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Pro Wrestling and the Art of Political Storytelling

PRO WRESTLING is political. This must be reiterated and placed forcefully at the center of its methods of storytelling.

It is political when we boo the classic evil foreigner. It is political when we cheer the babyface with the American flag. It is political when a storyline involves a workingman redneck beating up his boss.

It is pervasively, intensely political, at all levels of its storytelling. This is really important to understand, because the combination of its core of politics and the simplicity of its storytelling has allowed it to thrive for a hundred years. It will last a hundred more. You can like it or not, think that it makes sense or that it's weird, or something in between. It doesn't matter. It is the oldest form of modern entertainment to maintain a steady level of more or less high popularity in this country, from

the early 20th century to today. It's impossible to ignore the elephant in the room that WWE Hall of Famer Donald Trump is president-elect and he got there by cutting wrestling promos.

There is no political storytelling from the center or the left anymore, save that which we create for ourselves via algorithms and a retreat into the self; and this has given ample room for the right wing to capitalize on the appeal of simple, effective storytelling about the current political moment on an almost exclusive basis.

This is what Trump and so many others from pro wrestling get on an instinctual level. Their storytelling in the ring and on the mic is about simplicity. It's about morals, which, even if they're muddled, are clarified through violence. We all recoiled when Trump cut a year-long promo on immigrants, forgetting that the

MEXICO'S PSICOSIS JR.





JEFF COBB CHALLENGES DESEAN PRATT



foreigner is always the heel, the nativist is always the babyface.

Those stories can be used for good or bad. There's something impossibly dark about the persistence of the evil-foreigner gimmick in pro wrestling. It never fails to find purchase with the crowd at least a bit, and that says something about us when it undergirds the spine of our most visible working-class entertainment for so long. And we all cheer the babyface and boo the foreign heel, or we at least all recognize that we're supposed to, no matter how liberal or open-minded we think we are.

"Fuck that guy," you think, almost despite yourself. "He's Bulgarian."

But there's another kind of storytelling in wrestling, equally populist and in tune with working-class thought, but brighter and more optimistic. Because not just foreigners are bad guys. Rich

guys are, too. Vince McMahon is smart enough to know that he's a heel because he's rich—good luck getting to the root of the personal psychology of the intersection between the character and the real man, but the class politics of it are clear. Ric Flair was the annoying rich frat boy who always won and always cruised down Main Street after he did. Ted DiBiase ruthlessly taunted everyone with his money. On and on it goes, until the rich asshole as heel is almost as eternal as the evil foreigner.

This isn't to say that political strategizing on the left should organize itself around pro wrestling. That's crazy, though it's certainly a little less crazy than it was this time last week. But it is to say that there has been simple, moral storytelling of the type the left desperately needs—right in front of us every week for decades.





Mythologies

The World of Wrestling

THE VIRTUE of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess. Here we find a grandiloquence which must have been that of ancient theaters. And in fact wrestling is an open-air spectacle, for what makes the circus or the arena what they are is not the sky (a romantic value suited rather to fashionable occasions), it is the drenching and vertical quality of the flood of light. Even hidden in the most squalid Parisian halls, wrestling partakes of the nature of the great solar spectacles, Greek drama and bullfights: in both, a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve.

What is thus displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice. Wrestling presents man's suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks. The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an exces-

sive portrayal of Suffering; like a primitive Pieta, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by an intolerable affliction. It is obvious, of course, that in wrestling reserve would be out of place, since it is opposed to the voluntary ostentation of the spectacle, to this Exhibition of Suffering which is the very aim of the fight. This is why all the actions which produce suffering are particularly spectacular, like the gesture of a conjuror who holds out his cards clearly to the public. Suffering which appeared without intelligible cause would not be understood; a concealed action that was actually cruel would transgress the unwritten rules of wrestling and would have no more sociological efficacy than a mad or parasitic gesture. On the contrary suffering appears as inflicted with emphasis and conviction, for everyone must not only see that the man suffers, but also and above





all understand why he suffers. What wrestlers call a hold, that is, any figure which allows one to immobilize the adversary indefinitely and to have him at one's mercy, has precisely the function of preparing in a convenient, therefore intelligible, fashion the spectacle of suffering, of methodically establishing the conditions of suffering. The inertia of the vanquished allows the (temporary) victor to settle in his cruelty and to convey to the public this terrifying slowness





of the torturer who is certain about the outcome of his actions; to grind the face of one's powerless adversary or to scrape his spine with one's fist with a deep and regular movement, or at least to produce the superficial appearance of such gestures: wrestling is the only sport which gives such an externalized image of torture. But here again, only the image is involved in the game, and the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography. It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle: it is only an intelligible spectacle.

