

# Zola (film)

***Zola*** is a 2020 American black comedy crime film directed by Janicza Bravo and co-written by Bravo and Jeremy O. Harris. It is based on a viral Twitter thread from 2015 by Aziah "Zola" King and the resulting Rolling Stone article "Zola Tells All: The Real Story Behind the Greatest Stripper Saga Ever Tweeted" by David Kushner. Starring Taylor Paige, Riley Keough, Nicholas Braun, and Colman Domingo, the film follows a part-time stripper who is convinced by her new friend to go on a roadtrip to Tampa, Florida to earn money dancing, only to get in over her head.

*Zola* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 24, 2020, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. It was theatrically released in the United States on June 30, 2021, following a year's delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>[6]</sup> It received positive reviews from critics and earned a leading seven nominations at the 37th Independent Spirit Awards, including Best Film, Best Director, and Best Screenplay with two wins for Best Female Lead for Paige and Best Editing for Joi McMillon.

## Plot

Aziah "Zola" King, a self-assured waitress and part-time stripper in Detroit, meets Stefani, an outgoing and crass fellow stripper, while serving her at work. Stefani invites Zola to dance with her at a club that night, and they become friends. The next day, Stefani proposes that Zola join her on a road trip to Tampa, Florida, the location of a strip club where Stefani claims they can make significant money. Zola sets out for Tampa with Stefani, her mysterious roommate X, and Stefani's dimwitted boyfriend Derrek.

On arriving in Tampa, Stefani, Zola and X leave Derrek at a seedy motel while they visit the club where Stefani claims her friends earned over \$5,000 in one night. They perform, but do not net nearly as much as Stefani insisted they would. Zola learns that Stefani and X have posted photos of her and Stefani in a Backpage advertisement, offering them for sex. Zola tries to leave, but X threatens her, revealing himself to be Stefani's pimp.

X takes the women to an upscale hotel, where Stefani proceeds to have sex with a male client. Zola, who doesn't wish to participate, is incredulous when she learns X is charging only \$150 per

### Zola



Theatrical release poster

<b>Directed by</b>	<u>Janicza Bravo</u>
<b>Screenplay by</b>	<u>Janicza Bravo</u> <u>Jeremy O. Harris</u>
<b>Based on</b>	"Zola Tells All: The Real Story Behind the Greatest Stripper Saga Ever Tweeted" by <u>David Kushner</u>  Tweets by Aziah "Zola" King
<b>Produced by</b>	<u>Christine Vachon</u> <u>David Hinojosa</u> Gia Walsh Kara Baker Vince Jolivet Elizabeth Haggard

client. Zola edits the Backpage ad, changing the rate to \$500 to help Stefani earn more money. By the end of the night, Stefani has made over \$8,000. X is initially insulted by Zola's intervention, but quickly grows impressed. Meanwhile, Derrek, left to his own devices, befriends a man named Dion whom he meets at the motel. When X, Stefani and Zola return to the motel, X is enraged to discover that Derrek told Dion their reason for visiting Tampa. Worried that Dion and his associates will rob them, X forces the group to flee.

After arriving at another hotel, X arranges for Stefani to see more clients at various locations, while a reluctant Zola stands by to ensure Stefani's safety. When Derrek realizes Stefani is again engaging in prostitution, he argues with her, revealing to Zola that Stefani has manipulated other dancers into unwittingly participating in similar prostitution rackets. Zola is angered and loses all trust in Stefani. Derrek and Stefani's quarreling is interrupted when X bursts in with Baybe, his lover and madam, who is armed with a gun. After calming the situation, X gives Zola a gun for the women's protection, and Stefani and Zola are sent out so Stefani can continue to meet with clients.

After Stefani engages in a gang bang at a private residence, the two women visit another hotel, where a client has responded to their Backpage ad. When they knock on the client's door, he grabs Stefani and forces her into the room. A terrified Zola flees and calls X and Derrek on her phone. The three return to the room and find the men inside are Dion and an accomplice, armed with shotguns, who have posed as clients to rob Stefani of her earnings. At gunpoint, X offers the men \$50,000 and possession of Zola, if they let him and Derrek leave with Stefani, who has been beaten unconscious. As Zola is digitally penetrated against her will by Dion, X manages to draw the gun Zola has in her purse, then shoots Dion in the throat. They flee the hotel, throwing Dion's guns into the Tampa Bay.

They eventually arrive at a large, luxurious home X shares with Baybe. X finally lets Zola leave, and proclaims his possession of Stefani. Distraught, Derrek throws himself over a balcony, landing on the concrete below and injuring his head. Zola, Stefani and X drive Derrek to the hospital. On the way, Stefani proclaims her love for Zola, but the exhausted Zola looks out the window and ignores her.

