

# The New York Times

## Yo, Rocky, or Rambo, Gonna Fly Now at 60

By ALLISON HOPE WEINER



LOS ANGELES, Nov. 20 — When [Sylvester Stallone](#) first started talking about bringing Rocky Balboa out of a 16-year retirement for the character's sixth turn, even his wife saw humiliation and embarrassment ahead. Then there were the countless studio chiefs who advised Mr. Stallone that at 60 he was not exactly a

magnet for young moviegoers.

“People were saying the parade had gone by, and who was I to try and bring it back again?” Mr. Stallone said during a phone interview last week. “I just felt that I’ve had a lot of regrets in the past 15 years, and I had to go back and rid myself of this regret.”

So he took his shot when Revolution Studios agreed to join MGM in making [“Rocky Balboa,”](#) even while knowing that the film — about a washed up champion who insists on a last, doomed chance at a younger man’s game — would inevitably become a metaphor for his own fading career.

“An artist dies twice, and the second death is the easiest one,” Mr. Stallone said in speaking of his long fall from Hollywood’s pinnacle. “The artistic death, the fact you are no longer pertinent — or that you’re deemed someone whose message or talent has run its course — is a very, very tough piece of information to swallow.”

Set for release on Dec. 22, the new movie — written and directed by and starring Mr. Stallone — is not so much about a comeback as about eking the last ounce of potential from a once-great talent. In much the same spirit, Mr. Stallone, who has made little impression at the box office since his modest hit with [“Cop Land”](#) in 1997, has also agreed to revive the angry Vietnam veteran John Rambo, another trademark character, with a “Rambo IV,” due sometime in the next two years.

By resurrecting characters born decades ago — the original [“Rocky”](#) swept him to stardom in 1976, as [Jimmy Carter](#) was preparing to take office — Mr. Stallone may well rally some support from baby boomers who are similarly reluctant to leave the stage. But the gambit also leaves Mr. Stallone and his collaborators considerably exposed.

“We won an Academy Award for ‘Rocky’ and sent all our kids through college, and it means a lot to us,” said [Irwin Winkler](#), a producer of the original film and an executive producer of the new one. “We didn’t want to be embarrassed. Even after we’d finished the picture and knew it was good, we worried about whether it was an easy target for jokes.”

In “Rocky Balboa,” which has begun screening for the press, Mr. Stallone seeks to undercut the absurdity of pitting an ancient boxer against a young champion by casting the showcase bout as an exhibition fight, and by approaching the script with self-awareness and humor. “They’re playing around with the fact that he’s an old guy coming back, joking about it, and that works well,” said Peter Sealey, a former film executive who is now a professor of marketing at [University of California, Berkeley](#). “I think this one has a shot.”

Mr. Stallone has also tried to widen Rocky’s audience by going virtual. Rocky is drawn back to the ring after a national sports show features a digital boxing match between Rocky Balboa and the current champ, Mason (the Line) Dixon. “It’s a high-technology, Google-blogging, iMac-type of premise going on there mixed with the classic underdog versus the establishment,”

offered Mr. Sealey.

But the story's drive comes from its obvious attempt to grapple with irrelevance. "Maybe you're doing your job, but why do you got to stop me from doing mine?" the superannuated Rocky demands at one point of boxing commissioners who are reluctant to license him.

"This movie is about a man who doesn't feel he's all washed up because he's 60 years old," Mr. Winkler said. "And about a man who doesn't feel he should be ignored or will be ignored because he's getting on with his life."

Mr. Stallone, whose brightest spots lately have been a turn as the toymaker in ["Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over"](#) and his appearances on the reality boxing show ["The Contender,"](#) acknowledges that there were very few real film projects for him before "Rocky Balboa."

But he was not yet ready to accept obsolescence, even if that meant risking ridicule by turning back to the past. "Every generation runs its course, and they are expected to step aside for the next generation," Mr. Stallone said. "My peers are going through it right now, and they feel they have much to contribute, but the opportunity is no longer there. They're considered obsolete, and it's just not true. This film is about how we still have something more to say."