

# STUFF IN THE ATTIC

## *THE BOY WHO WOULD BE ROCKY*

By Charles Peebles



*“Rocky impersonators? They’re like Elvis impersonators - devoid of original wit and hammering with excruciating heaviness on exhausted tag lines. Rocky impersonators are particularly dim-witted ghouls...”*

Okay, I’d asked for it, and my longtime pal, an English professor, was reliably acerbic in expressing the disdain most of us hold- at least on initial impulse- for those who’d cash in one way or another on the tails of a famous figure. Back in the eighties I’d smirked at all those ersatz Michael Jacksons, replete with their epauletted uniforms and sequined uni-gloves. Didn’t these clowns have identities of their own? Didn’t they have lives? My disgust was tempered (or heightened, depending on how you look at it) by the fact that they were invariably surrounded by more starry-eyed girls than I’d ever be, so maybe they were onto something. Writing about celebs, would-be or otherwise, isn’t my usual *PhillyFIT* beat. But as that beat is marked by human-interest tangents and busting stereotypes, be they Rugby or Roller Derby girls, Lingerie League footballers, or bodybuilding devotees trying to justify their unfashionable regimens in a Crossfit-Functional-Pilates world, perhaps a Rocky impersonator could offer enlightenment about his world.

Mike Kunda has done that - handily. Not only did he establish himself as Philadelphia’s premier Rocky Balboa impressionist in a city wide contest, film an entertaining city tour of sites from all the Rocky films (you can see it on YouTube), and make a nice second career for himself, he’s written and published a witty, observant and highly insightful book, *CUE THE ROCKY MUSIC; A Memoir*. While he’s a bit young to have written a *memoir* (he was *six* when the *ROCKY* was filmed) he’s managed to make his remarkable journey from childhood in the grey streets of Scranton to Rockydom something of an epic which in many ways parallels the life-trajectory of his hero and offers the same lessons.

Look, any male with a pulse (especially if he’s from the Philly area) reacts at a gut-level to the first and last of those films; particularly those of us who saw ourselves as underdogs and hapless targets of the high school studs. It’s not just the visceral wallop, the memorable

dialog and Bill Conti’s powerful scores, but the inherent messages: *Take a shot. Go the distance. Exits matter as much as entrances. Yesterday means nothing, and today’s just a starting point. Do you believe in the magic of you?*

He’d seen the film for the first time at age eleven: *Nothing ever made me think like this before. When everything told me to stay back, this movie told me to move forward.* From that day forward, he would be Rocky Balboa. But he wasn’t much of an athlete, and like so many hapless young dreamers he was more likely to get stuffed into his own locker by the jocks than be one of them. Despite the bullying, the indignities and the bruises, he managed to survive a season of football and wrestling –always knocked flat but always getting up - ultimately earning the grudging respect of players and coaches. Rocky had carried him through that. And hadn’t the Rock’s own *creator* been through something similar? In 1976 hadn’t he been told that no one would want to see a boxing movie, a film with a “corny” positive message - especially a film starring a short, droopy-eyed no-name? Thirty years later, hadn’t they all *laughed* at the prospect of an aging has been action star trying to resurrect his aging iconic action figure? And wasn’t it beautiful how that same improbability - no *impossibility* - is exactly what gave both films their power, their magic?

Rocky’d also taken Mike some bad places; the price of trying to dress and act like his idol was understandably ridicule and isolation. More bullying: *“Wannabe!”* Snickers from the girls as well: *“Loser!”* Nothing promising: *“Guys like me?”* Mike told me, *“We don’t write books; we carry them for the pretty girls in school.”*

*“We don’t lose our dreams. We neglect them.”* Reconciling dream maintenance with reality maintenance (*“learning to use Rocky as a guide through life instead of a crutch”*) would require a steady hand. You have to feel the boundaries; many fans who haven’t truly done their homework, or simply lack judgment, make fools of themselves, gushing fatuous with others of their ilk in the crowds at the barricades, butchering those exhausted tag lines, an embarrassment to anyone they’d seek to emulate. Mike saw plenty of those as well, and they sure weren’t making things any easier.

There’d been other voices pushing him forward, an indispensable supporting cast: a few fellow Rocky-geeks as well as understanding family members, like a granddad who’d pulled a young Mike up into the attic one day to fish an old leather coat and a black hat out of a dusty trunk: *“We believe in stuff when we’re younger but life throws walls at us,”* the old man had told him. *“We grow up and tell ourselves to stop chasin’ dreams and settle into somethin’ safe. Don’t ever stop goin’ after what’s in your heart.”*

If there was ever an Adrian out there for Mike, he’d found her in a chestnut-haired beauty named Sue who could see past the low-budget

buckaroo in black (“I thought I was Mambo Italiano in action, but I was more like a Ballerina-DeRocco: mozzarella on a watermelon, just a bad combination”) to the yearning god-manqué beneath. It was she who’d bolstered him in moments of doubt when opportunity paraded before his eyes, *she* all but shoving him into limelight as he was edging away from it. Without her, he’d never have experienced what was perhaps his finest moment, not only in and of itself, but for the chain of events it would precipitate.

He’d once done a painting, titled *Going The Distance*, depicting Rocky getting back onto his feet to show a stunned Apollo Creed he was ready for more. He wasn’t going to haul that canvas with him to the gritty Kensington streets where the final Rocky was being filmed-*no way* - but she parried his excuses and made him take it. And people noticed that painting, from other fans, crew, the media, to Frank Stallone and finally the man himself, who managed to detach himself for a minute from the film set frenzy and asked if he could hold it: “You know what this is?” Sly looked at me as we were nearly eye to eye. “This is the heart and soul of Rocky. You captured it. This is impressive. This is something I won’t forget.”

Perhaps it borrows from the “Law of Attraction” but from that moment the ride would accelerate. In time, Mike would get to chum with Frank Stallone, the owners and crew of Victor’s Café (Adrian’s in the final film), Burt Young and others in the Rocky orbit, as well as chat with Sly a few more times. Heady stuff for anyone, euphoria for a self-confessed geek from “Scran’in” who’d progressed from a series of low level, dead end jobs to a higher level, dead end position as a corporate drone. So when the opportunity came to exit that professional purgatory to parlay his appearance and practice into gigs playing his idol for tourists on the steps of the Art Museum, conventions and at benefits like the March of Dimes, Mike was ready to grab it by the short ones. The legends, the lessons, and the lore of Rocky *matter* to an awful lot of people who’ll make a pilgrimage here to experience it one way or another.

Even when it doesn’t pay, it pays, like the time a Scottish couple visited the steps. As the man ran up them, huffing in a windbreaker, his wife spoke to Mike. “He’s waited his entire life to run these steps. Hasn’t left home in twenty years and he wanted to come here, to America. Could I get a picture of you with my husband?” she asked, holding the camera. The look on her face was a look I’ve seen on my wife’s face many times. Her husband saw the same thing I did in a movie and traveled thousands of miles to touch it, be part of it...”

The skeptics, the naysayers, the highbrows, and the lowbrows who’d stuff a guy like this into a locker, may well still snicker and sneer, but Mike Kunda’s had a helluva better ride than most of them, and infinitely more fun. As far as he’s concerned, the ride’s not over. He’s got plans. *Somebody, cue the Rocky music!*

Yo, Mike- meet ya over at Victors!



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