

## Interview: Actor Jake Johnson on Evolving in ‘Digging for Fire’

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CHICAGO – Actor Jake Johnson is expanding his presence in movies, and much of that has to do with his collaboration with director – and Chicago native – Joe Swanberg. Johnson and Swanberg have teamed up for their second film, after the success of 2013’s “Drinking Buddies,” and are listed as co-writers in “Digging for Fire.”

“Digging for Fire” is a character study of Tim and Lee – portrayed by Jake Johnson and Rosemarie DeWitt – at some serious crossroads. They are in their thirties, have been married for a number of years and have a child, but both seemed stalled in the “is that all?” syndrome. When Lee’s wealthy client asks them to housesit, a series of events take place that separate them for a night, and allows them the freedom to explore some other possibilities. The film is filled with symbolic purpose, questions of life that are familiar to couples in that age range, name actor cameos, and the free form style of director Joe Swanberg.



Jake Johnson Contemplates Life in ‘Digging for Fire’

*Photo credit: The Orchard*

Jake Johnson is on a hot streak at the moment. Besides his collaborations with Swanberg, he had a supporting role in this summer’s biggest film, “Jurassic World.” He continues as Nick on the FOX TV series “New Girl,” and contributed to the initial idea for Comedy Central’s “Drunk History.” He grew up in the Chicago area, studied playwriting at New York City’s Tisch School of the Arts, and moved to Los Angeles shortly thereafter. He launched himself by landing a gig in 2007 with the TBS series “Derek and Simon: The Show.” His films include “Paper Heart” (2009), “No Strings Attached” (2011), “Safety Not Guaranteed” (2012, directed by Colin Trevorrow of “Jurassic World”) and “Let’s Be Cops” (2014).

Johnson spoke to HollywoodChicago.com via phone, and expressed some insight regarding his collaboration with Joe Swanberg, and how growing up in the Midwest contributed to his way of thinking.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What the genesis for the idea regarding this film? Did it spring from a conversation that you and Joe had or was it a separate idea?

**Jake Johnson:** This one started out as completely similar to the film. I was digging in my backyard and found a rusted gun and some bones. I called the Los Angeles police department, and the scene that happened in the film happened in real life [the police department didn't follow up]. Like my character, I called a bunch of buddies, and got a bunch of shovels. In the end, we didn't find anything, but it was enough to tell Joe that there could be a movie in that situation. At the same time, Joe was talking to me about being a Dad of a four year old at that time, with the debate of pre-school of public school versus private school. He was talking to his wife about that, and we decided to combine the two ideas and create the film.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The wonderful thing about the husband and wife is that they both were at a certain crossroads, and the events of the weekend conspire to expose them to that crossroad. What did you and Joe want ripped open in the characters to define their decision making in the film?

**Johnson:** What we wanted the characters to discover in this film, is that while being in a long term relationship with a child is excellent, there are hard moments. We wanted to show that it's okay sometimes to take a breath, to let that relationship breathe. What we really wanted out of my character was to do a weird adventure, that everyone else told him was stupid. When you're a parent and a husband, and you want to do something, sometimes you just can't because it's just not the responsible thing to do.

He wanted to hang out, smoke a joint and go digging for a body, even though he was house sitting. For the character of Lee, we wanted her to not be on the schedule of motherhood and work all the time. We gave her a night to take her wherever she ends up. For both of them, in doing those things, they learned something new. That was the sense that the adventure was great, but they want to bring it back to each other, rather than lose the family because of stuff like this.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The mystery of the buried body had all kinds of symbolic and surface implications. How did the mystery evolve as you were outlining the scenario play, and how did you and Joe figure out how far you wanted to take it?

**Johnson:** We kept battling it. Obviously, symbolically, Tim is digging for a part of his former self, that was now gone with his life. His old life like partying with friends, meeting and dating random women and having a raging good time – he's looking for something. Joe and I debated on whether he should discover a body or not, and what would we do with it? In the end, we wanted to tell the audience that there was something there, in the sense of what Tim is looking for or feeling like he was missing.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There were some definitive economic concerns with the main couple, staying in a house they could never afford, the differences in school philosophies and Lee pining for comfort that they didn't have. Since California has such in-your-face wealth, what did you and Joe want to communicate about that envy for it?

