

**Magnolia Pictures & Max Born Productions**

**Presents**

**A MAGNOLIA PICTURES RELEASE**

# TYREL

**Written and Directed by Sebastián Silva**

Starring Jason Mitchell, Christopher Abbott, Michael Cera, Caleb Landry Jones, Ann Dowd

86 minutes

**Official Selection**

2018 Sundance Film Festival – World Premiere (US Dramatic Competition)

**PRELIMINARY PRESS NOTES**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Tyler joins his friend on a trip to the Catskills for a weekend birthday party with several people he doesn't know. As soon as they get there, it's clear that (1) he's the only black guy, and (2) it's going to be a weekend of heavy drinking. Although Tyler is welcomed, he can't help but feel uneasy around a close-knit group of white guys. The combination of all the testosterone and alcohol starts to get out of hand, and Tyler's precarious situation starts to feel like a nightmare.

With writer/director Sebastián Silva's signature handheld style probing subtext and body language, *TYREL* conjures an undeniable underlying tension and it marks his most radical character exploration yet—a timely, provocative, and brilliant observation of the idea of otherness in today's American climate.

## ABOUT *TYREL*

On a snowy winter's day, Tyler (Jason Mitchell) and his friend John (Christopher Abbott), two young restaurateurs from New York City, push a car along a back road high in the Catskills Mountains. They're on the way to a weekend getaway to celebrate the birthday of Pete, one of John's old friends, at a cabin in the woods. Tyler needs the excursion, even though he will be among mostly strangers, because the home he shares with his Puerto Rican girlfriend is packed with her visiting family – and the ailing, elderly mother to whom she is devoted. What could be better than a jocular, beer-soaked weekend in the country with a bunch of his buddy's friends?

Well, nothing ... except that an empty gas tank is only the first in a series of discomfiting moments Tyler encounters and engenders over the next 48 hours. Right off the bat, one of his new acquaintances mishears his name as "Tyrel," a subtle but significant alteration that both gives Sebastián Silva's latest film its title and sets up a theme of racially-tinged, passive-aggressive social awkwardness that leads the good-natured Tyler towards a shaky psychological edge.

The Chilean Silva, who has lived in New York for the past 17 years, approaches the subject of race as an outsider to American culture, but a knowing and insightful chronicler of alienation. Through his previous six films, from the 2007 *La Vida Me Mata* through 2015's *Nasty Baby*, Silva has distinguished himself as a gifted director of ensemble casts, with keen sense for capturing naturalistic moments with highly talented actors and non-professional performers alike. Once again, in *Tyrel*, he has assembled a stellar cast, led by Mitchell (*Straight Outta Compton*, *Mudbound*), Abbott (*James White*, HBO's *Girls*) and Jones (*Heaven Knows What*, *Get Out*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*), and also featuring frequent collaborator Michael Cera (recently seen in indie favorites *Lemon* and *Person to Person*), Michael Zegen (*Brooklyn*), musician Roddy Bottum (Faith No More) and Ann Dowd (Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, HBO's *The Leftovers*). Also essential to the stripped-down production was cinematographer Alexis Zabe, a longtime associate of Mexican visionary Carlos Reygadas (*Post Tenebras Lux*, *Silent Light*), who most recently won acclaim for the intense Day-Glo neorealism of Sean Baker's scrappy indie sensation *The Florida Project*.

The cast, embodying a range of electric and sometimes eccentric personalities, expands on a situation Silva initially observed while vacationing in Cuba with his friend Nico Arze. They came across a group of American tourists, drunk and in their mid-20s, and all but one of them white.

"It was probably my imagination, but the black guy seemed alienated. Alienation is a topic that interests me, and I saw it right there. And at that moment, this guy's alienation was linked to the color of his skin. Racism feels like it's always timely in America. It never ceases to be an issue, and that was part of it this moment. Something profound was happening there."

Later, Silva's friend Nico went to his cabin in the Catskills to celebrate another friend's birthday. "And they were all white and one of them was black, but there was nothing awkward about their dynamic. At the very end of their weekend they took a selfie and the black dude was the one who took it. That selfie also inspired this film. The mixture of that moment with what we had witnessed and talked about in Cuba made a case for something compelling, so I explored it."