But what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice. The idea of 'paying' is essential to wrestling, and the crowd's 'Give it to him' means above all else 'Make him pay'. This is therefore, needless to say, an immanent justice. The baser the action of the 'bastard', the more delighted the public is by the blow which he justly receives in return. If the villain--who is of course a coward--takes refuge behind the ropes, claiming unfairly to have a right to do so by a brazen mimicry, he is inexorably pursued there and caught, and the crowd





is jubilant at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment. Wrestlers know very well how to play up to the capacity for indignation of the public by presenting the very limit of the concept of Justice, this outermost zone of confrontation where it is enough to infringe the rules a little more to open the gates of a world without restraints. For a wrestling-fan, nothing is finer than the revengeful fury of a betrayed fighter who throws himself vehemently not on a successful opponent but on the smarting image of foul play. Naturally, it is the pattern of Justice which matters here, much more than its content: wrestling is above all a quantitative sequence of compensations (an eye for an eye, a

tooth for a tooth). This explains why sudden changes of circumstances have in the eyes of wrestling habitues a sort of moral beauty: they enjoy them as they would enjoy an inspired episode in a novel, and the greater the contrast between the success of a move and the reversal of fortune, the nearer the good luck of a contestant to his downfall, the more satisfying the dramatic mime is felt to be. Justice is therefore the embodiment of a possible transgression; it is from the fact that there is a Law that the spectacle of the passions which infringe it derives its value.

Wrestlers, who are very experienced, know perfectly how to direct the spontaneous episodes of the fight so as to make them con-



Wrestlers can irritate or disgust but never disappoint. They always accomplish completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of them.

form to the image which the public has of the great legendary themes of its mythology. A wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him. In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute, there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is presented exhaustively. Leaving nothing in the shade, each action discards all parasitic meanings and ceremonially offers to the public a pure and full signification, rounded like Nature. This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality. What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a uni





vocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction.

When the hero or the villain of the drama, the man who was seen a few minutes earlier possessed by mortal rage, magnified into a sort of metaphysical sign, leaves the wrestling hall, impassive, anonymous, carrying a small suitcase and arm-in-arm with his wife, no one can doubt that wrestling holds that power of transmutation which is common to the





Spectacle and to Religious Worship. In the ring, and even in the depths of their voluntary ignominy, wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible.





Toronto Is the
Nerdiest Wres-
tling City in
the World





THE ONE thing that doesn't waiver in Toronto is the city's passion for professional wrestling. Sports fans in Toronto are a passionate bunch. The fans of each of Toronto's major sports teams are known to be among the rowdiest in their respective leagues. When residents of Toronto get into something, they go way over the top.

"It's a very smart crowd, very educated in all forms of pro wrestling." -Kenny Omega, top international in New Japan

A blue octagonal sign with gold borders and handwritten text "FRESH 2 DEATH 3" hanging from a yellow rope. The sign is attached to a yellow rope that runs horizontally across the frame. The background is blurred, showing a crowd of people.

FRESH

2

DEATH

3



Why does the city take to pro wrestling the way it does, so consistently? In most cities, there wouldn't be room for all of it, but Toronto is different — pro wrestling always seems to take precedence.



“Whether you’re gonna go for strong style, you’re going to try lucha, OK we’re going to go classic North American or catch style, or we’re just going to do some over the top comedy—as long as they’re having fun, they don’t care. They’re going to cheer for it, they’re going to love it, they’re going to come back.”

