

SOLID AS ROCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN BOWEN SMITH

HE'S GOT TREE-TRUNK ARMS, GRANITE THIGHS AND ENOUGH STRENGTH TO LIFT A GROWN MAN OVER HIS HEAD. STILL, ACTION STAR **DWAYNE JOHNSON'S BEST FEATURE MAY BE HIS IRRESISTIBLE CHARM.** ESSENCE'S JEANNINE AMBER GETS A PIECE OF THE ROCK

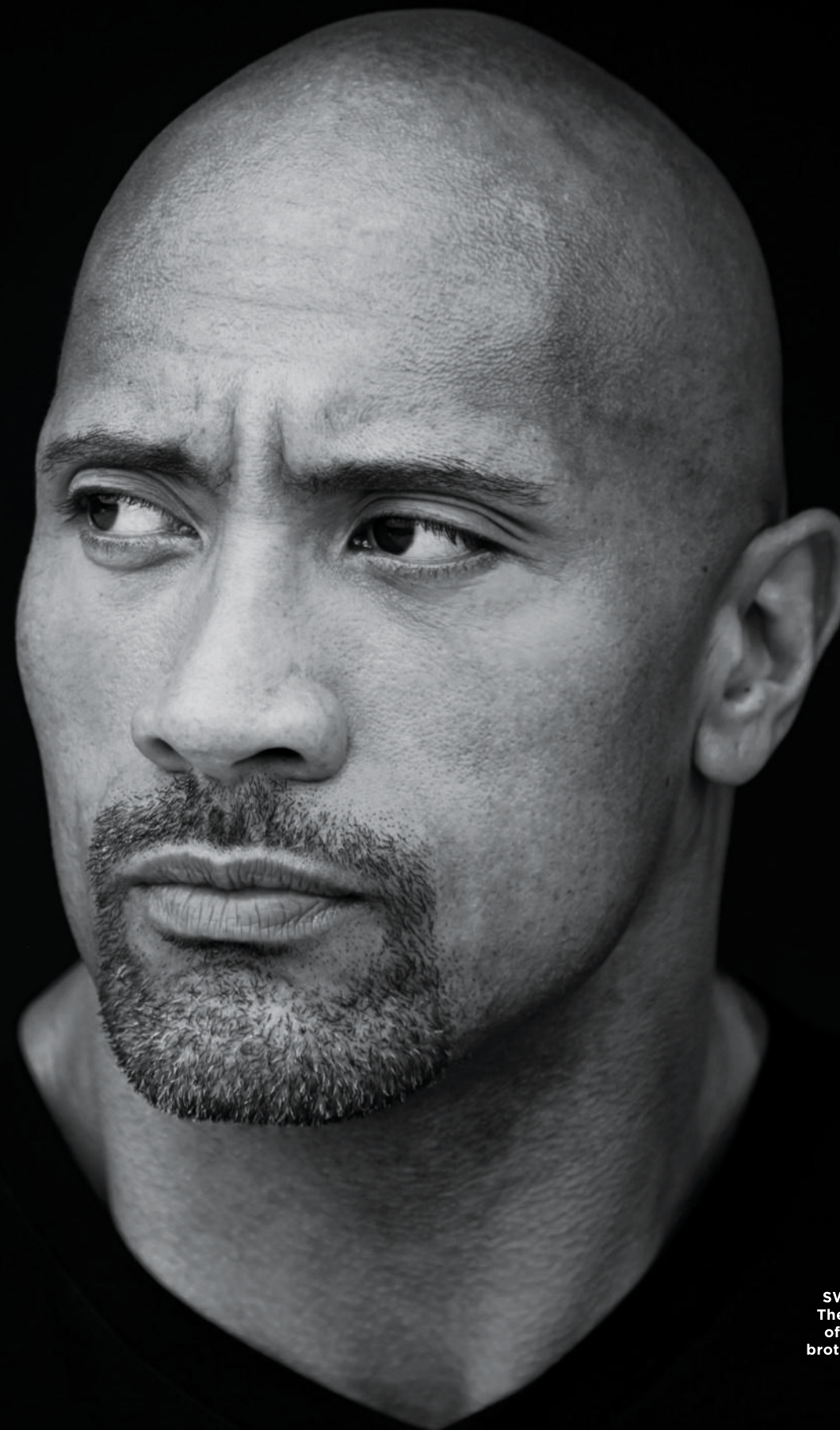
It's 5 p.m. in Budapest, Hungary, and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is relaxing in his suite at the Four Seasons hotel. In his left hand, he holds a phone pressed to his ear. "What am I wearing right now?" he says to the female reporter on the other end of the line. "A corduroy thong." Johnson lets the visual sink in, then adds in his trademark gravel-filled voice, "It's on backward. Ha, ha, ha!" The Rock finds The Rock very amusing.

