

Lifestyle | Features

Will Smith plays Venus and Serena's 'Lion' in Oscar-tipped 'King Richard'

"King Richard" plots the improbable rise of Serena and Venus Williams, from training on crumbling, gang-riddled Compton tennis courts to becoming all-time sporting greats. The movie could soon cap another unlikely journey, with former "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" star Will Smith heavily tipped to win his first Oscar for best actor, as their larger-than-life father, coach and manager. Smith "fell in love with Richard Williams" two decades ago, after watching him leap to 14-year-old daughter Venus's defense in an interview with an overly insistent journalist.

"The look of Venus's face... the image burned in my heart," he told an online press conference. "Because that's how I wanted my daughter to look when I showed up." "I knew I wanted to show a father protecting a daughter like that to the world," said Smith, who signed on to star and produce in the Warner Bros film. The film, which had its Los Angeles premiere Sunday during AFI Fest, focusses on how the Williams' unusual and tight-knit family in an impoverished and mainly Black neighborhood of the same city shaped their future success. Richard Williams, a self-taught coach, famously

wrote a 78-page plan to make Venus and Serena the top players in the world before they were even born, having learnt about the lucrative prize money on offer.

Venus-whose seven Grand Slam titles would later be eclipsed by Serena's 23 — occupies more of the screen time, having paved the way for her younger sister with early wins at junior tournaments. "I love that Venus opened doors, and her sister just ran through," Saniyya Sidney, who plays Venus, told AFP. "She's so humble, she doesn't even look at the status, or who's bigger... being given this opportunity to show the world exactly what Venus did, is so, so important." Growing up seeing "girls that look like me are in a sport that is predominantly a white sport... means so much to me," said Sidney.

'Revolutionaries'

The film follows Richard's efforts to find his daughters a professional coach at snooty Californian tennis clubs, and how he was initially met with rejection, ridicule and racism. The Williams family would later boycott the prestigious Indian Wells tennis tournament in California for 14 years, after booing that Richard slammed as racist, and which Serena later likened



(From left) Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith, Willow Smith and Jaden Smith attend the AFI Fest premiere of "King Richard" at TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

to a "genteel lynch mob." Serena, whose fiery temper has left her at loggerheads with officials on occasions, was banned from wearing a "Black Panther"-inspired black catsuit at the French Open in 2018. "Every time they come on the court, they are these walking revolutionaries,"

Aunjanue Ellis, who plays their mother and fellow coach Oracene, told AFP. "The tennis industry is still to this day trying to police how creative they are, trying to police their genius, and they haven't been able to do that."

'Lion'

For Smith—a father of three—watching Richard Williams protect his daughters all those years ago helped to shape his performance. "It was like [Venus] had a lion. And she was so confident and so comfortable that her lion wasn't going to let anything happen to her," he recalled. While Venus and Serena, plus two of their half-sisters, are involved with the film, Richard did not participate, and the film's largely positive portrayal also hints at marital infidelity. Filmmakers initially planned to put Smith in full prosthetics to closely resemble Williams, but eventually relied on the two-time Oscar nominee's acting to transform audience perceptions.

"He would just slide in to Richard Williams, which has all of that exuberance of Will Smith, but this whole other side of his character—it was startling to see," said co-star Tony Goldwyn. Smith is the current bookmakers' favorite to win best actor at February's Oscars, having missed out for his portrayal of boxer Muhammad Ali in "Ali," and in "The Pursuit of Happyness." "King Richard" hits theaters next Friday. — AFP

Rapper defends China satire 'Fragile' as views hit 30m

A rapper who penned a viral Mandarin pop song poking fun at Chinese nationalists said yesterday he had no regrets about being blacklisted by Beijing as his track hit more than 30 million views on YouTube. Released last month, 'Fragile' by Malaysian rapper Namewee, featuring Australian singer Kimberley Chen, has become a viral sensation across Asia and beyond despite being scrubbed by censors in mainland China. The track masquerades as a saccharine love song but is littered with digs towards "little pinks"—a term for China's online army of nationalist commenters—as well as Beijing's authoritarian government.

"I never limit myself or impose self-censorship," Namewee told reporters in Taipei as he and Chen sipped champagne to toast their track's 30 million views milestone. "To me, good creations should come from the heart, they should be sincere," he added. Mandarin-speaking singers, film stars and celebrities rarely court controversy when it comes to China given Beijing's long track record of punishing those deemed critical of its rule. A misspoken word can quickly lead to an artist being frozen out of the world's largest Mandarin-speaking market and a career in ruins.

But the willingness of Namewee and Chen to take on taboo subjects has struck a chord as China grows increasingly assertive on the world stage under President Xi Jinping. "The lyrics are clever because they sound like a love (gone bad) song, but in every line there is



Malaysian rapper Wee Meng Chee (left), known by his stage name Namewee, and Taiwan-based Australian singer Kimberley Chen, take part in a press conference together in Taipei yesterday. — AFP

a reference to either the fragile 'feelings' of the Chinese government or riffing on Chinese Communist Party rhetoric," DJ Hatfield, a professor of Musicology at National Taiwan University, told AFP.

'I don't feel banned'

Over the last four weeks, 'Fragile' has been a top trending YouTube video in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia as well as making smaller waves among Chinese diaspora fans in places like Australia, Canada and the United States. Within days of the track's release, Namewee and Chen's Chinese social media accounts were taken down and their music censored while state media accused the pair of insulting the country. China regularly removes songs deemed to be politically incorrect from domestic music streaming services.

