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A modern Renaissance man

The newly minted feature director and screenwriter, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, opens up about his new film, "Don Jon"



Writer/Director Joseph Gordon-Levitt sets up a scene on the set of Relativity Media's "Don Jon."

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By Kirsten Coachman

One thing you often hear from actors is how much they would like to write and direct their own films one day. Joseph Gordon-Levitt, whose film credits include "The Dark Knight Rises," "50/50" and "(500) Days of Summer," completed this daunting task, and on Friday, September 27, his feature film directorial and screenwriting debut, "Don Jon," will be released in theaters nationwide. In addition to writing and directing, he stars in the film alongside Scarlett Johansson, Julianne Moore and Tony Danza. The film is already creating a buzz among moviegoers with its commentary on how various forms of media can affect us.

Last week, while Gordon-Levitt was in town promoting his new movie, I had the opportunity to talk with him during an interview roundtable. He discussed what inspired him to make the film, what he felt was the biggest challenge of writing a screenplay and what advice he would give to aspiring screenwriters and filmmakers.

Q: The film's fantastic.
A: Thank you.

Q: I thought it was hilarious.
A: I'm glad.

Q: What initially inspired your unique twist on a romantic comedy type of movie?

A: Well, I've been working as an actor since I was young, and so I've always paid a lot of attention to how people react to TV and movies and all kinds of media. It's always intrigued me. And occasionally horrified me. I think especially when it comes to love and sex and relationships, we're all quite impacted by the stuff we see in the media. I wanted to tell a story about that. So that's why I thought having a comedy about a boyfriend and a girlfriend, where the guy's watching too much pornography and the girl's watching too many romantic Hollywood movies would be sort of a funny way of getting to talk about the unrealistic expectations we sometimes get from all different kinds of media.

Q: You directed the short film, "Sparks," what was the transition like from directing a short film to directing a feature film?

A: You know, they have more in common than they have not in common. The difference, of course, is telling a story in 20

minutes is really different than telling a story over 90 minutes. I think it has to do a lot with just pace. "Sparks" is a really fast and furious movie and most of the short films that I make are that way. There's just a lot coming at you all the time. I don't know, that's just my style. I like quick movies, I guess. I also like, though, especially when it comes to a longer movie, you can't sustain that for 90 minutes. Just as an audience member, I won't be able to pay attention to all that. You need to have space. So that was something that I was trying to keep in mind with "Don Jon." It's like, okay, where does it breathe? Because you can't just boom-boom-boom-boom-boom for 90 minutes straight.

So you get moments of him making his bed or walking up to the church or driving or things like that, where it's not exactly new information. It's new in that you're seeing it, like, okay, he's repetitive in his lifestyle, but it also kind of lets the audience breathe for a sec. There aren't really moments like that in "Sparks" or in most of the short films that I've made. It's over so quick, you've just got to hit 'em.

Q: What were some of your challenges as a screenplay writer?

A: I think the hardest part is the beginning, where you're just starting off, and you're like, "Wow, if I'm really going to write a whole screenplay, that's so big, I'm going to fail, at some point," you know. And you get these voices in your head, "Just quit. You don't need to do this. Other people have done this better than you can ever do this, blah, blah, blah. You don't need to do this." Those are hard voices to overcome. I think that's something we all face, whether we're writing or doing any other creative process.

For me, I think I kept going, mostly, because I was enjoying myself. And I would say, "Well, maybe this will come to something, maybe it won't, but I'm having fun doing it, so why don't I keep doing it?" And writing the script was something I was doing in my spare time, when I had a few hours to myself. And it would always make me feel good. I'd always find myself laughing or smiling, and I enjoyed it, so I kept doing it. That was definitely the hardest part.

Once other people got involved, there was certainly

still tons of work to do, but those voices of doubt, I could ignore them, because I don't have time to listen to those things anymore, I'm working with people here.

Q: Prior to working on this film, you worked with directors Rian Johnson, Christopher Nolan and Steven Spielberg. Did working with them affect your directing style? And how was the transition going from actor to actor/director/screenwriter?