Ask him again and he'll admit he's wearing olive green cargo shorts and a black button-down Hugo Boss shirt opened *just enough* to reveal a corner of the elaborate Samoan tattoo etched across his chest. "And I'm moisturized," he says. There's a certain smolder we've come to expect from our action heroes: a brew of swagger and nonchalance that says, *Yeah, I know I'm sexy.* And to be sure, Johnson has that machismo on lock. His over-the-top manliness—finely honed during years performing as a WWE pro wrestler—has led to total box office domination. By June,

Johnson had held the top spot for 15 consecutive weeks, starring in *Snitch*; *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* with Channing Tatum; *Pain & Gain* costarring Mark Wahlberg; and the sixth installment of the *Fast & Furious* franchise. In the works are almost half a dozen more action films, including director Brett Ratner's *Hercules*, in which Johnson plays the title role opposite John Hurt and *Deadwood*'s Ian McShane. He's been in the limelight for years, but now the man ESSENCE readers voted as having one of the hottest bodies in Hollywood has officially ascended to superstar status, with 5 million Twitter followers and a legion of adoring female fans.

When you hear Johnson has been cast as the mythological half-man, half-god known for massive strength and death-defying acts, you think, *What took them so long?* Even when he takes a role left of center stage, as Johnson did this summer as the host and executive producer of TNT's reality competition

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SEXIEST SWEETHEART: The Rock is one of our baddest brothers of 2013. See more on page 100.

series *The Hero*, he imbues it with testosterone-fueled theatrics. When Johnson, 41, meets the contestants for the first time, they're on the balcony of a high-rise in Panama City, Panama. Suddenly he swoops by, wearing a skintight tee and mirrored shades, riding in the belly of a helicopter and barking instructions at them. "Oh, I think I just peed on myself!" one woman says as he flies away.

But Johnson is much more than brawn and biceps. He exudes a warmth that is impossible to resist. He laughs easily, compliments generously, listens attentively. And his delight in his own jokes is so infectious that there's nothing you can do but laugh along. Our writer caught up with The Rock as he took a break from filming *Hercules*, scheduled for release next summer. In their freewheeling exchange, the two discuss what Johnson likes best about Black women, what he's learned about love and what he'd like to do with those big, strong hands of his.

ESSENCE: Tell me about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

DWAYNE JOHNSON: I was born in San Francisco, but my father was a professional wrestler, so we moved around a lot. We were like gypsies. We would get someplace, be there for 12 to 15 months and then move again. We lived in the South, and we lived in New Zealand for a while. Hawaii is the only place I lived for more than two years.

ESSENCE: You're very friendly. Do you think all that moving around helped you learn how to get along with people?

JOHNSON: I think there was value in moving around because it forced me to learn to adjust. But there's also value in just coming from a multicultural background and experiencing the culture of both my parents. The Samoan culture of my mother is rich and proud and so is the Black culture of my father. I've been fortunate to have had a lot of very strong women in my life: my mom, my grandmother and aunts. And my father was amazing. He was a pro wrestler in the sixties and seventies when it was a predominantly White sport and he was this trailblazer of an athlete, a real proud Blackman. When he was wrestling in the South, there were a lot of racial issues, but he broke down barriers and went on to become the Florida heavyweight champion, Georgia heavyweight champion, Tennessee heavyweight champion. He has really done amazing things. So from my father, I inherited confidence and swagger and his discipline to overcome. And physically, when you look at my body compared with my dad's body, it's very similar... in many ways [*laughter*].

ESSENCE: Part of your appeal is that you're big and strong, but you also have this gentleness about you. Given that duality, when you're in bed with a woman which side is more dominant?

JOHNSON: I like taking my time and I like tenderness. Also, listening is very important. You know, over time, as I've gotten more mature as a man, I've started to realize there are certain things I want and need that are important to me, and listening is one of them.

ESSENCE: Okay, so that's a lesson you learned as a man. What love and relationship advice do you have for women?

Say, hypothetically a woman wanted to be in a relationship with a man like you or, specifically, you. Hypothetically.

JOHNSON: Well, engaging in good conversation is important. So is embracing the power of kissing. I also want someone who can trust that my big hands are going to take care of them.

ESSENCE: Oh, I'm sorry, I think I just fainted.

