

WHITE BOY RICK (2018)

- September 14th, 2018
- 1 hr 51 mins
- \$29,000,000 (estimated)
- Directed by Yann Demange
- Written by Andy Weiss, Logan Miller
- Production company: LBI Productions, Protozoa Pictures, Studio 8
- Rated R for language throughout, drug content, violence, some sexual references, and brief nudity

QUICK THOUGHTS

- Phil Svitek
- Marisa Serafini

DEVELOPMENT

- Scheduled to be released in theaters on January 26, 2018 by Studio 8. Sony moved back opening eight months, Jan. 26 to Aug. 17.
- Bel Powley signed on to play Wershe's sister on 2/1/2017.
- Wershe signed with HarperCollins to write memoir that will tell story until to the present, with him asking for parole. 2/14/2017
- Producer teams of John Leshner & Julie Yorn of LBI Entertainment, and Scott Franklin & Darren Aronofsky of Protozoa Pictures, were each developing respective films about the notorious undercover teenage informant.
- The film would be financed by former Warner Bros' film division head Jeff Robinov's nascent movie company, Studio 8, and distributed by Sony Pictures.
- Scott Franklin and his producing partner, Darren Aronofsky, co-owners of Protozoa Pictures, had been developing a film with executive producer Matthew Krul, who represented the team that owned life and film rights to Rick Wershe's life.
- Franklin immediately got in touch with Rick Wershe in prison. The producer felt an instant affinity with the man who had spent in his entire adult life behind bars. "We forged a relationship immediately," Franklin recalls. "It felt like I was talking to an old friend. With what this guy has been through and the amount of time he's spent in prison, it just felt like something important that I had to be a part of."
- Demange and the producers visited Rick Wershe in prison and spoke with him on the phone on a regular basis. "It didn't take a lot of convincing Rick to let us tell his story," John Leshner recalls.
- When Franklin discovered the director was already involved with John Leshner and Julie Yorn's film, it made sense to join forces with the other project.

WRITING (Andy Weiss, Logan Miller)

- Andy Weiss's first draft of the film was written in 2009.
- Weiss decided to focus more on the family dynamics instead of it being another drug crime story.
- Each producing entity had commissioned their own screenplays: Leshner and Yorn had a script by screenwriters Logan and Noah Miller, while the Protozoa team had one by Andy Weiss. Both teams were drawn more to the emotional familial elements of the tale over the "gangster" themes.

- “To me, at its core, it's a father-son story. It's about this kid who's fighting to keep his family together.” -Leshner
- ““I was blown away by the story,” Franklin declares. “To me it was a coming of age story. It's the journey of this boy who does some wrong things and ends up growing up in prison. It's a story of a family that's been ripped apart. We focused on not making this just another drug dealer movie, gangster movie, or crime story. It really gets to the heart and soul of family. That's what was really important to us.”
- “Rick was very involved in the initial script,” Scott Franklin states. “We'd ask him tons of questions, and he'd give us notes and feedback.”
- “It was a long process because there was so much to tell. The trick was to distill it down, not to take liberties but to identify the key facts thematically.” Franklin
- This script was a favorite on the 2015 Blacklist, an annual list of the year's most liked unproduced scripts

STORY/TOPICS

- Family dynamic
- Detroit struggle
- Theme? Drugs in America? Gun violence?

CAST:

MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY (Richard Wershe Sr.)

- The first actor to sign on
- Was looking a project infused with heart and humanity. “When I was looking for my next project, I came across and I was like, here's something real, about real life, a real human story,” says the actor
- “I’m usually drawn to characters who, even if they’re on the fringe, they sort of ‘do unto’ or handle situations by hook or by crook,” McConaughey said. “This character gets done unto. The word vulnerability is thrown around a lot, but this one is done unto. This guy is a loser. Heart’s in the right place, but he loses.”
- McConaughey and Director, Yann Demange, visited Wershe Jr. in prison.

