

Interviews: Channing Tatum, Joe Manganiello Disrobe 'Magic Mike'

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CHICAGO – Beefcake is on parade in the new film “Magic Mike,” about a troupe of male strippers in sunny Florida. The film was partially based on the true life experiences of Channing Tatum, who did perform briefly in his late teens. In the film he is Magic Mike, and Joe Manganiello portrays “Big Dick” Ritchie.

“Magic Mike” is directed by Steven Soderbergh, and although it balances the outrageous male strip shows with some inevitable downfall in the performers, it maintains a feeling of truth and a path beyond the stage. HollywoodChicago.com recently got to talk to the lead actor Channing Tatum and his supporting cast member Joe Manganiello during a promotional swing through Chicago.

★ Channing Tatum, Title Character of “Magic Mike”

Channing Tatum’s career is on fire. Fresh from the success of the “21 Jump Street” remake, he follows up with a personal project in “Magic Mike.” As mentioned before, he achieved a bit of notoriety when he revealed that he started his performing career as a male dancer at 18 years old – as “Chan Crawford” – and has been working for a couple of years to get the story on screen. After the stint as a dancer, he went on to success as a male model, and morphed into an actor in such films as “Step Up” (2006) “Stop-Loss” (2008), “Public Enemies” (2009), “Dear John” (2010), “The Dilemma” (2011) and “The Vow” (2012).



Patriots: Matthew McConaughey (left, as Dallas) and Channing Tatum (Mike) in 'Magic Mike'
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: As most people know, this film was based on your own actual experiences as a male dancer in Tampa, Florida. What did you want to make sure the film got right about the life and the lifestyle?

Channing Tatum: Probably the lifestyle more. These guys are very much moment-to-moment, but yet they talk the whole time like they have big dreams. For every one of these guys, dancing is generally not the end all and be all, and they all have wild expectations for their lives. Some of them are entrepreneur-like, but somehow those projects just keep getting put off. Magic Mike in the film is going to start the furniture business, but it’s always next week. It’s all about the next big thing, they’re all hustlers, but they also can’t let the party die. It’s a weird cycle, and everyone did it, including me.

HollywoodChicago.com: Again, since you went through it in both real life and attempted to capture it with a film, what do you think is the main difference to how women react to male strippers as opposed to how men act with female strippers?

Tatum: Guys go to see female strippers for completely different reasons, I keep using the words 'carnal' and 'primal.' It's more reactionary, to get actual stimulation. Women go for the complete opposite effect. They don't go for stimulation, they go for a uninhibited experience that is more of an entertainment thing. They want to go to laugh, have a crazy time with their girlfriends and embarrass each other. It's more of a story they can tell for years to come.

HollywoodChicago.com: Backstage in the film, men help each other be more sexual, and onstage they are expressing that sexuality. Because in the film there is both men helping men, and men stripping for women, does it blur the line of being gay and straight?

Tatum: In real life, some of the guys also did dance at gay clubs, even though the club I worked at was an all-female audience, with no guys allowed. I recently went to a club in Hollywood where they let anybody in, male and female. I didn't know anybody's sexual orientation back then, but all my fellow performers were pretty much oriented toward entertaining women. Male dancing was different when I was younger, it was like rock stars. It's different now, I don't see as many venues.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is a vulnerability and sadness in your character in the film, that we haven't necessarily seen from you in other films. Was it easier to nail down the character because you had experienced the life, or do you feel that you're maturing as an actor and found it easier to connect directly to Mike?

Tatum: Probably both, equally. I've been acting in films for over eight years, and I feel like I am understanding how to get to a character more. I keep asking questions like 'why is the character in the story?' and 'how is he essential to the plot?' Mike is a real thing for me, and even though I'm not playing 'The Kid' [Alex Pettyfer], it is still the same person. We kind of did a past-present-future in 'Magic Mike.' The Kid is the past, Mike lives in his present and Dallas [Matthew McConaughey] is his future. They are all very similar characters.

HollywoodChicago.com: I don't know if you intended it, but the final scene reminded me of the final scene in Saturday Night Fever...

Tatum: Yep, you are very astute, sir. We almost did an artistic version of that exactly, but we thought it isn't the 1970s, and people now want something more in conclusion. What we landed on was satisfying, the ending that made sense for Mike and Brooke.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think Mike will get from somebody like Brooke [Cody Horn], that he couldn't from any of his numerous conquests?

Tatum: She gives him the strength to know he has an identity and a future without male dancing. That was fun, that was his younger life, but if it ultimately isn't what he wants, he should focus beyond it. To focus on figuring out what matters, whether it is Brooke or his other pursuits – to lock eyes on it and don't let go. Quit f**king around, essentially. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: You expressed when this project first came out that you wanted a different director. When he wasn't available, what was the process of bringing Steven Soderbergh aboard and what did he bring to the film that you didn't expect?

