

ELLE

NOV

WOMEN IN
HOLLYWOOD

Lena
WAITHE

Melina
MATSOUKAS

Jodie
TURNER-SMITH



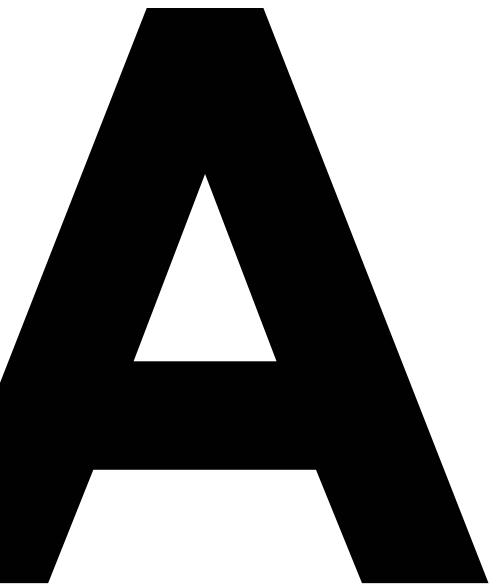
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America's myths are written by the victors. So when flashing lights in a rearview mirror end with a black life being taken, the justification of "fearing for one's safety" can sometimes be enough for a policeman to walk away unpunished. What kind of revisionist twist would it be if a routine traffic stop ended with the black motorists walking away and the officer dead? The first 12 minutes of *Queen & Slim*, the much-anticipated project from writer Lena Waithe and director Melina Matsoukas, see that exact scenario unfold. An unremarkable first date between two electrifying leads, played by newcomer Jodie Turner-Smith and *Get Out*'s Daniel Kaluuya, ends with the couple on the run as a nationwide manhunt ensues.

The film is many things. It's *Bonnie and Clyde* for the Black Lives Matter era; it's a look at the power of black resilience and the spectacle of black death; it's a timeless re-imagining of the blaxploitation genre. But in the end, it's the best meditation on black romance in an impossibly long time.

The women of the project—Waithe, Matsoukas, and Turner-Smith—are sitting in a Hollywood high-rise the day after Black Women's Equal Pay Day, August 22, the date in 2019 the average black woman had to work to (beginning on January 1, 2018) in order to earn as much as her white male counterpart did at the end of 2018. Naturally, we were discussing the dearth of opportunities for black female voices in the film industry.

This movie is a first for all of you: Lena, it's your first time writing your own feature film; Melina, your first time directing a feature; and Jodie, this is your first leading role. As creators who are women of color, do you feel pressure to be perfect, to get it right?

MELINA MATSOUKAS: In our success comes other black people's success, so there is a lot of pressure for us to do well—for the culture. It's hard to create art with that weight, and I feel it every day. It's one of my greatest fears, failing. I just want to make my people proud.

LENA WAITHE: I'm not thinking about that when I'm writing. If I do that, you're going to feel me trying to be perfect. Nah, I can't have that pressure; I'm just trying to be honest.

I remember when Slim presses Queen, asking why black people have to be excellent—why can't black people just be themselves?

JODIE TURNER-SMITH: You have to work twice as hard to have half as much. Do you know what I mean? [There's] constantly a different standard we as black people hold ourselves to, and hold each other to, in a way that can be oppressive.

From the outset, there's this Malcolm X-versus-Martin Luther King Jr. dynamic between them: Slim is very much a God-fearing, churchgoing, civil disobedience type, while Queen is more irreverent, more militant.

LW: To me, that's the duality of all black people. I'm a person who is constantly marinating on religion, because I was raised religious. [It's] very much a residue left behind from slavery, in terms of Sunday being the only day they got off. It was the one thing that was sort of honored, yet it was the thing that [made] them say, "Oh, this is why we're slaves, because the Bible says so." It was [what] they needed to give them joy, but it was the thing that kept them in captivity. There's still a lack of freedom, because of religion, in the black community.

MM: I've been on those dates where the man is praying, and you're awkwardly like, "Well, can I eat, because I'm starving? I don't want to disrespect you, or your religion." So I put that [dialogue] in because immediately that shows the difference between these black people.