A: I've been doing this for 26 years now and have been on hundreds of sets and worked with that many directors, and that's definitely why I felt able to do this job. I didn't feel like a first-time director. With Rian, Chris and Steven that you bring up, I'll say one thing I saw in common with all three of those guys — and they're very different people and they're very different filmmakers — they all struck a really good balance between having a thorough plan and being open to spontaneity. Because that's the question you get all day long as a director is, "Okay, this is what we planned on doing, but now we could do it this way, which do you want to do?" And you have to decide. I noticed that Rian and

FEATURE INTERVIEW

JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT

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Joseph Gordon-Levitt

Chris and Steven, all three of them, they wouldn't always go with either one. They were open to both. And that's so important, because if you're too married to your plan, I think you can end up with something sort of stale. But if you're too easy to lure into new things and you don't stick enough to your plan, you can end up sort of lacking a strong throughline. So I noticed all three of those guys struck that balance really well and it was something I tried to keep in the front of my mind while I was directing "Don Jon."

Q: You worked with Tony Danza in "Angels in the Outfield" when you were younger.
A: Yes.

Q: How do you view him as a person? Is he an idol or a father figure?

A: Yeah, he says it himself, that he feels sort of paternal to me. I definitely have that with him. He's such a good, sweet, loveable guy, and that shows on the screen. Anytime you see him onscreen, you always want to smile, because he's so good-hearted, which is why I thought it was really great to cast him in this part. I love it when I'm watching a movie and the actor's doing something that I don't expect them to do. Seeing Tony with a short temper or sort of being lecherous or not listening to his family and stuff. I love that, because it's not what you expect from him.

Q: I thought the casting was stellar.

A: Thank you.

Q: I thought everyone was tremendous, and in particular, I thought Brie Larson was hilarious. She was able to convey the voice of her character without really saying anything, and I was just wondering about the conversations you guys had prior to shooting.

A: As an actor, I'm always trying to cut my lines. I think lines are overrated. If you can communicate it without saying anything, that's usually the most natural and compelling way to do it. I think this is a character, we talked about it, it's not that she's checked out, it's not that she's not paying attention, she's just sort of realized what's

to check the boxes. And both Jon and Barbara have that.

Scarlett really brought so much to this character, though. One thing I really love about Barbara, she doesn't fit into any one category. I think it's a common thing in movies, in especially comedies with male main characters that female characters end up one or the other thing. Either the good girl or the bitch. Either the Madonna or the whore. No human being is like that. Every person, whether male or female, is complicated, has their strengths, has their weaknesses, is a unique person. I think the character that Scarlett portrayed doesn't fit into either of those categories. Certainly, she has her shortcomings and there are certain things about her that you don't like, but she also has her strengths and there are certain things about her that you do like and she's right about plenty of things. That's a huge part of what makes the movie funny as well as feel sincere is that the characters feel like human beings.

Q: What about Esther?

A: So Esther, too. She doesn't fit into any category and Julie is a stellar actress and has been in so many of my favorite movies.

Esther is sort of the opposite of Jon and Barbara. Whereas Jon and Barbara are all their front and all about this mold they're trying to fit into, Esther just can't be bothered. She's just kind of perfectly honest and present all the time, to a fault. Occasionally, that makes the people around her uncomfortable, but she can't help it. So you put that character together with the Jon character and it's going to be funny. Hopefully they'll both learn something from the other.

Q: Can you relate to "Don Jon" in any way?

A: Sure, I can relate to him. I think we all have a tendency to be selfish, want what we want and objectify people and just sort of put people in boxes with labels on them. We all have that tendency, because it's easy. It takes less effort to be selfish than it does to really pay attention to who's in front of you and learn who they are as a unique individual. That's harder. So I identify with that, sure. I think we all can, and, you know, Scarlett's character does the same thing. I identify with her as well.

Q: You had a lot of re-occurring images in your movie. You have the car, the church and I thought that the family was a really big one too, as this permanent symbol. You weren't raised Catholic, but your character was. Could you talk a little bit about the role of religion in the movie?

