

Film Close-Up: Mark Ruffalo

by Joey_Berlin

Mark Ruffalo is a chameleon on the big screen, subtly disappearing into the wide variety of roles he has played in films over the past 15 years. Most people would not recognize the Wisconsin-born actor and that is the way Ruffalo likes it, figuring his longevity in Hollywood depends on his ability to keep audiences guessing. On the other hand, he would not mind having a runaway box office hit every now and then.

Ruffalo's new film is "Zodiac," the subdued character-based thriller about the people involved in San Francisco's notorious unsolved serial killer case. From David Fincher, a director well-regarded for his dark and technically precise style, "Zodiac" stars Ruffalo as real-life homicide inspector David Toschi, with Robert Downey Jr. playing a newspaper reporter and Jake Gyllenhaal as an amateur sleuth.

MARK RUFFALO - Mark Ruffalo plays police investigator Dave Tosch in the crime thriller 'Zodiac.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Merrick Morton.

Ruffalo's most successful film so far has been "Collateral," in which he played a detective tracking Tom Cruise. He also co-starred with Reese Witherspoon in "Just Like Heaven," Jennifer Aniston in "Rumor Has It ..." and Jennifer Garner in "13 Going on 30." Ruffalo, who has fully recovered from the 2002 surgery, which removed a cyst in his brain and left part of his face temporarily paralyzed, will turn 40 in November.

Q: With all of the research material that you were given access to for "Zodiac," did you find yourself playing detective? Did you come to any conclusion about the case?

A: You start to think like a cop after a while. Me personally, I feel like it's Arthur Leigh Allen. I feel 98 percent sure that it's him. But there's still that niggling 2 percent that's just there. There's just a couple gaps. There really isn't a solid piece of evidence, you know? And that's what they were constantly fighting against.

Q: Why did the police have so much trouble catching this particular serial killer?

A: They weren't set up for it. There hadn't been a serial killer. They didn't have a name for it. They hadn't had somebody who was doing mass murder for the fun of it, or just to get off on it or be aggrandized in the culture, you know? And they didn't have the technology. They didn't have faxes, there was all this jurisdictional stuff going on and the guy was smart enough to kill in different places, where he knew there'd be problems with information going back and forth. Today, we'd probably get the guy. Maybe.

Q: Did it take a lot of practice to so dramatically change your voice and your demeanor for the role?

A: Well, part of that is just going and spending time with the guy. I mean, Dave Toschi talks like that. He has a very measured way of talking. I could think of a guy, a character in my imagination like I did in "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," that was a guy I made up in my imagination. He's got his own thing going on. But when I go to Dave Toschi, he's totally free. There's a human being there who's totally different than me, who dresses different, wears his hair different. So if I can, I try to spend as much time as I can with these people. I feel like I'll be around longer in Hollywood if I just keep doing that, and people won't get sick of me. I won't be just playing myself over and over again. Plus, it's fun. It's interesting to me as an actor.

Q: What struck you most about the investigators when you met them?

A: The guys, they had this gentlemanly quality, like it was in bad taste to really blow your top on anybody. Dave Toschi never says swear words when you're talking to him. He's like, "I'll tell ya, I was really P.O.'d about that, Mark. I mean, that G.D. S.O.B. That really got me angry." He has that old-school kind of quality. And so even in their most frustrated moments, they're not very explosive.

Q: Is Dave Toschi haunted by this case, because there was no definitive resolution to it?

A: It's that wound that a man might receive in his life that never heals, and he carries it to his grave. He has dealt with it with great dignity, and he and his family have moved on from it. They have assimilated it with grace into their lives. But it is constantly there. You know, Dave was being groomed to be the chief of police.

I mean, this guy was a good cop. And then politically, and what happened with the Chronicle, and all the speculation the HE might have been the Zodiac, he just had the stink on him and it never left. He recovered and he had another job, and he's done very well and loves his family and all that. But it was a huge thing to get over.

Q: Lastly, you have written, directed, and starred in a number of plays. Do you have any stage work coming up?

A: Not yet. I was asked to do "Hamlet" in Seattle. But the last stage work I did buried me. I got paid \$200 a week, so I'm still trying to work my way out of that. But I'll be back on stage, definitely.

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