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Return of the Underdog, Phillip Rhee

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Actor and filmmaker **Phillip Rhee**, best known for a series of popular martial arts films from the late '80s and '90s, is back with a family-friendly version.

by KARIN CHAN

Above photo: Rhee, right, with the actor Dallas Liu, who plays a younger version of Rhee's character in *Underdog Kids*.

Phillip Rhee talks like a man who has tasted rejection. The 54-year-old actor, filmmaker and martial artist also talks like one who refuses to be defeated by it.

“Don't take sh-t from anyone telling you you're not good enough,” he says, with his signature deep rasp, in answer to one interview question. “If you knock on enough doors and show passion, then somebody is going to say ‘yes.’”

Perhaps, those are words the Korean American has used to



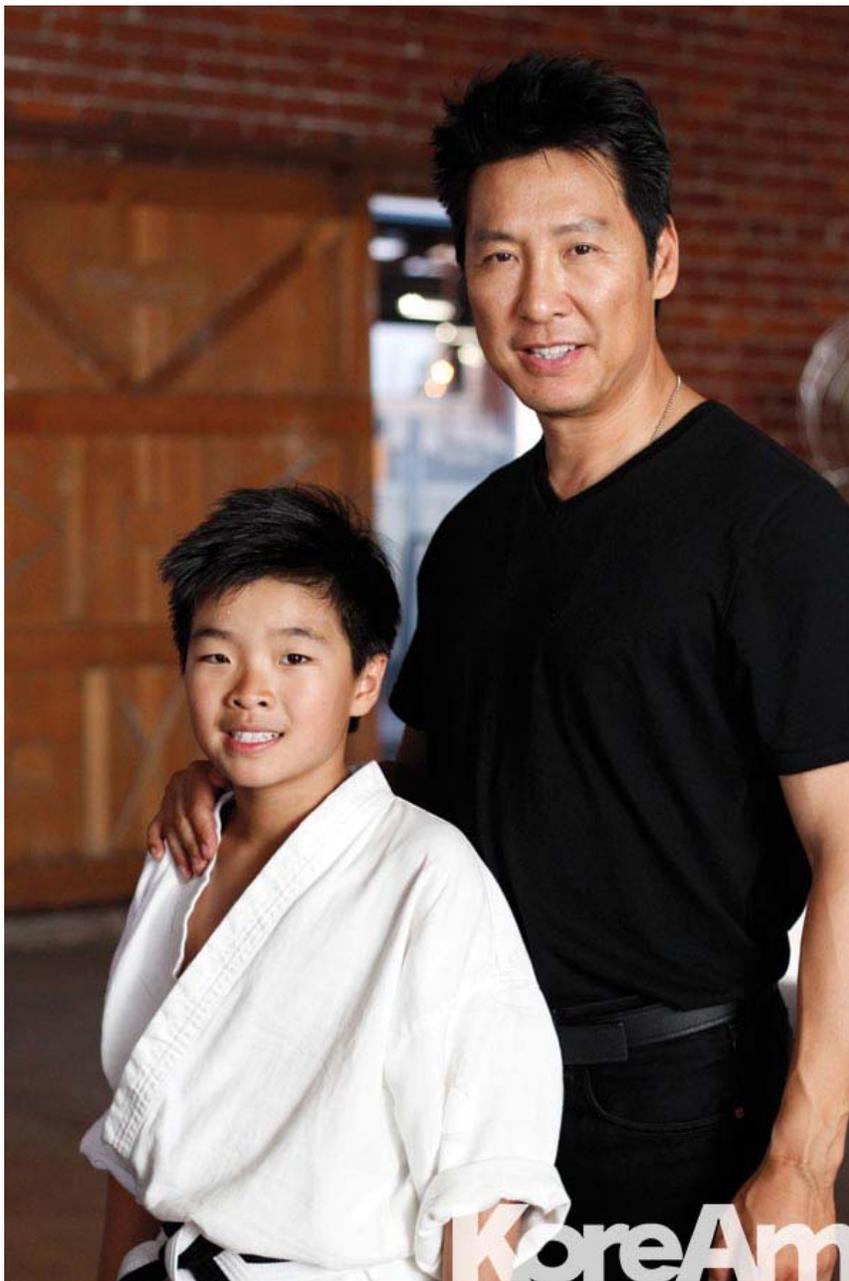
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coach himself over his storied underdog career in Hollywood. Before John Cho ventured to *White Castle* and Steven Yeun slayed his first zombie, Rhee graced the big and small screens in a series of popular martial arts films titled *Best of the Best*, which began with the 1989 original starring Eric Roberts and Rhee himself as American karate teammates up against a seemingly unbeatable South Korean team at an international competition. Though hardly a critically acclaimed film, *Best of the Best* and its three sequels—the first two were released theatrically with the latter two home releases—became martial arts classics, thanks to Rhee's gravity-defying stunts and the story's *Rocky*-esque never-give-up theme. In addition to starring