A: Sure, sure. Yeah, I wasn't raised Catholic, and I don't think that the movie's so much about Catholicism, in particular, as it is about organized religion. And I think that certainly lots of people have very genuine, meaningful connections to whatever faith they're a part of. I think there's lots of other people, who are just kind of going through the motions and not really connecting with these traditions. And Jon is that. He's that way with everything in his life. He doesn't really connect with anything. Like, you bring up his family. No one in his family is listening to each other, they all just talk over each other. His buddies, they don't really connect as friends, they're more kind of competing with each other. His car, even his own body. They're all sort of these one-way streets, these objects on a shelf, and his church is

another example of that. And then by the end of the movie, he does grow a bit. He begins to break out of this mold and start connecting with all these different things. And so with the church, in particular, he does. He asks the priest some questions. He's trying to connect with him.

Q: What kind of advice would you give to aspiring filmmakers and screenwriters?

A: The advice I would give to aspiring screenwriters and filmmakers is to do it. Do not wait for someone else to hire you or tell you that you can or any of that. Just do it.

Find a camera, make some stuff, put it on your computer, cut it together, find musicians or find music you can use — just make it happen. We were talking about this before, but you'll get those voices of doubt, like, "It's not going to be good enough, it's not going to be perfect." It doesn't matter. Like, your first one, yeah, it's going to be riddled with mistakes, sure. So what? You'll make another one and then you'll make another one. You're going to have to make a lot of them before you get good at anything. So just f***ing do it. Don't worry if it's good or not. Just get it done and move on to the next one and do another one. That would be my advice.

"Don Jon" will be released nationwide on Friday, September 27.

Kirsten Coachman is the Assignment Editor of the Academy of Art University newspaper. Tweet her at @AAUPaperGirl.

Writer/Director/Star Joseph Gordon-Levitt sets up a scene with star Julianne Moore and Cinematographer Thomas Kloss on the set of Relativity Media's "Don Jon."

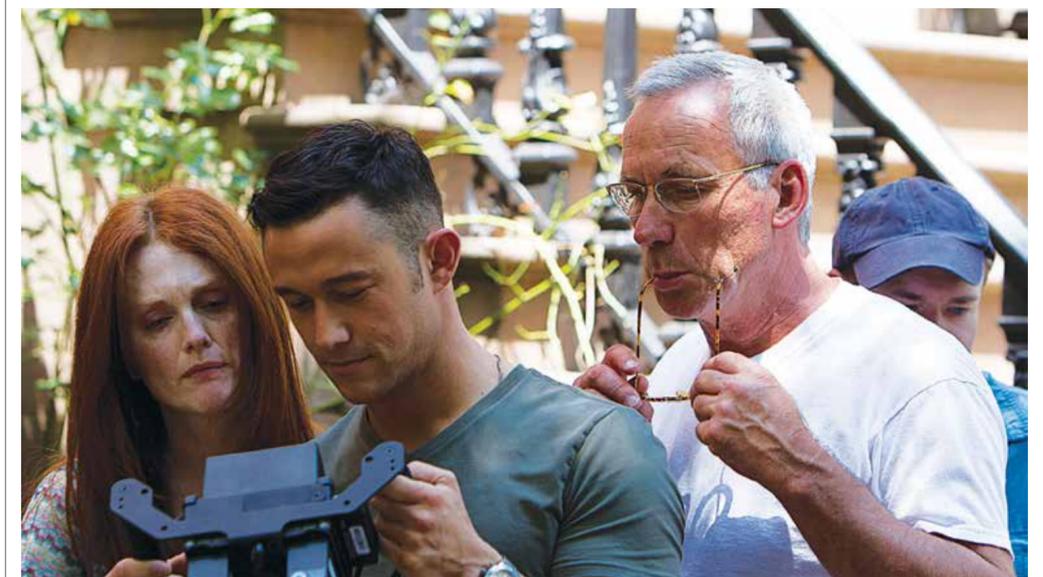


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