

Interview: Tasha Smith, Michael Jai White of 'For Better or Worse' on TBS

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CHICAGO – The Tyler Perry empire rolls on, with a new show called “For Better or Worse” premiering November 25th on TBS. The series is based on two films Perry produced, “Why Did I Get Married?” and “Why Did I Get Married Too?” and focuses on characters played in both films by Tasha Smith and Michael Jai White.

Smith and White were in Chicago recently to promote “For Better or Worse,” in which they play Marcus and Angela, a married couple going through the process of interrelating. They are joined in the series by friends going through their various stages of relationships. It is described by Tyler Perry as a drama/comedy that will focus on the ups and downs of marital bliss.



Tasha Smith and Michael Jai White in Tyler Perry's New TV Series 'For Better or Worst'
Photo credit: TBS Network

Tasha Smith is a veteran actress who got her breakthrough role in Perry's “Daddy's Little Girls” (2007). She recently had a notable role in this year's “Jumping the Broom,” co-starring Angela Bassett. Michael Jai White is best known for playing the title hero in “Spawn” (1997), as well as doing comedy in the “blaxpoitation” spoof, “Black Dynamite” (2009). HollywoodChicago.com talked to both of them about their relationship with Tyler Perry and their new show.

HollywoodChicago: You've played these characters in two films, how do approach a character differently when you know you're going to take them on in an extended television sitcom?

Tasha Smith: I don't know if you play it differently, you just pick up where you left off. You just try to create them in real time.

Michael Jai White: Essentially they are the exact same characters, but it is years later from the last movie. Hopefully your character has evolved a bit.

Smith: It's interesting because you have all of the history of what you've already created that you can add to your layer of truth, biography and background of the character, so you feel a little more rooted and grounded, because you've spent so many years with the character.

HollywoodChicago: TV shows often take templates from previous sitcoms. What template do you think Tyler Perry is using for this show and which shows does it feel like to you both?

Smith: Housewives of Beverly Hills, Housewives of Atlanta, Housewives of....[laughs]

White: I can't think of a show that is really like it.

Smith: It almost reminds me of a relationship version of 'Friends.' It's about these buddies who are in relationships and couples.

White: But it's also a drama, so I'm hard pressed to think of a direct comparison. It gives light to both the comic element, drama and even soap opera. It isn't anything singularly, you have to start throwing 'slashes' around.

Smith: It's like 'Sex and the City' meets 'The Bernie Mac Show.' [laughs]

HollywoodChicago: What aspect of your own experiences with relationships have you put into your characters?

White: Playing a married black man is a unique experience for me. A lot of us grew up in a single parent household. You don't learn the little nuances about relationships if there was a father in your life. You don't have a father saying things like 'your mother doesn't feel well today, you should compliment her on her hair' or 'your Mom is trippin', it will pass.' All I knew was he was out of there.

In my life, I would leave if it got out of control, that's all I knew. I didn't get the example of hanging in, so I'm bringing a lot of what I've learned, that it's a work in progress to make a marriage successful, without having the tools to do so. He's making it up as he goes along.

Smith: Don't get me started with Angela. Personally I didn't take a class or neither did any of my family on how to be a good wife. Angela hasn't either. But I do agree with Michael about the couple being a work in progress, and trying to figure out how to do this. Angela is extremely reactive – she has trust issues, insecurity issues, abandonment issues and rejection issues. All of these issues come out in her relationship with Marcus. Every time she doesn't see something going her way, she flips out, but it all comes from those issues and her deep need to be loved.



The Cast of Tyler Perry's New TV Series 'For Better or Worse'

Photo credit: TBS Network

HollywoodChicago: Describe that moment in your life when you knew, despite all the overwhelming odds against it, that you wanted to be an actor.

White: I was expecting my son Devon with my fiancée, and I had taken a period of time off from teaching school. I got my first real big professional acting job, and that came two days before I was going to go into the police academy. I felt that was a big sign. I decided that this was my path, and I'm going after it the best that I can. That day was a strong sign that this was what I was going to do.

Smith: It was always a dream of mine, as a little girl from Camden, New Jersey.

HollywoodChicago: You must have set Camden on fire.

Smith: I sure did. [laughs] It's still burning. I told everybody that one day I was going to be an actor, but I had a lot of troubled times as a young girl, running the streets and doing what I wasn't suppose to be doing. So at 18 years old, I made a decision to get out of Camden. I moved to California, with maybe a thousand bucks to my name. I started doing stand-up comedy, and that helped me to get my foot in the door. It was always a dream and I say your dreams are just God giving you a glimpse of your future. As you press for the passion in your heart, you never know what divine steps you'll end up taking towards your destiny.

