

Welcome to the movies! buzz

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ON SET!

Scrapheap challenge

REAL STEEL | Hugh Jackman muscles up and plays Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots for real...

➤ In cavernous Cobo Arena in downtown Detroit, a super-sized boxing ring has been constructed, sporting steel cables as thick as Arnold Schwarzenegger's forearm on all four sides. And for good reason - they have to bear the load of 2000lb, 8ft-tall robots banging seven shades of shit out of each other

in front of the stadium's baying crowd (a few dozen scattered extras, due to be multiplied into thousands in post-production). The ring itself is empty, but Hugh Jackman roams its edges like a coiled panther, barking instructions into a headset: "Left jab! Right uppercut!"

Buzz is on the set of *Real Steel*, based in 2020 when the sport of boxing has turned high-tech. Jackman plays Charlie Kenton, >>

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'It's a movie about super-cool, bad-ass robots that's really emotional'

Shawn Levy, Director

BOT OR NOT?

These robots aren't really there. While animatronic bots were used for close ups, fight scenes were shot on a motion-capture sound stage in LA using real boxers, choreographed by Sugar Ray Leonard.

ROBOT WARS

Zeus is the World Robot Boxing league champion. Like Noisy Boy, he was designed in the movie by Tak Mashido (Karl Yune). "He's the celebrity 'bot designer. He's part scientist boy wonder and part inventor," says Levy.

NEW FILMS!

CROWD PLEASER

Since there wasn't a real fight, the extras were reacting to fight commentary broadcast over an intercom to give atmosphere.

I, ROBOT?

Real Steel's robots are not self aware, they're controlled by managers who dictate their moves by remote control headset.

<< a washed-up fighter whose shot at the title was blown when giant steel robots stepped into the ring! Scraping by as a low-rent promoter who pieces together scrap-metal 'bots for underground fight clubs, Charlie gets a shot at redemption when his estranged son Max (newcomer Dakota Goyo) turns up and they bond while training up an iron-jawed contender named Atom. Unlike in the *X-Men* movies, Jackman doesn't get scrappy himself, but Atom is programmed to mimic the ex-bruiser's own fighting style (call it shadow boxing). Needless to say, the

ministrations of father and son take him all the way from the junkyard to the championship bout.

All of *Real Steel's* mechanised clashes were meticulously choreographed and motion-captured using real boxers before the live-action shoot began. To avoid that irritatingly clunky mismatch between visual effects and performance, Jackman (and *Buzz*) can see the fight moves he'll be watching play out on a big screen (today's clash pits Atom against a two-headed monstrosity named Twin Cities); the effects aren't 100% polished yet, but they're good enough to get >>

Spotlight: a robot fighter waits to enter the ring.



Sucker punch: robots Noisy Boy and Midas come to metallic blows in *Real Steel*.

<< a metallic blow-by-blow picture. "I know exactly what the fight's going to be, so I know how I'm controlling my robot," says Jackman. "The way I was doing this even a year ago was so totally different. It was pretty much guess-work, where the director would say, 'Duck!' but you don't know what's coming at you. If you ever watch me in *Van Helsing*, you'll see that a few times..."

'These robots are amazing, you believe they're alive'

Hugh Jackman

While motion-capture animation is being deployed for scenes where *Steel's* mechanised pugilists brawl, 19 animatronic titans were created for quieter scenes with the actors. It was Steven Spielberg, who is exec producing, who urged mixing up CGI with 'real steel'. "These robots are unbelievable," gushes Jackman. "They're operated by these amazing puppeteers and when you're in a scene with them, you just believe they're alive. We kind of treat it like James Stewart with Harvey - like they're real all the time."

Loosely inspired by a Richard Matheson short story called *Steel*, *Real Steel's* robots are, well, just robots (i.e. they're not sentient), although Shawn Levy's film gains a lyrical dimension when Max begins to believe there might be more than just a command-operated twinkle in Atom's laser-eye. Known for froth-coms (*Night At The Museum*, *Date Night*), Levy admits he's a bizarre choice for directing duties. "The first thing I said when Steven called me was, 'Have you seen my movies?'" the effusive director chuckles. "But he said that what he noticed in my comedies was heart, a kind of humanist warmth. There's a version of this movie that would just be technological pornography but in the aftermath of *Transformers* and *Terminator*, it's not fresh to do

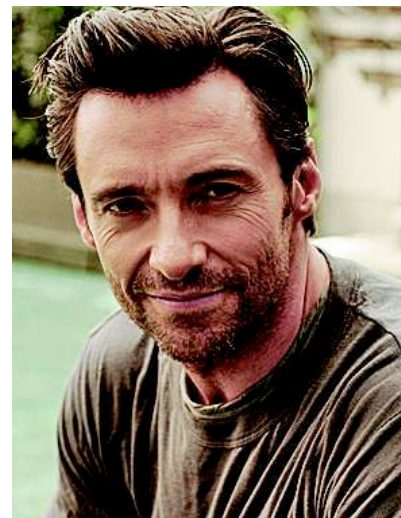
a fetishistic mechanised movie any more. I'm doing a movie about bad-ass, super-cool robots that's really emotional..."

Levy cites *Wall-E* as the robot movie he most wants to emulate, while Jackman labels the film "*Paper Moon* meets *Rocky*". But fear not, techno-porn fans: robots don't feel pain so *Real Steel's* smack-downs will be metal-crumplingly brutal. Finally, the clash of the titans we've been waiting for... **MM**

ETA | 7 OCTOBER *Real Steel* opens this autumn, for the latest features check out totalfilm.com

GA HUGH JACKMAN

The Aussie star won't be replaced by a robot...



Do you have a boxing background?

My old man was a boxer, actually. He was an army champ. But once I knew about this film, I did some training with Sugar Ray Leonard and another less well-known fighter in New York.

Did you watch any prior boxing films to prepare?

Both Shawn and I went back and watched the original *Rocky* and you forget - there was only one 10-minute fight at the end. We always said we should be able to take out boxing and replace it with anything. The sport could be snail-racing. It's irrelevant to how well-drawn this story and these characters are.

What attracted you to the role?

I feel like I'm getting to run in the paddock more than I have for a while. It's not just an action movie, there's a lot of heart in my relationship with the boy and my relationship with Evangeline Lilly's character. Every relationship in this movie feels very complex. I'm getting to show stuff that I haven't had a chance to show before.

Is the drama more challenging than the action, then?

In this movie they're not separate things because most of my action is actually controlling the thing that I have my whole life invested in.

Like human boxers in *Real Steel*, do you worry that actors will one day be rendered obsolete?

Well, it's probably true! But I'm a creature of the theatre, I love it, and I think the actor's role as storyteller will always be there. I'm sure on some level we'll always be needed, but maybe not as much as we are now!

EYEVINE/CONTRASTO