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presents

MICKEY ROURKE

JUST LIKE A MAN

produced by Acqua Alta

FOREWORD

MICKEY ROURKE: JUST LIKE A MAN

"He could have been the best of us, but he just couldn't stand authority. "

Typical dialogue from a generic 1980s Hollywood movie

"Everyone boxes at some point!"

Charles Bukowski

How did Mickey Rourke, a beloved 80's movie star, a troubled seducer destined to be the great Marlon Brando's designated successor, turn so quickly into the quintessential *persona non grata*, a sad bad-boy hounded by tabloids, a failed boxer, and a living cautionary tale for the excesses of plastic surgery?

By revisiting the journey of this fallen sex symbol who became an icon of abuse, this film proposes, beyond the classic but always moving story of a fall and a possible redemption, to draw a portrait of Mickey Rourke as a very contemporary symbol of a masculinity in crisis. We will observe it through the prism of the representations given by the Hollywood machine to create – and destroy – idols.

SYNOPSIS

Whatever happened to Mickey Rourke ?

For a while, in the heart of the golden eighties, we thought we had found a credible successor to James Dean, Monty Clift and Marlon Brando, in Mickey Rourke's ravishing features.

His eyes always sparkling under heavy eyelids, his fleeting smile, half ironic half sad; everything about him breathed a kind of melancholic and ambiguous benevolence, like the echo of a violence that he would have internalized to turn it against himself. We sensed in this seducer a tormented, compartmentalized, inaccessible inner space, except for brief flashes that made him more endearing to us with each new appearance: as Motorcycle Boy in *Rumble Fish*, as the crusading cop in *Year of the Dragon*, as the drunken writer in *Barfly* or the (literally) cursed private eye in *Angel Heart*...

In a few breathtaking roles, Mickey Rourke the actor has crafted the figure of a wounded man, at the same time sexy, masochistic and unpredictable. Women love him and male viewers are forced to recognize that a breach has been opened: an access to a male interiority that had never been exposed in such a raw way. For this magnetizing figure did not just influence women. At the time, the lines were already blurring. Mickey Rourke the glamorous punk would finally convince a male gender in full identity crisis ...

After attending the mythical Actor's Studio, after a painful childhood in the poor districts of Miami, Mickey Rourke had initially wanted to become a professional boxer. So he acted as if he was in a ring. At the height of his cinematic glory, he practiced the art of surprise, never better than in a duel, building a network of feints to let the unexpected emerge at once, the hidden crack that overturns the power relationships between the characters.

A disturbing game of distorting mirrors, reflecting each other endlessly. Very quickly, and from one film to another, we find a recurring image, which almost ends up becoming a cliché in itself: Mickey Rourke looks into a mirror, which he ends up breaking in anger, before contemplating his shattered, diffracted, irreconcilable reflection. And soon, through the looking glass, the sick masculinity that Mickey Rourke had donned on screen – undoubtedly to his own detriment – would remain in his own flesh... Manly masochism of the ring – sweat and blood... Once again, we cross paths with the shadow of Marlon Brando, who won his first Oscar with the famous speech "*I could have been a contender.*" of the failed boxer in *On the Waterfront*.

Mickey Rourke recalled being impressed, as a kid, by the scene where Marlon Brando dies in the flames at the end of

Mutiny on the Bounty. "It scared the shit out of me, because it was the first time I'd ever seen an actor...suffer like that, and I thought, 'My God, who is that bastard?' It looked so real."

Stanley Kowalski, the anti-hero of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, had made his mark on the collective post-war psyche by being terribly comfortable in his animality. But this was not enough to mask his inability to say... What? The deep internal wound of the modern male. This wound is expressed in Marlon Brando in a palpable way, but diverted, by bursts of rage, a withdrawn sadness, an ambiguous seduction. Alternating flamboyance and poorly kept secret, with a pronounced taste for the sculptural, codified pose, which goes back to ancient statuary. Mickey Rourke takes over this tradition, but the 80's are no longer the 50's: sexual liberation and Women's Lib happened in the meantime, and the era is one of excess, of the manufactured hyper-virility of the body-building heroes embodied by Stallone or Schwarzenegger.

Finding Marlon Brando at the dawn of the seventies, *The Last Tango in Paris* had known how to put in flamboyant images the existential crisis of the middle-aged Western male, his inability to find a just place, to express his pain, to understand it – and to establish with the following generations a relationship that is not one of domination, or even predation.

