

Interview: Jada Pinkett Smith Plays Host in 'Magic Mike XXL'

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CHICAGO – Jada Pinkett Smith was doing it her way long before she became half of one of Hollywood's biggest power couples. From modest beginnings, she worked her way up through the entertainment ranks on television, movies and in a metal band (more on that below). She portrays Rome in the sequel "Magic Mike XXL."

Jada Pinkett Smith was born in Baltimore, and was raised by her mother and grandmother. After graduating from the Baltimore School for the Arts – where she majored in dance and theatre – she moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career. After some minor TV parts, she appeared as a regular on the series "A Different World." She recently came back to TV, portraying the mysterious Fish Mooney on the dark comic book series called "Gotham."



Jada Pinkett Smith as Rome in 'Magic Mike XXL'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Pinkett Smith broke into film with "A Low Down Dirty Shame" (1994), and followed up opposite Eddie Murphy in "The Nutty Professor." She is best known as Niobe in the sci-fi films "The Matrix Reloaded" and "The Matrix Revolutions." She met her future husband Will Smith on the set of his TV show "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," and they married in 1997. Pinkett Smith also has a notable music career, gaining Hot 100 traction on the charts with the 2006 debut album of her metal band, "Wicked Wisdom."

"Magic Mike XXL" is the sequel to the popular 2012 film, "Magic Mike," expanding on the male stripper showmen – led by Channing Tatum –

from the first film. Jada Pinkett Smith adds some spice as the master of ceremonies character named Rome. She was recently in Chicago to promote the film, and talked to HollywoodChicago.com.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Magic Mike XXL' is so blessedly fun. What did writer Reid Carolin, producer Steven Soderbergh and director Gregory Jacobs want to make sure of – in the sense of that fun – when you approached your character of Rome?

Jada Pinkett Smith: It was really Channing Tatum that sold me on the project, when he said 'I want to bring a sense of responsibility to adult entertainment.' I was like, 'Really?' I didn't know where we would end up, but I had to take him up on that.

HollywoodChicago.com: What background note did you give your character of Rome that no one else knew about, and how did that characteristic come out when you performed the character?

Smith: I was very short on time in picking up the role. The part was written for a man – they had Jamie Foxx in mind – and they were already in production when I came in. Whatever I had to do, I had to do quickly. Because it was happening so fast, I gave every last drop of the backstory to the team, since I felt like it was important to be on the 'page.' I don't usually have to do that, but for this character it was so sensitive that I drove the [writer] Reid Carolin crazy with my questions about the character. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What type of advice do you think Rome would give you about life if you had a conversation? What would you ask her, given what you understood about her background and who she is?

Smith: I don't know about advice, but I could definitely have a conversation with her, and I could learn a lot. Rome has had the freedom to explore in ways that I hadn't in my life. For example, I'd never even been to a male strip club before. So if Rome taught me anything, it's the exhilaration and connectivity in the participation with this type of show. I never even thought that was possible.

It was even about being there with all the women, and how I felt that every one of them were my girlfriend. Usually, that's not the case, women are tighter than that when in public. But here, we were free, and we were saying to each other 'isn't this awesome!' We had a good time, and also with this type of show, men and women were interacting, and it was safe, celebratory and responsible. Rome taught me that, otherwise I would have never known.

HollywoodChicago.com: What single word would you use to describe your co-star Channing Tatum, and how does he define that word in his performance work and career?

Smith: Giving. He's a really giving guy. Channing has the gift of flowing power to all the artists around him on this movie, and he wants them to shine. Usually people in his position, unfortunately, want to keep the shine for themselves. It's his story, and his world, but he is absolutely giving in his work, outside the work, his friendships and with his family.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think the popularity of overt sexual films like 'Magic Mike XXL' and 'Fifty Shades of Gray' say about the state of American attitude toward sex?

Smith: I will speak for women, and I think they're in a place where they are ready to explore these ideas, and find their own personal relationship with those ideas – regarding sex and eroticism. 'Fifty Shades...' opened one door, 'Magic Mike' is about to open another. Women are now at a stage where they want to learn more about all this, because in many cases we're not allowed to explore these topics.

Channing said it best, 'I don't know if 'Fifty Shades of Gray' turned women on, as much as switched women on.' So I think women will continue to find those channels and paths, and explore the subject matter, in order to become more confident, and find their own self identity within that exploration.



Jada Pinkett Smith, Lead Singer of Wicked Wisdom
Photo credit: WickedWisdom.net

HollywoodChicago.com: Which of your early career experiences, say from 1990-1995, best prepared you for what came next when your career took off?

Smith: It was the idea of staying true, to never do things just for money. I used to get offers all the time, but I stayed true and connected to my own value systems. The minute that you start allowing that aspect of yourself to deteriorate, there can be serious trouble.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you were raised in a matriarchal household by your mother and grandmother, and are self made, how did that background prepare you for the rigors of show business?

Smith: It was about self confidence. It was a very male dominated business when I first came into it, and because of that they were telling me to all kinds of things. There was a producer who told me once, while I was doing a movie, that he wanted me to pose for Playboy. I told him that's not happening. He told me that everybody was doing it, and said I wouldn't be a star otherwise. I told him, 'Dude, I couldn't care less.' It was just having that sense of self to know that I wouldn't be that girl.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've come back to TV recently, with 'Hawthorne' and 'Gotham.' Since you were also Executive Producer on 'Hawthorne,' how did you protect the character and made sure she went into a direction that you wanted her to go?

Smith: My mother was a nurse, so that really helped, because I used characteristics in the way she worked. I don't know if I wanted to protect her that much, I think the TNT Network wanted to protect her more than I did. [laughs] I find flawed people much more interesting.

HollywoodChicago.com: I'm so intrigued by your fronting of a metal band. As a lead singer myself, what responsibility do you feel about bringing the magic in representing a sound and a song for your bandmates?

Smith: One the reasons why I created Wicked Wisdom is because I'd always been a metal head, probably because I was black and female, and it wasn't really for me. Part of my purpose was being in a metal band was to reject that idea. Metal music is about breaking down all the boxes. That was a helluva box to try to break in that arena. [laughs]

But to me the idea was – within that scene – to open my eyes and expand those beautiful ideas. The music itself, the culture itself, is all about breaking the rules and breaking outside of the construct. In those breaking of the rules and construct, let's also see who is accepted within this art form. That was really the purpose.

HollywoodChicago.com: What piece of advice, that you have received in your journey as an actor and performer, do you honor every time you approach a role?

Smith: As far as the characters I develop, I just want to keep them as honest as possible. That deepens as I get more experience and grow as an artist. That's the aspect I've always tried to keep with me – to keep it real.

"Magic Mike XXL" opens everywhere on July 1st. Featuring Channing Tatum, Joe Manganiello, Gabriel Iglesias, Matt Bomer, Elizabeth Banks, Adam Rodriguez, Donald Glover and Andie MacDowell. Written by Reid Carolin. Directed by Gregory Jacobs. Rated "R"

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