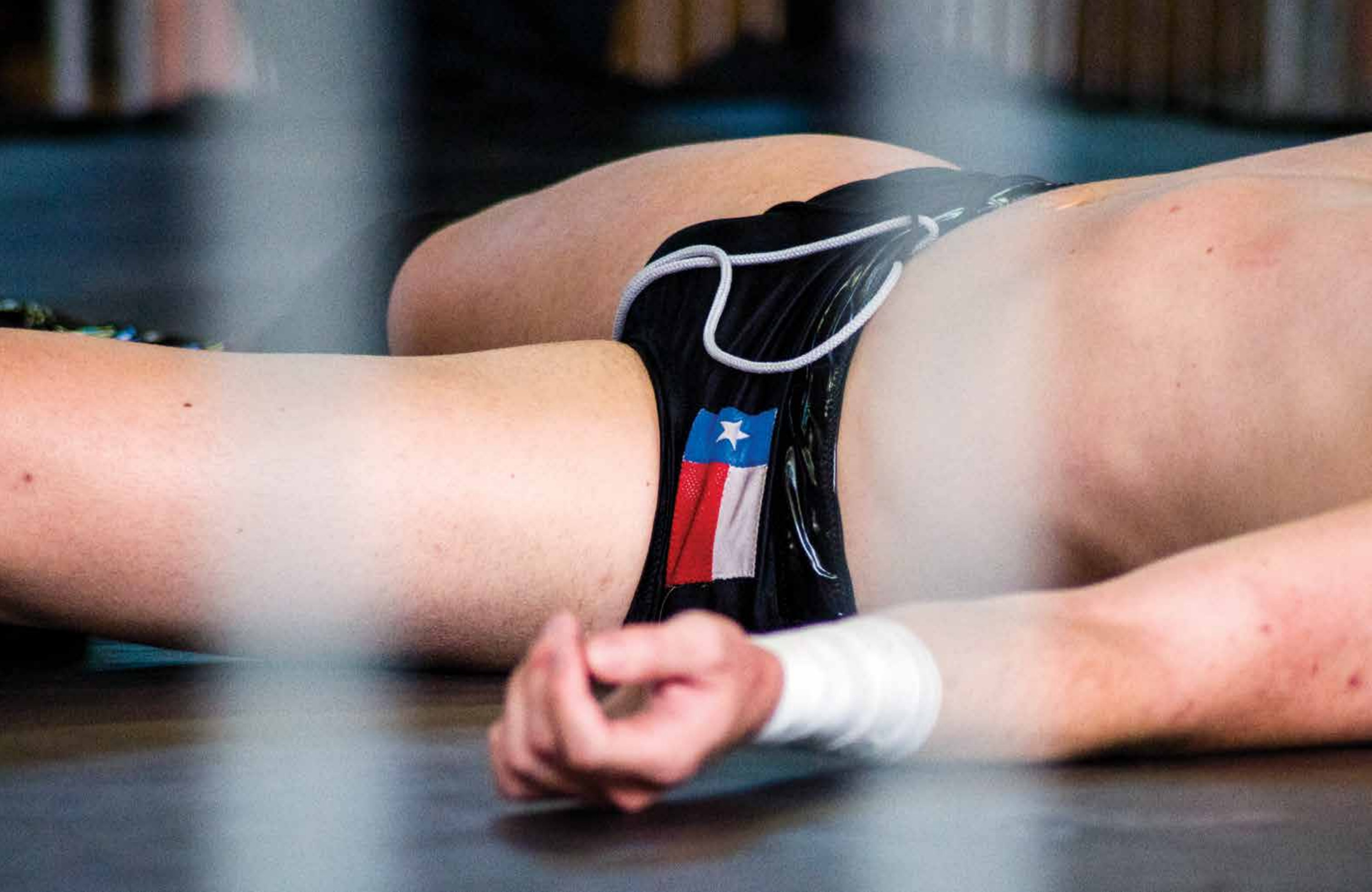




“It’s New York and Toronto... Toronto to me is ahead of New York because the facilities are nicer, and the fans are cooler. You don’t get the fuckin’ bunch that just wants to chant Twinkies at the referee.”



Wrestling fandom in Toronto will never waver the way it will for team sports. The Leafs and Raptors and Jays might fluctuate between contention and basement-dwelling, but barring an industry-wide collapse or scandal, the fact that wrestling is "fake" ensures that new stars will always be created and intrigue can always be drummed up. But promoters don't have to work too hard to entice people in Toronto. The city's love for wrestling is anything but fake—it's as real as it gets.





A photograph of a crowd of people at a sporting event. In the foreground, a man with a goatee and a black t-shirt featuring a graphic of a ship and a person is looking upwards. Behind him, other people are visible, some wearing hats and jerseys. The scene is lit with blue and purple lights, suggesting an indoor arena or stadium.