Tatum: It was more of a circumstance of who I talked to first. I talked to Nicolas Winding Refn ['Drive'] in reference to it, and he really wanted to do it. We just couldn't get it together time-wise. But Steven Soderbergh was the one who really lit the fire under the film, because he had never seen the subject on film, and he was excited about that. It was fun for me to watch this lowbrow subject like stripping, and these pedestrian people who do it, be seen through the viewfinder of a highbrow, cerebral director. He has a heart as well. He struck the right balance between the lightness and darkness of the subject, that's what he brought.

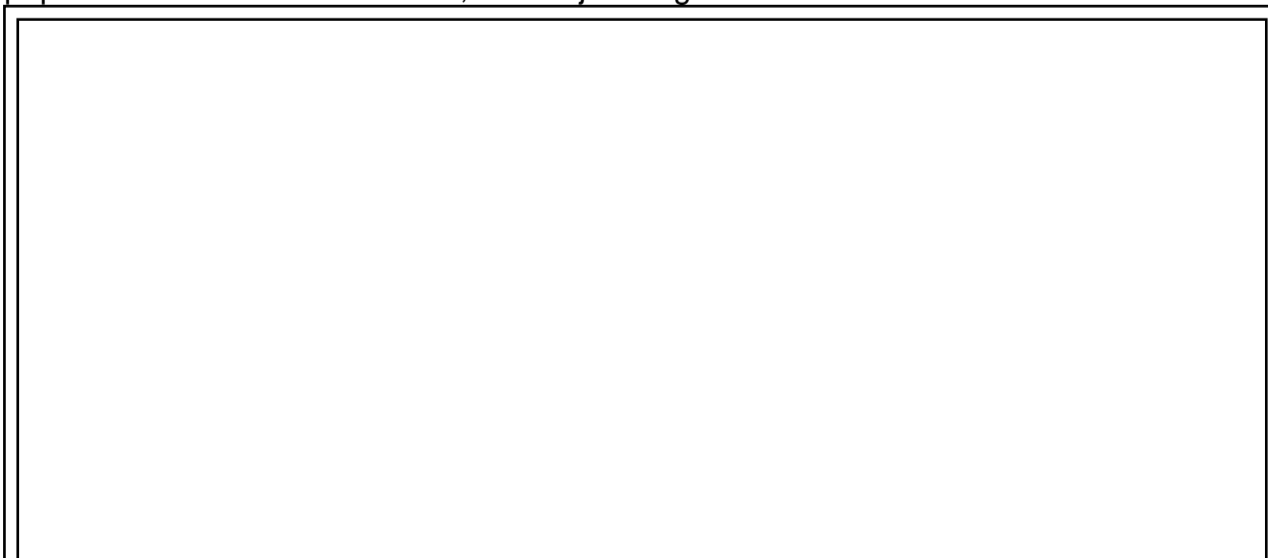
HollywoodChicago.com: Being a Hollywood celebrity is in some ways being like a stripper, you are put into many vulnerable positions in which you are asked to perform. What is the most difficult for you about this life, and how do you keep yourself grounded within it?

Tatum: What is most difficult is that you're constantly made to feel like you're somehow special. In that sense, sure, a lot of people are special. But I am playing everyday people, and I am an everyday person. If people start thinking that they're the answer. or a unique unicorn, that's when you can get into trouble. I love the fact that I come from normal blue collar beginnings, and now that I have found my way into this art, I try to keep people around me that love me and know me for me, and not 'Channing,' but 'Chan.' It's a weird world, and if you have your head on right, you won't get lost.



Joe Manganiello, Big Dick Ritchie in "Magic Mike"

It was Joe Manganiello that Channing Tatum and Steven Soderbergh had in mind when formulating the character of "Big Dick" Ritchie. The classically trained performer has a BFA in acting from his hometown Carnegie Mellon School of Drama in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After some recurring television roles in shows like "ER" and "How I Met Your Mother," Manganiello broke out as Alcide Herveaux, werewolf, in the popular HBO series "True Blood," which just began its fifth season.





On Fire: Joe Manganiello (Big Dick Ritchie) in 'Magic Mike'
 Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: When you first auditioned for 'Magic Mike,' was the character already established as 'Big Dick Ritchie'...

Joe Manganiello: I was offered the part. Channing was a fan of 'True Blood,' so when they were writing the script they had me in mind. Steven Soderbergh was flipping through the channels, and he saw me on 'Chelsea Lately,' and thought I was funny, so he and Chan talked and that was it.

HollywoodChicago.com: So how did you characterize such a direct and outsized persona?

Manganiello: You mean after coming off playing a giant werewolf? [laughs] It was kind of keeping with the trend, go big or go home.

HollywoodChicago.com: Before Steven Soderbergh met the cast for your initial production meetings, what was your expectations regarding his reputation, and how did he meet those expectations or surprise you in a way?

