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Hollywood's ageing he-men



Sylvester Stallone meets his match in Driven (copyright Warner Bros Pictures)

By New York entertainment correspondent Tom Brook

The plight of Hollywood's ageing action stars has captured the limelight once again as 54-year old Sylvester Stallone tries to revive his career with Driven, a racing car action thriller that opens on Friday at US cinemas.

Stallone, who once ruled the international box office as Rocky and Rambo, has taken a very modest backseat role in Driven.

Although he worked as a producer on the film, and wrote the screenplay, he has relegated himself to a supporting role.

He plays an ageing racing driver with a compromised career who redeems himself by helping a novice triumph on the track.

Even Stallone has sounded a little cautious as to whether this action thriller set in the world of open-wheel racing would succeed.

He has said: "You just have to go on blind faith, and hope that you're right. More often I've been wrong."



Sylvester Stallone: Blind faith

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Stallone is just one of several once mighty bankable male Hollywood leads from the 1980s and 1990s who are finding their box office clout much reduced.

The studios are imposing tough conditions on some ageing action stars to bolster their appeal.

Steven Seagal, who opens today in the UK in the Detroit cop thriller *Exit Wounds*, found Warner Brothers insisted he lose 22.5 kilogrammes (50lbs) for the role.

Seagal also knows that at age 50 he cannot sell himself on the basis of just hard he-man action.

Rapper

So he has been telling reporters that the cop he plays in *Exit Wounds* is a softer action hero.

"He's different in the sense that he's very human, more human than anything I think I've done and funnier," he says.

But Seagal can take little comfort from *Exit Wound's* decent performance at the US box office because much of it was generated by DMX, the hotshot young rapper who starred opposite him in the movie.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, who just this week announced he was not running for political office in California, has also suffered a loss in his once invincible box office prowess.



Although the 53-year old actor is working on a sequel to *True Lies* he was passed over for the leading role in the high-profile remake of *Planet of The Apes*.

Steven Seagal in *Exit Wounds*:
Upstaged by DMX

Age alone cannot account for the flagging careers of stars like Schwarzenegger and Stallone.

Many think it's because they are one-note performers associated with a bygone political era.

Both these action stars were in their heyday during the Cold War when audiences wanted clear-cut macho heroes who could save the world.

Also Stallone, especially with his Rambo character, portrayed an anti-government action man who subscribed to vigilante justice.

Toby Miller, Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University, maintains this kind of hero has lost currency.

"In the post Oklahoma City bombing era the idea of the heroic figure who takes on the government is hardly going to play," says Miller.

Diversify

Not all ageing Hollywood hunks encounter hard times because some action stars, like Bruce Willis, have very successfully reinvented themselves.

Willis who triumphed as the action hero in Die Hard has been willing to diversify, and work with talented young directors like Quentin Tarantino and M Night Shyamalan to maintain his career.

But some actors, most notably Kevin Costner, have not been so fortunate.

In the wake of his 1990 Oscar-winning *Dances With Wolves* Costner was Hollywood's golden boy.

Recently he has been flailing, trying an assortment of bewildering roles, from an awkward bad guy in *3000 Miles To Graceland* to a Kennedy aide with an overdone Boston accent in *Thirteen Days*.



Kevin Costner played a supporting role in *Thirteen Days*

Costner, like many ageing stars, has also not found it easier to adjust to the realities of the market and he has reportedly lost roles by keeping his asking price too high.

For many action stars who find their appeal has waned with US audiences there has been salvation with the overseas market.

While Schwarzenegger and Stallone may have lost ground with American moviegoers their box office clout in the rest of the world has remained relatively strong.

But now even the international box office appeal of stars like Stallone is softening.

But, before your heart bleeds, remember, if it is hard for Stallone it is much worse for women.

Male action stars do not encounter box office blues until their late 40s. For women, once they hit their mid-30s their chances of getting cast as the romantic lead in a Hollywood film have already become pretty slim.

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