Don't Look At
Me: On Seeing
and Being Seen
in the Crowd

EVERY GENERATION finds its own unique way to be isolated and lonely growing up, but coming of age in rural Maine before the Internet was a special kind of alone. It's difficult to overstate how isolated an odd, intense child can feel with little connection to the wider world, and as I grow up I'm convinced (like millions of others all around the world in every era) that I am the only person to ever feel so alone, the only person to ever be so out of place.

I fall head over heels in love with wrestling and don't even know why. I watch fans on television holding up signs, begging for attention, and am mystified; they may as well be lifting signs saying "Please dump a box of tarantulas over my head." I go to two live shows and watch people screaming for wrestlers to look at them, look at them, look at them, and I'm stunned, completely uncomprehending.

No. This is only half true. The other half is that of course, of course, to my horrified surprise, I envy them. I watch them reach out to touch Dean Ambrose and I'm sick with jealousy at the ease with which they call his name and jockey for his smile. I want to be able to do that. The fierce intensity of my longing shocks and shames me; at live shows I drop my gaze as wrestlers pass by as if it were a demand, an assault, as if it were something terrible and dangerous. I don't understand: after decades of trying to be invisible, why wrestling, why these people, why am I thinking, Where is my box of tarantulas?

Colt Cabana was chopping one of Dalton's Boys and we yelled at him to be nicer, and he looked at us and laughed and did it harder, it was the most amazing thing.

Remember that show? The one where Roman Reigns saw us cheering and smiled? I'll never forget it,





He looked right at us.

Barthes calls wrestling “the spectacle of excess,” but we, the audience, are the spectacle. Wrestlers are there to be seen but also to see us seeing them, to hear our

