

# Back in the ring

Sylvester Stallone's career has seen almost as many comebacks as his most-famous alter ego Rocky, writes Harold Von Kursk. And as *Tulsa King* proves, he's not done yet

Sylvester Stallone may have entered the ranks of movie icons many decades ago, but he still feels the need to keep proving himself. Even as he turns 77, he's reluctant to rest on the legacy of the *Rocky* and *Rambo*, films that turned him into one of the biggest action stars of all time.

That's why the burly actor decided to play a mob boss in *Tulsa King*, the new Paramount+ streaming series that first aired in the US in November 2022. It was a role that Stallone had been waiting a half century to play.

"The fear of failure makes you say, 'I still got something left in me,'" he laughs.

"I've been wanting to do [this kind of part] since I saw *The Godfather* – even prior to *The Godfather*... It feels good, but it's taken a while."

This crime drama is the brainchild of Taylor Sheridan (*Yellowstone*, *Mayor of Kingstown*) and Terence Winter (*The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire*). Stallone stars as Dwight "The General" Manfredi, a former top Mafia boss who hopes to regain his place within the mob hierarchy after completing a 25-year prison sentence. It's another story of a man to make his mark in the world despite being beaten down and forgotten.

"I didn't have to dig too deep for this," says Stallone.

"There are a few films I've done that have been pretty biographical, and this has a lot of aspects of that. *Rocky Balboa* was very biographical. There are certain emotional scenes in here that I think will surprise some people. I'm drawing from situations that I've lived through and I can take those and make it authentic. So yeah, I can relate to this character on a very personal level."

Instead of being restored to grace, Dwight's new crime bosses have other ideas for him and decide to send him to the remote city of Tulsa, Oklahoma to launch a new midwestern Mafia empire.

"He walks up and he makes you lower your guard because he's so charming – and his name is Dwight," Stallone smiles.

"There isn't an Italian in the world named Dwight. Why is he named Dwight? Because he's named after Eisenhower – Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. A five-star general who's an organiser and a leader, not a thug.

"That's part of what makes this show feel different and kind of refreshing. When's the last time you watched a movie or a series about a gangster who hates the idea of hurting anybody – unless he has no other choice."

Now with news that Paramount+ has already renewed his *Tulsa King* series for a second season, Stallone is enjoying his latest and possibly final comeback. "Things have changed now and we've reached a point where your best actors are doing streaming series because the studios aren't making a lot of good dramas these days.

"I shouldn't be where I am today, but I'm just lucky to have a few franchises that have kept the torch going because normally, you're done at my age, especially today, where, my God, youth is king," muses Stallone.

Once the highest paid motion picture star on earth in the 80s and 90s – he earned US\$300 million from his *Rocky* films alone – Stallone was as famous for his muscular, sculpted physique as for his trademark proletarian drawl.

"You do your job, make the studio a lot of money and everyone should be happy. But guess what? We don't need you anymore, so you go take up golf or whatever. So you start getting

used to the idea of being irrelevant until you realise that there's still that energy inside of you that won't let you quit. It's like Rocky who keeps getting up off the canvas – that was very autobiographical. Who d'ya think that guy was anyway!?"

Given the chance to return to active duty in *Tulsa King* despite the daily grind of a series that he had never experienced before, Stallone knew that it was time to see if he still had it in him. He also saw the series as an opportunity to resolve some deep questions about his identity and feelings of self-worth. "I think you always have something to prove," he admits.

"People say to me, 'You have nothing left to prove,' and those are just words. In your insecure brain there's always that notion that makes you wonder, can you still do it? 'You find people saying to you, 'Sly, people think you're finished. But what about you? Do you still think you have it?' And if you don't do it, are you going to be forgotten? Those are the things that run through your head and it's what motivates me. I've been underestimated all my life and I like coming back and proving people wrong. It keeps me going."

Reflecting on the twilight years of his career, Stallone allows that he could have done with some greater humility when he was one of the most bankable stars of his era and made some very forgettable movies – *Tango & Cash*, *Stop! or My Mom Will Shoot*, *The Specialist*, and *Daylight* all rank as examples of hubris run wild. "I look at making movies like a machine gun," he says. ►

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"When you're young, you have unlimited ammunition. You're spraying it everywhere, mowing everything down. But at my age, you look down and see that you have nine bullets left. So you pick your targets very carefully. When I look at some of the films I've done, I've asked myself why I did them. Back then, you think you're invincible, and someone will come to the rescue – the producer or the director – and that's not true. You end up taking the blame.

