



Mickey Rourke plays washed-up wrestler Randy "The Ram" Robinson.

PHOTO: AP

The reticent warrior

Despite a formulaic plot and hokey sentimentality, 'The Wrestler' still packs quite a punch

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Everyone knows professional wrestling is fake. Everyone knows the same about movies. In both cases the eager spectators simultaneously admire the artifice and pretend it isn't there, allowing themselves to believe that those people down in the ring or up on the screen are truly inflicting pain on one another.

The Wrestler, Darren Aronofsky's fourth feature (and winner of the top prize at the Venice Film Festival last year), cannily exploits this parallel and at the same time shows that, in both movies and wrestling, the line between reality and play-acting may be less clear than we assume. Shooting his battered hero mainly in trudging, hand-held tracking shots, Aronofsky, whose earlier movies include the brain-teasing *Pi* and the swooning, fantastical, unwatchable *Fountain*, here makes a convincing show of brute realism.

The supermarkets, trailer parks, VFW halls and run-down amphitheaters of New Jersey are convincingly drab, and the grain of the celluloid carries a sour and salty aura of weariness and defeat. But the story that emerges is disarmingly sweet, indeed at times downright saccharine — a familiar parable of squandered second chances. It's a bit phony, perhaps, but to refuse to embrace the movie's deep hokiness would be to cheat yourself of some of the profound pleasure it offers.

Randy (the Ram) Robinson, played with sly, hulking grace by Mickey Rourke, is anything but a phony, in spite of the fact that nothing about him is quite genuine. His real name, which he can't stand to hear, is Robin Ramsinski;

his muscles are puffed up with steroids, and it's highly doubtful that his flowing mane is naturally blond. But this careful fakery is, to some extent, what certifies Randy as the real thing, an authentic, passionate, natural performer. The description fits Rourke as well.

Back in the 1980s, both the real actor and the fictional wrestler were superstars. (A monologue eulogizing that decade and cursing the one that followed has an obvious and piquant double meaning; that the speech is addressed to the character played by Marisa Tomei, whose career hit some snags of its own in the later 1990s, makes it all the more touching.)

Rourke was a tenderhearted tough guy with a crooked smile and a gentleness that came through even tough-guy poses and bad movies. Randy, meanwhile, was a giant in the world of pro wrestling, inspiring action figures and video games and plying his brutal trade in top arenas like Madison Square Garden.

Now, 20 years later, he — Randy, that is — has been relegated to a shabbier existence. He has trouble making the rent on his trailer, and his health is failing. His professionalism, however, is undiminished, and the most moving and persuasive scenes in *The Wrestler* show the Ram backstage with the men who are his comrades and rivals, working out the finer points of their routines with a warmth and respect completely at odds with the viciousness they display in the ring.

With a younger wrestler, Randy is warm and avuncular, praising the kid's ability and urging him to stay in the game. Others, many of them played by active or retired

Film Notes

THE WRESTLER

DIRECTED BY: DARREN ARONOFSKY
STARRING: MICKEY ROURKE (RANDY), MARISA TOMEI (CASSIDY) AND EVAN RACHEL WOOD (STEPHANIE)
RUNNING TIME: 105 MINUTES
TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

real-life wrestlers, he refers to with-out affectation as "Brother."

While the fights are choreographed, the pain and the blood are frequently real. We are privy to tricks of the trade, like the tiny bit of razor blade that Randy uses to open a cut on his face in the middle of a bout. And we witness a horrifying match involving broken glass, barbed wire and a staple gun, all of it agreed upon by the combatants.

We also understand that every fight is a miniature morality play. At one point Randy and an adversary sit in chairs, trading slaps across the face. When the designated bad guy lands a blow, the crowd boos; when he's on the receiving end, it cheers. The basic rule is laid out succinctly by an old nemesis of Randy's: "I'm the heel, and you're the face."

About that face. Aronofsky takes his time showing it, trailing behind Rourke and allowing us sidelong glances for the first few minutes of the film, before disclosing the battered, lumpy yet still strangely beautiful wreck of what we remember from *Diner* or *The Pope of Greenwich Village*.

