



Hidden Remote



# Shahadi Wright Joseph talks starring in *Us* and *The Lion King* remake



by Victoria Davis 1 hour ago

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*Thirteen-year-old actress Shahadi Wright Joseph talks about her first Hollywood role in Jordan Peele's horror film *Us* and voicing young Nala in Disney's remake of *The Lion King*.*



At age nine, New York native Shahadi Wright Joseph landed her first role in the spotlight, starring as Young Nala in *The Lion King* on Broadway. Though she had a thriving theatre career appearing in *Hairspray* and *School of Rock*, Shahadi made history as the youngest actress to play the role of youth Nala on stage. Now, at age 13, she gets to revisit starring as the young lioness in Disney's new animated remake. Shahadi's voice will be heard alongside Seth Rogen, Beyonce, Donald Glover, James Earl Jones and others.

But before Jon Favreau's reimagined masterpiece hits theaters this summer, Shahadi can be seen starring as Zora Wilson in Jordan Peele's horror/thriller film *Us*. Also starring Lupita Nyong'o, Elisabeth Moss, and Winston Duke, the film follows a family who takes a seemingly harmless vacation to Santa Cruz, California, only to find themselves fighting for their lives against their psychotic doppelgängers. Shahadi's character Zora is the daughter to Gabe (Duke) and Adelaide (Nyong'o) and sister to Jason (Evan Alex).



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Though still a young actress, Shahadi has already made a name for herself in the entertainment industry both on stage and in front of the camera for some of the most anticipated films of the year. *Hidden Remote* sat down with Shahadi to talk about diving into the horror scene, her favorite off-camera moments and what it was like to play Nala for a second time.





**Hidden Remote:** Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us, Shahadi. Your acting portfolio is impressive for someone so early in their career. What was it that drew you to pursue acting? Starting out in musical theatre is something not often seen in young actors today.

**Shahadi Wright Joseph:** I live in New York, so of course I see a lot of Broadway and a lot of theater in general. But I think what really drew me to acting was that you could turn into this other person and also get paid for it. It doesn't even feel like work. That was something I really wanted to do as a kid.

**Hidden Remote:** You've had some amazing experiences on Broadway so far with *Hairspray*, *School of Rock* and *The Lion King*. Now you are starring in two Hollywood movies, one of which is a voice acting role. Did you have any idea you would have such a versatile range this soon in your career?

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**Wright Joseph:** No. I don't think that anybody really did. But this is my passion and I've been working on this for a pretty long time and I had no idea I would make it this far. ⊗