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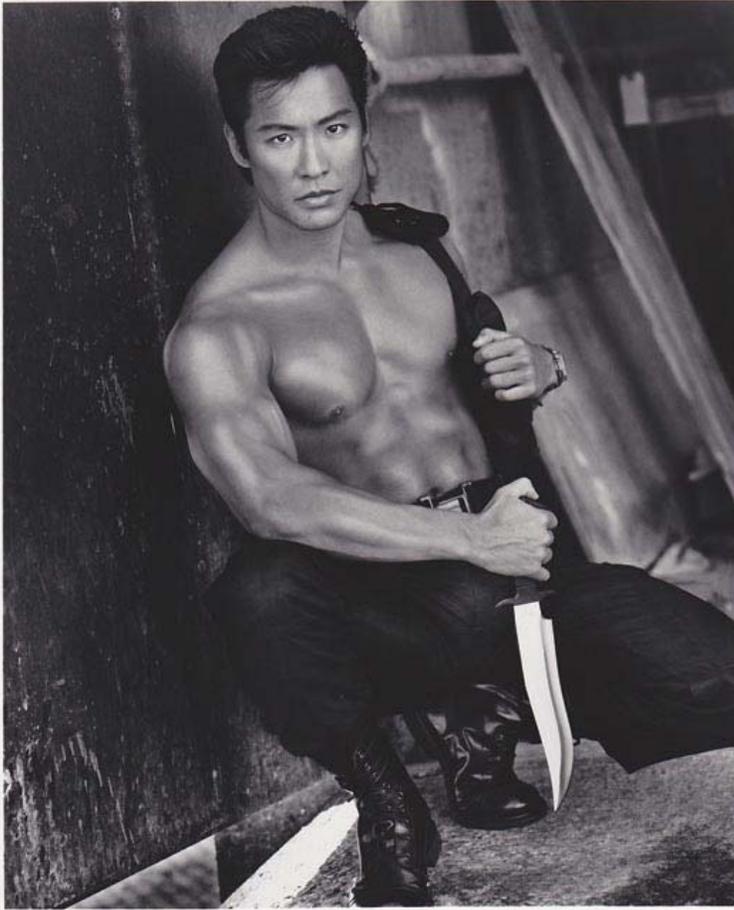
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in all of them, Rhee wrote and produced the first two and directed the third and fourth.

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PHILLIP RHEE

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Rhee in 1997. Courtesy of Phillip Rhee.



In this still from Best of the Best 2, Rhee, second from left, demonstrates a move during a fight scene to Master Myung Kim (second from right) and a student person (far left). Courtesy of Phillip Rhee.

When Fandango recently released its “15 Most Inspirational Sports Movies” of all time, *Best of the Best* made the short list.

Now, some 17 years after the original was released, Rhee hopes he can add another film to that inspirational sports movie canon, with the release of his latest, *Underdog Kids*. Again wearing multiple hats, Rhee wrote, directed, produced and stars in the family-friendly martial arts movie, which he dubs a “*Best of the Best* for kids.” In the movie, which also co-stars Beau Bridges, Tom Arnold and Ryan Potter, Rhee plays washed-up mixed martial arts athlete Jimmy “Lightning Bolt” Lee, who coaches a young, down-on-its-luck inner-city karate team that’s vying for the national championship title against a team from Beverly Hills.

The film had a limited theatrical release this past summer, and is now available on DVD and on demand.

Rhee set the story in Los Angeles during the 1990s recession, when many people were losing their jobs and families were struggling to survive. He wanted to convey to youth audiences that, even when their lives feel broken, “through tenacity, they [can] succeed,” he says, during a phone interview in July. “It doesn’t matter who you are, as long as you don’t give up, then you will hit your goal.”

Despite a clichéd quality to Rhee's recurring cinematic message, the life experience that shapes it is genuine. After immigrating to the United States from South Korea at age 9, he and his family eventually settled in San Francisco, a city rife with gang activity in the 1970s. He witnessed territorial wars between the Latino gangs in the Mission District, African American gangs in Oakland, Wa-Ching and Joe-Boys in Chinatown and Filipino mafias in the Sunset District.

