

Jada Pinkett Smith was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE, May 8, 2010, in Los Angeles.

SO JADA, SO FREE

Jada Pinkett Smith wants to talk to you about a revolution. She wants to talk to you about our bodies, our Black skin and why we all need to teach our daughters to let their light shine. **Jeannine Amber** gets a lesson in sisterhood

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YU TSAI

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Jada Pinkett Smith has seen the light and now she's preaching the gospel. It's about the beauty of Black women—the perfection and all-encompassing appeal that is us. With her husky voice and knowing smile, she's urging us to celebrate our skin, our bodies, our womanliness. She says we've got to let everything go. Release the fear, the anger, the shame. Peel it off, she says. Set yourself free. She knows what she's talking about. A few weeks ago she shed her clothes in front of our cameras and she says it felt exhilarating.

Jada—mother, wife, actress, entrepreneur, rocker and Broadway producer (with Jay-Z and husband Will Smith) of the hit *FELA!*, which garnered 11 Tony nominations—is so worked up about this, you'd best listen up. "There's a lot of history with Black women and our bodies," she says.

It's Jada's lunch break and she's sitting in her trailer on the set of TNT's drama *HawthoRNe*, now in its second season. Of all the trailers parked in the lot you can tell which one belongs to the show's star and executive producer. In the row of nondescript white boxes on wheels, Jada's is the one with

a shade-producing awning hanging over a little patch of AstroTurf decorated with a small table and chairs for folks to sit at between takes. Today the forecast for Van Nuys, California, where the series films, is unseasonably overcast, so Jada's inside, dissecting the psychological burden of being a Black woman. "There's a lot of shame we carry in our skin," she says. "But a lot of healing can come from us confronting our bodies and scraping off the shame."

Jada, 38, is preaching about freedom by way of explaining how it is she came to be posing on the cover of this very magazine dressed in little more than a smile. It's not about her, she insists. Not about her body. Though we may envy her smooth hips and flat stomach, this isn't about any one woman. It's about all of us. Jada wants to ignite a revolution; she wants Black women to stand up and embrace our beauty. She says until we see our glory, we can't expect anyone else to recognize it. "We want other to people to have acceptance of us first," she says. "But it doesn't work like that."

The importance of this message crystallized for Jada at the *ESSENCE* photo shoot a few weeks earlier. "I was wearing a really



Jada says she felt the full expression of her spirit when she became a mother to sons Trey, 17, Jaden, 12 and daughter Willow, 9.

cute pair of taupe-colored shorts, and nothing else," she remembers. "And I thought, *This just looks like 'scared.'* Everything comes off but the shorts? Fear is what that communicates. We can't be afraid of our own sexuality or our own Black skin. So I said, 'Why not take these off?'

"It's not just about being sexy," she adds. "It's about the power of being a woman—the vessel of life! I know people have their different theories, but in my opinion, a Black woman is where life began. So how did we get to the point that we're afraid to look at our own Black bodies? Why is it that other women feel liberated and empowered to pose naked, but we as Black women do not? What are we saying about ourselves? That makes no sense to me. So I was like, 'We gotta take the shorts off!'"

With that Jada slipped into her dressing room at the Los Angeles photo studio, and emerged wearing only black strappy stilettos and a white terry cloth robe. She walked over to the backdrop set up in front of the bright lights and let the robe slide off her shoulders.

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like a queen,” she says. “I felt like the world was *mine*. Like there was this power just emanating from my person. Like there was nothing I couldn't do.”

After the shoot Jada says she went home and showed the picture to her 9-year-old daughter Willow. “She said, ‘Mommy, you look so elegant,’” Jada recalls. The photo prompted a conversation with Willow about what she found special about being a young Black girl. “She went through all of her friends and talked about all their different personalities and what made them beautiful.” Jada pauses, whistling through her teeth in wonder at the moment. “To start the next generation of young Black women with those ideas of who they are, to give them a foundation for their identity, to show them how we represent ourselves, our beauty, our bodies, our sexuality, our sensuality, our power. What greater gift could we give our daughters?”

Coming Into Her Own

One thing Jada wants to make clear: This spontaneous desire to shed her clothes is not Hollywood vanity. This is about Jada making a statement. “Lay your eyes on the beauty of Black women!” she announces. “That’s the statement. The Black woman is very spiritual. She is the ultimate mother, the ultimate of everything. We connect to all things. Lay your eyes on that.

“It’s not about looking like me,” she continues. “It’s about looking like you. We, as women, have to love ourselves. Whatever you look like, you better be comfortable with it.” Of course, that’s easy for her to say. What is she, a California-size negative zero? But what about those of us with our real-woman rolls and folds? What about those of us who look in the mirror and feel anything but fierce?

“You don’t think I want to be a couple of pounds heavier?” Jada says with a raised eyebrow. “Black men like their women with a little meat. All my life Black men have told me how flawed I am. People may look at that picture and not necessarily be able to identify my woes about my own body, but I have them. It’s just that I’ve gotten to the point where I’m like, *This is me* and I embrace that. I’m getting older. I’ve got wrinkles in my face that I didn’t before, but it’s my face!”

Jada didn’t arrive at this self-acceptance overnight. This was a journey—one that started way back in Baltimore, where she was raised by her mother, a head nurse at a women’s clinic, and her grandmother. “I used to hate being a girl,” she recalls. “I felt like I

was left to fend for myself in a very harsh world, and it knocked me down a couple of notches. I started to take on a lot of masculine characteristics just to survive. I started to really dislike being female, and couldn’t understand the power of being a woman. The bumps and bruises of that imbalance can be a trying thing.”

Jada thinks this rejection of our femininity is not uncommon among Black women. “Often we’ve had to be surrogate men because our men aren’t there,” she says. “We have to wear the shield and the spear, so we don’t have the luxury of exploring what our feminine natures are about.”

It wasn’t until her first pregnancy, with son Jaden, now 12, that Jada began to have “amazing epiphanies” about being a woman. But ironically, the final embrace of her femininity came in 2005, when she was touring with her band Wicked Wisdom as part of the heavy metal hyper-masculine rock festival cofounded by British rocker Ozzy Osbourne. “Ozzfest is a very aggressive, White male environment,” she says. “There isn’t enough maleness a woman of any color could muster to confront that. So I had to learn how to be all woman. And when this little woman got on stage with the intention of using her feminine power, it just put all that *rah-rah* to rest.” She laughs boisterously. “I realized that a drop of femininity in a whirlwind of masculinity is the most powerful thing ever. And that’s when it really became clear to me: Everything that’s vulnerable is what makes me beautiful.”

Now that Jada has made the journey from self-doubting girl-child to potent woman, she’d like her sisters to join her. She wants us to rejoice in our beauty, to celebrate our skin. “Find a space where you feel safe, where you can just be with yourself and your naked body,” she says. “Do you love what you see when you look in the mirror? Because I bet that if you love it authentically, everybody else around you will. They won’t even have a chance to see anything else, because you will have a shield of confidence around you. That is a powerful gift that God gives us that most of us rarely use.” Take your gift, says Jada. Celebrate your skin, your body, your Blackness. Peel off the layers of your clothes—be free. □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for this magazine.

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“This is about the soul of Black women,” says Jada, “because that beauty is something fierce.”