Fifteen years later, the John Gray played by Mickey in *9 ½ Weeks*, his greatest public success, seems to have nothing left to hide but the ominous void his life as a golden boy has become. The crack is in plain sight, but there's not much left behind. This doesn't prevent the film from establishing Mickey's image as the iconic seducer for a few years: by turns tender and brutal, secret, dominating or abandoning himself like a child... A strange and sexually ambiguous cocktail, which wreaked havoc on the audience's libido (and not only on women).

There's a Madness to the Method

The Method taught at the Actor's Studio has produced its fair share of movie stars between Brando and Mickey Rourke: actors, who are also icons, and whose tumultuous or traumatic private lives nourished their creations on the screen. For the Method insisted on personal experience, the actor having to probe themselves to connect with the character's emotions. But this blurring of inner boundaries, which made the glory of Dean, Clift or Brando, goes a step further in the unintentionally postmodern cinematographic landscape of the eighties: there is a perverse pleasure for the audience to confuse the vulnerability, the suffering, the inner violence of the characters with those of the actor who embodies them, who lends their own flesh to this artistic creation... So much so that the lines have been blurred between dramatic art and emotional pornography.

Like his glorious predecessors regarding the Method, the iconic “Mickey” has played a dangerous game. Mirroring the heartbreaking sincerity of his on-screen compositions, he seems to have insisted on cultivating the same edgy sensitivity, and the same propensity for emotional and social catastrophe in his real life.

Mickey Rourke’s trajectory from the end of the 80’s onwards will start looking eerily like a one-way ticket to hell. For his downfall would come in a heartbeat, in two or three years. At first, we saw him act in a series of bland thrillers such as *A Prayer for the Dying* or *Johnny Handsome* (accompanied by rumors that our idol was unruly on the set, and behaved like an idiot outside).

Then in the painful *Homeboy*, where Mickey portrayed and was portrayed as a second-rate boxer with a bad luck record, according to a script written by him – a first-degree masochistic trip filmed like a long commercial with nothing to sell.

Yet Mickey Rourke didn’t seem to pull the brakes on that losing streak. In 1990, he appeared in the pitiful erotic thriller *Wild Orchid*, sharing his time between Jacqueline Bisset, Carré Otis (his new love, freshly married, hence the “allegedly hot” scenes galore...) and long rides on his Harley, hair in the wind and something wrong in the face... The first signs of a long and painful history with a cohort of more or less talented cosmetic surgeons. Soon the memory of “Mickey Pretty Face” would fade, and so would his promising career. Too big-mouthed, too quick to declare in interviews that he did not like Hollywood, nor the acting profession, nor the actors themselves...

In 1991, he announces that he gives up being an actor to resume his career in the ring. There, he would have liked to be called “El Marielito”. Unfortunately, the Russian, German or Japanese promoters who organized his matches needed his name to fill their venues. Curse of the star system... But could there really be “no second act” in the life of an American?

A few more or less dubious victories, and a severe risk of concussion later, Mickey Rourke abandons this career and starts shooting again, but far from the studios’ A-list. His recurring misadventures with plastic surgery make him a particularly monstrous figure of has-been.

In the early 2000s, Mickey Rourke is no longer a simple degraded icon, he has become an icon of degradation itself. Cannon fodder for the tabloids. Haunting a succession of gloomy thrillers and broke action movies, his body and face start racking up even more stitches, his outer armor is gradually reduced to a shifting mass of scar tissue... And yet, it is almost a progress for the ramshackle aura that emanates from Mickey Rourke: we perceive all the better the tears of the soul trapped in this Frankensteinian body.

Back... to what future?

In 2008, Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* opened a new chapter in Mickey's adventures, a more conventional one: the moving return of the lost sheep. The role of a wrestler getting back on the saddle, with a half-destroyed body, whose career is in free fall presents troubling analogies with his own. Yet Mickey comes back in the spotlight, earning the more or less sincere support of his colleagues, while indulging himself in a plethora of tearful interviews. There is also something unpleasant in this endeavor, which draws its strength from an assumed form of emotional pornography: the lines are cleverly blurred, we cry to see what Mickey has become, and that is how we are supposed to relate to him. At a time when meta is doing well, we are offered the spectacle of the star's decline, caught in a game of mirrors between biographical fiction and the authentic presence of his decaying body. A voyeuristic redo of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, with Mickey instead of Bette Davis: *The Wrestler* is actually a horror film.

