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Like many people, I viewed the news of another Rocky picture with hoots and insults about Rocky hitting someone with his walker. After the horrible “Rocky IV”, I didn’t think things could be any worse until I saw “Rocky V”. And now, sixteen years later, Stallone wanted to submit us to another one? How desperate could this man and his ego be? This could be nothing but an embarrassment on par with Sharron Stone’s debacle “Basic Instinct 2”.

But just like he fooled us all in 1976, coming out of nowhere to create one of the decade’s best movies, Sylvester Stallone has done something even more incredulous: he has made the final chapter in the long Rocky saga a touching, sincere, and ultimately satisfying sendoff to a character we once loved despite our frustrations at the actor who portrayed him. A poignant look at a man trying to be comfortable in growing old, but still wanting/needing a challenge and just a little respect; from others and himself.

The movie is the closest to the original, and indeed it unashamedly wallows in nostalgia with many of the songs/music from the original and several brief flashback scenes (shown in black and white). Rocky is not a millionaire ex-jock reveling in his former celebrity; nor is he a pathetic punch drunk has-been, scraping by on the goodwill of others. He has a row-house in his beloved Philadelphia, and runs a small Italian restaurant named, of course, Adrian’s, where he recaps old stories for the customers, poses for pictures, and in general is very content with life.

However, he is still affected by the loss of his beloved Adrian four years earlier to cancer. And while he is not crippled with despair at the point in time where the movie begins, he has been slowed down with sadness. On each anniversary of her passing, he makes a lonely pilgrimage to all the spots that were important in their courtship from “Rocky”; the pet store where she worked, the streets where they walked and the ice rink, which had since been demolished, leaving nothing but debris and old memories.

Rocky’s cranky brother-in-law Paulie is still around, and is still a miserable human being, but Rocky still obviously cares for him as his best friend. Rocky’s son is also still in Philly, but Robbie resents “the big shadow” that his father casts, and is trying to make a name for himself in corporate America, and therefore spends little time with him.

Chance is what normally drives these types of plots, and in this case it comes in the form of Rocky’s chance meeting with Marie, the young girl that responded to his advice in the first “Rocky” with an obscene gesture and an equally insulting “screw you, creepo!” She’s now a grown woman in her early 40s working in a dilapidated bar Rocky walked into on his Anniversary walk, a single mother with a teenaged son of her own. Rocky takes the young man somewhat under his wings, and in the conversations with him and his mother, starts to feel the urge to once again box. Not for money or glory; just some local bouts to make him feel something again.

Of course, Rocky in a club fight wouldn’t exactly be big box office material, so the plot must invent one. One night the Microsoft of sports broadcasting, ESPN (and I don’t mean that in a good way) put together one of their bogus “sports entertainment” shows. The talking heads create an entire show with boxing “experts” debating who would win a fight between current heavyweight champion Mason Dixon (aka “The Line”…get it?) and Rocky circa 1980. The panel is split two to one in favor of Rocky and computer shows that Rocky would have beaten the champ, who is despised by the public as a man with no persona, no heart, and no worthy opponents that can last more than three rounds with him. The pay per view receipts are dwindling for the champ and his handlers must find a new way to generate revenue…thus the opportunity for a big, glitzy “event” in Las Vegas.

If the entire plot sounds relatively familiar, it should, as it is the one that most closely parallels the original underdog story. Fortunately, it also mimics it on focusing on the people in depth, not just on the icon that Rocky became in the other sequels. Stallone gives his best performance since his Oscar worthy showing in “Copland”; dignified, introspective, and fully cognizant of what he’s doing. It’s a performance I didn’t think he was capable of, one where he shows the decaying of age and the fear of someone who isn’t quite the immortal icon that he

may have thought he was at one time. Perhaps he's taken some lessons from Sean Connery or Robert Redford on how to gracefully enter your later years. One can only hope so, although I still have major concerns about the reported "Rambo" sequel.

The rest of the cast performs well in limited roles. Geraldine Hughes is not the original girl that played Marie, but she is of the right age, and she gives a wonderfully understated performance as the vulnerable single-mother who may or may not become Rocky's love interest. Luckily, the romance issue is not pushed at all, something that at first concerned me. Marie is fully respectful of Rocky's love for Adrian and even brings to him a picture of Adrian from the restaurant the night before the fight. They lean upon each other as friends, with only the slightest hint that it may eventually turn into something more. Burt Young is still aggravating as the tempestuous Paulie…I honestly have no idea why he's still in the series other than to show that Rocky has the patience of a saint. Milo Ventimiglia also does a good job in limited opportunities as Robbie Balboa; torn between love of his father and the desire to make a name on his own.

The Big Fight is what Rocky movies have always been about, and this one doesn't disappoint, although it's probably not up there with the classic battles with Apollo Creed or Clubber Lang. Stallone is still quite impressive physically at age 60 (Rocky, on the other hand, is said to be in his 'mid-fifties'), and the fight scene still generates a lot of excitement. Rocky doesn't have much in terms of speed any more, so he must try to take advantage of pure power, which comes across as quite believable in the script, as do the earlier training sequences that include his long time trainer Duke (Tony Burton).

The worst decisions were in first giving a strange cameo to Mike Tyson in the boxing scene, showing him mouthing off to the champ for no apparent reason. The other came in the announcers, who were just as annoying in the movie as they are in real life. Jim Lampley and Larry Merchant were enough to have me looking for a remote so that I could hit the mute button. They were only redeemed by a pretty good job from Max Kellerman, who played the role of himself as a man too busy being star-struck from announcing a fight from "his hero" to pay attention to being objective…a rather cute touch.

In the movie, Rocky simply hopes that he doesn't embarrass himself. And the same could probably be said from Stallone. In "Rocky Balboa", both the actor and the character's wishes are fulfilled. Stallone stated that he wanted to make this last movie because he was so dissatisfied and unhappy with how "Rocky V" turned out, and he wanted the series to go out on better terms; a sentiment completely echoed by his pugilistic alter-ego. Consider dignity restored.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs). That's with a warning that if you didn't like the original "Rocky", you will hate this one. But to me, this was a movie that probably gets a higher rating than it should due to the class shown by Stallone and the rest of the crew in sending the palooka out in such a rewarding manner.

Rating the Rockies:

Rocky (1976): Bernie Kosar (4 footballs).

Rocky II (1979): Bill Nelsen (2 ½ footballs).

Rocky III (1982): Frank Ryan

Rocky IV (1985): Jeff Garcia (1 football)

Rocky V (1990): Spergon Wynn (zero footballs)