RICHIE MERRIT (Rick Wershe Jr.)

- Debut acting
- Street casting director Jennifer Venditti went to scour high schools, boxing gyms, and other places where teens congregate, in inner cities all across the Midwest and Northeast to find a white kid from a similar socioeconomic environment as the young Rick Wershe Jr.
- Production audition young kids with no experience as well as young actors until they gave the role to Merrit, saying he had a natural charisma. They wanted someone with an authenticity and a similarity to his background to Wershe Jr.
- “Auditioned for the role at an open casting call held at his school.”
- October 2016, Merritt was summoned to the school principal's office where he was introduced to the film's talent scout and told about the movie project.
- As the final part of the audition and casting process, on January 26, 2017 the production flew Richie with his dad to Los Angeles to meet with and screen test with Matthew McConaughey. It was clear the pair had chemistry together, on and off camera.
- REAL LIFE RICHIE

- Because of the malignant socio-economics of this once great, now failed city of Detroit, a young man of any color had few available options other than to turn to drugs or crime.
- At the age of 14, the FBI and Detroit Police recruit the street-smart teen into the drug world as a confidential undercover informant.
- Principal assignment is to infiltrate the Curry Crew who dominate East Detroit's drug scene.
- Rick's handlers from the FBI and Detroit police even ply the underage informant with pocket money, airline tickets and a fake ID, so he can join the Curry clan in Las Vegas for the big Hearn/Hagler fight, where they hope he will secure information that law enforcement can use in their case against the notorious Detroit drug dealers.
- Rick rises rapidly in the area's drug scene while earning his own street nickname, "White Boy Rick," all the while still under the guidance and encouragement of law enforcement.
- Richard Sr. teams up to become Rick's partner in crime, traveling together with Art Derrick to Miami to strike a deal with the Cubans who supply Derrick with his illicit merchandise. He's on his way to becoming a full-fledged drug kingpin, utilizing the skills he learned working for law enforcement.
- May 1987, when the 17-year-old is arrested for possessing 8 kilos - or 17 pounds - of cocaine and is convicted and sentenced under Michigan's 650 Lifer Law, a 1978 law that mandated life imprisonment without parole for anyone convicted of possessing more than 650 grams of cocaine
- Michigan's longest serving non-violent juvenile drug offender - spends the next 29 years in a Michigan prison. On July 14, 2017, a majority of the Michigan Parole Board voted to release him. However, he still has three years to serve in Florida for a separate offense. The 47-year-old prisoner may finally gain his freedom in 3 years or less, just in time for his 50th birthday.

BEL POWLEY (Dawn Wershe)

- Powley was never in contact with the real Dawn Wershe while filming, she did get stories and information from Rick Wershe Jr. about his sister via phone calls.
- Powley admits she was stepping out of her comfort zone. "In my young career I've gravitated to outwardly formidable characters, but Dawn is vulnerable, and very mouthy and invincible in the way she presents herself," the actress says.
- Powley notes that Dawn has one of the broadest character arcs she's ever played. "When we first meet Dawn she's only 17, and as a teen she feels everything more. Your extremity of emotion is on a much bigger scale. And she's really going through that," Powley notes. "Plus they're an incredibly impoverished family and her mother is absent for whatever reason. So when we meet her she's in the midst of all that. She's acting out.

JENNIFER JASON LEIGH (FBI Agent Snyder)

- Jennifer Jason Leigh IS the type of person who will talk to real FBI guys from the 1980s.
- Jennifer Jason Leigh was born Jennifer Lee Morrow in Los Angeles, California, the daughter of writer Barbara Turner and actor Vic Morrow. Her father was of Russian Jewish descent and her mother was of Austrian Jewish ancestry. She is the sister of Carrie Ann Morrow and half-sister of actress Mina Badie