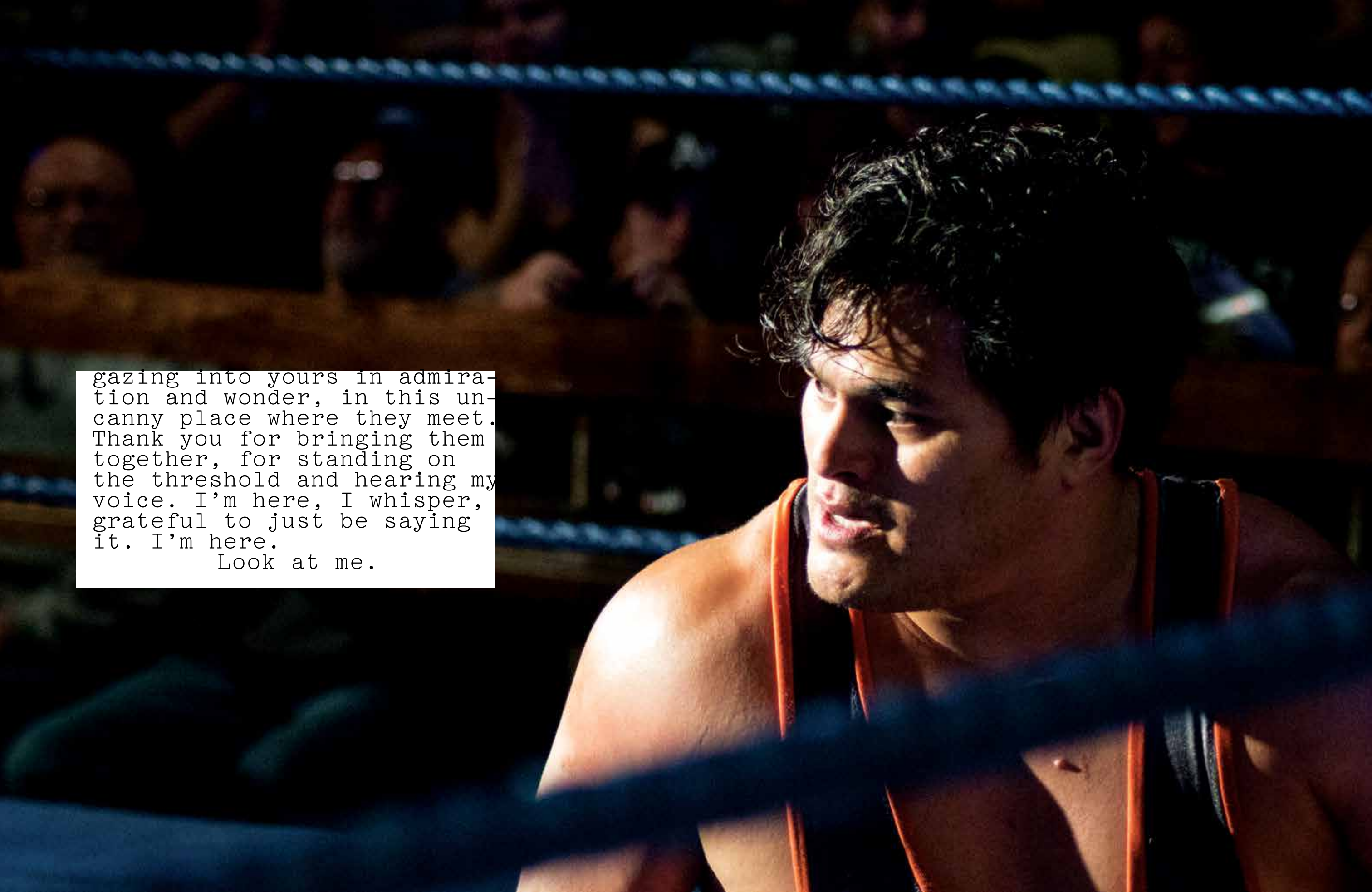




cheers and respond to them, to make us part of the story.

Wrestlers are liminal, a wonderful word which means “on the threshold, standing between two states or two realms.” They stand partly in our world and partly in the fictional world, and they hold the door open to include everything they can hear and see in the story. While we’re in the audience, we have a part to play in this huge sprawling tale, in this world of demon kings and warrior queens and cyborgs, giants and legend-killers. Wrestlers invite us into a world where we have a destiny, we have a role to fill, our voices have an influence on these maharajas and eaters of worlds and monsters among men.

You can’t say thank you without being heard, you can’t give energy without being seen. So I keep trying to say: Here I am in my world, this terrible and beautiful world,

A close-up, low-angle shot of a man with dark, curly hair and a light beard, wearing an orange and black tank top. He is looking down and to the left with a somber expression. The background is a blurred crowd in a boxing ring, with blue ropes visible. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

gazing into yours in admiration and wonder, in this uncanny place where they meet. Thank you for bringing them together, for standing on the threshold and hearing my voice. I'm here, I whisper, grateful to just be saying it. I'm here.

Look at me.







TEXT TOM BREEN
PHOTOGRAPHY MARS QUAVE

Theses on the Philosophy of Joey Janela

“A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”
– Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History

TWO IMAGES from this past March in Orlando, FL, during the week-long pageantry around Wrestlemania 33:

First, the beefy Canadian wrestler Ethan Page, standing in a wrestling ring a few hours before dawn, expertly imitating the jerky, unnatural movements of characters in the 1990s video game “Mortal Kombat,” theme playing through the public address system. Standing across from Page in the ring is 52-year-old Raymond M. Lloyd. More than 20 years ago, Lloyd was brought out by World Championship Wrestling in a series of campy vignettes as “Glacier,” a masked, armored combatant who was plainly a live-action imitation of Sub-Zero, one of the characters in the Mortal Kombat game. Lloyd, in the remnants of the Glacier ring gear, stands completely still, his eyes glassy, seemingly mesmerized by the spectacle in front of him, his own past flaring up in a moment of danger, to borrow an image from Benjamin.

At last, he decides to fight, but it’s too late: distracted by another wrestler, Glacier is easily rolled up and pinned by Page.

Second, a few nights later, Matt and Jeff Hardy – who began their careers with the then-World Wrestling Federation around the same time that Lloyd’s Glacier gimmick was washing up – standing triumphant at the Citrus Bowl in front of an announced crowd of 75,000 (although the total will almost definitely be thousands fewer), holding the Raw Tag Team Championship belts after their surprise return to the company after a decade in the wrestling wilderness.

