

Why Rocky Matters

"Do we ever really hit the bottom of our soul, or is there always something percolating down there that wants to come out?" Sylvester Stallone is musing partially to himself, partially to the interviewer during his "Rocky Balboa" release junket. But mostly he is threading some existential mine field traveled by historical figures from Aristotle to Thoreau to Dylan to every fifty year-old who cringes when that first letter from the AARP arrives in the post. For Stallone, 60, and his celluloid character, Rocky Balboa, there has always been this, "What you got left?" ethos, not some personal challenge of the pugilist but a kind of rough hewn angst and gut-level inquiry.

But something is different this time around, the last, we are told. Balboa is not fighting for his chance, his wife, his dead trainer, his kid or his pride anymore. He fights because that's who he was and more importantly, what has finally given rise to what he isn't.

"I kept saying. 'I'm more than Rocky,' but the truth is, I'm not. I'm half of who he is," Stallone tells a reporter. Listening to Stallone you get the feeling that he has pushed out the four corners of the ring to include the four points of the compass. And in doing so, he has realized that he is very small indeed.

The quick-to-judge will think that Stallone is talking about his string of weak, middle-years films, some about *Rocky*, others *Rambo*, all of them about himself looking for that authenticity in his art that was the original *Rocky* script. But what Stallone is saying is that he has come as close as he can to who he is by admitting that he may never write or act as well as he once did.

And he may never live a life as dignified and impassioned as his character.

Therein may lay the reason that Rocky matters. All along we have loved him for his ability to win. But we had it wrong. Rocky Balboa has been much better at loosing, a skill not easily nor comfortably attained. We might've sat there and cheered for Balboa in *Rocky I* as he went the distance with Apollo Creed or bled child-like empathy as he cared for his pet turtles. But what we were really admiring, was how this figure had maintained a standard of principle and dare I say it...grace, while growing up where Social Darwinism dictates your life choices. In Rocky's life, even before he'd met Creed, he had already won by limiting his losses.

The legend of Rocky Balboa transcends sport and pop culture in ways that most of us may never really understand. We know the films have no great cinematic quality, the acting is average at best and the writing, while resonant in the first film, has no chance for any such canonical acclaim. Nevertheless, we've embraced Stallone's character in some near-mythic projection of desirable qualities. He is over-done, he makes mistakes, he's been subject to greed and made as many poor decisions as those who've paid at the box office to see him fumble and fail. Still we embrace his cliché like an old friend, knowing that he has let us down but has always picked us up and set us on a higher plane.

You see, laws of nature do not apply to popular heroes, both real imagined. They move in a world slightly suspended, defining their own time and space. For *Rocky 6* to succeed there had to be thirty years of failed films. And for Stallone to finally come to accept his role in creating the character, he had to deny him while continually reifying him. And finally embrace the character as a projection of what he could only strive toward.

Stallone may or may not have realized this as he wrestled with *Rambo* and other failed film projects. To his credit, even as he churned out weak *Rocky* scripts while wandering around the Hollywood desert, he never forced the character on the public. There were occasional hints that Rocky and Stallone struggled for identity in synch. In *Rocky II*, Balboa tells Creed in a conversation about having to fight, "Men like us, we don't have a choice." Stallone realizes now that he was wrong.

"To fight it was almost arrogance," Stallone says, admitting that the creation has overshadowed the creator. Perhaps in some nod to Shelley, age and loss and the wisdom garnered through his personal pathos has made it clear that he is Balboa's creator but Rocky is his master. Such is the way of myth. Its power over us--culled with time, peppered by

discourse—myth has as much to do with our need for heroes as it does for the organizing principles they provide. If *Rocky* movies were predictable, they were something of stasis during times of tumult. In an increasingly urban and ascetic world, *Rocky* was a way for us to connect to what depth of character, as tragic as it may be, resides in the dark brick and mortar of the inner city, that place where our own ancestral immigrants landed.

Balboa the character was never comfortable with wealth and sabotaged himself in some quest to find what he had lost on the backs of all those victories in the ring. That too, may be the reason that Rocky matters. In all our wealth and material gains, our search for peace in Prozac, the values that Balboa finally returns to in his classic Campbellian journey from the Call to the Return, are the same ones we struggle to find in our victories. Like Stallone, we should know that all the while, there they are—in the midst of our losses.

You see, we have consumed not the character but his myth, what he makes us feel and what that feeling—if we allow it—teaches us. We cannot inhene those values in our heroes, only impute them. And if we feel that hegemonic forces are forever leading us through a paint-by-number existence, one that just doesn't jive with a truer self, the artist within each of us, then we can always wonder how some bumbling southpaw from Philly was able to ride that sweet science like a bad coaster that drops you at better place when you finally get off.

S.T.