- Jennifer's parents divorced when she was two. Jennifer worked in her first film at the age of nine, in a nonspeaking role for the film Death of a Stranger (The Spy Who Never Was) (1976). At 14 she attended summer acting workshops given by Lee Strasberg and landed a role in the Disney TV movie Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color: The Young Runaways (1978), and received her Screen Actors Guild membership in an episode of the TV series Baretta (1975) when she was 16. Jennifer performed in several TV movies and dropped out of Pacific Palisades High School six weeks short of graduation for her major role in the film Eyes of a Stranger (1981). Her first major success came as the female lead in Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982)

BRIAN TYREE HENRY (Detective Jackson)

- Nominated for a Tony Award as Best Featured Actor in a Play for his performance in "Lobby Hero" in 2018
- Nominated for the 2018 Emmy Award in the Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series category for his role as Alfred 'Paper Boi' Miles in Atlanta (2016), but lost to Henry Winkler from Barry (2018)

BRUCE DERN (Grandpa Roman 'Ray' Wershe)

- Dern was also interested in working with director Yann Demange, whose desire to tell Wershe's story was contagious.

PIPER LAURIE (Grandma Verna Wershe)

- Known for Carrie, Twin Peaks, The Hustler

DIRECTING: (Yann Demange)

- When Demange read an article about Wershe Jr., he didn't see a movie in it, but changed his mind when he saw an "opportunity to make a relationship drama against this backdrop that thematically felt very current."
- Earned global accolades for his debut film, the critically acclaimed drama "'71" starring Jack O'Connell
- "Everyone on the crew went an extra mile for him every day and he went an extra mile for them. Yann's greatest ability is as the captain of the team. He coached a kid who's never acted and made him believable and honest and touching. That's very hard to do." -Dern
- "Yann is a force of nature. Not only does he bring this incredible energy to the set, but he's very sensitive to the machinations of the way the actors work and the subtleties of performance." -Radcliffe

TRIVIA

- As of July 14, 2017, the man this film is about had been paroled from the Michigan prison system after twenty-nine years. Upon release, Mr. Wershe was immediately turned over to U.S. marshals for transfer to Florida and to begin serving time there on a separate charge
- A shot of Rick Sr. and Ricky driving into their neighborhood was filmed at the intersection of St. Clair Avenue and E. 99th Street. This location is significant in regards to Cleveland-based hip hop group Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, who regularly reference it in their lyrics. The street signs for the intersection are seen in the music video for their 1995 breakthrough hit "1st of tha Month."

- Matthew McConaughey and Rory Cochrane previously starred together in *Dazed and Confused* (1993)
- Matthew McConaughey and the real-life Richard Wershe Jr. were born the same year, 1969
- Though he's never seen in the film, a Detroit Police officer, named Gil Hill, is mentioned a couple of times during the course of the events leading up to the trial. This was the same Gil Hill who would become famous as Inspector Todd, Axel Foley's boss in the *Beverly Hills Cop* movies. Following his retirement from the Detroit Police Department, he went into politics as a Detroit City Councilman, and later, President of the Detroit City Council. During his time as a police officer, he was involved in the "White Boy Rick" case

PRODUCTION/CINEMATOGRAPHY (Tat Radcliffe)