JOHNSON: [*Laughing*] I realize that's the biggest cheese pizza I've ever delivered, but it's true. You have to trust your partner.

ESSENCE: Have you ever dated a Black woman?

JOHNSON: Yes, I have.

ESSENCE: Pretty awesome, right?

JOHNSON: [*Prolonged chuckling*]

ESSENCE: You seem to be reliving some great memories right now.

JOHNSON: Exactly.

ESSENCE: What do you love about us?

JOHNSON: With the Black women I've dated, I always appreciated their love for family and their love of culture. I also appreciate the details in a woman, like her nose and lips, how her skin feels, even the way she does her nails.

ESSENCE: I'm disappointed your films haven't included more romance. If you were to film a passionate love scene, who would you want as a costar?

JOHNSON: Hands down, Halle Berry. She's a friend, and in the movie in my head, she's holding her own, kicking ass. Then there's this explosive...relationship [*laughter*].

ESSENCE: Besides *Hercules*, what's up next for you?

JOHNSON: I'll share this with you: I want to build an entertainment empire where I'm not only starring in movies but producing them as well. I'm getting involved in a multitude of television projects that I've lined up to create and produce. And I like trying to think of new, creative ways to redefine how we use social media. I'm kind of new to it; this is only my second year. I just want to continue to grow. It's been one of the greatest experiences of my life. Social

“WHEN I TAKE CARE OF A WOMAN, I’M GOING TO TAKE CARE OF HER EMOTIONALLY AND SPIRITUALLY.”

media allows me to connect with an audience in ways I never could before: in fun ways and motivating ways and sharing dirty jokes ways [*laughter*].

ESSENCE: Your ex-wife, Dany, whom you married when you were 25, and divorced seven years ago, is your business partner. You two must have a very good relationship.

JOHNSON: We do. Since our divorce, we've become pretty good at working together, and we are also raising our beautiful 11-year-old daughter, Simone. You know, you don't sign up for a divorce when you get married. It's very painful. But it's taught me a great deal about myself.



ESSENCE: What do you think has been the key to keeping your relationship positive?

JOHNSON: One of the most important things I've learned is to understand a woman's value on many different levels. And to remember a person's good qualities after you break up. Going through our divorce defined and shaped me. I came to an understanding of the type of man I want to be in a relationship.

ESSENCE: And what kind of man is that?

JOHNSON: I want to be a man who is truthful and who won't let pride get in the way of my ripping myself open to my partner and saying, "Here I am. This is me. This is all of me." I feel there's something powerful when a man reaches a point in his life when he can be completely vulnerable, completely honest, completely truthful. Because often we let pride and ego get in the way. Especially with a woman, you want her to see you a certain way. Now it is more important to me to be authentic. There is no longer a duality in my life where there's one guy the public sees and another guy the woman I love sees. In this case, it's the same person; that's important to me. And when I say I'm going to take care of a woman, I don't just mean physically or sexually or romantically. I'm going to take care of her emotionally and spiritually. I'm going to take care of her in all ways. I take a lot of pride in that today.

ESSENCE: That's pretty deep. You set a high bar for how people in relationships should treat each other. What are you going to do when your daughter starts dating? Any teenage boy is going to be terrified of you.

JOHNSON: Well, fear is a good thing, especially when it comes to daddy's little girl. What's nice is that I have a reputation that precedes me. And with would-be suitors I will be firm, I will be fair and I will be protective, as any dad would be.

ESSENCE: Those boys are going to be like, "Is your dad home? Can we just meet at the corner?"

JOHNSON: [*laughter*] No, the prerequisite is you've got to come to the house, you've got to knock on the door, shake my hand and look me in the eye. Then you've got to sit down and answer my questions. You've got to get incredibly uncomfortable and you're going to have to sweat.

ESSENCE: Okay, so I guess your daughter won't be dating until she goes away to college. What about you? Are you seeing anyone?

JOHNSON: I've been in a beautiful relationship for six years now. She's an amazing singer and songwriter. How lucky am I?

ESSENCE: Do you think you'll get married again?

JOHNSON: I would love that. But with everything I've learned in life, I've also learned the value of just pausing for a second.

ESSENCE: You've had two long-term relationships. Did you ever have a phase as a playboy?

JOHNSON: The playboy lifestyle just wasn't for me. I enjoy a relationship. I enjoy conversation. I enjoy company. And if I'm with you, I'm *with* you. I like connection. And I want a woman to know she's in good hands when she's with me. Good, strong, calloused hands. □

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