

Nick Cannon: The 'Chi-raq' Interview

By Kam Williams
For The Skanner News

Nick Cannon is a multi-faceted entertainer who wears many hats: comedian, executive producer and host for television, film star, director, entrepreneur, philanthropist and author of children's books. Cited by People magazine as one of the "Top 10 Most Successful Young People in Hollywood," Cannon is proof positive that focus and hard work can pay off. Nick made his first appearance on the big screen alongside Will Smith in *Men in Black II*, and was later seen in *Drumline* and *Bobby*.

More recently, he wrote, directed and produced his first studio film, *School Dance*, and produced the sequel, *Drumline: A New Beat*. And he is currently in production on the reboot of the TV-series, *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous*.

The San Diego native began performing at the age of eight, after his grandfather left him several instruments as a gift. Shortly thereafter, he took to the

stage to perform his music along with stand-up comedy.

Nick headed for Hollywood at the age of 15 and landed gigs at world-renowned comedy venues including The Improv, The Laugh Factory and The Comedy Store before landing his first television gig as a series regular and writer on Nickelodeon's long-running hit series *All That*. This trajectory culminated in the creation of "The Nick Cannon Show," which he starred in, directed and executive-produced.

Nick currently hosts NBC's *America's Got Talent*, which kicked off its 10th season last May.

“ Spike Lee came to me and said, 'I want to save lives in Chicago, on the South Side'

Here, Nick talks about playing the title character in Spike Lee's new film, *Chi-Raq*, a modernized adaptation of Aristophanes' classic Greek comedy, *Lysistrata*.



Nick Cannon

Film Review: 'Chi-Raq'

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Just when we were ready to give up on Spike Lee, wouldn't you know he'd reassert his relevance with a decent inner-city drama decrying the gang violence in Chicago? Ironically, this timely tale is based on *Lysistrata*, an ancient play staged by Aristophanes in 411 BC. Set in Athens during the Peloponnesian War, a headstrong female brought an end to the hostilities by persuading the women of Greece to withhold sexual favors from their mates until peace was declared.

Spike's version unfolds in present-day Chicago where we find a gun moll named *Lysistrata* (Teyonah Parris) growing frustrated by the escalating body count in the Windy City war between a couple of rival street gangs. Her boyfriend, *Chi-Raq* (Nick Cannon), is the leader of the purple-sporting Spartans, the sworn adversaries of the orange-clad Trojans.

She gets fed up when a neighbor's (Jennifer Hudson) young daughter is caught in the crossfire during a drive-by shooting.

Besides borrowing Aristophanes basic plotline, I must point out that *Chi-Raq's* dialogue is almost entirely in verse. When was the last time you saw

a movie that rhymed?

The novel screenplay was co-authored by Spike with film professor Kevin Willmott, the brains behind *Confederate States of America*, a brilliant social satire speculating about what the U.S. would be like today, if the South had prevailed in the Civil War.

Watching *Chi-Raq*, the pair's experiment in iambic pentameter gets tiring after about 15 minutes or so. You feel like yelling, "OK, you made your point. Now just let the thespians act without the burden of having to sound poetic."

Credit Spike for assembling an A-list cast featuring Teyonah Parris as *Lysistrata* and Nick Cannon in the title role.

The dramatis personae also includes Academy Award-winner Jennifer Hudson (for *Dreamgirls*), Oscar-nominees Angela Bassett (for *What's Love Got to Do with It?*) and Samuel L. Jackson (for *Pulp Fiction*), as well as Dave Chappelle, John Cusack, Felicia "Snoop" Pearson and real-life, grassroots activist Father Michael Pfleger.

Chi-Raq may never be confused with *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) or *Do the Right Thing* (1989), but it nevertheless represents the best adaptation of a classic into ghetto fabulous fare since the inspired reinterpretation of *Romeo and Juliet as Romeo Must Die* (2000).

★★½ Very Good

Kam Williams: Hi Nick. I'm honored to have another opportunity to speak with you.

Nick Cannon: Oh, likewise, Kam. How're you doing?

KW: Great, thanks. I told my readers I'd be interviewing you, so I'll be mixing their questions in with mine. Children's book author Irene Smalls asks: What interested you in *Chi-Raq*?

NC: Even before I read a script, Spike Lee came to me and said, "I want to save lives in Chicago, on the South Side." And I was like, "I'm in! I don't know what that is, but I'm in." Then, when I saw how he made the brave artistic choice to take Aristophanes' 2,500-year-old play, *Lysistrata*, and set it in modern times, I thought that was brilliant and I felt honored to be able to be a part of the project.

KW: Were you aware of *Lysistrata* before making this movie?

NC: Yeah, I was definitely familiar with *Lysistrata* and other works of Aristophanes, and had heard the play's plot referenced in various ways over the years.

KW: What did you think about all the rhyme in the dialogue?

NC: I thought it was outstanding that this film was in verse. I love how Spike remained faithful to that original format while mixing in spoken word and hip-hop and conveying an emotional message.

KW: Irene also asks: To what extent do you think we Blacks are responsible for the violence in our communities?

NC: I say we're responsible for everything in our community. We have to take responsibility for us, and for our own. Right now, I feel like it's about reconditioning the community. We let

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