



Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer

Can 'Scorpion King' make this wrestling rolling stone a

SCORPION KING

star?

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Rock as a Rock

Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer



Is 'Beaches' devotee Hollywood's next action hero?

By Evan Henenson
Staff Writer

The Rock likes "Rocky." Well, duh! It kinda figures that a man who made his fortune in the ring should dig a flick about an underdog Philadelphia palooka battling his way to glory ... even though he would barely have been a pebble when the 1976 best-picture winner came out.

And it makes a certain sense that the wrestler-turned-actor looking to be the next big action star should take a shine to "Raiders of the Lost Ark," the "Terminator" movies, starting bodybuilder-turned-actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and "Star Wars." The Rock, who stars in "The Scorpion King," is a cinema hound. The Rock has diverse tastes.

So says Dwayne Johnson, 29, the wrestler frequently known as The Rock. "I've always been a big fan of a great story as well," he says. "I go from being a big fan of 'Rocky' to the 'Godfather' series to 'Honeyuckle Rose' with Willie Nelson to 'It's a Wonderful Life' and 'Beaches.'"

"Beaches"? As in that 1988 Bette Midler/Barbara Hershey weepfest? The ultimate chick flick? The Rock likes "Beaches?" "I can't get it out of my mind," confesses The Rock. "I know: typical Rock movies, just what you'd think The Rock would like."

Not that anyone short of an armored car would even try to suggest what The Rock should and shouldn't be inserting into his DVD player. But the man with the open-toed shoes slipping bottled water in a Beverly Hills-area hotel suite is not, despite his considerable size, the trash-talking ass-kicker he portrays in his World Wrestling Federation bouts. The Rock keeps it humble.

Which isn't necessarily an easy thing to accomplish when the merchandise empire you've spawned has seen you transformed into more than 25 action figures and 10 video games.

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screen is not a kinder, gentler Rock. In the comic-book-turned-celuloid known as "Scorpion King," The Rock's character takes out half of ancient Egypt with arrows, swords, knives and anything else he can lay his beefy hands on. He also gets a bit buffoonish, even to the point of getting particularly creative when he's up to his neck in sand facing a swarm of ants. And, oh, yes, we do see that famed raised right eyebrow, when Mathayus, the Akkadian assassin played by The Rock, gets catapulted into a Gomorrah harem.

(Don't ask.)

It was the persona of the self-spoofing Rock that drew director Chuck Russell to "The Scorpion King." Russell had seen The Rock hosting "Saturday Night Live" and sensed that The Rock could roll.

"I had no idea who he was, and I'm not particularly a wrestling fan," said Russell.

"He was charming, he was handsome, and he was as funny as any celebrity I had seen do the show. There hadn't been someone new in action drama in five to 10 years. I wanted to find out who this guy was and learn more about him."

Russell credits himself with a nose for developing not-yet-discovered talent, having directed Jim Carrey and Cameron Diaz in "The Mask" and Vanessa Williams in "Eraser."

So, is The Rock in that kind of company?

"There is that thing that, for lack of a better term, we call star quality," says Russell.

"He is very charming, and he has a very dangerous edge about him, and that's part of what makes him fascinating. He is authentically a good guy, and I think that comes through. He's someone you can root for."

Action and mayhem The Rock can handle, usually without a stunt double. For the scenes in which he had to dis-

good actor, and would do whatever he had to do to become that."

The Rock's limited acting experience was only one hurdle faced by "The Scorpion King" team. Between the rush to complete filming to beat a potential Screen Actors Guild strike and juggling The Rock's schedule so he could perform his WWF duties on his non-shooting days, it was a hectic three months.

Now, on the brink of a new kind of additional stardom, The Rock says he has no difficulty

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play "a sense of poignancy," The Rock worked with Santa Monica acting coach Larry Moss, who had worked with Helen Hunt on "As Good as It Gets" and Duncan on "The Green Mile." Like Russell,

Moss was largely un-Rock initiated when he took the assignment. And like Russell, the acting coach is now a fan.

"Now they're talking about him being the next Arnold (Schwarzenegger) and those are big shoes to fill," says Moss. "But he's a sweetheart. He's incredibly focused and smart. He really wanted to be a

keeping perspective. He and his wife Dany became the parents of a daughter, Simone, shortly after filming wrapped a year ago. And the lean, pre-Rock empire years aren't too distant a memory.

"I just always remember that six years ago, I was still sleeping on a (expletive) stained mattress that I got out of a Dumpster. So I'll never forget that kind of stuff," he says.

"I'm always remembering that's what I've had to go through to get here, what I know I'm going to have to go through to get where I want to go."