

Interview: Deon Taylor and Laz Alonso Talk 'Traffik', Modern Slavery, Trump

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CHICAGO - Many people think that human trafficking is a problem in other countries, but not the US. They would be wrong. This modern form of slavery is alive and well in the US, but it is well-hidden, especially since most people don't pay attention to the signs. Writer/Director Deon Taylor and actor Laz Alonso talk to us about this dark topic and much more!



Deon Taylor (left) and Laz Alonso (right) for their upcoming film, 'Traffik'

Photo credit: Studio One Atlanta

HollywoodChicago.com: At first glance, "Traffik" is a suspense/thriller about human trafficking, but the deeper you get into the film, you realize it's actually a horror film. What drew you to the topic?

Deon Taylor: My Daughter. Now I think it's a blessing because I get to talk about this so many times. My daughter is 12 and we got a letter from her school saying kids were being trafficked at our local mall. That was the original inception and why how I started writing the screenplay. I just looked it up, did the research and realized really quickly that black and brown people were the most at risk, domestically, for this. After building on a thriller, I meshed the two together and started pulling stories from the headlines. Two years later, here we are with Paula and Laz and Omar, and talking to you. What did you think?

HollywoodChicago.com: Even knowing ahead of time what the film is about doesn't prepare you for visceral or hard-hitting the events are.

It's made all the worse when you think about how big of a problem this really is.

Laz Alonso: That's what Deon did really well. What I love about this particular film is how he uses images a lot and allows your mind to create the fear. The part of the movie that still haunts me to this day is the analogy of these trucks. These 18-wheeler trucks that pass us on the freeway or next to us in traffic could be carrying anything. We assume that what it says on the side of the trucks is what they are trafficking or carrying inside, but it could be anything, including people. For a very long time, and even to this day, they are used to carry people around and we don't have a clue.

HollywoodChicago.com: At the end of the film, in my notes in big letters, I wrote, "NEVER TRUST A TRUCK AGAIN!"

Laz Alonso: (laughs) Right! Exactly! That's how I feel.

Deon Taylor: (laughs) Never trust a big truck and a smile.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there a lot of research involved in preparing for your role, Laz?

Laz Alonso: I didn't really do research. I just kind of channeled people I know that annoy me.

HollywoodChicago.com: We always know someone like that. It's always THAT guy.

Laz Alonso: (laughs) You know what I'm saying? You don't even need to describe him, just call him THAT guy. I just tried my best to bring that character to life, not only in every scene but every moment. That type of person is always looking for when to strike. They're always looking for when they have an opening to let their presence be known and exert their presence. It's the need to be seen and heard all the time. Usually, it's because they're covering up something and they don't want to be exposed. The more that they can keep you on the defensive, the less chances that you'll be able to call their crap out.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film's biggest theme is modern slavery, like human trafficking, but there are also other forms of systematic slavery, like the US prison system. How important is it that people know slavery still exists in the US?

Deon Taylor: I think it's really important on a lot of different levels. We have to get educated on so much stuff right now. We've been asleep at the wheel for so many years. The prison system is messed up, the political system is messed up, and slavery does exist. What's even more demonstrative and even more mind-boggling is that when you really pull back the sheets, you'll find people who really wanted it to remain in existence. That's why we're now politically broken because America can't find a way to see that there are people who aren't afraid to say, "I like things this way," and "I want it to return to this way." Now because they have someone [Trump] up there that they feel thinks and believes what they believe, they think they can say and do these things and feel protected. We weren't all ready to hear it. I think it's important to have conversations about this. I like your question because this movie has sparked another idea in you, and as a filmmaker that's what you hope to do. When you make a movie, you hope that people a) like it, and b) you get your message across. Conversation is key right now.

HollywoodChicago.com: Especially since many people think that because we have an amendment, slavery is automatically over, but "Traffik" shows us it's still alive and well.

Laz Alonso: I think Ava DuVernay did a great job with "13th" to show that slavery has been strategically and politically kept intact. It's just transformed mediums. Human trafficking has become a topic that has remained taboo to talk about. It's a best-kept secret. To know that Atlanta, Georgia is a hub for sex trafficking is insane, and that it exists in all places in the capital of California, Sacramento, right under the governor's nose is insane. This is the age of transparency, where all of those dirty secrets are coming to light.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the film, there was a brief exchange between Omar Epps' character and one of the biker traffickers where he pays Epps a racist, backhanded compliment. Every day, it seems that I see on my social media a new video or news report where a person, usually white, is openly and unabashedly saying something racist. Do you think Trump is emboldening these types of people?

Deon Taylor & Laz Alonso: Absolutely

Laz Alonso: At first, it bothered me because it felt like we were going backward. Then I had an epiphany and realized that we're not going backward. After Trump won, all those people didn't suddenly become racist. They just finally felt like they could show the rest of the world and stop hiding. I'll be glad people are finally being who they really are and showing me. I don't have to agree with you, and you don't have to agree with me, but just know that I know who you are and where you are coming from, and you're going to get an equal response on my end from where I'm coming from.

Deon Taylor: I think he has empowered a lot of people to hate, and like Laz said, to take their masks off. More importantly, I think besides the hate, he's riling up another thing that hasn't been fueled in a while: white privilege. He's rallying the idea that blacks, Latinos, Asians, and anyone else that is not white is taking our jobs and ruining our country. At some point, it's not about being racist anymore is instead used as a control mechanism. I heard this interview with him from a few years ago where he was saying blacks getting jobs over whites was ruining businesses. He was saying something like how he wanted to be a black man so that he could get a better job. It's that type of thinking that has woken up a whole nation of people that realize the importance of voting.

HollywoodChicago.com: Human trafficking also has a bit of an optics problem because it's not something you can see since it mostly happens in the shadows. What's a way that the average person can help stop it?

Laz Alonso: First of all, by watching this movie. It puts the issue in your face and shows you how we are overlooking it on a daily basis. Like with Paula's [Patton] character in the restroom of the gas station. If you see a female that's beaten up and scratched up and just messed up, we might just write her off as a homeless druggie. We try to avoid them, even though we don't know if they need help. Deon always says, "If you see something, say something."

Deon Taylor: That is exactly how it should be. What I found out when shooting the film's final scene was that when trafficked women escape, they tend not to speak to anyone for fear of being captured since they don't know who they can trust. Another thing that happens is that these women have been beaten to the point of obedience. They'll quietly stand on the corner and do whatever they need to do so they don't buck the system. It's another way that they're entrapped. I thought Dawn Olivieri, who plays the woman in the bathroom with Paula, nailed that. She did a lot of research and I talked to her about that. Originally, we had a lot of dope lines, and back and forth between the two characters and nothing seemed to work. Then, in between takes when we were adjusting a light, I looked at the monitor and just saw them each standing there waiting and preparing to do the scene. Then I realized that that was the scene I needed. Action! Don't say anything, Paula. That was the moment.

"Traffik" opens everywhere on April 20th. Featuring Paula Patton, Omar Epps, Laz Alonso, William Fichtner, Missi Pyle, Dawn Olivieri, and Roselyn Sanchez. Directed by Deon Taylor. Written by Deon Taylor. Rated "R"



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