

DO YOU SMELL WHAT THE ROCK IS COOKIN'?

With the Upcoming "Walking Tall," A Bone Fide Movie Career, Jabroni

by Annlee Ellingson



The Rock is a hard guy to pin down—and not just because he's a seven-time champion in World Wrestling Entertainment (nee Federation). In the span of as many days, he jets among Hawaii, Los Angeles and Mexico City—in that order—for a photo shoot, a television appearance and the Latin American junket for "The Rundown" before finally getting on the line with **BOXOFFICE** via a questionable cell-phone reception during a lunch break. "If I lose you [as I'm] going through these mountains in Mexico, I'll call you back," he says. And does.

It's a manic schedule demanded of one of the industry's leading contenders for the title

of Next Big Action Star. Ever since hosting "Saturday Night Live" in 2000, drawing audience numbers the show hadn't seen in half a decade, and his five-minute role in 2001's "The Mummy Returns," in which he did not speak a lick of English, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson has risen through the ranks of marquee players

perhaps faster than any other actor, earning \$15 million after just four film roles. After Universal's studio executives saw the dailies on his "Mummy" appearance, they built the actioner "The Scorpion King" around him and later cast him in "The Rundown," in which, alongside co-star Seann William Scott, he gave his comedic chops a workout.

It was also in "The Rundown" that California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger made his now much-talked-about cameo in the opening scene, passing the torch, as it were, to the next muscleman to dominate the big screen with the simple phrase, "Have fun." "Absolutely, unequivocally not," the Rock insists when asked whether he knew that's what was happening at the time. "Once it was brought to my attention, I thought, 'Well, if that's the case, it's very, very flattering, and I can't thank him enough.'" (The Rock, it should be acknowledged, does a mean Ah-nold impression as he recounts this story.)

But the Rock wants more: He'll next be flexing his dramatic muscles in MGM's remake of 1973's "Walking Tall" as a retired soldier who returns to his hometown to find it overrun with crime, drugs and violence and vows to clean it

up. Although here his character is called Chris Vaughn, the story is based on the true story of Tennessee Sheriff Buford Pusser.

"I wanted to take on this role that allowed me to play someone who was an amazing man who stood up for what was right," says the Rock, an avid movie buff who cites the films of Bruce Willis and Russell Crowe as exhibiting the range he would like to emulate. "Here's a movie that I had seen and had been a big fan of for a long, long time, ever since I first saw the movie when I was a kid. But the thing that attracted me most as a kid wasn't necessarily the fact that he decided to stand up for what was right and take responsibility. It was just the fact that he kicked a lot of ass with a big stick."

The appeal of "Walking Tall's" signature two-by-four is perhaps more akin to the Rock's star-making launching pad of professional wrestling than of the intimate experience of performing on a movie set. But, although the Rock admits he has had to tone down his acting—particularly his facial expressions—for the camera, in both endeavors he aims to keep it simple.

"What has always attracted me to my favorite movies and my favorite performances was simplicity, whether it's a simplistic story or whether it's a simplistic scene that's really moving," says the Rock, who's never been shy about seeking help from actors, directors and acting coaches to achieve the subtlety needed for film. "In wrestling, a lot of guys get caught up in being the biggest, the strongest, the loudest, the most colorful, the craziest, where I typically relied on simplistic innuendo, whether it be—we laugh about it—but whether it be raising an eyebrow or whether it be being silent and not saying anything for what seems to be an uneasy period of time, which will eventually lead to people just going crazy and chanting my name."

It's this allure that Hollywood hopes to tap into and has so far successfully—perhaps best exhibited in his blend of baby-face good looks and bad-ass physicality in "The Rundown"—without resorting to the eyebrow hoist that would reduce the Rock's act to a novelty. Hulk Hogan in "Mr. Nanny," anyone? On the big screen, as in the ring, the Rock has the moves to be the People's Champion.



*"Walking Tall,"
Starring The Rock.
Directed by Kevin Bray.
Written by Channing
Gibson, Brian Kop-
pelman and David
Levien. Produced by
Ashok Amritraj, David
Hoberman, Jim Burke,
Lucas Foster and Paul
Schiff. Action/drama.
MGM. Opens 4/9.*

