



R H O D E  
I S L A N D

ROCKY



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# Across the Land: The Voice of Rocky Horror

Just another autumn Friday night in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The usual mixture of hoboes and bohoes, kids out for a good time and jolly parasites out to feast on them. Around midnight, 400 or so young people have lined up on either side of the Eighth Street Playhouse box office. Their behavior is genial and gentle, with no rock-concert jostling; there might be an invisible Sister Mary Ignatius patrolling the sidewalk. One couple chats in Portuguese; a trio converses in Czech. It's a U.N. in miniature—so much so that when a derelict wanders by, desperate to strike up a monologue, he asks a gaggle of teens, "Excuse me, do you speak American?" This guy is a rap artist without synthesizer, improvising an autobiography as he addresses the girls, and they pretend not to notice him. "Hey, Elaine baby, did you know I played high school basketball with Akeem Olajuwon? An' I was quarterback for the Jets. An' my seven sisters were kidnaped and raised by the Chinese. An'..." But now Elaine and Denise and the others have reached the door, and the scat-chatting street poet is being hustled away by the theater manager. There'll be enough eccentrics inside, thanks awfully.

Just another night of *Rocky Horror*. Each Friday and Saturday night, at a couple of hundred houses across North America, the faithful gather in a strange and bracing ritual. A high-camp priest of an emcee announces weekly events and milestones: a birthday, say, or a new record for consecutive attendance. The "virgins" in the congregation—those making their first visit—are baptized with incantatory cat-calls. Then, in the velvet darkness of the blackest night, rises the communal cry: "Let there be lips!" And lo, there are lips, big ruby-red ones on the theater screen, intoning an invitation to "the late-night double-feature picture show." The voice of *Rocky Horror* is heard in the land.

Like Rocky, the hunky mutant concocted by Mad Scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a creature spawned in countercultural obscurity and now deemed truly beautiful to behold. The film bombed so ignominiously in its 1975 American premiere that the distributor, 20th Century-Fox, was ready to give it up for dead. Ten years after, this polysexual rock-'n'-roll travesty has earned over \$60 million at midnight box offices. But *R.H.P.S.* is more than a sleeper hit for insomniacs. It is a cross-generational phenomenon, an evocation of '50s monster movies wrapped in

the anything-goes spirit of the '60s that found a niche in the '70s and has blossomed in the '80s into a rite of passage for millions of American teenagers. As Richard O'Brien, the 43-year-old New Zealand-born Londoner who wrote *Rocky's* script, music and lyrics, noted on its tenth anniversary, "The movie is really an excuse for dressing up and having a party." A 3-D, three-level party, at that. While the film is projected onscreen, *Rocky* regulars mime each character's words and gestures in meticulous drag onstage, and the audience talks back to the movie and, on cue, scatters comic props throughout the theater. This is movie mania at its participatory best: a nationwide epidemic of *l'amour fou*.

The faithful in each city work their own variations on a standard text. As the ruby lips in the film's opening credits give way to a wedding attended by normal, nerdy young Americans Brad Majors (Barry Bostwick) and Janet Weiss (Susan Sarandon), the audience in Coconut Grove, Fla., flings rice gaily in the air. When the young lovers get stranded in the rain, regulars in Denver douse the front rows with squirt bottles. When Brad and Janet see "a light over at the Frankenstein place," hundreds of lighters, flash-lights and one small '50s table lamp illuminate the Eighth Street Playhouse. In Dr. Frank's old dark house, where Brad and Janet are seduced in turn by the extraterrestrial transvestite, they meet their old science prof Dr. Scott (Jonathan Adams) and in Washington the air is filled with streamers of Scott toilet paper. Frank (Tim Curry) proposes "a toast," and burnt toast pops up at a Chicago theater. At the end, when a betrayed Frank sings about "cards for sorrow, cards for pain," the cognoscenti in Berkeley mournfully toss playing cards aloft.

