

MOVIES NOW

MOVIES

ENTERTAINMENT

'Jean of the Joneses' delivers fresh voices from Stella Meghie and Taylour Paige at SXSW

By MARK OLSEN MAR 18, 2016 | 4:20 PM



Actress Taylour Paige stars in "Jean of the Joneses." The feature debut from writer-director Stella Meghie had its world premiere as part of the 2016 South By Southwest Film Festival. (SXSW)

One of the inspiring joys of attending a film festival like South by Southwest is to encounter new talent in the process of first discovering and expressing their artistic voices. "Jean of the Joneses," the feature debut for both writer-director Stella Meghie and star Taylour Paige, is exactly that: a movie that is both fresh and refreshing, at once familiar and new, with a lead performance to match.

Paige plays Jean Jones, who, having published her first novel by age 25, is struggling to follow up on her early success. With the mix of support and needling that can only come from family, she is constantly surrounded by her grandmother (Michelle Hurst), mother (Sherri Shepherd) and other family members (Erica Ash, Gloria Reuben). As unexpected circumstances force them all to come together, Jean comes to accept her family and herself and find a way forward.

"It is definitely a personal story," said Meghie in an interview just before the start of SXSW. "It's not autobiographical, but there are loose pieces taken from my family for sure.

"I would say the core of it is my experience, so it felt honest to me the way I was dealing with it," she added.

Born in Toronto to a Jamaican family, Meghie, 34, was a few years into a career in fashion and beauty PR in New York City when she decided to make a career change. "Jean of the Joneses" was the first script she wrote, finishing the first draft sometime in 2010. The script would serve as a calling card that would get her other jobs, including deals at

Warner Bros. and BET. She now splits her time among Toronto, Los Angeles and New York.

In particular, it is the tone Meghie chose to tell the story that sets it apart, deciding to frame it as a comfortably bourgeois indie comedy-drama rather than the broad commercial comedy or serious straight drama more typical of on-screen depictions of black family life. For references Meghie pointed Paige toward films that were either about family dynamics or women who tended to get in their own way, most notably "Frances Ha," "Slums of Beverly Hills," "Volver" and "Hannah and Her Sisters." Those films created a rough blueprint for the offbeat tone of the film.

"I guess, unfortunately, it is unusual. I watch a lot of things and when I watch my own movie I think sometimes, 'Oh, I haven't seen this,'" said Meghie. "Which is a strange feeling to have. I'm lucky I got to tell this story, that South by Southwest responded to it to show it to other people. Hopefully, people will watch it and understand there are different stories and different ways to tell the same stories and different audiences for those stories."

Originally from Inglewood, Paige, 25, was attending Loyola Marymount University with a background as a dancer when she briefly took a gig as a Laker Girl. By the end of her senior year she had been cast in "Hit the Floor," a VH1 soap opera set around a professional basketball team's cheerleader squad.

Her response to "Jean of the Joneses" was immediate.

"When I read it, it was a real visceral experience. I just thought she was very human," said Paige in an interview in Austin the day after the film's world premiere. "And I've been there before. We're very different but I could relate.

"She's very self-accepting," continued Paige. "I think I'm just now tapping into that in my real life. Like, this is who I am. It was a cathartic experience. Jean taught me a lot. Jean's just unapologetically who she is, with her family, with guys, she just knows she is who she is."

The contemporary sensibility of the film includes its evenhanded treatment of Jean's sexual freedom, as she moves easily between ex-boyfriend Jeremiah (Francois Arnaud) and an EMT named Ray (Mamoudou Athie).

"She's just a normal young woman. Young women have sex," said Meghie. "Definitely because it was coming from my voice, it was nonjudgmental. I just tried to make Jean as multidimensional as possible and tried to not be worried what someone might think of her slipping out of bed and going to church the next morning."

With the history of the project going back a handful of years, that the movie finally premiered directly on the heels of the recent Oscar nominations controversy and conversation around representation in Hollywood is more coincidence than design.

"It's a strange time, to come out right on the cusp of the conversation," acknowledged Meghie. "But it's been a process to get here, so it is interesting

timing."

Having seen (and even as a struggling young actress turned down) scripts that traffic in more common or stereotypical on-screen depictions of contemporary black life, for Paige, "Jean of the Joneses" immediately seemed different and the kind of project she had been waiting to find.

"When I got the script it was like, the girl happens to be black, it's not about her being black," said Paige. "And we get her culture but it's not like this couldn't happen in any culture. It didn't feel like it was playing around with the topic of diversity or saying, 'Here you go, Hollywood.'

"It's like a real family, a real girl. They're everyone's issues. And that's the world we live in, that's the reality," Paige added. "Playing out cultures and their stereotypes, I feel like that's so tired. There is more to my culture, and your culture and everyone's culture than the stereotypes. So when I read it I felt this is so cool because anyone really could actually play Jean. It's not about the color of her skin, but it's refreshing that she is who she is."