JTS: And it's really interesting how things like family, things like love, can make you feel spirituality, feel religion. It can make you start to feel God. So even if you're a person like Queen, who at first is like, "I don't believe in God," as she goes through her journey, even she is like, "Let me bust a prayer real quick."

The film is a sort of protest—it takes the tragedy one could anticipate when a black person encounters a racist cop, and turns it on its head.

JTS: The act of committing that type of violence is not something that is glorified, but it's really a comment on how black people are put in this kind of life-or-death situation way too often. These people make the radical choice to survive, even when it means doing something so horrible that there's no coming

WITH *QUEEN & SLIM*, LENA WAITHE, MELINA MATSOUKAS, AND JODIE TURNER-SMITH ARE MARKING CAREER FIRSTS—AND FLIPPING THE SCRIPT ON A HAUNTINGLY FAMILIAR NARRATIVE. BY ANITA LITTLE. STYLED BY SHIONA TURINI.

back from it. Even thinking about the concept raises the hairs on my arms, because it really is a film about black survival at all costs.

LW: It was just a scene that played in my head, and I was like, "I'm going to write this." It was so empowering in terms of my experience in Hollywood, where I had my own version of Jim Crow. I didn't truly experience what it means to feel like a second-class citizen until I sold my first TV show. Because out of five people, I was the fifth most important person in the room. During the first season [of *The Chi*], I didn't have any real agency, so that's when I started working on the script. It was almost my way of rebelling and reminding myself I do have a gift. They can't appreciate it now, but they will.

When you decided to open the film in Cleveland, was the shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice on your mind?

MM: It was one of the reasons [I chose it]. I had actually scouted Cleveland the year before [for a commercial], and I went to visit the site where he was killed in the playground. Everything is based on authenticity. Slim has the white Accord because I was on that same street—which is in a black community. In a half hour, six people were pulled over, and I remember a white Accord being pulled over by Cleveland police. I was like, "It's Slim's car—that's him."

LW: Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice; we know these names not because of their accomplishments but because they were killed. Black people are sometimes more celebrated in death than in life.

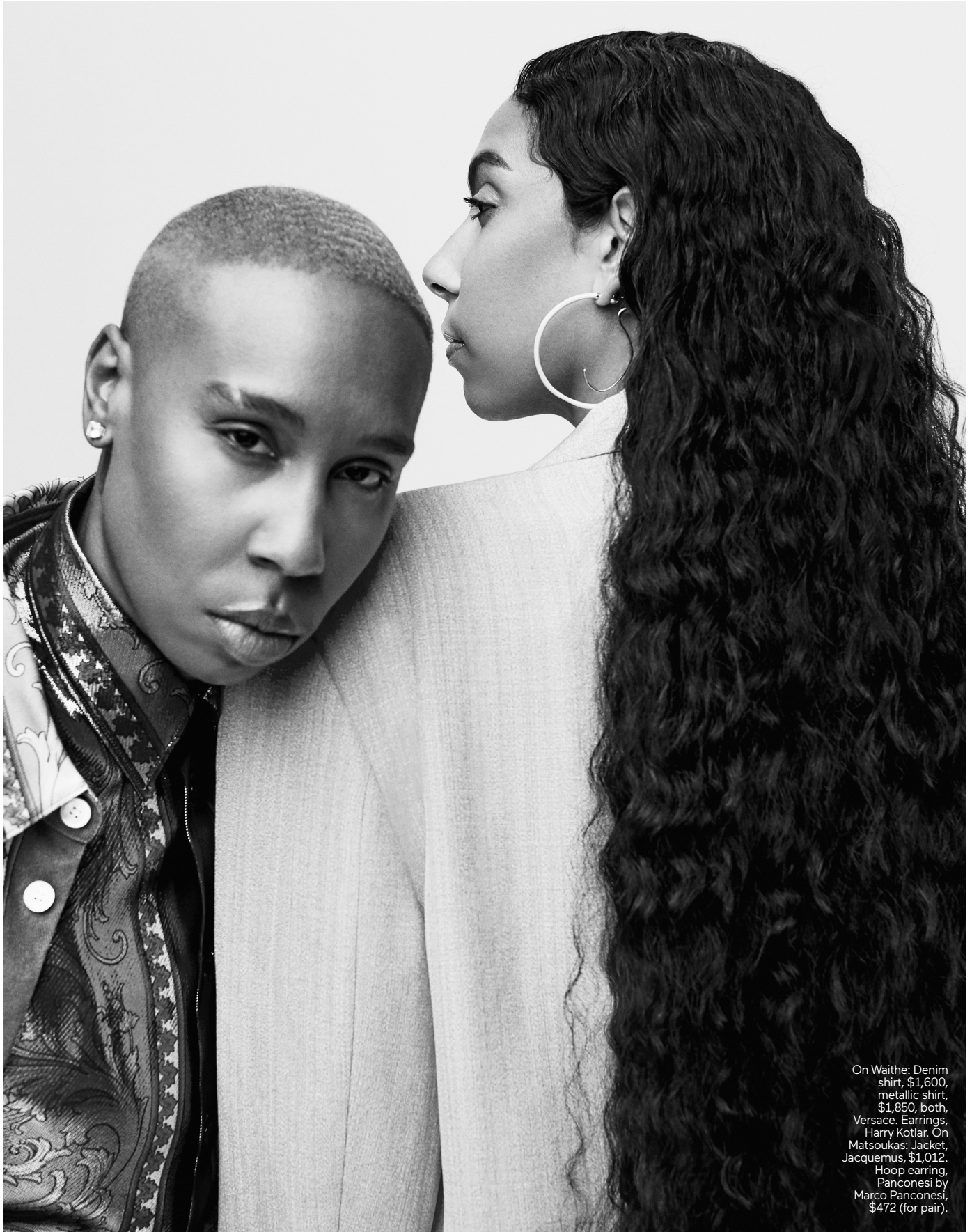
And despite this backdrop of generational trauma, there's the heart of this film: a love story that perseveres. It's also a rare depiction of black sensuality that's not voyeuristic.