**Johnson:** Well, first off we wanted to make a pure Los Angeles movie. Part of making an L.A. movie was casting it up with recognizable faces – because one of the craziest things about L.A. is that there are faces that you've known from TV and movies, from the 1970s on up, that are in grocery stores. It's the L.A. experience.

Also, wealth is so crazy here, it's everywhere. So the lines are so close, between public and private schools, between smaller homes and expensive mansions, that Joe and I thought that idea felt like Los Angeles, and this time in our lives. Where you are at, as opposed to where others are at.



Poster Art Depicting Jake Johnson and Rosemarie DeWitt of 'Digging for Fire'



Photo credit: The Orchard

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I’m curious, did the cast come up with any theories as to why the bones ended up underneath a wealthy housing enclave. Did you theorize about the mystery of it, and what was that inspired by?

**Johnson:** My theory on it was in the scene with the neighbor. He talks about how before the house was built up, on the hill was the ‘Chicano Hall of Fame.’ What I like about that line was evident in the streets of L.A. The neighborhood I lived in is rapidly gentrifying, but my neighbors told me during the mid-1990s you couldn’t walk alone on the streets safely. So basically we were saying in the film that the mansion used to be a scary hill.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Sexual curiosity and boredom are often the catalyst for affairs, was there anything more to Tim and Lee’s opportunities as they emerged in the film, and do you think one would pull the trigger more than the other if those couplings were optimal?

**Johnson:** Rosemarie’s character ended up kissing Orlando Bloom, that was way further than my character went. [laughs] The kiss wasn’t part of our treatment, but Joe said he wanted the option. I think her character would have went farther. Yes, Tim was connected to Brie Larson’s character, but it was less a sexual thing with those two, more like the goal of the dig.

Now that I’m 37 years old, more people will tell me not to bother with certain ideas. If I wanted to, for example, build a shed, most people will say don’t do it or don’t waste my time. But there was a time in life where nobody cared, and you would build a shed, even if it ended up just being a pile of wood. Tim’s arc in the film is that he thinks there is a body, and even if he’s right, he’s now married with a kid, and needs to be responsible.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So many of the young go-getters in dramatic and comic Los Angeles lent a hand to this film. What was behind the casting pattern, and was it a situation of calling in favors or Joe’s emerging reputation in how he puts his films together?

**Johnson:** It was both, but mostly many of the people are interested in experiencing a Joe Swanberg movie, because they are truly unique. They are like no other movie I’ve ever worked on, and it’s like a drug I’m addicted to. I knew a lot of actors who wanted that experience, and since there weren’t many lead characters, it was all side roles. People like Jenny Slate and Tim Simons could be leads in film, but they did the great scene as the yoga couple. So many people just wanted to experience it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Both you and Joe are Chicago influenced, what flavor of that influence do you find in ‘Digging for Fire,’ and what characteristic of the ‘Chicago School’ of performance do you find helps your survival in show business?

**Johnson:** There is always going to be something very grounded about the characters I play, because of my Chicago roots, because the city is so grounded. Even my wife pointed it out when we were in the city this summer, she said that even the architecture is grounded in Chicago, it’s so solid. Because it has to deal with winters. [laughs] There is something about Chicago that keeps people centered and grounded, and there is an element of that always in Joe’s work.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you were a witness to the phenomenon, describe the nature of Colin Trevorrow between ‘Safety Not Guaranteed’ and ‘Jurassic World,’ as far as how he handled the sets?

**Johnson:** It was truly seamless. He directed ‘Jurassic World’ exactly like ‘Safety Not Guaranteed.’ He had a vision of it, he imagined it very big and imagined the audience cheering and really loving it. He wanted both to be satisfactory, and neither felt any different.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What can you tell us about Zooey Deschanel that the rest of the world doesn’t know?

**Johnson:** I don’t have anything for you, buddy. Those secrets are safe with me. [laughs]

*“Digging for Fire” has a limited release, including Chicago, on August 21st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Jake Johnson, Rosemarie DeWitt, Anna Kendrick, Brie Larson, Sam Rockwell, Orlando Bloom, Jenny Slate and Sam Elliott. Written by Jake Johnson and Joe Swanberg. Directed by Joe Swanberg. Rated “R”*



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