"As a teenager, I saw people get shot in the chest, throwing up blood. I saw a guy get shot in the side of his face with his teeth falling out," describes Rhee. "I mean, it was horrific stuff."

Martial arts helped him get his mind off all the "negativity in urban life," says Rhee, who holds a sixth-degree black belt in taekwondo, third-degree black belt in hapkido and first-degree black belt in kendo. "Martial arts taught me discipline, humility and character. Those are the values I wanted to show in my films."

It was in fact his real-life experience competing in taekwondo at the 1980 Asian Games for Team USA against the South Korean team that inspired Rhee's screenplay for *Best of the Best*, in which he played the character of Tommy Lee, an unusually strong and humanizing role for an Asian American male at the time, notes Rhee.

The actor recalls that a Hollywood casting director once told him that his eyes were too small for the camera to pick up his emotions. That's when he realized that, if he wanted to play strong Asian male characters, he needed to create them, and also often wear producer and director hats to make sure those movies got made. After producing, co-starring and doing fight choreography for the 1988 film *Silent Assassins*, Rhee was approached by Sony Pictures, which had lost in a bidding war over that movie. Sony wanted to collaborate on his next project, which would become *Best of the Best*.

After the film's strong showing, Rhee became a sought-after martial arts instructor by many high-profile clients, including former President Ronald Reagan's son Ron Reagan, Jr., Sylvester Stallone's son Sage, and actors Josh Brolin and Heather Graham.

"I knew the movie was a hit when I was in Germany's Frankfurt Airport, and all the security guards looked at me and said

‘Tommy Lee’ with a heavy German accent,” says Rhee, laughing.

His acting and moviemaking career seemed poised to take off. He was in talks to star in a big-budget film to be produced by Oliver Stone and directed by John Woo, and meanwhile, *Best of the Best* sequels were released in 1992, 1995 and 1998. By the late 1990s, he was also offered a \$9 million deal to co-produce three films with Village

Roadshow Pictures, a major producer and financier of Hollywood films. Unfortunately, the Oliver Stone project got mired in what Rhee now calls “development hell,” and the Village Roadshow deal never materialized.

Rhee took a break from Hollywood in the early 2000s, focusing on raising his newborn son with wife Amy Rhee. When he returned to the entertainment industry in 2008, it was in a much different role; he started a Korea-based 3D film conversion company with Jim Miller, a then-Warner Bros. executive. After struggling in the early years, the company, now called Dnext Media, has been able to work on such projects as converting major films like *Titanic* and *Transformers 3*.

But Rhee was itching to return to his moviemaking roots. So, three years ago, during lunch with a writer friend, Fabienne Wen, he told her about an idea he had: the plot that would become *Underdog Kid*.

“I was telling her the story of the kids, and she started crying and said, ‘Phillip, this is a wonderful story and we need to make this movie and don’t worry about financing because I’ll find the money!’” Rhee says.

Wen kept her promise and became the film’s co-producer. Despite the independent film’s limited budget, Rhee found that many Hollywood veterans, including actor Beau Bridges, were happy to join the project because, he says, they “loved the story.”



A scene from Underdog Kids, in which a washed-up mixed martial arts athlete (played by Rhee) coaches a young, down-on-its-luck inner-city karate team.

Rhee is equally proud of the young members of his multiracial cast, which includes Ryan Potter of *Big Hero 6* fame, Disney Channel *Shake It Up!* star Adam Irigoyen and 11-time martial arts world champion Rayna Vallandingham, who makes her film debut. The director's 15-year-old son, Sean, also appears in the film.

The only young female actor and taekwondo athlete on set, Vallandingham, 12, tells *KoreAm* that when she first heard about a casting call for a Phillip Rhee film, she knew she had to be in it. Though born in 2003, some 14 years after the first *Best of the Best* was made, she is a huge fan of the film series and considers Rhee a martial arts role model. Now, she also sees him as a mentor.

"He told me that taekwondo saved his life because he was a young immigrant in San Francisco with gangs telling him to join them, but instead he chose the path of a warrior, even though it was a difficult one," says Vallandingham.

"He has always been the underdog," the seventh-grader adds. "It made him the man he is today."

That underdog filmmaker and actor shared some good news for *Best of the Best* fans. Rhee is working on a reboot of the entire series featuring new characters, and hopes to start production next year. Will such films with an oldschool message, sans

dazzling CG effects, find a receptive audience today? Hey, it could happen.



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