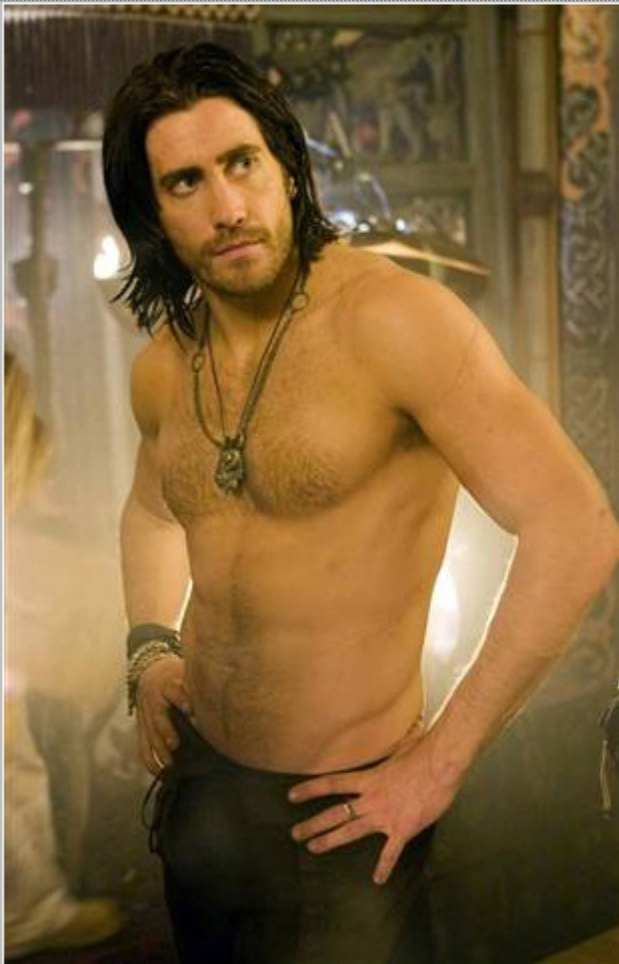


Welcome to the era of the buffed actor

Rippling biceps, six-pack abs now the rule, not the exception, in Hollywood



Mike Torchia, personal trainer extraordinaire, remembers working with Kevin Spacey on the 2000 film “Ordinary Decent Criminal,” shot in Dublin, Ireland. Spacey lived in a beautiful estate during the production, and Torchia was not only his exercise guru, but also his personal chef.

“When I got there, in the cabinets he had all this pasta and Paul Newman Sockarooni sauce,” Torchia said. “He was used to having a big bowl of pasta and a half a jar of Sockarooni sauce with cheese on it every night. I threw everything out one day. When Kevin came home, he said, ‘Where’s my pasta?’ He flipped. ‘What am I gonna do?’” Then Torchia told him what he was going to do: Work out hard, eat right (no carbs or sugar), and eventually reduce his 23.8 percent body fat to eight percent.

Spacey may not seem like the prototypical Hollywood action hero, but that’s the point. The Era of the Buffed Actor is upon us, which means no significant male leading role is exempted from the expectation that he have rippling biceps and six-pack abs. That’s Hollywood.

Whether it be Matt Damon in the “Bourne” films, Jake Gyllenhaal in “Prince of Persia,” Russell Crowe in “Robin Hood,” Robert Pattinson and Taylor Lautner in the “Twilight” series, Robert Downey Jr. in the “Iron Man” pictures, or many others, flab is clearly not fab.

Actors in action or physically demanding roles are defined these days by their definition. “There’s been a fitness craze in this country for the past decade, and we have come to define fitness by its most visible feature — the hardened body, even though it could just as easily be cholesterol count, blood pressure, etc.,” said Susan Jeffords, professor and pop culture expert at the University of Washington-Bothell and author of the book, “Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era.”