But Mickey is even more devious than that, he does not fake his masochism, nor his talent. And he almost comes out a better man from this degrading endeavor. Because the formidable actor that he has remained despite everything manages to regain control, with monologues written by him, proving once again he is the best at blurring the lines. And this sordid melodrama sometimes manages to wring tears out of us, without us knowing to what extent it happens because we are projecting Mickey's real life or because his true talent as an actor transcends this dubious parallel. He knows how to rekindle in us a form of empathy out of time and fashion towards his character of a battered performer.

So Mickey Rourke gets back on track, he is recognized for his talent once again. It doesn't matter that he continues to debase himself from time to time in the ring during a handful of rigged matches where he knocks out opponents who are thirty years younger than him. The prodigal son returns to his great family of cinema, and it reserves him a place of choice in the contemporary Hollywood landscape. He comes back as a super-villain in *Iron Man 2* or *The Immortals*, desperately trying to breathe in some authenticity amid the digital explosions.

Where are the roles that fit him? Finally at peace with the demons of his youth, the most striking actor of his generation has found a place in the industry at a time when it is plagued by rampant infantilism.

INTENTIONS

This film proposes to place the iconic Mickey Rourke in the cultural landscape of a masculinity in crisis.

He appears in the wake of Brando, and his idols are DeNiro, Pacino, Keitel... but his rivals at the box-office of the 80s will be Stallone and Schwarzenegger, hypertrophied body and ego, cult of strength and mystique of victory... Mickey Rourke, with his deep taste for defeat and the all-out exploitation of his emotional cracks, was no match. At the time, it was a fresh-faced Tom Cruise who finally won the day, acclaimed as a great actor AND action movie star – who knows how to keep his deep ambiguity under wraps much better than Mickey Rourke. Nice-guy Brad Pitt will take over as a pure physical figure, with his impeccable torso and seductive look, while Johnny Depp will peddle from film to film a more or less credible version of the young modern rebel. Only Sean Penn was able to pull his weight without too many compromises.

Mickey Rourke, meanwhile, was too busy turning the violence of the world against himself, in the city even more so than on the screen. Would the case of Mickey Rourke be finally readable as an extreme case of toxic masculinity, damaging the male individual himself first and foremost? His career is definitely revealing, from one fabricated label to another:

- the secretly fragile male, the eternally maladjusted hero, with self-destructive tendencies becomes in a handful of films a sex symbol with a troubled personality.
- then his image as a Hollywood rebellious bad boy, with all the tools of the trade (motorcycles, bad company, brawls outside the clubs and professional behavioral problems) takes over in the public's imagination.
- Finally, as a logical conclusion, Mickey Rourke becomes the comeback kid, lauded by his peers, happy to see him back on top... even if they had carefully avoided him until then, and have not really given him the chance to prove how great an actor he could be – the last of the giants...

The film will be based on the intertwining of two stories: the comeback story of the Hollywood bad boy, as moving as it is authentic, and then, in parallel, a more obscure, more complex story: an ambiguous, painful moment of transition in the history of contemporary masculinity – through the image that cinema contributes to both creating and maintaining. Drawing on the work of American researcher Keri Walsh, among others, the film will therefore also be the story of the construction, then the self-destruction, of an involuntary icon.

The fascination that Mickey Rourke exerted in his early glory was due to the ambiguity that he knew how to cultivate, between strength and weakness, virility and fragility constantly questioned in a real dynamic of inversion. Sex symbol for the girls, ambiguous role model for the boys, Mickey offers since *The Wrestler* a synthesis of all the contradictions he has shouldered in spite of himself: a man's body whose over-virility appears as a construction, a heap of damaged meat to be rented in order to project our fantasies about what could the male seduction be. The case of Mickey Rourke is an archetypal tuning point in the self-image that men have built through cinema, and it is nowhere more visible than in America. His face, which has become a Frankensteinian mass of scar tissue, is like a portrait of Dorian Gray of a certain ideal of masculinity in the 20th century. To paint this picture, we will use mainly pre-existing materials: film excerpts and interviews will be used to trace the meteoric rise and fall of both the actor and his on-screen persona.

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