**Hidden Remote:** Was it nerve-wracking going from theatre to Hollywood acting?

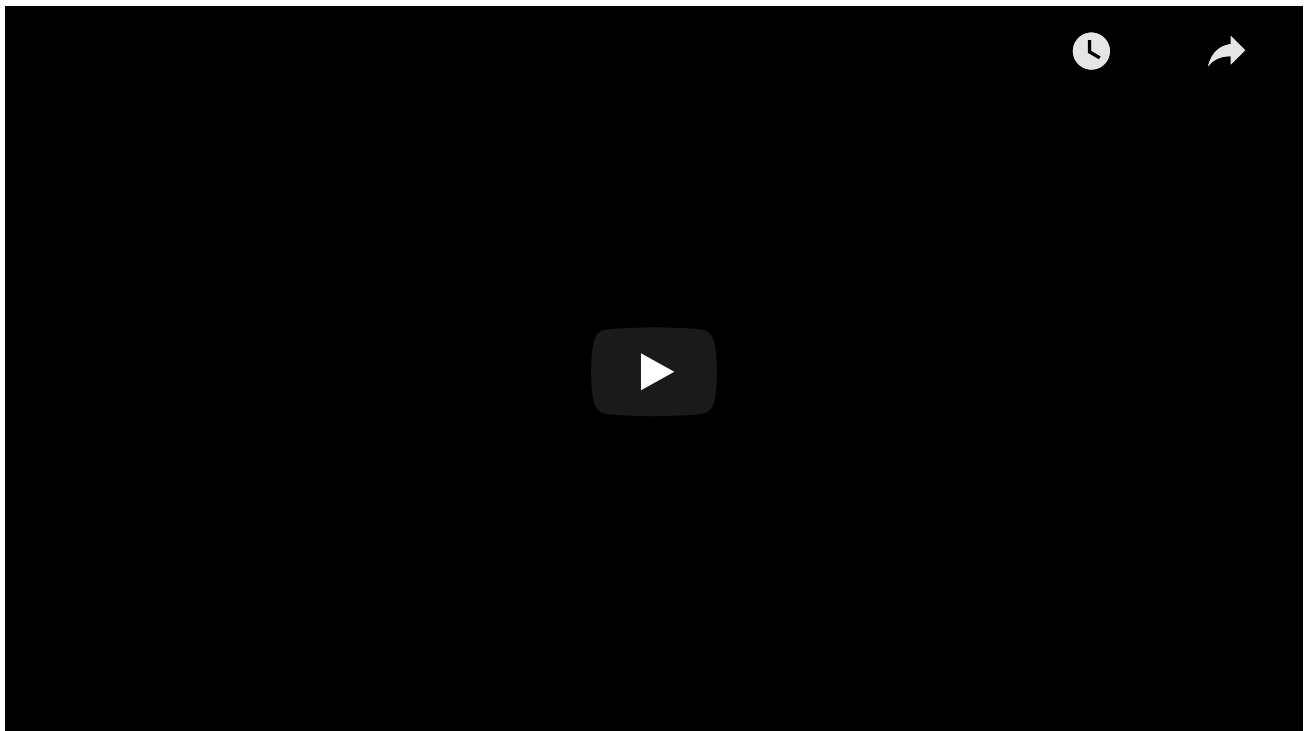


**Wright Joseph:** It wasn't too hard but I actually think Broadway was a good training ground. We had to do eight shows a week, rehearsing all the time. But with film, it's a little easier. It was like a stamina practice back then.

**Hidden Remote:** How did you get involved with the film *Us*? What stood out to you about the script?



**Wright Joseph:** My agent sent me the slides for the audition last year and I saw that they were really dark and daunting. So the idea drew me into it right away. It was almost like reading a good book. Horror is one of my favorite genres. If I wasn't cast as Zora I would definitely go to see *Us* about a hundred times.



**Hidden Remote:** That's admirable that you weren't intimidated at all by a horror script!



**Wright Joseph:** Oh I was a little bit. I'd never done anything like this before so I was like, "Oh my god, I really want to get this but I have no idea where to even start!" So my family helped me out



with it and now we're here.

**Hidden Remote: How did your family help you?**

**Wright Joseph:** My dad and my mom, we went over lines together and we just went through the process step-by-step with each line. We were wondering what would Zora do in each situation and how she would walk and stand. That really helped a lot and getting a call-back where I got to meet Jordan was probably the most exciting feeling ever.

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**Hidden Remote: What was it like meeting Jordan Peele for the first time?**

**Wright Joseph:** He was actually sick the first time I met him so I couldn't hug him, but I really wanted to. I thought that he would be really intimidating because he's this amazing director but he was so nice about telling me what he wanted for each scene and what he wanted to create for Zora. He made it really easy for me to connect with Zora as a character. It was my favorite audition yet.

**Hidden Remote: With being in such high intensity moments throughout most of the film, how do you begin getting into the mind space of a horror film character like Zora?**

**Wright Joseph:** Usually I would be in my trailer for about 20 minutes before we had to go to set and I would start thinking in the ways of Zora, or as my doppelganger. I would say some of the thing that she would or I would think the way she would about her parents and what's going on in the scene we were doing.

It was really difficult sometimes because we would be shooting these scenes for a couple of days where we'd switch back and forth between acting as the doppelgangers and then back to



acting as the Wilsons. We had to cry for like three days and for 12 hours each day, so we were super dehydrated. But it's always a lot of fun.