“We’re a visual culture,” she explained, “and we look for external signs of our selves. You can hear the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ in the theater when a male star removes his shirt to reveal hardened abs and well-defined arm muscles. This is even true for women, where you can hear men in the audience admiring Angelina Jolie’s arms in ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith.’ It’s not ‘essential’ for all film roles, but it’s a pretty sure feature of any action-adventure movie.”

Hardbodies part of the landscape

“I do think audiences come with certain expectations for action heroes,” noted Betsy Sharkey, film critic for the Los Angeles Times. “It’s just more than muscle sometimes. Tobey Maguire’s ‘Spider-Man’ and Shia LaBeouf in ‘Transformers’ are wiry and fall into the ‘boy-next-door’ category of reluctant hero that audiences definitely embrace just as much as the Gerard Butler’s of the six-pack-ab world.”

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“But on the scale, the ab crowd is certainly winning. When Arnold Schwarzenegger first came on the scene, he was unusual. Now it’s unusual for an action hero not to be body-building fit, or close.”

If you want to travel into movie-making’s past, you could probably cite many examples in which the hero was sculpted like a Greek god. Charlton Heston in “Ben-Hur” (1959) is a classic example. Ditto for Kirk Douglas in “Spartacus” (1960). Later came Arnold in the “Terminator” films, and Sylvester Stallone in the “Rocky” and “Rambo” testosterone fests.

But in recent years, it seems that most roles with even a little action come with puffed pecs, and those actors are being marketed as sexy muscular hunks like never before. It seems to be not simply the selling of eye candy, but rather Hollywood’s manifestation of a cultural phenomenon.

“It does seem that if you get an action role these days, you’re facing about six months of extreme boot camp to get that sort of physical definition,” Sharkey explained. “If only as much time as spent on the script, the beautiful bods might not be so distracting. “But it’s not just the movies who are to blame for the growing obsession with physical perfection, it’s all the celebrity magazines who fill their pages each week with shots of actors, many of them at beaches. If they don’t look buff, there will be a caption that says so — or a cover story — on what happened. It’s as if having anything but that hard-body perfection is a crime.”

Eivind Figenschau Skjellum is the founder of masculinity-movies.com. He believes this proliferation of perfectly crafted bodies in movies is the result of something more basic in the evolution of mankind.

Return of the alpha male

“Back in the old days, before civilization as we know it arose, men were the hunters and the guardians of the family and the tribe,” he said. “The man who possessed the best physique, the most able body, was the best man for a woman to be with, for he could protect her better than the weaker man, and thus she could carry forward children under relative safety. It was an era that belonged to the alpha man.

“It is because of our need to breed that we like our heroes to be alpha men. It is what makes him a hero, to defeat the obstacles and achieve the goal in service of his family, his country and mankind.”

And that’s where guys like Torchia come in.

One of the top personal trainers in Hollywood (operationfitness.com), he prepared Damon for his work in all three “Bourne” installments, and has also worked with Al Pacino, Kim Cattrall and many others. Torchia said the muscles you see on the screen are the result of a comprehensive lifestyle program, not just a few hours in the gym. He reads the script for the film, then connects with the actor and helps the actor connect with the character he will play

with the new, improved body he will soon develop.

“I not only want the character to look the part, but I want the actor to feel what the character feels,” he explained. “I connect with my clients and get into their heads. They become so excited about being powerful.

“Matt Damon said to me, ‘You’ve made me become Jason Bourne.’ I help them connect to being physically strong, so when Matt played Jason Bourne he felt he could take on six men.”

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, an actor playing a part similar to the one Damon played in the “Bourne” franchise will have to look like he can do just that, because audiences expect nothing less now.

“The whole idea of training oneself into great shape has completely embedded itself in the culture now,” said the L.A. Times’ Sharkey. “Look at ‘The Biggest Loser,’ with its obese contestants turning into stars as they get into shape.

“But as obsessions go, you could do worse than having fitness, and the training it takes to get close to perfection, at the top of your addiction list.”