

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

BY DON STEINBERG

"CREED," WHICH OPENS Nov. 25, is the seventh "Rocky" movie and the first that the franchise's creator and star Sylvester Stallone didn't write. Mr. Stallone, 69 years old, has written twenty-plus movies including every installment of "Rambo" and "The Expendables" (with occasional co-writers). For the original "Rocky" in 1976, Mr. Stallone became the third person—after Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles—to earn both screenwriter and actor Oscar nominations in the same year. ("Rocky" won Best Picture.)

"Creed" was written and directed by 29-year-old Ryan Coogler, whose first film was "Fruitvale Station," about a young African-

American man fatally shot by a transit officer. The 2013 independent movie won the audience award and the grand jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Mr. Coogler approached Mr. Stallone with the idea. Co-stars Michael B. Jordan ("Fruitvale," "Fantastic Four") and Tessa Thompson ("Dear White People") bring a contemporary vibe to the story, shifting the focus from Philly's working-class



THE INTERVIEW

SYLVESTER STALLONE

white neighborhoods to African-American millennials. But, spoiler alert: It's still a Rocky movie.

Mr. Jordan plays Adonis Creed, angry son of Apollo Creed, the father he never knew. Apollo had been Rocky's first rival and then his pal, before being killed in "Rocky IV" by Russian heavyweight Ivan Drago. Adonis is a born fighter but boxes under a *nom de guerre* ("I'm afraid of taking the name and losing. They'll call me a fraud, a fake Creed.") He persuades a reclusive, ailing Rocky to prepare him for the light-heavyweight title—and it wouldn't be a 'Rocky' movie without a training montage.

Last week Mr. Stallone returned to Rocky's old workout grounds, the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Mayor Michael Nutter declared it "Creed Day." Joining them was football player Vince Papale, subject of a different Philly underdog movie, "Invincible," who told fans the museum was "made famous by Rocky." Mr. Stallone spoke with the Journal about the new film and his other work. Edited from an interview.

Fans of Rocky and Rambo might not appreciate something. You're a prolific writer. An accomplished painter. A voracious reader. Are you a closet intellectual?

I mean, the writing was a matter of survival, because I wasn't making it as an actor. It ended up being the lever that propelled me forward. (Producers loved the "Rocky" script but he would sell it only if he could play the lead.) I don't think I ever passed an English course in my life. My construction and being able to diagram a sentence and so forth was not very accomplished. But I realized I could tell a story.

As for painting—because I'm somewhat dyslexic, I started painting at a very early age. A lot of people didn't realize I was dyslexic. Back then you were just considered stupid or slow. That's when they had the dunce caps available. I would draw or paint characters. As for being a voracious reader, it's true. It takes me a while to get through a book, but yeah.

Your characters tend to play down the smarts. Yeah. I realized early on that because of my speech pattern and the tone of my voice and the shape of my mouth, that I was always going to be playing kind of a dubious, underworld character. (A doctor's



Updating A Contender

Stallone says the world is 'less naive' now than when he first wrote 'Rocky.'

accident damaged a nerve in his cheek during childbirth.)

Is writing easy for you?

Writing is torture. It can glaringly display all your defects. It can mess with your confidence. When I did the screenplay for "Paradise Alley," I spent months and months, and it didn't work. I remember I was directing "Rocky II," trying to follow an Oscar-winning movie, and "Paradise Alley" comes out. I go to the afternoon show in Philadelphia, and it's four people in the theater. Then I need to walk onto the "Rocky II" set and say, "Okay, guys, let's charge!" I tell people, you need to come to terms with the gods of rejection, and don't take it as a permanent situation. Take it as a learning moment. Everyone fails. Ninety percent of my life I failed.

That's the philosophy of "Rocky" and "Over the

Top" and other movies you made.

It's repetitive, but that's what I believe.

Does the agony of writing explain why you let someone else do "Creed?"

No, I think to be true to Ryan's vision, this has to be seen through a younger man's eyes. Because the world is so radically different and less naive than when I wrote "Rocky." What I did is put a certain spin on Rocky's dialogue, because Rocky has a very convoluted way with a sentence: "Hey, you know, I'm dumb, and you're shy. We make a couple of nice coconuts, you know?" So when Adonis is looking in the mirror, I say, "I think the toughest guy you're gonna fight, you're looking at him."

Rocky had his own mirror scene in the first movie.

I used to call it mirror therapy. When I was broke, I would look in the mirror and have

these ongoing conversations. I couldn't afford a psychiatrist. I don't know if it worked, but I started to use that in the Rocky movies.

There's a rumor you have another Rambo movie coming. People tend to think Rocky and Rambo are similar—the strong, silent type who fights. But in some ways, it's the eternal optimist versus the eternal pessimist.

You can't get more diametrically opposed. John Rambo is the abandoned individual who grew up in an institutionalized type of setting. He's so scarred that it comes out in unregulated violence. That's his voice. The last one was just pure fury and what I thought this guy would have become. He walks away again, discarded until the next horrible situation. I don't know if I can do another Rambo, between you and me. Actually Rocky's very talkative. He wears his heart on his sleeve. He just says "I wanna tell you something" and he lays it right out.