

The Danny Devito Divergence

In 1975 a club boxer from Bayonne New Jersey was tapped to be the punk for the comeback bout of one of the greatest fighters in history, Muhamed Ali. Known as a stepping stone for being able to hold up in the ring and go the distance for better fighters to showcase their skills on, the Bayonne Bleeder, Chuck Webner went 15 rounds with the heavyweight champion of the world.

A young actor with dreams of one day directing named Danny Devito, a garden state boy himself, watched the Webner - Ali fight and the muses spoke to him. The story could make a great film. A poolaka from the streets of Jersey gets the chance to fight the greatest boxer who ever lived and against all odds and with no chance of winning takes the fight all the way to the bloody end.

Devito saw it through the eyes of the fighters long suffering brother-in law Paulie, a small business owner balancing the stress of his hysterical sister, her brutish husband, and a faltering meat business against a taste for the bottle. Devito would play Paulie as a sensitive yet at times explosive little man pushing back against a big world.

He recruited a boxer, dabbling in acting whom he met on readings for an upcoming comedy ensemble show. Tony "Tough Tony" Danza (12-3-0) and Devito created the character of the brother in law, Rocky. A washed up pro fighter who worked as muscle for a local loan shark. They wrote Rocky as a lout and infused the characters actions with sight gags while attributing his boxing success to goofy luck and a rock hard head.

Through his recent acquaintanceship with Jack Nicoloson whom he had recently finished shooting *One Flew Over the CooCoo's Nest* with, Devito was introduced to Shelley Duval at around the same time. He pictured her instantly as Rocky's ballbusting wife, Paulie's haranguing sister Adriane.

Ray Walston, much loved from TV's *My Favorite Martian* who Duval knew from her mime classes at the Y came in to create a campy but wise old boxing coach with twitchy hands and a fabulous seventies wardrobe. Asked to bring in another boxer to play the Ali-esque champion, Apollo Creed Danza recruited Gleason's gym star, boxer- actor Carl Weathers. The smallest speaking role went to Ned Beatty who took the part for scale being cash strapped at the time.

Paulie was released in 1975 to a certain level of critical acclaim that smoldered for years, eventually establishing it as one of the great films of the seventies mostly missed by the masses.

Devito continued to direct a series of small independent films featuring dark and brooding characters who release themselves through humor and violence which continue to bring him critical success but no real box office returns. Then in 1984 he shifts gears to direct a screwball

comedy starring Tom Hanks, John Candy and the stunning Daryl Hanna as a wayward mermaid lost in the Manhattan high life and Tom Hank's capable arms.

The movie is a huge success grossing over 60 million domestically and launching Devito into a career of creating ever more complex romantic comedies before making the switch back to drama in 2001 with the film *A Beautiful Mind* finally winning him the Academy Award for best director and a nomination for best supporting actor in the role of Parcher while Tom Hanks took his first Oscar home as the lead.

In 2005 feeling stuck in a rut of melo-dramatic scripts crossing his desk he receives a request from three young actors who are about to lose their little TV show about buddies who run an Irish bar in Philadelphia. Devito sees this as a way to break loose, takes the role of Frank Reynolds and puts himself wholly into the character which he continues to play today.

Despite the poor box office reception of *Paulie*, Tony Danza is approached to star in a sequel with his character reworked as the titular role, getting a chance at a re-match with Apollo Creed, except this time he wins. *Rocky* becomes one of the most profitable franchises in film history as do *Rambo*, a role written specifically for Danza after his single minded terrifying performance in *Rocky 2* where he beats future television star Mr. T to death in a finale scene that gained the film an X rating at first. In late career with over two hundred action roles on his resume Danza created his own franchise which includes a shopping list of washed up, has-been action stars in a series of kill crazy films called *the Recyclables*.

Paulie leads Shelley Duval to a series of semi-comic roles until she lands Dianne on a new James L. Brooks show called *Cheers*. After a few years of winning rave reviews for her erudite cocktail waitress Duval walks away from the show to return to movies, never to be heard from again.

Ray Walston throws his hat into the growing field of late night talk shows after *Paulie* with a reasonable amount of success hosting *Ray in the Wee Hours* with such regular guests as John Cassavetes, Joan Biaz and the poet Charles Bukowski. He continues to play Mick to Danza's Rocky as the flamboyant coach who through the franchise comes out of the closet with the Rock's love and support but still tragically dies of Aids in *Rocky 4*, *Russian AIDS*.

Though paid less than scale for his eight minute roll in the film *Paulie*, Ned Beatty missed meetings for two major films, *Network* and *Silver Streak*, which steered him into a downward spiral of television commercial work from which he never recovered. Today he hosts a solar energy podcast from his ranch home in Arizona.

Though Sylvester Stallone wasn't touched by the muses that day to create Rocky he continued as a B actor playing background tough guys until actress Marilu Henner, whom he had met playing a thug on the show *taxi* which was making her a television star sent him a thank you part in the film *Cannonball Run II*. The role allowed Stallone to expand from tough guy to tough

guy with a sense of humor. A role he continued to explore for years afterward on the evergreen fan favorite sitcom *Who's the Boss*, opposite Judith Light and as the father of future soft porn actress Allysa Milano.

Burt Young moves along the trajectory of type casting he had established through the late sixties and early seventies as a goon with Italian roots moving up through the echelon of mafia flicks into the role of Frenchy in *Goodfellas* which escalated his profile enough to ironically land the role of Paulie "Walnuts" in *The Sopranos*. A role he played through to the end of the run, outliving the show's star Ray Liotta who died of a massive coronary when his weight ballooned to over 300 pounds after the finale of the show.

Talia Shire gave up on what she felt was a career lacking in deeper meaning, left acting to further study eastern religions. After disappearing to the ashrams and cult clusters of India and Nepal she returned to Hollywood as a Gruvi. There she began her own star born influenced center of worship that melds sexual freedom, financial irresponsibility and controlled drug intake.

His role as sea hardened shark hunter Quint in *Jaws* rockets accomplished stage actor Burgess Meredith to sudden box office recognition which he parlays into funding an epic production of *Moby Dick* written and directed by Orson Welles who works sporadically on the production for years crushing budgets and ignoring deadlines until Meredith along with his fellow investors are tapped. After almost a decade of picking up secondary roles Burgess takes a leap in 1983 at a money grab television role, playing the crusty leader of a group of falsely accused Vietnam vets who travel the country righting wrongs known as the A-Team. He loved it when plans came together, right up until his on-set death in 1987. His eulogy was read by co-star and close friend Mr. T, of Clubber Lang fame from *Rocky 2*.

Though the Devito divergent universe is near exactly the same as our own with only the tiniest of changes explored above, David Thayer simply never existed in this iteration.