Manganiello: The guy is a legend, his film career is crazy insane. There is 'Traffic' and 'Erin Brockovich,' but one of my favorites of all time is 'Out of Sight,' which I think flies under the radar for a lot of people. There aren't many people that can pull off Elmore Leonard. What it takes is somebody with a lot of intelligence, and a firm grasp on the pulse pop culture, that constant flowing stream of the collective consciousness. You have to have an understanding of that, combined with a wicked sense of humor.

How he surprised me is that I hadn't been on a set with someone who, as a director, was his own camera operator. That cuts out the middle man, he doesn't have to explain his shots to anyone. He can picture the movie in his head and not have to take the time to explain it, or water it down. What you get is a non-compromised, artistic end product. It also allows for improvisation at a directorial level, which keeps us on our toes, because we're going have to improvise. A lot of the scenes with the guys backstage came out of those moments. It creates an electricity that keeps it fresh.

HollywoodChicago.com: Obviously this was both a physical and rhythmic role, due to the dancing. As you were learning the moves, what fascinated you about the art of choreography associated with this style of dancing, and did you find the experience to natural or unnatural?

Manganiello: Male stripping is less of a story being told through ballet [laughs] with expressive body movements and more of setting up a theatrical character. The fireman coming through the window in rescuing the woman, the police officers pulling them over for speeding, which eventually all degrades into having their way with them. Which means there is about 90 seconds of choreographed dance moves, followed by three minutes of dry humping. [laughs] It's rudimentary, but there is an elegance to men in their simplicity.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think is the main different about the way women react to male strippers versus how men react to female strippers?

Manganiello: For one thing, male strippers are not physically threatened by women, whereas the reverse is the case in a female strip club. Security is evident in female clubs to keep things in line. Because of the threat men pose, there is a different vibe. In male stripping, it's about fun. There is a vocal excitement and energy from women about this film. They can't wait, they stop me on the street and express it. You wouldn't see that in a female stripper movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film has a "Boogie Nights" vibe, in which everything is great until the extreme exploitation of sexual physicality starts to throw people off track. Since you've fictionally experienced the life to a degree, why do you think it's so difficult to maintain a sense of stability in such a world?

Manganiello: Drugs and alcohol. I started working in clubs in my teens, until about my twenties, and it's a hard lifestyle. You can make a lot of money, and become a prisoner of the moment, because there is a lot of fun to be had. That is what draws you in, but the fun turns into fun and problems, and then finally it's just problems. If you've worked clubs or the nightlife, there has to be very stringent rules to abide by in order to last in that lifestyle for any amount of time.

HollywoodChicago.com: The new season of 'True Blood' has just begun. Now that you've been on the show for a couple of seasons, what has been the most satisfying aspect of working with creator Alan Ball and the cast?

Manganiello: The cast is so wickedly talented, so diverse, an eclectic bunch of weirdos. We are the 'Island of Misfit Toys,' assembled on this show. It's a fun show, with characters that you just don't find in other projects.

My favorite contemporary playwright is Tennessee Williams, so passionate and full of heart, but also gothic, Southern and the stuff he would take about was just dead on psychologically. In 'True Blood,' I feel like I do that type of emotion every day. I feel like I'm a werewolf in a Tennessee Williams play. It's so fulfilling on so many levels, and that is in Alan Ball's writing. It's passionate, hot, sexy, fun and deep.

HollywoodChicago.com: Obviously you know what is going to happen to your character this season. But if you could choose his direction, where would you want him to go in the series?

Manganiello: Exactly where I end up in the finale. It's what I've been waiting for in the three years I've been on the show. I read the finale, and I said, yes, yes, yes, yes! That's it, right there.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were raised in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area. If the city were a character, what type of personality would you describe it having, and how has that personality affected your approach to your career?

Manganiello: The city is a character, and the city has a personality that has infused the football team. Even though the factories closed, and the workers were laid off in the 1970s, their energy still flows through the Steelers. That personality was adopted and became the heart of the city. The team is blue collar, hard working and emphasizes character. There is that blue collar mentality. Talent is great, but you don't have any control over that. What you do have control over is the work. Work hard, don't be an idiot, don't be an embarrassment to your family, your neighborhood or the city. I'm an ambassador, and I want to be that personality. If you are somebody's friend from Pittsburgh, you can trust them. But do something to break that trust, watch out.

HollywoodChicago.com: What type of character would you like to play that so far casting directors don't necessarily consider you for and why?

Manganiello: I couldn't have dreamed any of my career. I couldn't have dreamed up a deconstructionist werewolf, which is a dream come true, a vulnerable, sensitive monster. I couldn't have pictured playing a character named 'Big Dick' Ritchie. I'd feel weird coming up with something like that. [laughs] I think whatever the universe has planned for me, I am nothing but excited for the future, because I can't cook this stuff up.

"Magic Mike" opens everywhere on June 29th. Featuring Channing Tatum, Joe Manganiello, Matthew McConaughey, Alex Pettyfer, Cody Horn and Olivia Munn. Screenplay by Reid Carolin. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. Rated "R"



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