The director was coming off of a bad experience trying to set up a much bigger production that had collapsed, and craved a less-fraught opportunity. "I wasn't disenchanted but, dude, I needed to make a movie my way," he says. It was January 2017. "I made *Tyrel* in February. I wrote an 80-page screenplay and talked to my actor friends. Nico had the place. I got a dog and shit got together. It was fucking heroic."

Most importantly, Silva had a dynamic star and collaborator in Jason Mitchell. The 31-year-old actor has enjoyed a smashing run onscreen the past three years, breaking out with his portrayal of Los Angeles gangsta rap pioneer Eazy-E in *Straight Outta Compton*, followed by prominent roles in Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit* and Dee Rees' *Mudbound*, and in productions as varied as *Kong: Skull Island* and the Key and Peele action-comedy *Keanu*.

"Someone mentioned Jason and told me he was Eazy-E. I thought, 'I need to see this guy!' I remember seeing this movie in a theater and crying over Jason's performance," Silva says. He went to visit Mitchell in the actor's native New Orleans. "We were pretty much on the same page," he says. "Jason was truly the best person to have because of his ability to be completely honest with everybody and have a sense of humor while being politically responsible and empathetic. It was a good mix of looseness and realness. We became a team."

Mitchell and the filmmaker hit it off immediately. "Sebastian's a really passionate guy," says the actor, who was struck by Silva's openness and drive to find authenticity in writing for characters across racial lines. They began working together to flesh out the character of Tyler, whom Mitchell envisioned as an African-American Everyman.

"I wanted *Tyrel* to be the movie that speaks for the middle-class black guy," he says, "the black guy that wasn't a thug. The black guy that's like most of the black guys out there these days. There are a lot of black guys that are trying to be successful and do things in their lives, but they get in the situations that are awkward for them that they don't know how to handle."

The performer also had access to his own experiences, summoning some of the anxieties and insecurities he felt before his current success, and also working in a reference to his 52 tattoos ("We shot this a little while ago, so I have 62 tattoos now," he laughs). "There was a point before my career started to take off when I thought that by having tattoos or for coming from where I come from, I wouldn't be accepted," he says, "but I later learned that people were going to love me for me. So many times, in order to be successful, black men have to change who they are, and that's what some of these moments are built off of."

Although the film deals with tension arising from racial difference, nothing about the story, or the characters, is purely black or white. Instead, like each of Silva's previous six films, ambiguity is everything. "There's a lot of layers," the director says. "I'm not completely sure these guys mean

to be cruel or to look down on Tyler. Black people have been put in such a generic box. So, Tyler's not going to be a saint and he's not going to be a victim. I don't want to have clear victims or clear victimizers. I don't want to have the bad guy and the good guy. I don't want a conversation about taking sides. I want to make people think about what they witness. This movie will live in every American's own set of prejudices and opinions. I want people to be somehow troubled by the conclusions they come to on their own."

### **Making A Movie In A Cabin In The Woods**

The barebones production style was refreshing to Mitchell, who enjoyed a greater sense of creative agency working with Silva. "This film brought me from actor to filmmaker," he says. On a more typical shoot, he recalls, actors are dispatched to their "happy place" while technical issues are resolved: "Just go sleep in the trailer while we take care of all the debauchery that's happening." Not so making *Tyrel*. "We *had* to make it happen," Mitchell says. "If anyone drops the ball, or if anybody chooses to just not be a team player, then the film isn't going to be made. It brought the best out of everyone and it put us in some of the worst situations [laughs]. You saw the creative aspect of the business really come to life rather than the technical side, because we had to trust the fact that we were going to nail it."

Off-camera, Cera taught his fellow cast members how to play poker. "Poker brings out your personality," Mitchell says. "You see what type of people you're hanging around. And not only were we a group of guys, we were a group of guys from different sexual preferences. It was beautiful to see a group of guys get together and not get weird. It was all of us being able to experience our beauty as friends."

Abbott concurs. "We were together all the time. I had a lot of fun but three more days would have been too much," he says. The location and brisk shooting schedule had a strong influence on the film's vibe and its performances. "In a way the shooting of it felt like an art performance piece in itself. There wasn't great phone service anywhere and there was terrible Wi-Fi, so it forced us to focus. That was satisfying. I also loved it when Seb would laugh during a scene while he's shooting it. It all felt fun and alive."

