

Interview: Craig Robinson Riffs on ‘Peeples,’ ‘The Office’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 6, 2013 - 3:48pm

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CHICAGO – Craig Robinson is in the swirl of two media events in the next two weeks. His latest film “Peeples” – in which he plays the romantic comedy lead – opens on Friday. The famous TV series he has been featured in, “The Office,” has its final episode after nine seasons on Thursday, May 16th.

Through it all the unflappable Mr. Robinson portrays his laconic character style with depth and personality. He was born in Chicago, and did much of his early training through improv comedy classes at the famed Second City. He developed a musical act with comedian Jerry Minor called “L Witherspoon and Chucky,” and has appeared on HBO, Comedy Central, “Real Time with Bill Maher,” and “The Jimmy Kimmel Show” in that persona. But he is best known as the character Darryl Philbin on “The Office,” creating his own particular vibe and presence on the successful series.



Kerry Washington, Craig Robinson (center) and David Alan Grier in ‘Peeples’
Photo credit: Lionsgate

Robinson stars in the new film “Peeples,” written and directed by newcomer Tina Gordon Chism, and produced by Tyler Perry. He portrays Wade Walker, a musician who caters to kids, and he plans to pop the question to his girlfriend Grace Peeples, portrayed by Kerry Washington. The only problem is he has never met Grace’s family, the Peeples, who he describes as “the chocolate Kennedys.” Wade takes the situation into his own hands, and shows up unexpectedly at a family reunion.

HollywoodChicago.com talked with Craig Robinson about these upcoming touchstones in his career, his years on “The Office” and even an upcoming film in which he plays “himself” called “This is the End.”

HollywoodChicago.com: This is a departure for you, playing a romantic lead in a comedy. Were you inspired by other performers in playing romance and comedy, or were you just forming the character with writer/director Tina Gordon Chism?

Craig Robinson: I did formulate it with Tina, she actually lived this scenario, in which she was dating someone but it took a long time to meet

the family. All the secrets start to unravel, and she made a movie out of it. So we came to who Wade Walker was together. But I also come from the era of Pryor, Murphy and Cosby, and watching those cats – along with Steve Martin, Leslie Nielsen, Martin Mull and Peter Sellers – I learned my deadpan style. I stand on those shoulders, but it was definitely a collaboration.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is an all-star cast in the film with you as the centerpiece. Who did you especially enjoy working with for the first time, since you got this opportunity?

Robinson: Easily David Alan Grier [portraying Virgil, Grace Peeples’s father], who is one of the funniest guys on the planet. Being in his energy, going back and forth with him, and having the opportunity to figure out stuff with him, that was a dream come true. I grew up watching him, ‘In Living Color’ came out when I was in college. So going toe-to-toe with him was awe inspiring.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is part of the Tyler Perry entertainment machine, which you have worked in before. What niche is Mr. Perry fulfilling for his audience, and why do think he does it so successfully?

Robinson: He is expanding his brand with this film, to shine a light on up and coming artists, like first time director Tina Gordon Chism. He is showing his greatness yet again, and I’m humbled and honored that he chose to do this project. He sticks to his truth, he does what he believes in and he’s unwavering in it. The criticism he endures comes back ten times in positive energies, by sticking to what he wants to do. People are definitely out to get him, but it falls off his back like water.

HollywoodChicago.com: You got the opportunity to work with the legendary Melvin Van Peebles. What part of movie history – not just African American movie history – do you believe Van Peebles represents?

Robinson: I think Melvin is the true originator of the independent film. I saw his classic ‘Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song’ not too long ago, and the story of that film is so incredible. He showed us how to get beyond obstacles, and he had some words of wisdom on the set. It was like being in the presence of history, and he advised me to ‘stay strong.’

HollywoodChicago.com: Had you ever been in the situation that Wade was in, that of trying to impress a family of a romantic pursuit, and did you use any of that experience in ‘Peeples’?

Robinson: When I was younger in my Chicago days, yes, but not lately. For marriage purposes, no. I was always pretty good with the parents, though, because I was polite and played the piano, they saw me as not too threatening. They thought, ‘oh, she won’t bang him.’ [laughs]



Craig Robinson as Darryl Philbin in ‘The Office’
Photo credit: NBC

HollywoodChicago.com: Let’s talk about Chicago. You were born here, and started your early career here. What characterizes actors and performers from Chicago that is different than anybody else? What do you love most about your Chicago roots?

Robinson: I love that there is a genuineness here, and people are kinder to one another. I think Chicago actors have honesty, and an everyman kind of quality. It also makes you tough, so you can go to Hollywood and take all the abuse and rejection. The biggest bond and debate between fellow Chicago actors is all about the pizza. For me, it’s always about ‘Connie’s Pizza.’

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve wrapped the series finale of ‘The Office.’ What was going through your mind as you filmed the final scene you appeared in?

Robinson: It was bittersweet. A lot of people were crying – not me – but definitely I will be missing those guys. I was looking around and thinking was it really happening, is this the end? It was hard to fathom. It will be easier to process once there is a little time away from it.

HollywoodChicago.com: After Steve Carrell left the cast, what was the biggest concern among the rest of the cast and the creative staff regarding the direction of the show?

Robinson: With [writer/director] Greg Daniels and show runner Paul Lieberstein – who also played Toby – they just know television. We got two more years after Steve left, and the concern was basically giving the other cast members more playing time. We threw the ball to everyone more often, and we became more satiated as a group.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the oddest quirk of being on a long running television series, that is different from any other show business pursuit?

Robinson: It's not so odd, but beautiful. Wherever I go, I feel like I have friends, because of the series. Every once in awhile, I will test it out, I'll just walk into somebody's house, and see if they're cool with it. [laughs] 'Oh, it's Darryl, what's up?!?' That is one of the perks, I was even recognized in Israel.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are an actor that isn't necessarily characterized through being an 'African-American' performer, you are more of an every man character. How did you think that performance personality of yours developed, and how does it inform your comedy sensibility?



Craig Robinson in Chicago, April 30th, 2013
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Robinson: As I said, I'm a big deadpan guy. I love the straight man, and the laughs they can get just by being that way. I get so much joy watching a deadpan character, chaos flying all around them, and they're there as if nothing is happening. Like Leslie Nielsen in one of the 'Naked Gun' movies, there is a big explosion and fireworks, and Nielsen deadpans, 'nothing to see here.' [laughs] That is a big comedic turn-on for me. I thought as an actor, if I can take that demeanor from my stage show to another outlet, I might be on to something.

HollywoodChicago.com: Well, 'The Office' used it perfectly in Darryl.

Robinson: Thank you, yes, I was made to do that part. I knew I was destined to be on that show when I first heard their 'that's what she said' joke. In my act, I'd always say 'if I had a dime for every time a girl told me that...' When I was auditioning for the series, I thought, that's the same joke. It was my comfort zone.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what will we learn about the character of Craig Robinson when you portray Craig Robinson in the upcoming film 'This is the End'?

Robinson: We will learn he's a murderer, and he is a heightened version of the 'Craig Robinson' character. [laughs] He still will smoothly say things like 'take your panties off,' but he also promotes other things he definitely would not say or do in real life. Hopefully people will go in and play with us, and take in the ride.

“Peeples” opens everywhere in Chicago on May 10th. Featuring Craig Robinson, Kerry Washington, David Alan Grier, S. Epatha Merkerson, Melvin Van Peebles and Diahann Carroll. Written and directed by Tina Gordon Chism. Rated “PG-13.” The hour-long series finale of “The Office” is on NBC, May 16th, 2013, 9pm ET/8pm CT. See local listings for channel locations.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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