous chiefly to himself.

With a growing reputation for awkward behaviour and nascent roster of questionable films, in 1990 he retires from

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acting and returns to the ring, this time as a professional, aged 39. It is a move described by some in the fight world as suicidal.

Here, you might say, act two begins. After eight fights he notices he is losing his short-term memory and retires. Having not so much burned as incinerated his Hollywood connections, he then falls off the radar. The movies he makes from this point on are either entirely forgettable or memorably bad. After his second wife leaves him he descends into what he describes as "a state of shame". A former mansion dweller, he lives off junk food in one room with six dogs, wondering if the telephone will ring, then gradually realises nobody has his number anymore. By the turn of the century he is an almost

mythical figure — a show business yeti, more rumoured than seen, glimpsed only in impossibly gruesome photographs. A cautionary bedtime story for unruly actors and a rumour for the rest of us. Did you see what he looked like? Was that really him?

Somewhere around the mid 2000s, the resolution begins. He stages a comeback, first with *Sin City* and then, famously, *The Wrestler*: a story with such obvious parallels to his own that the world seems happy to afford him the status of a beloved survivor, all the more welcome for the time that he was lost. For Rourke, though, it is not the final act. "I wanna act right now as long as I am breathing. And what's my favourite movie? I haven't made it yet." He may have returned from the wilderness a changed man, but the old fire is undiminished. He will tell you at length that he is glad to be back on the bus, but that doesn't mean he's going to sit quietly. "No, listen. They're gonna have to pay me my money now, because I'm givin' 'em gold. I'm bringing them the best that I can bring, and when I bring the best that I can bring, it's a cut above the rest. That I *know* about what I can do, and I'm not shy about that at all. So it's not about money on some projects because they can't afford it. But on others, they're gonna have to pay me through the asshole."

We meet in New York City, just around the corner from his home. The first thing you notice about him is that he looks better than he has done in a long, long, time. In part this is due to a short haircut, dispensing with the eccentric mane to which he once seemed wedded. There may be other, subtler and quite possibly surgical processes at play as well. Whatever's gone on, it's working. This man is a clear and close relation of his handsome younger self, and not the distant relative who seemed to have run away and joined the circus (to eat fire, while blindfolded) depicted in the tabloids of yore.

He is an imposing figure also. Physically he has slimmed down from his *Wrestler* peak, but he is still in formidable shape, and not just for a man of 57. The raw presence that he has on screen is here too. There is a certain wild radiance about him, regardless of demeanour. He is not, you

sense, a man whose time is lightly wasted these days. Equally, he is completely focused on the matter at hand. He keeps relentless eye contact; at one point I take a drink and notice he is looking directly back at me through the glass. It is slightly disconcerting but also energising. Were this a scene in a movie, or something unfolding in some nameless bar, you would be glad to have him in the room.

The effect is completed by a low, clear voice delivered in a broad, blue-collar, East Coast accent that only shifts briefly when he does an impression of Sylvester Stallone. He has just completed work on Stallone's movie *The Expendables*, playing a cameo as a thank you, Stallone being one of the few people to give him work when he was down and out. Clearly he is not one to forget a favour, even now that he has a dozen movies either filmed or slated for production. How times change.

He talks of how he fell out of love with making movies during his first run of fame: "All of a sudden they're paying you a ton of money, and you're hating to go to work. It gets real confusing." How though did it even get to that point? No one gets to even be in that position without being tremendously motivated in the first place. "Yeah, I was motivated 'cos I enjoyed competition. I enjoyed boxing and playing football more than I ever did acting. If I couldn't go in there and knock the fuck out of the park and blow the cunt away I'm working with, then let me do something else." Competition with yourself, or with who's around you? "Oh both, both, both."

It would be fair to say then that he had a competitive outlook? "Absofuckinlutely," he concurs. "And there's nothing wrong with that. It's like if you're on a soccer team. You want to be the best player on the field every fuckin' day, and the only way you do that is the way you train. People say, you're so aggressive, you're so competitive. So what? What the fuck is wrong with that? I'll be less aggressive and competitive when they put me in the ground, OK?"