HollywoodChicago: Given the influx of powerful showbiz persons like Oprah and Tyler Perry, where does the business still need to go as far as giving equal footing to African American performers and actors?

White: I think the African American image in media has regressed since the 1970s, personally. There was a time when every film, and every show, you had alpha males and alpha females. It was the era of Pam Grier, Tamara Dobson, Jim Brown and Fred Williamson. You don't have any of that anymore. It's strange to me that there aren't those strong male and female images. I feel now that African Americans are used like pets in the movies now, and not as equals in a lot of cases.

Smith: I don't see half the faces I saw as a little girl with a dream. With the all the reality shows, that takes up a lot of scripted drama time. Before that, we had the 'Steve Harvey Show,' 'Jamie Foxx Show' and 'Martin.' Today, there is less diversity, which is why I thank God for Tyler Perry. When you think about it, there were few black shows on until he came around. We need these shows so the next generation can see African American images on television.

White: I believe also that there is a huge segment of the African American population not represented. There is a black president who everybody knows about, but have we ever seen his representation on television? Any college graduates on television? It's either poor folks or upper echelon beyond, there seems to be no middle ground.

HollywoodChicago: Then what do you think Tyler Perry is trying to accomplish as a communicator and entertainer?

White: He's trying for something more universal, something that can be understood by both black and white audiences. I think there are some black targeted shows that only reach a small segment of the African American audience, and white people don't really get it. In 'For Better or Worst,' these are the black people with which white people attended college, which is more universal.

HollywoodChicago: Tasha, I wanted to ask you about the recent film you did, playing Shonda, in 'Jumping the Broom.' What did you learn as an actor, playing opposite veterans Angela Bassett and Loretta Devine, and what did you do to make the character more approachable?

Smith: Angela Bassett is a friend of mine, so it was a blessing to work with her. It felt like we were on vacation and getting paid for it. Her level of focus and commitment was wonderful. Loretta Devine is such an amazing talent, she really is. She lives in a truth that is so vibrant and infectious, I love her.

With Shonda, I thought she was kind of a fish out of water, living vicariously through the opportunity her family friend to go to Martha's Vineyard. For me personally, that goes back to being a little girl in Camden. I always wanted friends that lived in an area that could introduce me to another part of life in the environment I was in. That's how I learned, and that's how I grew.



Tasha Smith and Michael Jai White in Chicago, November 14th, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago: Michael, you have stated that as a former teacher you cannot have a positive opinion on hip-hop music and the lifestyle it perpetuates. Do you think the evolution of the form is becoming more positive, and how do you think we can best teach younger kids about separating the life from the music?

White: In my opinion, it's not getting more positive. Luckily, some of the gangster stuff is down, but I still think it's misogynistic and pro-ignorance. Unfortunately, you can't separate it for younger children, only adults can decipher it. That is the problem. The rappers don't see how pervasive that is, and how damaging it can be for kids. I ask a lot of rappers who try to defend it, 'what made you want to be a rapper?' And inevitably, it was another rapper.

It's not going to encourage anyone to learn or get educated, especially young boys. I don't care who you are, if you're a young boy that wants to get girls, you're going to behave like a thug. It's just not for kids, I can't condone rap.

HollywoodChicago: Finally, if you both had the choice of playing a real person in a film of their biography, who would it be and why?

Smith: I have two people, and they are completely opposite. One is Donna Summer, because I’m a fan of hers and her story. And the other woman, who I’ve just come to know, is a boxing trainer named Anne Wolfe. She’s had a very interesting life, she actually just trained a guy named James Kirkland who just won a fight on HBO. She lives in Austin, Texas, she’s done time in jail and a mental institution, she’s had a very interesting life.

White: Definitely Paul Robeson. He is one of the most incredible Americans who has ever lived, and there is generations who don’t know who this person was. I think it’s a travesty that there hasn’t been a film done about him, and that would be my dream role.

“For Better or Worse” premieres on TBS Network on November 25th at 10pm/9pm Central. See local listings for channel locations. Featuring Tasha Smith, Michael Jai White, Kent Faulcon, Crystle Stewart, Jason Oliver, Cocoa Brown and Chandra Currelley. Created by Tyler Perry.



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