On the surface, these two scenes have very little in common, but at a closer examination both prove to have the same engine powering them, which is nostalgia. One of these scenes was scripted by Vince McMahon, the chapped megamillionaire at the helm of the WWE, while the other was brought to the



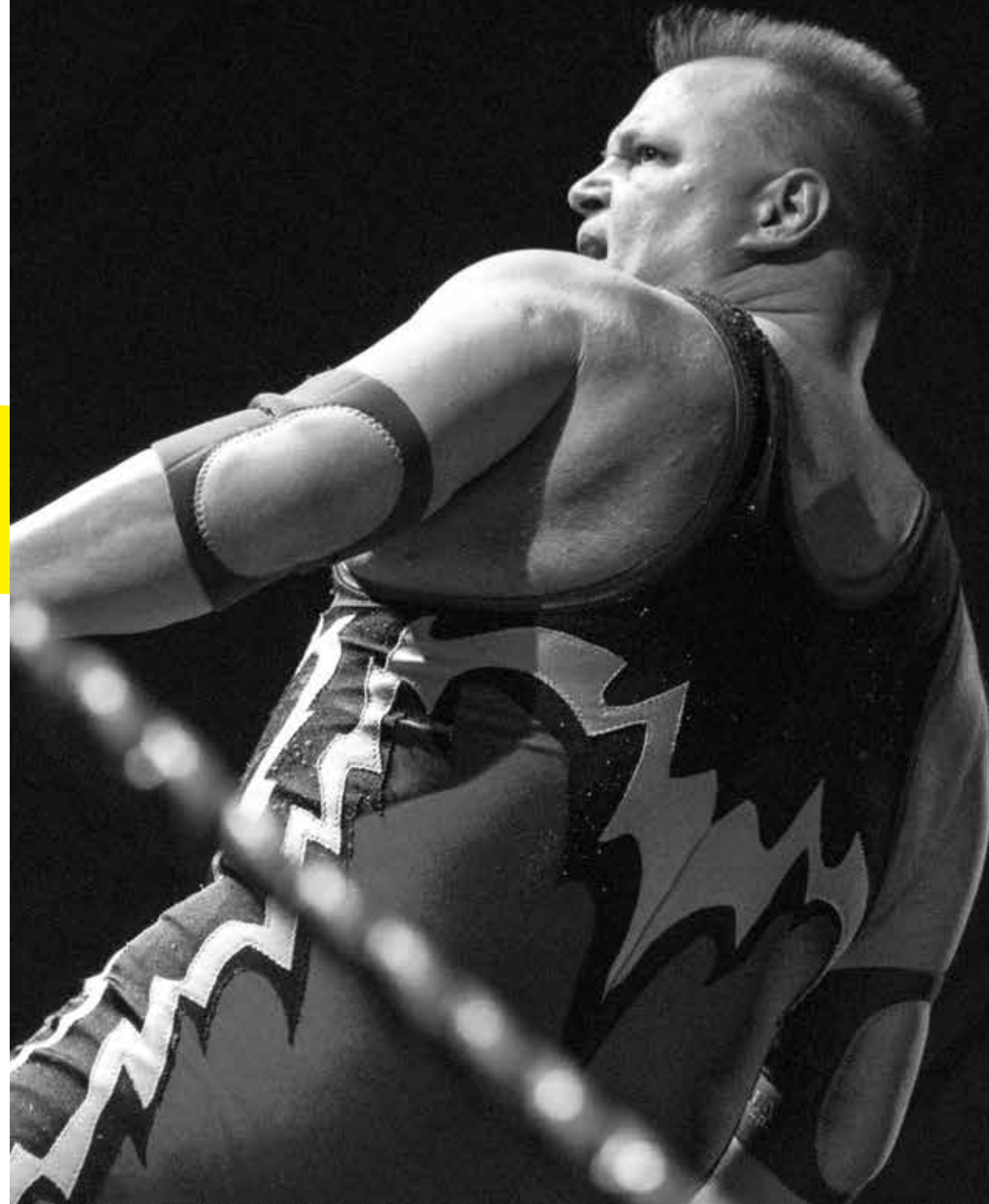
L: ETHAN PAGE, R: GLACIER


world courtesy of one Joey Janela, a 27-year-old independent wrestler who still lives at home in New Jersey with his mother, in the wrestling memorabilia-bedecked bedroom he's occupied since childhood. Of the two, Vince McMahon unquestionably knows more about selling tickets to wrestling matches, but I will argue that Janela – in his persona, in his booking, in the ingenuous vignettes he crafts, and in the unacceptably reckless stunts he engages in during matches – is by far the superior philosopher of nostalgia.

One of the consequences of the Internet has been that there is no longer a past, at least not as our grandparents thought of it: nothing is packed away forever anymore, the cultural detritus of all subsequent ages continues forever in a kind of eternal simultaneity that expresses itself as the culture of the present. Such a present should in theory render

nostalgia extinct, since if nothing is really gone, there's no reason to pine for what's been lost. In reality, this is merely another way in which capitalism fails by attempting to address an emotional need with a material product: nostalgia has become one of the dominant emotions of our age, an age in which people have ceased to even dream about the prospect of a utopian future.