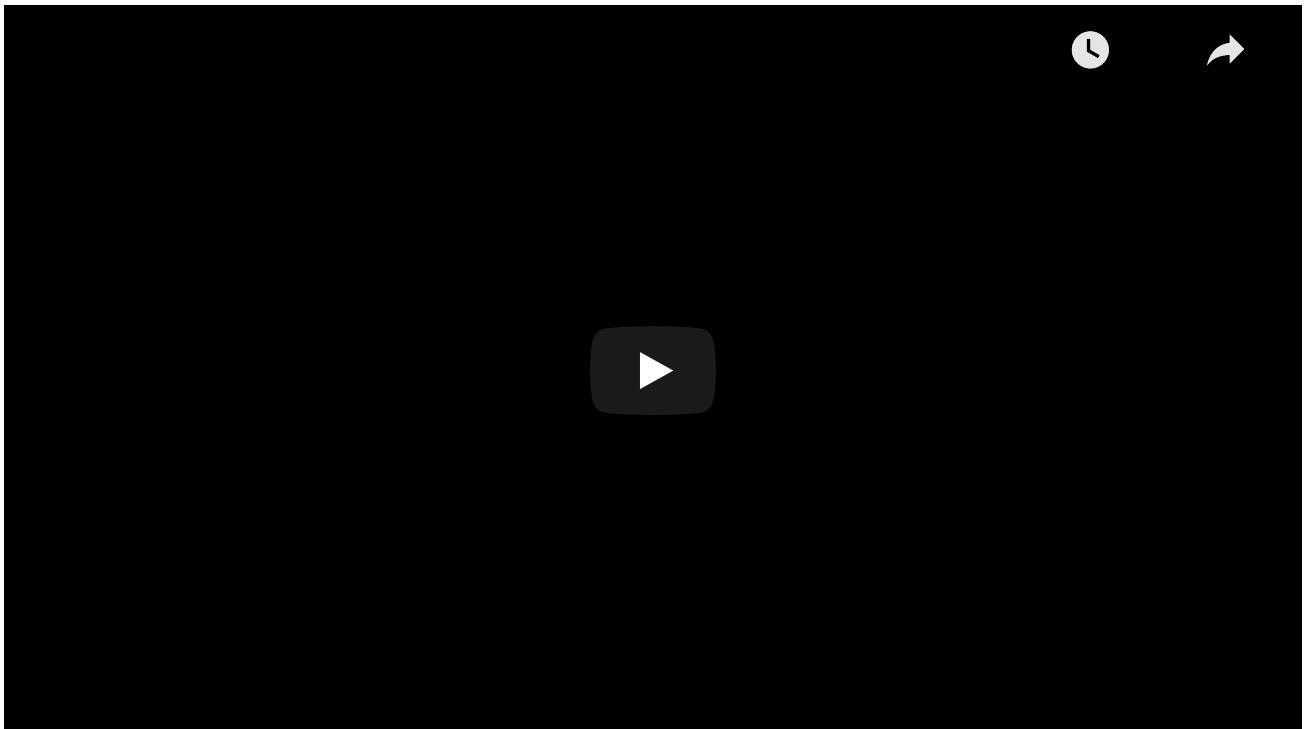
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**Hidden Remote: I can't even imagine. Do you have any favorite moments from set? I can imagine there would be a lot since it's your first Hollywood film experience.**


**Wright Joseph:** Yeah there was. I think the most memorable behind the scenes moments were taking place in the hair and makeup trailer. It was our opportunities to switch from the Wilsons into us as individuals. Plus, there was always really good music playing all the time so it was kind of like a party whenever we walked in there.

**Hidden Remote: Switching gears a bit, let's talk about your role in the new, computer animated rendition of The Lion King. This is your second time playing Nala, but in a different medium. What are you most excited about with revisiting her character in this way?**

**Wright Joseph:** I'm most excited about creating a new personality for her. On Broadway, we're told how to be Nala. But this is going to be really fun having so much more freedom to be creative with her. And Nala will probably have a different mindset as Shahadi the 13-year-old, going into high school. Plus, with the CGI, you can really feel the realness come through with these animals and it's a totally new energy. I can't wait for people to see it.



**Hidden Remote: So how did it go voice acting for the first time?**

**Wright Joseph:** It was a totally different energy and a totally different technology. It was a lot of fun seeing the behind the scenes art work and the animation. I also had a lot of fun working with 



JD McCrary who plays young Simba. It was cool seeing Jon Favreau work because I've seen basically all his movies and it was unreal feeling getting to work with them.

**Hidden Remote:** I know that with some voice acting it can be difficult to dive into a scene or a character if you're in the recording studio alone. But it sounds like you and JD were together for most of the recordings. Did you find that to be helpful?

**Wright Joseph:** Yeah it was easier having another kid there with me and not being so alone trying to take on the energy of young Nala just by herself. Young Simba and young Nala, they're the best of friends, so I think young Nala wouldn't be her if she didn't have young Simba with her.

**Hidden Remote:** So with all these experiences that you've had at this point in your acting endeavors, what are some of the most important lessons that you feel you've learned as a young actress?

**Wright Joseph:** I think that one of the lessons I've learned is to really listen and to watch these great actors that I've been working with for the past year. Jordan Peele, Lupita Nyong'o... They've learned so much in this business and you can learn so much from them just by being around them.

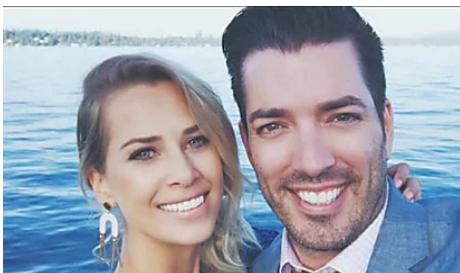
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*Us* will make its official premiere at the 2019 South by Southwest (SXSW) festival on March 8, with a national theatrical release March 22. Shahadi can be seen as Young Nala in Walt Disney Pictures' CGI animated *The Lion King* July 19.