Even for the gifted and driven, surviving as a modern movie star is suited to conformists, something Rourke assuredly is not. When he began to see his movies re-cut, under-promoted or, in the

case of *Angel Heart*, overshadowed by moral indignation, his problems emerged. "Bill Cosby had a hard-on that Lisa Bonet [who had played Cosby's daughter on *The Cosby Show*] did a nude scene in the movie, you know what I'm saying? So people listened to all his bullshit. I thought Lisa did a hell of a job." Point out that in Europe no one cared about that and he still seems annoyed. Talking about the lack of studio support for *The Pope Of Greenwich Village* he says, "I worked too hard on that movie — I broke my ass. I did my job and they didn't do theirs. That was the beginning of the short-circuiting."

Read interviews from this period and he is fabulously indiscreet, railing against

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actors, directors and anything else that riled him. In one prophetic outburst he announced he no longer wished to be known as an actor: "Put down animal on my passport, or businessman, because I am in the business of living and surviving." While they make for refreshing reading — people seldom gave interviews like that then, let alone now — his candour was more than posturing. Disgust was his default state of mind.

Of filming in England in the late-Eighties, he remembers, "I hated going to work every day, so I was in this Daimler and we pull over to the side of the road. Me and my trainer just put the gloves on and beat the piss out of each other, then get in the car and go to the set. That was the only way

I could go to the set every day." Presumably this is no longer part of his pre-performance routine. "No. I was quite mad back then. That was before I had a therapist."

When the boxing replaced the acting entirely, he began to drift away from Hollywood by mutual consent. "I took it to another level where I wanted to do it competitively again and I started to really enjoy it and realised if I don't do it now, competitively, five or six years from now it's gonna be too late. 'Cos you only have a certain amount of time and I wanted to do it one more time. You only live once. I wanted one more time just to do something I enjoy doing. Just, *pheeww*, I enjoy the process. I was tired of the process of the acting, it was like pissing in the wind, you know? But I was also at the point where it was an immaturity, and I blame myself now 'cos I didn't have the tools to realise that a lot of the problem was me. I was taking everything personal. They'd go, 'Mickey, whose ass do you wanna kick? Who do you want to slice up?' You're hollering in the dark. There's nobody there. It's not personal."

Predictably perhaps, he overdid it — training until he began to injure himself again. He stands up and throws punches towards me to illustrate his point. "Like a punch here — a liver shot or a punch in the mouth will really fuckin' hurt, or an upper cut — but the rest of it doesn't hurt after a while. You can take it all, you get desensitised to it, it's like, come back and do it again motherfucker! And it adds up. It's in the training that Ali and everybody got hurt... A lot of the damage comes out." And so you train more than you need to? "Oh absolutely. Oh yeah, yeah. And I enjoyed it and, er, it took its toll."

Like his screen work, much of his conversation takes place between the lines. He uses his face as punctuation, chiefly to express the notion that whatever you might be thinking pales next to the realities he recalls. You also get a sense that he is never far from strong emotion. Drift into certain topics and he seems like he might weep, but he is also given to bouts of deep, hurdy-gurdy laughter. On the subject of the missing years, post-boxing, post-marriage, pre-Wrestler, he is especially sanguine.

“Being somebody who *had* it and lost it all, it was worse than back where I started, because I never tasted the other thing before. And you’re living in a town built on envy and you are as good as your last film and you’re judged on who you are, where you dress, where you live — all that shit — where you go out to eat. I couldn’t afford it — I was eating in Burger King, man, for seven, eight years. I was going to my buddy who was giving me money to eat. If I got really broke I couldn’t pay my rent, I was selling my motorcycles.” It must have cost more to feed the dogs than him. “Yeah, yeah. But we were all eating the same shit. I’d go to Burger King and get three fuckin’ cheeseburgers for myself and several cheeseburgers for them, take the buns off. We’d all eat the same meal.” Later he tells me that he had always been an insomniac, neither boxing nor drinking ever really calmed him down. I say that in that case those years count double, he was almost living in dog years effectively. “Oh fuck!” he says. “You hammered the nail right on the head. Yes, exactly. Sleep back then was few and far between. Wow, I never looked at it like that till what you just said. Yeah, the night never ended.”