Silva relishes opportunities to work with ensembles, whether dealing with a minimal script and ample improvisation – as he did making *Nasty Baby* – or sticking more directly with the written word, which was the case with *Tyrel*. "I'm good at controlling big groups of people," Silva says. "I was working with very talented guys that totally understood what we were doing, and they knew we had the freedom to do whatever we wanted. Everything came together perfectly. It's funny, when I'm on set I'm extra sharp, very focused. But generally, I'm very much ADHD and it's really hard for me to focus on one thing, but when I'm there with people and I'm creating a human dynamic, something clicks together in my head."

Because the film is largely built from conversations and tiny, nuanced situations, "the dialogue and psychological moments needed to be extremely on point," Silva says. "We had 80 pages and all the beats are there. The actors read it the first time but they never studied, nobody came to set with the lines learned. I was there with the screenplay just telling them what to say and we would change a few things and make jokes, but we were really following the screenplay."

Abbott praises the director's personable touch and eye for detail. "I think Sebastian is just genuinely interested in the strangeness of human behavior," he says, "and what he's great at is putting a microscope to the off-handed remark, the seemingly mundane, and the inconsequential, and make you say 'why do we do this?' Even what, on the surface, may seem simple, is actually layered and complex when he takes over."

### **On Race and Suspense**

While *Tyrel's* set up recalls some of Silva's previous ensemble films – such as *Crystal Fairy* and *Magic Magic* – in which an outsider experiences alienation in a remote location, the new movie may also generate a feeling of unease for some viewers. Combine the spooky "cabin in the woods" setting familiar from endless low-budget horror films and gothic tales, with drunken rituals of male bonding, and then add the element of race to the mix ... there's clear potential for things to go badly wrong. Although Silva insists he didn't intend to push exactly those suspenseful buttons.

"I didn't do that on purpose," he says. "There was a very similar process with another movie I made, *The Maid*. I wasn't aware of the tension or danger or suspense."

The filmmaker suggests that such a reading of his film is, however, appropriately reflective of society. "Currently, our culture is just messed up," he says, "and the racial wound in America is so strong and deep ... so it makes sense that this feels sinister. It rings truth. The film is just about a guy who feels awkward and isolated, but in America it's a thriller because of the country's history."

*Tyrel* comes in the wake of the massive success of Jordan Peele's horror-comedy social commentary *Get Out*, a bitterly satirical spin on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. (Caleb Landry Jones also stars starred in *Get Out*, in a characteristically unsettling performance).

"It's such a weird coincidence," says Silva, who takes no affront at the association, and even finds it humorous.

The story's vibe is more naturalistic, grounded in the peculiarities of human nature, the emotional flux of a social setting awash in testosterone and alcohol, and the ambiguities of speech and gesture. Mitchell's Tyler is having a very weird time, and that can make the viewer nervous for what could happen next. Mitchell feels that, too.

"The whole time you're waiting on the boom," he says, "or you're waiting on the horror. The horror comes from the fact that we're living in a world where we believe we need a mask in order to impress each other or in order to co-exist. I don't want to live in a world with just black people. I don't want to live in a world with just any kind of race. I love the fact that we're one big gumbo pot of different ideas and different things, because we can all influence each other. Hopefully, films like this will make it a little bit easier to for us to bring up this dialogue and continue to be able to talk about these subjects."

## ABOUT THE CAST

### **Jason Mitchell**

Jason Mitchell over only the last five years has steadily been building a reputation as an actor on the rise. Mitchell has achieved critical acclaim for his role portraying the iconic “Eazy E” in Universal’s 2015 N.W.A. biopic *STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON*, directed by F Gary Gray. Starring opposite Paul Giamatti, Jason beat out competition from around the country for this coveted role. Mitchell won the African American Film Critics Association Award for Best Supporting Actor as well as sharing nominations with his fellow cast mates for Best Ensemble at the Screen Actors Guild Awards as well as the Critics Choice Awards. He also received Variety and San Diego International Film Festival’s “Rising Star Award” in September 2016 for his work in film.

Most recently, Mitchell appeared in Dee Rees’s *MUDBOUND*, the sensational World War II period drama which received overwhelming praise at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and was quickly picked up by Netflix for distribution. In summer 2017, Mitchell was in the Kathryn Bigelow directed *DETROIT* released by Annapurna Pictures. Mitchell also recently starred in the box office hit *KONG: SKULL ISLAND* alongside his *Compton* co-star Corey Hawkins, directed by Jordan Voigt Roberts.