The Eighth Street regulars consider themselves the college of cardinals for this amiable sacreligion: that must make Sal Piro the pope of Greenwich Village. Piro, a tubby, T-shirted imp of 35, was just a member of the audience when *Rocky* mania started blooming a few blocks away at the Waverly Theater in 1976-77. But now he

has seen the film 873 times and cheerleads a half-hour pre-show routine in a style that blends the early Jerry Lewis with the late Paul Lynde. Tonight Sal does a little break-dancing. He asks for a show of hands from those who have seen *R.H.P.S.* more than a hundred times; more than a hundred arms are raised. He surrenders the stage with a hearty "Welcome to the second decade!" and the real show begins.

By the late '70s the Eighth Street players had codified an elaborate system of responses to the screen dialogue and action. Tonight, as on every weekend night, they perform their lines with a professional

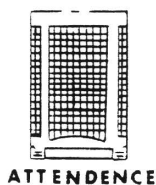
precision the latest cast of *A Chorus Line* would be hard put to match. As the logo fades, the crowd recites the utterly appropriate prologue to *Star Wars*: long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Poor normal Brad is greeted with the scatological taunt every time his name is mentioned: poor virginal Janet is "Slut!" Brad cannot slap a desk, or Frank snap surgical gloves, without the faithful's perfectly timed handclap. The portents pauses in *Rocky* cry out for rude interjections, so that the screen actors at times seem to be responding to directions from the audience. Before Frank can introduce his assistant Magenta, the crowd bleats "What's your favorite color?" Before he mentions another character, Columbia comes the question, "Where do you get your drugs?" When Frank asserts that "There's no crime in giving yourself over to pleasure," the New Yorkers respond "There is in New Jersey!" The evening is raucous, high-spirited and remarkably benign—a PG-rated toga party.

If the film has a moral, it is, "Do I dream it, be it"—a line O'Brien took from the catalog of the racy couturier Frederick's of Hollywood. For most *Rockyphiles* it is enough to dress like Frederick's dream: Dracula makeovers, dominatrix corset, your basic black garter belt. The hard-core fans, who mime the dialogue onstage, do more than suit up for the dream; they star in it. And once in the full moon the dream can come true. Ron Maxwell, 22, is a Citibank computer operator by day and one of the Eighth Street regulars performing "Brads" on weekends. Listening to this testimony of salvation: "At school I was a nerd, a dork, a social outcast. So I identified with Brad. Now I'm still a dork, but it's O.K. *Rocky Horror* says, 'You're weird, but you belong somewhere. Let's all be weird together.'" He excuses himself to go onstage opposite comely "Janet"; they met at the Eighth Street and are engaged to be married. *Rocky* movies can have happy endings too.

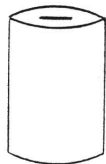
And birthday parties as well. On Halloween Sal, Ron and 2,600 *Rockyites*—some from as far away as Montreal, London, Sacramento, Winston-Salem, N.C. and the Bronx—made a pilgrimage to Manhattan's cavernous Beacon Theater for their tenth-anniversary bash. Sal presented shares of Oscars to each of seven *R.H.P.S.* actors who tried not to look as if they had wandered into a Star Dreck convention. The audience judged a costume contest: dozens of odd fellows dressed as their favorite *Rocky* characters. Everyone had a ball. Richard O'Brien, dressed for the occasion in a curving black tube top with feather-dust hem, black mesh stockings and a rhinestone choker, set the tone for the evening, and offered a clue to his film's enduring, endearing popularity, when he proclaimed, "It's very hard sometimes to separate fantasy from reality. *Let's keep it that way!*" Sage advice, inside or outside a late-night double-feature picture show.

—By Richard Corliss

## LAST WEEK AT CTC



ATTENDANCE



COLLECTIONS



PRIZES

FRI	56	\$ 7.48	Keith Paquette
SAT	132	\$ 7.10	Angela Auleride