

Mickey Rourke put steely determination into preparing to play Iron Man 2' villain

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When Mickey Rourke talks about the busy state of his career, the gritty actor who made a remarkable comeback two years ago with "The Wrestler" says he's fortunate.

"I feel very grateful to have that opportunity," he says. "I just think if you persevere and you work hard enough and you don't fade away, you can get lucky."

Rourke's cinematic renaissance continues to move along nicely with his current role in "Iron Man 2," which opens Friday. It's the much-anticipated sequel to the 2008 summer box-office sensation that was popular with superhero fans and newcomers alike, earning \$318 million in the U.S.

Although he's not really a comic book guy, Rourke says he liked the first "Iron Man" and was drawn to the sequel by the opportunity to work with Robert Downey Jr. and director Jon Favreau.

Rourke credits Downey and Favreau with lobbying for him to be in the movie and convincing Marvel Comics that it would be a good idea.

"Pretty much when I got the part, I felt very obligated to do the best job I could, because of the way those guys were campaigning for me," he says in a no-nonsense voice, speaking by phone from Los Angeles.

"Iron Man 2" follows the latest adventures of Downey's character, wealthy and debonair industrialist Tony Stark, who announced to the world in "Iron Man" that he was the superhero in the flying suit of armor. Now Stark is dealing with the repercussions of his celebrity and being pressured by the government to turn over his technology.

This time, the cast includes Scarlett Johansson, Sam Rockwell and Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury. Don Cheadle replaces Terrence Howard as Stark's friend James (Rhodey) Rhodes. Gwyneth Paltrow returns as Pepper Potts, Stark's loyal assistant.

Rourke plays Stark's nemesis Ivan Vanko (also known as Whiplash), a mysterious Russian technology expert who, in the trailers for the movie, sports long hair and tattoos and looks like a stylish, worthy villain.

The actor credits Favreau with allowing him to bring his ideas about creating the character to the table.

"I made some choices as an actor that he went to the Marvel people and ... had to convince them that I wasn't out of my mind," he says.

Rourke visited a Russian prison to familiarize himself with the culture and protocol and learn about the prisoners' elaborate tattoos.

"There was one particular fellow that actually, a few days after I went to the prison, he came to my hotel room with some people. He undressed and he showed me some different tattoos. His whole body was covered from his toes to the back of his neck."

He studied the Russian language for about three months, spending two or three hours a day on it, a task he calls "really hard work." He says his Russian girlfriend made fun of his accent. "I've met her parents and I'm the only one that doesn't understand what they're talking about," he says with amusement.

There also were months of physical training to prepare for the heavy gear he wears in the film. When told that it sounds like he took preparing for the role seriously, Rourke replies, "I take everything serious."

At the start of his career, Rourke gave dazzling performances in films like "Diner" in 1982 and "The Pope of Greenwich Village" in 1984. But he went through some lean years in which he developed a reputation for being difficult and spent time boxing before "The Wrestler" brought him back to prominence.

"I ruined that myself," Rourke told the Associated Press last year, talking about the derailing of his initial promise. "I wasn't ready at that time. There were some broken pieces I didn't know how to fix that made me behave a certain way. I wasn't knowledgeable enough for many, many years to understand or want to accept the fact that the movie business was political and that it's a business."

Today, Rourke sounds more tolerant of what's expected of movie stars. Although he doesn't necessarily like promoting films by talking about his work, "I understand now that it's part of the job."

Some fans felt they were seeing the real Rourke in "The Wrestler," a movie in which he gives a compelling, sympathetic performance as a pro wrestling star whose glory is faded.

"I guess there were a lot of parallels that I drew on or you could easily compare," Rourke says. "'The Wrestler,' because of the comparisons perhaps on a lot of different levels, it wasn't the most fun movie to do. It's also a movie that I don't particularly care for watching. Some of it is too close to the bone."

"The Wrestler" earned him an Oscar nomination for best actor and spurred the boom times he's experiencing now. He's taking a break from filming "Immortals," a Greek mythology epic, to promote "Iron Man 2." He says he plans to do a couple of projects with director Tony Scott, including the drama "Potsdamer Platz."

He just finished a "very weird, kind of romantic, kind of strange movie" called "Passion Play" with Megan Fox of "Transformers" fame, whom he describes as a disciplined and talented actress.

And he says he'll star in a movie about Genghis Khan, a project with writer-director John Milius. "Probably more excited about that than anything I've done," he adds.

Rourke and Khan share an affection for dogs (the actor thanked his dogs when he won a Golden Globe last year).

Rourke goes on to describe a scene where Khan tells his son to unchain the dogs before a battle and let them go.

"Usually the dogs died in the battle and he didn't want his dogs to die," he says. "And I thought, oh I like that part."