Damaged, tired, ill used as he may be, Rourke is still, in the wrestling sense of the word, the face, the magnetic pole of our interest, the guy we're rooting for.

But Randy is also, outside the ring, something of a heel. He is estranged from his daughter, Stephanie, (Evan Rachel Wood), whose anger when he tries to reconcile suggests some major mess-ups in the past. He also has a crush on a stripper known as Cassidy (Tomei), whose lap dances and friendly chitchat he interprets as signs of reciprocated interest.

The news that Tomei plays a stripper may make you roll your eyes — it may, for that matter, make them pop out of your head — but her job is more than an excuse to get exposed flesh other than Rourke's up on the screen. Randy and Cassidy (it's not her real name, either) are both performers, both expert at faking something the customers desperately want to believe is real. The wrestlers don't really hate one another, and the stripper doesn't really love you.

The fact that Randy doesn't quite get that when it comes to Cassidy — and yet senses that they do something in common — is part of his appeal. He's not that smart, really, but he has a genuine gift. And parts of *The Wrestler*, which was written by Robert D. Siegel, are dumb in their own way, or rather in the way that so many movies are. The Randy-Stephanie subplot is unpersuasive, and the last few twists of the Randy-Cassidy romance verge on the preposterous. But like its hero, the movie has a blunt, exuberant honesty, pulling off even its false moves with conviction and flair.

Your grace

Saul Dibb's girdle-and-garter outing falls short on exploring the Georgian social environment and the woman behind the enigma that was Georgiana Cavendish

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Following in the footsteps of Kirsten Dunst, who managed to turn the fall of the house of Bourbon into a teenage coming-of-age romp in *Marie Antoinette* (2006), albeit one that ended in a beheading, Keira Knightley has stepped up to the block by taking on the role of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, the lady of another great house who had a less than delightful time in her marriage. Unfortunately, it also means a less than delightful time in the cinema, despite all the splendid clothes and long, lingering shots of the sumptuous interiors of great Georgian houses.

Georgiana, after her marriage to the peculiar William Cavendish, 5th Duke of Devonshire, became known for her advanced social views and unconventional domestic arrangements. She was one of those grand hostesses of Georgian England who played a significant behind the scenes role in greasing the wheels of political and social intercourse.

Unfortunately, the director Saul Dibb seems utterly unable, or at least unwilling, to go beyond the topic of sexual intercourse. There was also a good deal of that going on as well in the second half of the 18th century, both inside and outside the facade of respectable marriages, but the fact that a marriage into the immense wealth and political power of the Cavendish family was motivated not by love but by political and financial considerations, seems to outrage the director.

Is Dibb trying to draw parallels with another unhappy marriage that was dealt with in *The Queen* (2006), an infinitely superior film. Georgiana was a member of the Spencer family, as was the late Diana, Princess of Wales, and was also much loved, though not by her husband.

Knightley is perfectly competent in the role of Georgiana. She showed some talent in the period drama *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) — before losing herself in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise — but in *The Duchess* she is not given



PHOTO COURTESY OF GATCHPLAY

adequate tools to work with, and to a large extent ends up a mere clotheshorse. Make no mistake, this is a sumptuous production and the outfits are really splendid. The one actually erotic scene, not surprisingly, focuses more on clothes than on bodies.

Apart from a few throwaway lines intended to suggest Georgiana's interest in the world around her and canny intellect in interpreting what she sees, the qualities that made her a force in society are never revealed. And even in the gentlemen around her, one gets almost nothing other than doe-eyed indignation at thwarted love by characters such as Charles Grey (Dominic Cooper), one of the most forceful politicians of his age, and vaguely flirtatious behavior from Charles James Fox (Simon McBurney), another formidable member of the political elite. These peripheral figures are relegated to nothing more than a bewigged backdrop for Georgiana's victimization at the hands

of an abominable husband, who goes so far as to make a mistress of his wife's best friend, and who expected the two women to live amicably under the same roof. It is something that the historical duke in fact achieved, but *The Duchess* gives us little insight into the social context in which such an arrangement could be realized.