## Cast

- Taylor Paige as Aziah "Zola" King
- Riley Keough as Stefani
- Nicholas Braun as Derrek
- Colman Domingo as Abegunde "X" Olawale
- Ari'el Stachel as Sean
- Jason Mitchell as Dion
- Ts Madison as Hollywood

	<u>Dave Franco</u>
<b>Starring</b>	<u>Taylor Paige</u> <u>Riley Keough</u> <u>Nicholas Braun</u> <u>Ari'el Stachel</u> <u>Colman Domingo</u>
<b>Cinematography</b>	<u>Ari Wegner</u>
<b>Edited by</b>	<u>Joi McMillon</u>
<b>Music by</b>	<u>Mica Levi</u>
<b>Production companies</b>	<u>Killer Films</u> Ramona Films Gigi Films
<b>Distributed by</b>	<u>A24</u>
<b>Release dates</b>	January 24, 2020 ( <u>Sundance</u> ) June 30, 2021 (United States)
<b>Running time</b>	90 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Country</b>	United States
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$5 million <sup>[2]</sup>
<b>Box office</b>	\$5.2 million <sup>[3]</sup> <sup>[4]</sup> <sup>[5]</sup>

- Nelcie Souffrant as Gail
- Nasir Rahim as Jonathan
- Sophie Hall as Baybe
- Jarquale Stewart as CC

## Production

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In October 2015, Detroit waitress Aziah "Zola" King posted a 148-tweet thread about a trip she took to Florida with a stripper named Jessica; the story, containing details of prostitution, murder and an attempted suicide, quickly went viral, garnering the recognition of people such as Missy Elliott, Solange Knowles and Ava DuVernay.<sup>[7]</sup> About a month later, *Rolling Stone*'s David Kushner published an article interviewing people involved in the story; while the article noted several inconsistencies, and King has admitted to embellishing some of the more sensational details, most of those involved have admitted to the general events.<sup>[7]</sup>

In February 2016, it was announced James Franco would direct the film from a screenplay by Andrew Neel and Mike Roberts. Franco, Vince Jolivette, Christine Vachon, David Hinojosa and Kara Baker were to produce the film under their Rabbit Bandini Productions, Killer Films and Gigi Films banners, respectively.<sup>[8]</sup> In January 2018, it was announced that the film was initially set to begin production in February 2018, but was shelved following sexual misconduct allegations against Franco.<sup>[9][10]</sup> In June 2018, it was announced that Janicza Bravo would direct, replacing Franco, and that A24 would distribute.<sup>[11]</sup> In October 2018, Taylor Paige was cast in the lead role.<sup>[12]</sup> That month, Riley Keough, Nicholas Braun, Colman Domingo and Jason Mitchell joined the cast,<sup>[13][14]</sup> and in November 2018, Ariel Stachel joined the cast.<sup>[15]</sup>

Principal photography began on October 29, 2018.<sup>[16]</sup> The entire film was shot in 27 days.<sup>[5]</sup> Production concluded on December 7, 2018.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Release

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The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 24, 2020, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Awards pre-screening.<sup>[18]</sup> Sony Pictures Releasing, under the Stage 6 Films banner, acquired the international rights (excluding Canada and Japan).<sup>[19][20]</sup> It was released in the United States on June 30, 2021.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Reception

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### Box office

In the United States and Canada, *Zola* was projected to gross \$2–4 million from 1,468 theaters in its opening weekend.<sup>[2]</sup> It made \$505,000 on its first day of release and \$282,000 on its second. It went on to debut to \$1.2 million in its opening weekend and \$2 million over the five-day frame, finishing ninth at the box office.<sup>[22]</sup> It fell 48% to \$620,000 in its second weekend, finishing 10th.<sup>[23]</sup>

### Critical response

On review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, the film holds an approval rating of 88% based on 252 reviews, with an average rating of 7.5/10. The site's critical consensus reads, "*Zola* captures the stranger-than-fiction appeal of the viral Twitter thread that inspired it – and announces director/co-writer Janicza Bravo as a filmmaker to watch."<sup>[24]</sup> On Metacritic, the film has a weighted average score of 76 out of 100, based on 46 critics, indicating "generally favorable reviews".<sup>[25]</sup> PostTrak reported that 68% of audience members gave *Zola* positive score, with 46% saying they would definitely recommend it.<sup>[22]</sup>

