

Film Close-Up: Will Smith

by Joey_Berlin

Will Smith once owned the Fourth of July with his streak of hits on that holiday, year after year. The fresh prince of all media has lately moved off the biggest movie-going weekend of the year, but his stature as the king of the mega movies isn't in any danger.

WILL SMITH - In 'I Am Legend,' Will Smith is on his own and in danger in Manhattan after a virus has transformed everyone else into cannibals. CNS Photo courtesy of Barry Wetcher. Smith is starring in the survival horror film "I Am Legend," a future-shock thriller set in a post-apocalyptic New York City. In "I Am Legend," Smith does some of his finest acting work yet as a lone survivor after a virus has wiped out most of the population of Manhattan, transforming everyone who remains into cannibals - except for Smith. A sinister story with a menacing vibe, "I Am Legend" should keep Smith bankable until he returns to the Fourth of July next summer with the super hero movie, "Hancock." Actress Jada Pinkett Smith's multi-talented husband, Will, has another major event to look forward to next year: his 40th birthday.

Q: Richard Matheson's novel "I Am Legend" has been filmed twice before. Why did you feel the time was right to make a third big-screen version of the story?

A: The thing that I felt we would be able to do with this film is, there has never been this level of technology to support the idea. You actually can shut down six blocks of Manhattan and if a car goes by in the background, you say, "Damn, don't worry about it." And you just remove it later. So you actually can see empty New York. You can see fighter jets take out a bridge.

That level of technology has never been around to support the weight of this story. So I felt like it would be a great opportunity to see visuals and to experience emotion that in the past you haven't been able to.

Q: How important is that to you as an actor, to have the surroundings be as real as possible?

A: I really got that concept from working with Michael Mann on "Ali." It was important for him to not shoot the Africa scenes in Mexico or the Caribbean. He wanted everyone to have to take the flight that the characters took to Africa. You experience the same things and you go into and immerse yourself in the same situation.

So you just can't beat actually walking down the center of a New York street with an M-16, you know? It's like, "What had to happen for me to be here?" And it just really assists in creating the psychology of the character when you can actually be in the place and not in front of a green screen, or in Baltimore playing it for New York.

Q: It sounds like you learned a lot about filmmaking from "Ali."

A: My cinematic education really reached a critical mass in working with Michael Mann. Something happened, something clicked, and I feel like over the next 10 years that I'll actually make the best movies of my career. I almost feel like an athlete and I just caught my prime. I'm in the best physical condition of my life, I'm mentally prepared and love what I do. I feel like this is truly the time for me to make my artistic sprint in my career.

Q: You have taken some risks in terms of your career already. Are you a risk-taker, in general?

A: It's interesting, I actually don't consider myself a huge risk-taker. I'm a student of the patterns of the universe. If I can figure out how something is seemingly risky but I've got the numbers on my side, I get really comfortable taking a leap. When I first came to Hollywood, my manager James Lassiter and I - I was a kid saying, "I want to be the biggest movie star in the world!" And he's like, "OK, we should probably figure out what they do, and plot a course."

He went and got the top 10 movies of all time up to that point. So we looked at them and were trying to figure out what the patterns are. And 10 out of 10 of them were special effects movies. Nine out of 10 had creatures, and eight out of 10 had a love story. So "Independence Day" is not really a hard call to make when

you look at the numbers. And so "I Am Legend," in concept, is not a hard call to make. Then it becomes about execution.

Q: Who inspired you to be so self-assured?

A: There's a very central idea in my life. My grandmother thought that I was just the greatest. She always had us playing the piano and doing recitations at church and all of that. And there was a look of pride that my grandmother would have in her eyes that became the fuel that I need for life. Like, I need my woman and daughter, and women in general, to look at me with that look.

Q: So it all goes back to that, for you? That look in their eyes?

A: I was about 15 years old when my first girlfriend cheated on me, and it so destroyed my concept of cause and effect in the universe. The way I processed why she cheated on me was, I wasn't good enough. And I remember laying in my bed making a decision that I would never not be good enough again.

And in that bizarre, hurt, 15-year-old mind it was, "OK, then no one will ever be able to cheat on me and no one will ever leave me." I may have gone a little overboard with it in my mind, but every single day Jada has to have that look. I can't function if she doesn't have that look in her eyes. So that means with my movies, as a father, as a husband, in every thing that I do in my life, I have to educate myself to the place that I can contend as the best on earth. And that's the only way to keep my woman from leaving me, ha-ha!

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