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An extra learns a bit about the movies

The mayhem is made up, the monotony real.

By Rich Westcott

For The Inquirer

A little while ago, I made my movie debut. I didn't have a very big part. I didn't even have a very small part. I was merely an extra in a crowd scene. But it was a memorable experience.

> My debut came during the filming of a movie called *The Wrestler*, which stars Marisa Tomei and Mickey Rourke and opens Friday (at the Ritz at the Bourse and the Showcase at the Ritz Center). Randy "The Ram" Robinson, an over-the-hill wrestler (Rourke), tries to make a comeback and gets involved with a stripper (Tomei). Some insiders think the film could be award material.

> The scene was shot at the New Alhambra Arena, a boxing and wrestling mecca deep in the heart of South Philly. Although most of the movie was filmed in North Jersey, the seedy, old Alhambra was such an ideal venue that Hollywood came to Front and Ritner Streets.

> How did a lowly scribe from Philadelphia with absolutely no acting experience get a chance to hobnob with the Hollywood crowd? Simple: My youngest daughter, Amy, is the costume designer for the movie. She's also the costume designer for the HBO show *Entourage*, and when she's not trying to make Vinnie Chase (Adrian Grenier) and the boys look good, she does movies. Among her recent credits are *The Squid and the Whale*, *Smart People* and *Roger Dodger*. In town for *The Wrestler* shooting, she invited my wife, Lois, and me to view the proceedings. While there, we were invited to participate.

> In "our" scene, the aging hero has a match he hopes will resurrect his career. During a violent brawl, he throws his opponent (a real-life wrestler known as Necro Butcher) out of the ring, then jumps down after him. In an act that suggests a lack of sensitivity, the Ram grabs

the crutch of an amputee at ringside and uses it to slam Butcher into the stands. He follows that by viciously pummeling Butcher with the aid of a trash can and the amputee's prosthesis.

> Lois and I were among 30 or so wrestling fans in the stands as one bloodied combatant tossed another even bloodier combatant into our midst, then climbed among us to continue the mayhem. As instructed, we cheered the hero as he triumphantly returned to the ring. Pro wrestling at its outlandish best.

> Not a pretty sight - by design. No real blood. No real bruises. And all that sweat was really water squirted on the actors from a bottle by a crew member.

> You learn a lot by watching the way a movie is made. What you learn, mostly, is that appearances can deceive. A pane of glass smashes over a man's head, and he must then walk over the shards barefoot. Real? Not. Those nasty-looking shatters scattered on the floor were really rubber. Those thumbtacks jammed into his back? Also rubber, and glued on. That barbed wire he was thrown into? Rubber again.

> Rourke had a double for some of his scenes; they looked like twins. Speaking of the performers, I found it interesting that most of them acted just like regular people when they were off camera. When the light went on, they became entirely different people.

> The filming process is a classic case of organized chaos, people going in all directions, noise level high, tension readily discernible. There are maybe 100 or more crew members, including producers, directors, cameramen, makeup artists, carpenters, grips, and gaffers, each with a very specific role. There seems to be zero tolerance for slackers or a job poorly done.

> That explains why a director seldom buys the first take. A scene has to be perfect. And if it's not, it's done over. And over. And over. We were comparatively lucky. Our scene, when edited, would last roughly two minutes. It took more than two hours to set up. However, we had to do it only three times, not the 20-30 takes I've heard of for some scenes.

> It's clearly a hard job, being a movie person. There are weeks, months of preparation. Once the shooting starts, the days and nights are long. For her films, Amy commands a truck trailer filled with clothes and a staff of at least five. She often works until 2 or 3 a.m. The night of my debut, when we had dinner with Amy at about 10 p.m., she was actually on her lunch break.

> As for me, I'll probably not make another movie. It was fun while it lasted. But I wouldn't want to have to ride in limos all the time. Or pose for magazine covers. Or get pushed to the head of the line at fancy restaurants. I'd rather keep my writing job.

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