But it's not only the future – which now seems a gloomy, apocalyptic stew of climate change, unpredictable acts of nihilist terror, and pandemic poverty wrought by out-of-control automation of industry – that seems bleak. The prospect that human events can be submitted to rational direction seems remote, and in coming to despair of the future, people have also ceased to believe in the present's ability to deliver on promises of social improvement or species-wide achievement.





in coming to despair of the future, people have also ceased to believe in the present's ability to deliver on promises of social improvement or species-wide achievement. That leaves only the past to dream about, but the promise lurking in fantasies of the past can never be fulfilled



L: COLT CABANA, R: THE FRATERNITY

That leaves only the past to dream about, but the promise lurking in fantasies of the past can never be fulfilled — we literally, of course, cannot travel back in time — and so nostalgia produces deformed, brutish offspring: the crypto-fascism of our political moment, the absurdist gibberish of our public sphere, the fetid, joyless spectacles of our entertainment industry. This is where Joey Janela steps into the light.

Janela is the Millennial-as-wrestler: he lives with his mother and drives for Uber on the side, because he doesn't make nearly enough from wrestling to support himself, despite the astonishingly dangerous stunts he routinely performs. And his vision of wrestling — one of the most compelling visions of anyone currently in the industry — is one characterized by nostalgia: for the campy spectacle of the pre-Attitude Era, mixed with the blood-soaked brutality of

the ECW-influenced hardcore style that flourished in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

But nothing from the past can be transferred whole to the present: to render history “as it really was” is not the point, Walter Benjamin wrote. The point is to seize a moment of the past that can serve the present, which is in a perpetual state of emergency.

For Janela, this is accomplished by viewing the past through a cracked lens composed of the ironic detachment which is another aspect of the Internet's default psychology. He does not yearn, in the manner of Baby Boomer wrestling nostalgists like Jim Cornette, for a return of the past, whole and unsullied: Janela, as a Millennial, instinctively knows the promises it makes are empty in wrestling just as they are elsewhere in American life. And so his methodology is to reach into the past and pull out an isolated image. Janela's rever-





So his methodol-
ogy is to reach
into the past and
pull out an iso-
lated image, a
la Benjamin, and
bring it into the
present, covered
in a glaze that's
equal parts com-
edy and horror.
Janela's rever-
ence for the past



ence for the past is inseparable from his understanding that it was often absurd, and his horror that it continues to work beneath the surface of contemporary life, mutating grotesque travesties rather than fulfilling its Utopian claims.

But it's the GCW show from Wrestlemania week that best encapsulates Janela's view of wrestling, of nostalgia, and of the futility of trying to live up to the demands the past places on the present. Most of all, there was the Clustfuck. Billed under that name, it was the perfect distillation of the Janela aesthetic, and the perfect antidote to the lubricated version of nostalgia peddled a few nights later at Wrestlemania. Ostensibly a scramble match, with new competitors announced every few minutes and the last wrestler standing the winner, it was a chaotic stew of conflicting symbols and differing styles, the Internet-spawned eternal-present made flesh in the form

of Dink the Clown biting Veda Scott on the ass, prompting Pro Wrestling Guerrilla's Excalibur, on commentary, to remark, "Just as capitalism makes criminals of us all, wrestling makes misogynists of us all," a line that could perhaps only happen at this show.

This where Page faced down Glacier in a sudden flash to a past that Page and Janela can only dimly recall, but which Glacier experienced fully. He should have won: Glacier, the embodiment of the pre-Attitude Era in wrestling, when a company could do something like unironically present a video game ninja as a credible competitor, the nostalgic past in blue ring gear, returned at last to redeem the present.

But he lost. And so did the other representatives of those ostensibly better days: Jannetty superkicked by Janela, Severn tapping out to Riddle, Dink wandering off into the humid night.

L: CARTER MASON

R: MIKE ORLANDO





Nostalgia brings us not helpers, but monsters. Joey Janela, a 27-year-old wrestler from New Jersey who lives with his mother, seeks not to return to the past, but overcome it.



COLOPHON PINFALL 01

PINFALL a wrestling magazine

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