

Interview: Actor Thomas Haden Church is Character Driven in 'Max'

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CHICAGO – Thomas Haden Church has the recognizable name, and a long career of character roles in comedy and drama. His laid-back persona gets a bit more intense as a conflicted father in the new film “Max,” about a military dog who comes home to an uncertain future with a grieving family.

What may look like a standard family film is actually an exploration of the mourning and the healing process, and the waste of war. Church is Ray Wincott, an early 1990s “Desert Storm” veteran, who sees his son Kyle (Robbie Arnell) follow in his Marine Corp footsteps to the Afghanistan conflict. One of the Kyle’s duties is to care for Max, a German Shepard who sniffs out bombs in the region. When Kyle is killed in action, Max is sent back to the Wincott family to get over his companion’s demise, but will only respond to Ray’s other son, Justin (Josh Wiggins).



Thomas Haden Church and Josh Wiggins in 'Max'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Thomas Haden Church came from a military family background (his father was a veteran of the Korean War), and started his show business career in radio and voiceover. He moved to Los Angeles in the 1980s, and established himself as an aircraft mechanic named Lowell in the popular NBC-TV sitcom “Wings.” Afterward, he did another series (“Ned & Stacey”), and did roles in films like “Tombstone,” “George of the Jungle” and “Monkeybone,” before landing his 2003 Oscar nominated supporting part in “Sideways,” opposite Paul Giamatti. Since that breakthrough, he’s worked steady and in high profile roles in films such as “Spider-Man 3,” “Killer Joe,” “We Bought a Zoo” and “Heaven is for Real.” He is currently working on a new HBO series, co-starring Sarah Jessica Parker, called “Divorce.”

HollywoodChicago.com talked to Thomas Haden Church, two days before the release of "Max" on Friday, June 26th. The candid Mr. C spoke of his inspirations for his character of Ray, and his preparation in realizing the role.

HollywoodChicago.com: There were so many burdens your character endured – his past, his son's death, his conflict with the son left behind, his business, and his disdain for what Max represents. How do you fold all those characteristics into the physicality and sensibility of Ray?

Thomas Haden Church: I made the determination to have the military haircut, but the bushier mustache was the stamp I was using for him today. I wore his work uniform virtually throughout the film, because I wanted to show him dedicated to taking care of his family through his work. I also wanted him to move with a sense of purpose.

HollywoodChicago.com: You also play a veteran, and have military service in your family. How does the service of the generations affect a family dynamic in your experience, and how was that folded into the family dynamic of the Wincotts?

Church: Ray's military background was cut short through an injury, right after he got his first command as a sergeant. Whatever his career might have been, it was already over. The military is all about management by intimidation – do as you're told or suffer at the next level of command. My Dad was that guy. With Ray, the inspiration from my background wasn't implicit, but it drifted in here or there.



Josh Wiggins with the Title Character in 'Max'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was the role a tribute, in effect, to your father?

Church: On some level, yes. I wasn't on the set everyday thinking, 'this is for you, Dad.' But my Dad passed away three years ago, and was buried with full military honors at a national cemetery just outside of Dallas. Having the military service in the character, and with his son, there was a lot of sense memory of what I'd gone through with my father. It came back into my life as a movie performance.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the most remarkable scenes in the film is the reveal of Ray's burdensome secret from his past. How did you and director Boaz Yakin approach how that scene would unfold, and what in Ray beforehand tips us off that he may have that secret?

Church: There are a few moments beforehand. As the film opens, the family is talking to Kyle on Skype, and the younger son Justin is ignoring the whole thing. As we're saying goodbye after the call, Justin does a very flippant, 'goodbye.' Boaz does a thing where he lingered on me, and my disdain is felt, since every moment spent with Kyle – on even something like Skype – is a precious moment.

There are molecules of his shameful truth before the reveal. When Ray challenges Justin with 'what do you know about sacrifice?', maybe that question was, even though I'm limping around with a wounded warrior background, is 'what did I know?'

HollywoodChicago.com: And how did you approach the revealing speech once it was put on film?

Church: It was between Sheldon [Lettich, co-writer], Boaz and myself. As originally written, it was a very long monologue, that we kept playing with over the weeks. I finally asked Boaz if I could rewrite it in my own words. He called Sheldon, and he agreed, so I took a shot at it. I cut it down considerably, and changed the order on a bunch of stuff, and we worked it all out together.

HollywoodChicago.com: W.C. Fields once said, 'never work with children or animals.' You did a bit of both in this film. What was

fascinating, in your observation, about the handling of the trained dog Max?



Thomas Haden Church in Chicago, June 24, 2015

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Church: [Laughs] Well, you know that Fields was drunk most of the time, so at long last we can discard that nugget. I've worked with them all. If you are truly fearless as a performer, than you don't fear kids or dogs. The head animal trainer I had worked with before on 'We Bought a Zoo' and 'George of the Jungle.' First of all, he's the best in the industry. I've worked with lions, tigers and bears, and as soon as I saw him, I knew we were good.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the main ingredient in the chemistry of your performance relationship with Paul Giamatti's character in 'Sideways' that you feel made the film so special?

Church: We'd both gone through rigorous audition process to land the roles, by the time I talked to him for the first time. I got on the phone with him, and we talked for four solid hours. It was in the Summer of 2003, and we talked from when the sun was fully out until it was completely dark. From the first time we talked, we laughed together, we loved the same music and we liked the same books. Paul is better read than any university literature professor. He comes up with these quippy references that only Paul and someone from Mensa would f**king understand. [laughs] We had crazy common interests – Louis L'Amour cowboy novels from the 1970s, the author Cormac McCarthy and the rock group Iron Maiden.

As soon as we got together for the film, it was like a brotherly love affair. After we spent that time together, we'd be doing a number of promotional tours, and even in a big crowd – like a magnet to steel – we would find each other within minutes.

HollywoodChicago.com: We were born a month apart. What do you think our generation has contributed to society and culture in our time here?

Church: It's a weird thing, because I was going through the chronology with my ten year old daughter, who was just learning about the presidents and their characteristics. She pointed out that I was born when John F. Kennedy was president. I had to tell her it wasn't true. Dwight D. Eisenhower was still in office.

I think our generation contributed to – post the Vietnam War – a thoughtfulness in the move from the late 1970s, into the 1980s. But there was also a confusion, because so many generations are defined by war, and we weren't.

"Max" opens everywhere on June 26th.. Featuring Thomas Haden Church, Robbie Arnell, Josh Wiggins, Lauren Graham and Mia Xitiali. Written by Boaz Yakin and Sheldon Lettich. Directed by Boaz Yakin. Rated "PG"



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