Writing for The A.V. Club, Shannon Miller gave the film a grade of "B" and said: "*Zola* is first and foremost a zany, catastrophic road-trip dramedy, one that balances the whimsy of social media with the harrowing reality of being trapped in a dangerous situation."<sup>[26]</sup> Critic Owen Gleiberman of Variety called *Zola* "a true story so extravagant it feels like it must have been made up. It's a mini volcano of sex and violence and danger and deception. It's a close-to-the-bone portrait of women who work in the sex industry. It's a youthquake as real as American Honey. It's a piece of pure filmmaking bravura."<sup>[27]</sup>

Peter Debruge, also writing for Variety, praised the "virtuoso filmmaking and a pair of killer performances" but wrote: "Sure, it's fun to see a movie skewer the vapid soullessness of social media and the unregulated economy of male desire, but *Zola* ultimately rings hollow. The actors are fearless, and yet, how much do we know about these characters in the end? The answer: something of their values, but almost nothing of their lives."<sup>[28]</sup>

Writing for *The Face*, Ludwig Hurtado said the film was a canonical part of a genre he named "Tampacore," which he described as presenting a "hyper-stylised vision of Florida" with "all the violence and drama of a classic western"; he included *Waves* and *Spring Breakers* as comparable titles.<sup>[29]</sup>

## Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<u>Austin Film Critics Association</u>	<u>January 11, 2022</u>	Best Supporting Actor	<u>Colman Domingo</u>	Nominated	[30]
<u>Black Film Critics Circle</u>	December 22, 2021	Pioneer Award	<u>Janicza Bravo</u>	Won	[31]
<u>Black Reel Awards</u>	<u>February 27, 2022</u>	<u>Outstanding Independent Film</u>	<u>Janicza Bravo</u>	Won	[32]
		<u>Outstanding Emerging Director</u>		Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Actress</u>	<u>Taylor Paige</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Breakthrough Performance, Female</u>		Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Supporting Actor</u>	<u>Colman Domingo</u>	Won	
		<u>Outstanding Breakthrough Screenwriter</u>	<u>Janicza Bravo and Jeremy O. Harris</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Editing</u>	<u>Joi McMillon</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Ensemble</u>	<u>Kim Coleman</u>	Nominated	
<u>Chicago Film Critics Association</u>	<u>December 15, 2021</u>	<u>Best Supporting Actor</u>	<u>Colman Domingo</u>	Nominated	[33]
		<u>Best Supporting Actress</u>	<u>Riley Keough</u>	Nominated	
<u>Gotham Independent Film Awards</u>	<u>November 30, 2021</u>	<u>Outstanding Lead Performance</u>	<u>Taylor Paige</u>	Nominated	[34]
		<u>Outstanding Supporting Performance</u>	<u>Colman Domingo</u>	Nominated	
<u>Independent Spirit Awards</u>	<u>March 6, 2022</u>	<u>Best Film</u>	<u>Janicza Bravo</u>	Nominated	[35]
		<u>Best Director</u>		Nominated	
		<u>Best Female Lead</u>	<u>Taylor Paige</u>	Won	
		<u>Best Supporting Male</u>	<u>Colman Domingo</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Best Screenplay</u>	<u>Janicza Bravo and Jeremy O. Harris</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Best Cinematography</u>	<u>Ari Wegner</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Best Editing</u>	<u>Joi McMillon</u>	Won	
<u>Palm Springs International Film Festival</u>	<u>January 2, 2020</u>	Creative Impact Awards	<u>Janicza Bravo</u>	Won	[36]
<u>Philadelphia Film Critics Circle</u>	December 13, 2021	Best Supporting Actor	<u>Colman Domingo</u>	Nominated	[37]

		Best Script	Janicza Bravo and Jeremy O. Harris	Nominated	
Sundance Film Festival	January 23, 2020	Grand Jury Prizes – Dramatic	Janicza Bravo	Nominated	[38]

## Awards Controversy

In 2021, *Zola* was nominated for seven Independent Spirit Awards, including Best Screenplay.<sup>[39]</sup> Aзияh "Zola" King was not nominated as a writer for the movie, nor was she invited to attend.<sup>[39]</sup> King was frustrated by this snub, writing on Twitter, "I think it's hilarious ZOLA is up for 7 awards and no one thought to invite me nor include me IN the writers award category. As if there would've been a film or a script to write if I didn't um... write it?"<sup>[39]</sup> She said that her issue was only with A24, as writers Harris and Bravo had been very supportive to her.<sup>[39]</sup>

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## External links

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- *Zola* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5439812/>) at IMDb
- *Zola* (<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/zola>) at Rotten Tomatoes
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