

Interview: Zach Gilford on the World in 'The Purge: Anarchy'

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CHICAGO – Zach Gilford is a familiar face to fans of the TV series “Friday Night Lights,” where he portrayed Matt Saracen. The actor grew up around Chicago in Evanston, Ill., and has risen through the ranks of acting in his new home of Los Angeles. He currently is featured in the sequel film, “The Purge: Anarchy.”

“The Purge: Anarchy” takes up the premise of the first film, which presupposes a near future America in which laws are suspended for one night a year, allowing all aggressions, crimes and firearms to be practiced with abandon. Zach Gilford portrays Shane, who is part of a couple – his real-life wife Kiele Sanchez is Liz, his other half – that are accidentally thrust into the Purge night with no protection, and hooks up with a armed vigilante named Leo (Frank Grillo). The sequel ups the ante of the first film, with more social commentary and fire power.



Zach Gilford with His Real-Life Wife Kiele Sanchez in 'The Purge: Anarchy'

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

Zach Gilford is a working actor in Los Angeles, moving to the show business capital after graduating from Northwestern University in Evanston. After making his professional debut in “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” in 2005, he took on TV and films roles both before and while doing his regular part in “Friday Night Lights” (2006-11). After featured roles on the TV shows “Off the Map” (2011) and “The Mob Doctor” (2012) didn't pan out, Gilford has concentrated on films, with two releases last year and two so far this year, including ‘Devil's Due.’

HollywoodChicago.com met Zach Gilford at a traveling "interactive experience" promotion for "The Purge: Anarchy" up in Lake Villa, Illinois. The enthusiastic and thoughtful actor talked about his role in the film and his career.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'The Purge: Anarchy' has several themes running concurrently – indictments of government, wealth, the gun culture and man as killing animal. Which of these themes, or something else, do you believe is the main thesis of the Purge?

Zach Gilford: Because I've talked to James DeMonaco, the director, I think it's 'man as killing animal.' He told me that the government theme was a seed, but not as much as you'd think. The first film was much smaller, and James didn't know he was going to make a sequel. He said to me, 'I'm f**ked up. I came up with this f**ked up idea of this Purge night, I don't know why.' [laughs]

It's more about the violent nature of man, but from that it spiraled into an indictment of government. And then he's able to say things that he believes, and I agree with, and that's why it's so interesting as a thematic film. It's so much more than a violent film where people get to kill each other. It's another world, like ours, with a different set of laws. Imagine the whole United States like that.

HollywoodChicago.com: You had to immerse yourself into a world of mayhem and disorder. What type of emotions came through your acting instrument in regard to living in a world with a Purge?



Zach Gilford Gets Interactive, June 27, 2014
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Gilford: Actually these types of films are a bit easier than other kinds of acting, because I ran around a lot and people did actually shoot blanks at us, which is freaky. You don't have to do much acting when you're running down a street, trying not to get shot. At long as you get yourself not to laugh, and I'm running down the street properly, ergo I'm a great actor. [laughs]

The hard part was filming out of sequence. My first scene of the day might be in a stairwell after a shoot-out, and you need to get in the proper mood. It's about accessing that five year old kid who likes to play make believe, and for most actors they are in touch with that five year old kid.

HollywoodChicago.com: The wealthy are treated with a peculiar light in the film – they are shown to be callous toward human life. In the debate between the 1% and the 99%, do you think the themes in 'The Purge' are correctly symbolic as to what wealth is doing to society today?

Gilford: Yes, I think it's on the nose. The top are getting richer, the bottom are getting poorer. There is too much of a marriage between corporations and government, and that seemingly can't be untangled any more.

HollywoodChicago.com: Guns are a big part of what 'The Purge' is – both the Purgers and the 'heroes' use them to express their points of view. Given the rash of mass shootings in America recently, does our culture of guns serve us or destroy us, and what does the film say about that issue?

Gilford: I'm a very strong anti-gun person. There was a scene where I shot off this huge machine gun. As I was looking at it, I thought, why would anybody need this? Why should anyone have a right to own this? Beyond hunting rifles and handguns, why does anyone need a military grade weapon, designed to kill people quickly? The film is a condemnation of violence, as it highlights these guns that are simply exist to kill people.