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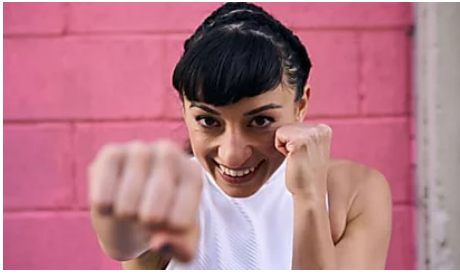
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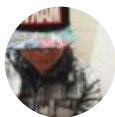
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MOVIES

# Smaller and Smaller Circles: A tense Filipino crime drama



by Wesley Lara 4 hours ago

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***Murder, corruption, and institutional abuse runs rampant in the U.S. release of the disturbing Filipino crime drama, Smaller and Smaller Circles.***

Institutional abuse may live on as one of the slimiest phrases of expression to exist in spoken language, all due to what it represents. Taking advantage of people worse off than yourself, lying about the rings of crime being committed under the institution's name and the efforts





made to silence those who dare oppose these rules are just a few of the criminal tactics explored in the Filipino crime drama, *Smaller and Smaller Circles*.

Adapted from the Filipino crime novel of the same name, *Smaller and Smaller Circles* focuses its sight on the ongoing story of the Payatas murders: a series of unsolved murders of boys in the lower class area of Payatas, Philippines, which sprouts an investigation led by two Jesuit priests and an ambitious reporter eager to put all of the grisly crimes behind them.

That's easier said than done though, as the movie gradually starts juggling the main narrative with a heaping dose of corruption and mass cases of abuse by religious authorities, turning the seemingly straightforward crime drama into a disturbingly compelling look into the systematic abuse perpetrated by the religious heads of power in the Philippines. *Smaller and Smaller Circles* functions as both a procedural drama and a disturbing study of abuse of power, but how does the final end product look after all of this?

## More than meets the eye

*Smaller and Smaller Circles* starts out about as typical as the usual procedural drama would begin: a grisly crime is discovered by an unsuspecting bystander (in this case, a group of bystanders), prompting an investigation to be held to help catch the unknown killer. This story's investigation is held by two Jesuit priests named Father Saenz and Lucero, who work for the Society of Jesus in their local church.

The story of *Smaller and Smaller Circles* doesn't simply focus on the core investigation, interrupting the expected story scenes with several interludes of boys wandering around at night as a voice meditates on their traumatic upbringing. It's at these instances where the film becomes more than just a crime drama.

*Smaller and Smaller Circles* is best described as a strange mix-up between David Fincher's *Se7en* and the 2015 drama, *Spotlight*, combining the murderous and corrupt nature of both films to create a damning critique of the police and religious forces in the Philippines. The film highlights the poverty that many of the victims live in, existing as lower class and "lesser" citizens that won't be missed by society, least of all the large organizations rampant throughout the land.

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The film makes it a point to show the details behind the children's murders, pointing out disturbing patterns that ultimately mean something incredibly gruesome and chilling later on. The violence, though somewhat minimal for a crime drama, takes that leap into unsettling territory, being portrayed as clumsy, yet realistic and horrifying to watch as we learn of the implications behind it. If you didn't already guess, this is anything, but a feel-good movie.



## Not flashy, but necessary

*Smaller and Smaller Circles* doesn't bother trying to recreate these scenes from the novel as a rich, cinematic experience and ultimately, it is one of the film's most necessary strengths. Though there is an emphasis on purposeful blocking brought to life by solid direction, there are not many scenes that beg the viewer to watch it on the biggest screen possible. Much of the film relies on the actors talking and contemplating on the increasing number of bodies and that can make for an initially stale experience.

The film's writing brings up its quality, as it is solely focused on expressing the pain and frustration stemming from generational abuse and an immoral system of lies, corruption, and manipulation. The **novel** and film express the angered thoughts of people being taken advantage of by their trusted sources of power and that anger oozes through in the film's




negative depictions of religious authorities. The bias is strong, but it kind of needs to be in order to make this strong of a point.

*Smaller and Smaller Circles* is a film that, unlike a similar movie in *Spotlight*, may very well easily get swept under the rug by general audiences. Firstly, there's the cultural barrier of this taking place in the Philippines that might turn off some American viewers (though the actor's abilities to switch between Filipino and English might win some over). Secondly, the film is not nearly as hopeful as the end of *Spotlight* was. The end of the movie is far from the end of the true story brimming from under the main narrative. It just continues, much like how it is in life, which may make for a less positive experience.

That being said, I certainly would encourage readers to seek this out if it's playing near you at all. *Smaller and Smaller Circles* represents the **foreign market** in the U.S. that is in desperate need of exposure and box office success, while most importantly representing the stories of abuse that are routinely ignored in these situations receiving the kind of exposure that could potentially lead to a change in this systematic abuse of power. It's not the most exciting film of 2019, but it may just be the most necessary.

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***Smaller and Smaller Circles* will receive a limited theatrical release in the United States today.**   
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