The production is given some backbone by Ralph Fiennes as the Duke, who as one of the most powerful and richest peers in England had little need to concern himself with the opinion of others. His utter weirdness is remarkably convincing, as are the attitudes of Charlotte Rampling as Georgiana's mother. Their efforts lift *The Duchess* slightly, but ultimately the director's belief that a second rate romance dressed up in crinolines makes a historical drama is the production's undoing. If you like gorgeous clothes, spectacular hats and resplendent architecture, there is plenty to enjoy in this film, but don't expect much more.

Film Notes

THE DUCHESS

DIRECTED BY: SAUL DIBB

STARRING: KEIRA KNIGHTLEY (GEORGIANA, THE DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE), RALPH FIENNES (DUKE OF DEVONSHIRE), CHARLOTTE RAMPLING (LADY SPENCER), DOMINIC COOPER (CHARLES GREY), HAYLEY ATWELL (BESS FOSTER)

RUNNING TIME: 110 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

►► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Doubt

There has been no newspaper advertising for this adaptation of John Patrick Shanley's award-winning play, despite the film's five Oscar nominations and that the leads (Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman) are Oscar winners backed by an excellent support cast. Hoffman is a progressive Catholic priest who bumps heads with the conservative principal of a Catholic school (Streep), especially after she becomes suspicious of the relationship between Hoffman and a young black student. Not everyone liked this movie, with Salon.com calling Streep's performance absurd and manic, but the critics were wowed by Viola Davis, who plays the student's mother.



Marley and Me

This confection had previews last weekend, but its season proper starts today. Based on the popular book by John Grogan, Marley is a Labrador with a habit of renovating interiors with his teeth. His owners, journalists Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson, are nearly driven to distraction by their overactive doggie, but he does eventually become the subject of Wilson's column and helps pay the bills. The ending will challenge the tear ducts of even the most hardcore dog haters. Also stars Kathleen Turner and Alan Arkin, while Marley, according to *Variety*, is played by 22 dogs.



The Class

Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign Language Film, *The Class* is a largely improvised pseudo-documentary that pits a well-meaning, passionate teacher (Francois Begaudeau, whose autobiography inspired the film) against a multiethnic gaggle of students from a working-class French neighborhood. This is not a formulaic movie with heroes and villains and a crudely redemptive climax, but a meticulous depiction of classroom politics. The students, who exhibit far more cunning as a group than movies normally allow, rehearsed for months before filming. Original title: *Entre les Murs*.



The International

Interpol agent Clive Owen and attorney Naomi Watts team up to battle the nastiest banks in the world. Not the ones that triggered the present economic debacle, but the others that fund catastrophic conflicts and hire hitmen to cover their tracks. The chase takes our heroes on a James Bond-like itinerary and showcases a New York Guggenheim Museum shoot-'em-up that may last longer in the memory than anything else in the film. Critics asked why it is that people so closely connected to opposing criminality could appear so bemused that institutions get away with murder.



Coming Soon

This Thai ghost story could be best described as a cross between Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and Lambert Bava's *Demons* — but without the extreme violence. A projectionist falls asleep while previewing a gruesome new release, only to wake and discover that the cinema's manager has disappeared and become a corpse in the film he's watching. From there the barriers between movie and reality blur. The good news is that this latest T-Horror entry has picked up good notices for its wit and atmosphere. A treat for movie buffs, *Coming Soon* is the directorial debut of the writer of the acclaimed Thai horror films *Shutter* and *Alone*.



Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land (暗戀桃花源)

Starting tomorrow, the SPOT — Taipei Film House (台北之家—光點電影院) is offering limited screenings of this Taiwanese feature from 1992 directed by Stan Lai (賴聲川) and based on his landmark play. Two theatrical troupes are forced to share a stage while performing the rather incompatible works *Secret Love* (a tragedy) and *The Peach Blossom Land* (a comedy). A power failure and the arrival of a mentally ill woman looking for her "boyfriend" only add to the heady mix.