HollywoodChicago.com: James DeMonaco is the creator of Purge, and obviously has a specific agenda when it comes to communicating his work. After you signed on, was there a specific meeting as to how he wanted the actors in the film to be in regard to the circumstances of The Purge?

Gilford: We had that meeting right after I read the script. I wanted to make sure my character Shane didn't get into a pissing contest with the character of Leo, in the battle for alpha male. The way I wanted to interpret it was 'we're all in this together,' and I wanted to communicate my lines through that way. I didn't want to one-up Frank's character. There was a line, 'who the f**k is this guy?' I wanted to say it like I didn't know what's going on, not to take over. James just said, I want what you want. We were on the same page.

HollywoodChicago.com: There is a character with the word 'God' written on his mask. Is there a religion in the universe of The Purge, or has that influence died with the 'rebirth' of America in the film?



Zach Gilford in 'Friday Night Lights'
Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

Gilford: That's interesting, because people in the film 'pray' to the new Founding Fathers of this America, the Purge Prayer. We didn't really even talk about it. As far as the word 'God' on the mask, I didn't even notice it until near the end of shooting, because the actor wearing the mask was usually far away in our scenes. There was one point where James said, 'so I want the actor in the God mask...' I thought, 'the God mask?' But I knew who the actor was when he mentioned it, and put two and two together. I finally got a little closer, and there it was. [laughs] Oh, I'm dumb.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were on the series 'Friday Night Lights.' What does the sports culture, as shown in Texas, have to say about how the overall culture in America is shifting. Are sports the new family pastime for folks dedicated to that pastime like in 'Friday Night Lights'?

Gilford: I grew up here in the Chicago area, but I picked up the book and saw the film, and loved both of them. Up here, we don't have the intense football culture or Friday night games, they were on Saturday mornings. So when I went to Texas, I saw the high school stadiums that are bigger than Northwestern University's college field. They live through these kids, maybe because of a glory they never had, because they are so personally close to it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you were a drama major at Northwestern, where do you stand on the theoretical acting training like Meisner or Stanislavsky, versus just letting it fly?

Gilford: Personally, I'm a 'let it fly' actor. But what I loved about my training at Northwestern was that they threw a bunch of different theories and techniques, and we took what liked and left what we didn't like. We did scenes from Ibsen, Chekov, Shakespeare, Sam Shepard, Tom Stoppard and practiced those theories you mentioned. It was about trying it, and that was the approach.

HollywoodChicago.com: Again in theory, if you're a actor you need to strip away the layers to get to the core of a character. Did you have a particular layer that you needed to discard in order to be a core actor?

Gilford: I don't know. For the roles I've done the best in, I don't know how or why it happened. It is what it is...I had an episode of 'Friday Night Lights' that people have given me praise for, but when I read that script I was really scared, because I didn't know how I was going to do it justice. And somehow on set, in connection with the other actors and the direction, it just happened.

HollywoodChicago.com: I read on your bio page that you were very active as an outdoorsman. What do urban or suburban Americans miss out on, in your opinion, if they don't get the opportunity to get in touch with nature?

Gilford: They just have to try it. Nine out of ten people who try it, gets it. And for the one person who still says no, I'm okay with that, it's not for everybody. You have to try it in this life, and we're farther and farther away from nature with our technology, but it's much more natural than our relationship with our mobile phones.

HollywoodChicago.com: How has being an outdoors person helped with your acting?

Gilford: It's kept me grounded and kept my life in perspective. That, and my Chicago roots. I always tell people in Los Angeles that I can't get a swelled head, because in Chicago they'll put you down in two seconds. [Sarcastically] 'Good for you...'

HollywoodChicago.com: In that same theme, what values have you learned in Chicago, that help you to survive the show business jungles of Los Angeles?

Gilford: First, don't take it personally, because rejection is around every corner, and you can't just think it's about you. Sometimes you're off one day, or another you kill it acting wise, but they want someone with brown eyes. What you hear a lot, 'he was great, but he's just not the guy,' Sometimes that is bullshit, but sometimes it's true. It stinks, but once you realize how it works, you just shrug and say, 'I wasn't the guy.'

"The Purge: Anarchy" opens everywhere on July 18th. Featuring Zach Gilford, Frank Grillo, Carmen Ejogo, Kiele Sanchez, Zoe Soul and Justina Machado. Written and directed by James DeMonaco. Rated "R"



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