"Now I look at everything as if it might be the last thing I'll do. I pretend seriously that this could

**Top: Sylvester Stallone and wife Jennifer Flavin at the Academy Awards Above: Flavin and Stallone with actress and model daughter Sistine Rose Stallone attend the closing ceremony screening of *The Specials* at Cannes International Film Festival**



be my last go-around, so I better nail it. I tell other actors that. I say, 'You're young and you're still foolish – and you deserve to be – but I'm telling you right now. You have to pretend that if this was the last scene you were ever going to do it? Are you happy with this?'... Then they dig down and find something. I wish someone had told me that when I was 29."

Stallone is being too hard on himself. His iron will, self-belief, and underdog mentality were personal attributes that pulled

him out of poverty – he really did once sell his dog for \$25 to feed his family.

As an out-of-work actor in Los Angeles, Stallone turned to writing in the early seventies as a means of survival. He would

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finish his *Rocky* script in three days and begin shopping it to every studio in Hollywood. Despite receiving several offers including one that would have paid him US\$360,000, Stallone stubbornly turned them down because he refused to sell the rights unless he was attached to play Rocky himself, a character largely drawn from his hardscrabble life.

Finally Stallone sold his screenplay for a heavily discounted fee of \$75,000 so he could play the lead, to producers Irvin Winkler and Robert Chartoff who decided to take the chance that Stallone could carry the film.

Stallone's extraordinary willpower and refusal to give up on his dream would pay extraordinary dividends.

The public identified with his portrayal of a working-class hero and turned it into the biggest box-office hit of 1976.

The film also won the Oscar ►



for Best Picture and earned Stallone two nominations for best actor and best original screenplay. The *Rocky* franchise has since gone on to earn a total of US\$1.7 billion at the world-wide box office, including the two recent *Creed* sequels, and the original *Rocky* is considered to be one of the most popular movies of all time. Sadly, Stallone still regrets that selling the screenplay also meant selling his stake in a franchise that he hoped he could one day leave to his children after his death: "It bothers me," says Stallone.

"It does, it's not about the money. It's like... it's part of my soul belongs to someone that has very little. That's all."

**Above: Stallone attends *The Expendables 3* Premiere during the 67th Cannes International Film Festival in May 2014 Right: Stallone at the induction ceremony for Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for Mike Medavoy in 2005**

In highly publicised comments made in the industry trade magazine *Variety* last year, Stallone complained about the fact that 91-year-old producer Winkler – who still owns the rights to the *Rocky* franchise - has never been willing to give up a share of his equity stake to the man who created the character – and made Winkler rich – in the first place.

"*Rocky* is shown on TV around the world more than any other Oscar-winning film other than *The Godfather*. You have six of them, and now you have *Creed* and *Creed II*. I love the system – don't get me wrong. My kids and their kids, they're taken care of because of the system.

"But there are dark little segues and people that have put it to ya. They say the definition of Hollywood is someone who stabs you in the chest. They don't even hide it," said Stallone

Stallone has since had occasion to turn his attention more to the present. His renaissance as a streaming star and the

tremendous reception accorded *Tulsa King* has rekindled his love with acting and embrace of his legacy.

His spirits have also been buoyed by his reconciliation with his wife Jennifer Flavin. She decided to call off their pending divorce after *Tulsa King* wrapped its first season in the Spring of last year and they are currently in the process of rebuilding their 25-year marriage.

They make their home in Hidden Hills, a celebrity-studded enclave in California's San Fernando Valley, after selling Beverly Hills mansion to Adele for US\$80 million. In the meantime, Stallone will soon be seen in a very different type of TV series, a reality show that will chronicle his home life with his daughters – Sophia, 26, Sistine, 24 and Scarlet, 20 – and wife Jennifer.

"I'm so much more conscious of wanting to be with my family now," said Stallone after he and his wife had decided to give their marriage another shot.

"For the past few years I've been thinking about how sometimes I should have spent more time with my kids...

"How rare it is to have a real good relationship. Sometimes I put the work ahead of [family], and that is a tragic mistake which won't happen again."

With respect to getting back into the acting ring, Stallone aptly chooses a boxing analogy.

"You're like a fighter until you finally get knocked out cold," he says.

"I haven't been knocked cold yet, but I've been staggered a few times. So I'll keep going on until my wife says 'You're done.' Then I'll pull the plug."

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