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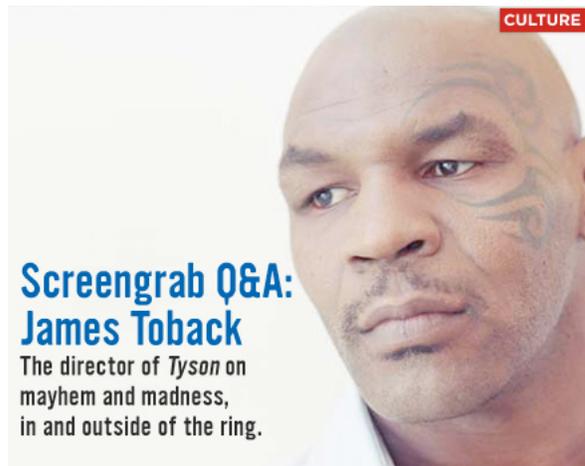
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Screengrab Q&A: James Toback

Posted by Nicole Ankowski



By Emily Wilson

It's been over twenty years since Mike Tyson became boxing's youngest-ever Heavyweight Champion of the World. In the decades since, his demons outnumbered his titles, and the former bruiser became better known for his addictions, ear-biting and uncontrollable temper than for his victories in the ring. Filmmaker James Toback (*The Pick-up Artist*, *Fingers*, *Bugsy*) aims to bring some nuance to that image with his new documentary, *Tyson*. And he may succeed; the film was lauded at Cannes and Sundance, with Tyson himself saying, "I'm afraid of how much money and how much pussy I'm gonna get."

A self-styled provocateur, Toback has always been able to raise a tempest around himself and his extensive network of celebrity associates — perhaps because the line between him and his subjects, between his art and his life, has never been clear. As a young journalist in 1971, he was assigned a piece about Jim Brown; he ended up moving in with the football-legend-turned-actor and writing a memoir about the endless orgies at Brown's house. His film career, in many ways, has continued to blur that line, with extra provocation whenever possible. One scene in 1999's *Black and White* finds Tyson himself — as himself — politely deflecting the advances of a pushy Robert Downey Jr., before suddenly and shockingly punching him in the face.

The same charisma Tyson displays in that unforgettable moment animates Toback's new documentary, essentially one long interview with a very willing subject, interspersed with impressive archival footage. Toback opens up about his childhood, turbulent relationships, addictions, prison, and the intimate, twenty-year-long relationship he and Toback have shared. It's a mesmerizing film, and perhaps Toback's best. Nerve spoke with Toback about friendship with a man whom many consider a monster.

You've known Mike Tyson for over twenty years. How did you first meet?
 It was quite unexpected. He came to the set of *The Pick-up Artist* to meet Robert Downey Jr. He and I started talking, and we hit it off. We took a long, long walk at five in the morning through Central Park. He'd just met Jim Brown, and I had lived up at Jim's house for a couple of years. He was fascinated to find out about all the wild activities there. I told him about my flip-out on LSD when I was his age, nineteen. He was very interested in the whole notion of madness and what it meant to go crazy. His mind was very curious, in particular about that subject. I wasn't all that surprised when, years later, he flipped out, when he was in solitary confinement. In fact, he told me the first thing he thought was, "This is what Toback was talking

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about."

How did you stay in touch? Did you meet up or call one another?

I'd call him out of the blue. Or I'd get a call at four in the morning and he'd say, "Jim Toback, Mike Tyson." And two hours later we'd say goodnight.

Did you always talk about heavy subjects?

Yes. There was no small talk ever. Not a syllable. Very much like in the movie.

How did you decide to make this film?

It was clear to me we'd have some extremely interesting episodes together, and over the years we did. They just happened organically. There was this constant sense of invention and renewal. I felt when he came out of prison after the long stay, that would be a great time to use him because he was — and still is — an icon in the hip-hop world. I was doing [this movie about hip-hop] with the Wu-Tang Clan, *Black and White*. He fit very naturally within the framework of the film.

In *Black and White* there's a scene in the gym where he speaks in a self-reflective, meditative way about murder and humiliation in prison. I thought *that voice*, if I find the right cinematic style, would make a great self-portrait, filtered through my own aesthetic. I talked to him about it right away and he was all for it. It was just a question of finding the right time.

And what made this the right time?

The death of my mother, which made me feel I had to get to work on something right away or I'd have a real problem functioning at all. And he'd just been arrested for cocaine possession and was in rehab. I thought: this is going to be a period of time he can indulge in self-analysis and reflection, without having the kind of fractured, frantic life he usually has.

Do you feel you had a lot in common?

In some odd way, by making a movie about him, it raised all these subjects that all of my movies deal with: identity, and the loss of it; madness; sex; love; crime; money; death. The less likely the scenario, the more interesting it is to me. So to take a subject, namely Mike Tyson, where the backgrounds and the origins and any number of [other] superficial differences would suggest a lack of communion — and then to find there are these rather fascinating connections — made it all the more interesting.

Some of the film is painful for Tyson; he cries at certain points. Why did he agree to make this film?

First of all, clearly, he is shy on one level. But he's one of the most famous people in the world, and it's not by accident. He has a need to be known and to be understood. I think that was part of it, but I think he has a confessional nature, too. Strict Catholics find a confession booth sufficient to answer that need. Maybe Tyson's needs are a bit more unusual.

In the movie he talks about his tumultuous relationships with women.

Numerically he's had so many experiences with women, you'd almost have to say the law of averages would suggest there'd be a certain amount of problems. If your life revolves around five or ten women, you might be able to get away with a pretty tranquil existence. But at five or ten thousand, you're gonna have some mistakes.

How will this film changes people's preconceptions of Mike Tyson?

There are quite a few people who go in with a conception of him as a convicted rapist and ear-biter. And when they come out, they feel a sense of shock — that he has moved them the way he has, and that they feel that they know him in a way they didn't expect to.

Did you consider interviewing Tyson's friends, or critics, for the film?

No. It only could have been this kind of movie. I had no interest at all in making the movie that was a poll of various people's views. The whole idea was to take advantage of this opportunity, to have a special, personal perspective about himself.

You say you think of him as a figure out of Greek tragedy.

Well, he's the one who said, "It's like a Greek tragedy; the only problem is, I'm the subject." As in classic Greek tragedy, you have a large-scale figure who has risen against all odds by dint of his own capacity, strength and ability — and then has brought himself down by an act of hubris.

What was his act of hubris?

Thinking he could get away with anything — handle problems and challenges that needed rigorous discipline [without that discipline]. Thinking he could get away with succeeding in the way he had, because of his [past] discipline.

How do you feel about the film?

You know, you have a general feel for what a movie is supposed to be when you start it — and [afterwards] you might feel you fulfilled it, or almost fulfilled it or, didn't come close to fulfilling it.

In this case, I think it's probably the first time it actually went *beyond* what I could have imagined. I didn't know it was possible to feel that. I look at it, and my imagination of what it might be is less than what it is. Whereas in previous films, I felt like this is what I wanted, or this isn't quite what I wanted. Or, in the case of *Love and Money*, this isn't close to what I wanted.



and Nick Cosentino, Directors of *John of Rambow*

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Tyson opens in select cities this Friday. James Toback is being honored, along with Robert Redford and Francis Ford Coppola, at the San Francisco International Film Festival, running April 23 to May 7.

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Posted Apr 22 2009, 07:00 AM
Filed under: james toback, interview, sex, sundance, robert downey jr., cannes film festival, black and white, mike tyson, tyson, madness, documentaries, prison

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