Disfigured by the fights and slipshod plastic surgery, he was completely off the map. In LA in 2001 I remember someone referring to him as “The Elephant Rourke”. In one epic period he says he stayed awake for 13 days. An associate from the time went on to work as Maradona’s bodyguard. “He went, ‘Huh, I thought you were bad. But this guy is the devil. You never sleep,

he *never* sleeps.” The difference, Rourke says, is that he wasn’t using drugs. He was driven by his own despondency. “I had issues with my childhood that I never got over. I never got the right information to heal the wounds, fix the broken pieces, so everybody paid. Anybody who came in my way paid for it like they were the enemy from the darkness where I came from.” And so he found himself alone.

True to the maxim, though, the darkest hour was just before the dawn — but to suggest his rehabilitation happened overnight would be simplistic. He sees his renaissance as the result of years of hard learning, good therapy and

day. His name proved to be kryptonite to investors and distributors; at one point he lost the role to another actor. It’s a tribute to both Aronofsky and Rourke’s own determination that things are where they are today.

Does the anger come in useful for performances these days? “Nah,” he says. “I put it to one side. I don’t really tap into that kind of stuff. What I do tap into is — if I’m upset about something, I have to go and catch myself... this is what scared me before. I gotta count to 10. No, I can’t throw a hammer at that guy’s head. I’m not gonna break all the windows.” So those ideas still run through his mind? “And they always will. I’m always gonna be that little guy with two axes in here [he points to his heart]. And I gotta say, ‘Shh. Stay there, quiet. Hold on.’ He wants to come out all the time and I can’t afford that. I don’t wanna go back to the 10 years sitting in my house, lookin’ at the fuckin’ phone.”

After an hour his girlfriend arrives. He tries to get her to tell me what she says to him when they argue, but she won’t and so he tells me himself. “She goes, ‘Go — be alone. You can be a legend all by yourself.’” But he tried that once and it didn’t work. “But there’s a truth to that. You look at all the so-called legends, Brando, Elvis. There’s no happy ending.” So who gets a happy ending? “Probably mediocrity, probably.” And no one could ever accuse him of that. **E**

The Expendables is out on 19 August. *Esquire* flew to New York with British Airways and stayed at The Hudson Hotel

I never got the right information to heal the wounds, fix the broken pieces, so everybody paid, anyone who came in my way paid for it

a measure of good fortune. Making *The Wrestler* with Darren Aronofsky is not the kind of opportunity that happens every

THE AGES OF MICKEY

From the hottest man in Hollywood to bum — and back



Diner (1982)
As Robert “Boogie” Sheftell, he’s asked who he prefers — Sinatra or Mathis. His answer? “Presley.” Cool.



Rumble Fish (1983)
Coppola’s follow-up to *The Outsiders* sees Rourke outshine Dillon, Cage and Fishburne as The Motorcycle Boy.



9½ Weeks (1986)
Gets fruity with Basinger in Adrian Lyne’s notorious erotic drama.



Barfly (1987)
Cements his status as one of the industry’s rising stars with this iconic portrayal of a drunken writer.



BOX-OFFICE PULL: ROURKE WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND, MODEL ANASTASSIJA MAKARENKO



Angel Heart (1987)
Like James Dean and Marlon Brando rolled into one, with torrid Lisa Bonet sex scene thrown in for good measure.

Wild Orchid (1989)
Bizarre erotic flop in which he and co-star Carré Otis (later his wife) act out infamous sex scenes that hit the cutting room floor.



Harley Davidson and Marlboro Man (1991)
In the interests of Mickey's reputation we'll elect to move on.



Double Team (1997)
Plays Stavros the terrorist (rather than kebab shop owner) in Van Damme vehicle that didn't suck quite as hard as it might have.



Sin City (2005)
Signs of life as Rourke plays Hellboy-lite in stylised outing from Robert Rodriguez.



The Wrestler (2008)
An epic, potential-realising turn that earns an Oscar nomination and proves, beyond doubt, Mickey is back.