- Yann has a 12-year relationship with Radcliffe that includes work on British television series and the director's first film, the 2014 award-winning drama "71."
- The filmmakers flirted with the idea of filming the movie entirely on location in Detroit where the story is set, but they found that the city no longer resembled the Detroit of the 1980s.
- Production found that desired aesthetic in another former Midwest manufacturing giant, Cleveland. Boosted by Ohio's strong filmmaking infrastructure and generous film incentives, the decision was made to film primarily in the northeast Ohio city.
- Yann Demange began scouting locations six months prior to the start of filming that would accurately depict the look and feel of Wershe's world in mid-1980s Detroit.
- Production designer, Stefania Cella, had long been fascinated with the American Midwest and, specifically, Detroit.
- She devoured news archives for information based on the true story of Rick Wershe Jr., and also explored photography of the era who documented African-American communities of the 1980s.
- Cella and Radcliffe chose a palette consisting of blues, browns and mustards to reflect the bleak, Detroit wintry look that serves as the backdrop for many scenes in the film. "We wanted strong saturated colors, especially for the skating rink, the Vegas casino and the pool," says Radcliffe, who, in addition to handling the cinematography duties, did double duty as the film's "A" camera operator. He continues, "We looked at reds, but reds didn't work so well on either white skin or black skin, so we went with deep blues which worked very well."
- Filmmakers sought out rundown exteriors, which were unfortunately still prevalent in certain parts of Cleveland following the Great Recession. "We wanted a bombed-out, post-riot, urban decay look," Cella notes. "Everything is faded. Everything is rundown. Everything is falling apart. Their lives are falling apart."
- Digital Alexa XT and Alexa Mini camera bodies that allowed them to push the light sensitivity, combined with an array of anamorphic glass lenses from Panavision.
- Tried to shoot many of the scenes handheld with a 360-degree perspective. Radcliffe explains, "I think it gives it a rawness, a roughness, an energy where we're never really sure how a scene might progress."
- Back in the '80s car owners general held on to their vehicles for 15 years on average, Cella knew the vehicles should reflect not only the mid-1980s of the film's timeline, but also the 70s. "If you only put in cars from the '80s it wouldn't look believable," Cella explains. "We had a lot of cars from the '80s, but we also had to have a little bit of stuff from the past." Some of the film's prominent picture cars included Richard Wershe Sr.'s

faded 1980s Cadillac Seville, Grandpa Wershe's ancient Chrysler Imperial, Rick's Mercedes 560SEL with the "Snowman" license plate, and the FBI's 1984 Cadillac Coup de Ville.

- Costume designer Amy Westcott - "People didn't have a lot of money to spend on excessive things like great fabrics, so they just make do with what they had, which was really exciting. There were a lot of interesting things being done to existing items, whether it was paint on jeans, or pieces that were made into something different." To costume the film's large starring ensemble and over 2,000 extras, Westcott and her team of costumers and buyers sourced most of the film's wardrobe from retail vintage outlets
- During the last week of principal photography in Cleveland, production was briefly halted on two separate occasions due to exchanges of gunfire in neighborhoods near the set

EDITING/VFX (Chris Wyatt)

- Following audience testing, in which the film scored quite high—in the 90s—director Yann Demange was given the go-ahead to shoot extra scenes

SOUND/MUSIC (Max Richter)

- Previously contributed music to *Shutter Island*, *Arrival*, and more.
- Richter's soundtrack mirrors and amplifies the murky underworld of the film, drawing on drone and industrial influences, as well as the composer's trademark ambience.

PROMOTION

- The film was originally scheduled to be released on January 12, 2018, but was pushed back two weeks from its original release date of January 12, 2018, to January 26, 2018, but was pushed back again from January 26, 2018, to August 17, 2018, after successful test screenings.
- In April 2018 it was pushed back again from August 17, 2018, to September 14, 2018
- It had its world premiere at the [Telluride Film Festival](#) on August 31, 2018
- It was also screened at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) on September 7, 2018

BOX OFFICE

- In the United States and Canada, *White Boy Rick* was released alongside *The Predator*, *A Simple Favor* and *Unbroken: Path to Redemption*, and was projected to gross \$5–9 million from 2,504 theaters in its opening weekend
- It ended up debuting to \$8.8 million, finishing fourth behind *The Predator*, *The Nun* and *A Simple Favor*
- It dropped 43% in its second weekend to \$5 million, finishing sixth

RECEPTION

- Rotten Tomatoes: 59% Tomometer, 61% Audience
 - The site's critical consensus reads, "Solid work from the cast - particularly a scene-stealing Matthew McConaughey - helps *White Boy Rick* make up for a number of missed opportunities in the script."
- Cinemascore: B
- IMDb: 6.8/10

SEQUELS/LEGACY