In August, the Chinese culture ministry said it would establish a blacklist of banned songs with "illegal content", such as endangering national security. Namewee and Chen are both currently

based in democratic Taiwan and have brushed off their blacklisting. "When you say I am banned, I don't feel that way," Namewee said yesterday. "I feel it's the people who can't listen to this song that are being banned." The 38-year-old rapper has repeatedly been at the center of controversy in Muslim-majority Malaysia. In 2016, he was detained for several days for allegedly insulting Islam over a video partly filmed inside a mosque.

He was arrested again two years later for allegedly insulting Islam with a Lunar New Year video that featured dancers wearing dog masks and performing suggestive moves. Chen, 27, grew up in Australia but moved to Taiwan in 2009 to pursue a pop career. After her Chinese social media accounts were pulled, she responded by singing altered lyrics from 'Fragile's chorus celebrating that she still had access to Facebook and Instagram, which—like YouTube—are banned in China. — AFP

A breakdown of 'Fragile', the viral pop song poking China

With more than 30 million YouTube views, the song "Fragile" has done something previously unthinkable—become a commercial success while sending up China's authoritarian leaders. In the Mandopop industry, poking Beijing can end careers. But Malaysian rapper Namewee and Australian singer Kimberley Chen have bucked that trend. Days after their tongue-in-cheek love song dropped last month, Beijing's censors scrubbed their online presence, ensuring their blacklisting in the world's largest Mandarin-speaking market.

But across much of Asia and the global Chinese diaspora, the song struck a chord. "It's an incredibly clever song, the tune is catchy, and the performance is spot on," DJ Hatfield, an associate professor at the Graduate Institute of Musicology at National Taiwan University in Taipei, told AFP. "As for blacklisting, often censorship is the best advertisement." Here are five ways the song mocks China.

Little Pink

To the uninitiated, "Fragile" sounds like any other saccharine ballad. But even before the music starts the politics are made clear with a warning: "Please be cautious if you are fragile pink." The phrase is a reference to "little pinks"—a term for China's online army of nationalist commenters, who go in to bat against any perceived slight. The music video's set is awash with pink, including the clothes Namewee and Chen wear as well as a giant panda—a clear refer-

ence to China—dancing in pink camouflage overalls. The catchy chorus meanwhile centers around apologizing to someone who is fragile and cannot take criticism.

NMSL

At one point in the song, Namewee wrestles with the giant panda in an empty pink swimming pool while singing the line "You say NMSL to me when you get angry". For anyone observing online tussles between China's nationalists and their latest target, the phrase NMSL is ubiquitous. It stands for "ni ma si le"—or in simple English "your mum is dead"—and is often left in online comments. Last year a flame war erupted between Chinese and Thai netizens over a Thai celebrity's comments about the coronavirus. Thai internet users started to subvert the phrase, creating a host of viral memes that portrayed China's nationalists as automatons who instantly type "NMSL" whenever they spot something online they disagree with.

Winnie the Pooh

While the main target of the song is China's nationalist netizens, President Xi Jinping is not spared. He has long been satirized as looking like the children's book character Winnie the Pooh—China's censors often remove online references to the character. Namewee sings how Winnie the Pooh might disappear people who breach China's internet restrictions, namechecks Xi's "common prosperity" drive and references forced labor camps for Muslim minorities in Xinjiang province.

At one point Namewee raps how the subject of his song "swallows the apple, cuts off the pineapple." The first is seen as a reference to Hong Kong's Apple Daily newspaper, a pro-democracy tabloid that collapsed after its assets were frozen and multiple executives detained under a national security law. — AFP



LOYAC presents fashion show under the theme 'KhairEveryWhere'

The International Women's Group (IWG), Kuwait in cooperation with LOYAC (a Kuwaiti non-profit organization working towards the overall development of youth), held a special fashion show on Sunday, Nov 14 at LOYAC's premises at Al-Qibliya School for Girls, the first school for girls to open in Kuwait. The event presented 'KhairEveryWhere', a development and humanitarian project aiming to empower (especially in war-torn countries) Arab women, artisans and youth in the field of design by promoting handicrafts that combine innovation and

professional skills. Laila Boulous, public relations coordinator, introduced Cristiana Baldocci, wife of the ambassador of Italy to Kuwait and President of IWG 2021-2022. Baldocci welcomed all members and guests and expressed her thanks for their participation in this worthy event. She also extended her gratitude to Sheikha Hanouf Badr

Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, Honorary President of IWG, for her continued support of the group. Baldocci then introduced Fareah Alsaqqaf, LOYAC's founder, chairperson and managing director, who delivered an informative presentation about LOYAC and the 'KhairEverywhere' project. A short movie was shown, followed by

an outstanding fashion show which featured a small collection entitled "Outside My Tent", inspired by women of marginalized societies in Lebanon, by Palestinian designer Safa Bardini and produced by Syrian women. The show continued with a bigger collection entitled "We Will Blossom" by Yemeni designer Nadine Dada. It concluded with a live Hadrami

(South Yemen) folklore show and a special buffet, prepared by the chefs of Crowne Plaza, which was enjoyed by members and guests. This very special event had a massive attendance by IWG members and many prominent members of the local civil society.