Mitchell can now be seen in his first ever TV role as a series regular role in Showtime’s “The Chi,” directed by Emmy® winner Lena Waithe which premiered in January. The timely and distinctive coming-of-age story follows a half dozen interrelated characters in the South Side of Chicago.

Additionally in the upcoming year, Mitchell will play in *MUSTANG*, which tells the story of Roman Coleman, a violent convict who is given the chance to participate in a rehabilitation program involving the training of wild mustangs. The film is directed by Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre and stars Matthias Schoenaerts and Bruce Dern. Mitchell currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana with his two daughters.

### **Christopher Abbott**

Christopher Abbott is an acclaimed stage, screen and television actor. He starred in Josh Mond’s acclaimed film *JAMES WHITE* which was released by The Film Arcade in 2015 and garnered him Best Actor nominations from both the Independent Spirit and Gotham Awards. He also appeared for two seasons as Charlie in Lena Dunham’s HBO series “Girls”. He was named by Variety as one of 10 Actors to Watch in 2015. Other film work includes *WHISKEY TANGO FOXTROT* with Tina Fey, JC Chandor’s *A MOST VIOLENT YEAR* with Oscar Isaac and Jessica Chastain, Jackie

Earle Haley's CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES, Mona Fastvold's THE SLEEPWALKER, and Carlos Puga's BURMA. His lead role in Oscilloscope's HELLO I MUST BE GOING earned him The Sundance Film Festival's "Fresh Face In Film" recognition. Christopher first burst onto the screen opposite Elizabeth Olsen in Sean Durkin's MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE for which he was nominated for a Gotham Award for Best Ensemble.

On stage, the Stamford, Connecticut native made his Broadway debut in John Guare's THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES. Other theatrical work includes THE ROSE TATTOO with Marisa Tomei at The Williamstown Theatre Festival, Lucy Thurber's WHERE WE'RE BORN at The Rattlestick Theatre, Annie Baker's JOHN at The Signature Theatre and Sam Shepard's FOOL FOR LOVE at The Williamstown Theatre Festival. Recently, Christopher was seen in the independent film KATIE SAYS GOODBYE with Olivia Cooke and Trey Shults' IT COMES AT NIGHT with Joel Edgerton, Carmen Ejogo and Riley Keough, and Jamie M. Dagg's SWEET VIRGINIA with Jon Bernthal and Imogen Poots. He will be appearing in two films at Sundance this year, TYREL with Jason Mitchell and Caleb Landry Jones and PIERCING with Mia Wasikowska. You can also see Christopher in the new hit TV show, THE SINNER.

### **Michael Cera**

Work includes the role of George-Michael Bluth in the Emmy Award® winning Fox series "Arrested Development," as well as lead roles in the feature blockbusters *Superbad* and *Juno*. Other film roles include *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*, *Youth in Revolt*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, and the comedy hit *This is the End*. Most recently, Michael Cera was heard in animated blockbusters *Sausage Party* and *The Lego Batman Movie*. Cera made his Broadway debut in Kenneth Lonergan's award-winning play *This is Our Youth* following a sold-out and critically acclaimed run at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater, and he returned to Broadway last winter in Kenneth Lonergan's *Lobby Hero*.



## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Sebastian Silva** (Writer/Director) I'm Sebastián. I'm 38, six foot, 175 pounds. I've lived in NYC, on and off, for 16 years. I write and direct films and paint a bunch. Looking for someone my age (or not), with a kind heart and sense of humor. I'm sexually very open but believe monogamy is key during the first few years. Hoping for a long-term relationship but not opposed to no strings attached. See you on the dance floor.

**Jake Wasserman** (Producer) is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Wasserman produced notable and critically acclaimed films such as 'James White' (Winner of Sundance NEXT Audience Award, AFI Audience Award) 'The Eyes of My Mother' (Sundance NEXT 2016 Official Selection), virtual reality film 'Broken Night' (2017 Cannes NEXT Official Selection) with his latest feature films 'TYREL' and 'Piercing' premiering at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival. Wasserman has also produced and directed several award-winning commercials, music videos, and virtual reality films for clients such as The North Face, Gatorade, The Wall Street Journal, Sony Music, and Samsung. Wasserman was born in New Orleans and now lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## **CREDITS**

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