JTS: Sex can be portrayed as something that's very animal. And black people, especially black men and women of our complexion, are often hypersexualized. [There's] a dichotomy of blackness where there can be such violence and terror, and yet in the middle of that, black people can find intimacy and beauty in the comfort of each other.

MM: Like Lena always talked about, these two people fall in love with the world burning down around them. ■



From left, on Turner-Smith: Jackets, \$4,700-\$4,900 each, jeans, \$1,650, all, Chanel. Ear cuff, \$4,846, earring, \$12,250 (for pair), both, Ana Khouri. Necklace, De Beers. Ring (index finger), Cartier. Ring, Bulgari, \$11,000. Slingbacks, Christian Louboutin, \$695. On Matsoukas: Jacket, pants, both, Kenzo. Corset, Orseund Iris, \$175. Hoop earrings, from \$2,750, all, Tiffany & Co. Ring, KatKim Fine Jewelry, \$1,620. Boots, Dries Van Noten, \$1,105. On Waithe: Blazer, \$700, custom pants, both, Pyer Moss. Necklace, Tiffany & Co., \$6,300. Watch, Rolex. Sneakers, Nike, \$81. Her own studs. Stylist's own T-shirt.



On Waithe: Denim shirt, \$1,600, metallic shirt, \$1,850, both, Versace. Earrings, Harry Kotlar. On Matsoukas: Jacket, Jacquemus, \$1,012. Hoop earring, Panconesi by Marco Panconesi, \$472 (for pair).

MATSOUKAS: HAIR BY NAKIA RACHON; MAKEUP BY CELINA RODRIGUEZ. TURNER-SMITH: HAIR BY NAI'YASHA AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY CAROLA GONZALEZ FOR AVYA SKINCARE. WAITHE: HAIR BY DOMINIQUE EVANS; MAKEUP BY REBEKAH ALADDIN. ALL: MANICURE BY THUY NGUYEN AT SWA; PROP STYLING BY ALI GALLAGHER AT JONES MANAGEMENT; PRODUCED BY MICHELLE HYNEK AT CRAWFORD & CO PRODUCTIONS.



On Turner-Smith:
Jacket, Balmain,
\$5,130. Ear cuff
(left), Ana Khouri,
\$5,870. Earring
(right), Panconesi by
Marco Panconesi,
\$523 (for pair).
Rings, both, Cartier,
\$8,500–\$12,100
each. Her own
necklace. For details,
see Shopping Guide.

BEAUTY TIP
Create defined
waves and keep
them in place
with Oribe Rock
Hard Gel (\$42).