

Interview: ‘Nickelodeon’ Star Josh Peck Grows Up, Director Jonathan Levine Speaks Out on ‘The Wackness’

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CHICAGO – It’s 1994 in New York City. In an age before mobile phones, terrorist threats and a grown-up Olsen twin, there is “The Wackness”. This is the debut film of writer and director Jonathan Levine and a coming-out role of sorts for the child star Josh Peck of the popular Nickelodeon series “Drake & Josh”.

HollywoodChicago.com recently interviewed the director and “The Wackness” star for insight on the recent nostalgia of the film and an era seemingly so close yet so far away.



Actor Josh Peck (left) and director Jonathan Levine for “The Wackness” in Chicago on June 19, 2008.
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com





Olivia Thirlby from “Juno” fame as Stephanie in
“The Wackness”.
*Photo by JoJo Whilden, © 2008 Occupant Films and
courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

The film’s time and place is a mood element for the story of Luke Shapiro (Josh Peck). He’s an unpopular east side teenager recently graduated from high school.

His parents are having money conflicts and he’s wrestling with his affection for a comely classmate named Stephanie (Olivia Thirlby of “Juno” fame). She clouds his summer job of selling marijuana from an ice cream cart.

“It’s autobiographical in the sense that this was the world I grew up in, that’s how we talked, those were the clothes we wore and those were the type of kids who I hung out with,” director Levine said.

He added: “The outsider thing is interesting to me. The arbitrary nature of ‘who’s cool’ in high school is interesting. But in the movie, it’s about individual perspective. Your reality can change on how you perceive it.”

To complicate matters, a psychotherapist named Squires (Ben Kingsley) – who occasionally administers to Luke (in exchange for dope) – is Stephanie’s stepfather. The two develop a grudgingly close friendship that’s rooted in Luke’s loneliness and Squires’ mid-life crisis.

Peck said about Kingsley: “He intimidated me only when he did Gandhi impressions (laughter). But when we first met, he put all my worries to rest. He knew that it was up to him – because of his status, stature and the caliber of his acting – to put my neuroses and fears to rest.”



Sir Ben Kingsley as Dr. Squires in “The Wackness”.
Photo by JoJo Whilden, © 2008 Occupant Films and courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics



Rating: **3.0/5.0**

“I let him do whatever the f**k he wanted (laughter),” Levine said. “He is very, very smart. As a relatively new director, it was incumbent upon me to just say: ‘What do you need?’ Clearly he is going to do something that makes me look good.”

The film features Peck, Thirlby and Mary-Kate Olsen in transitional roles as young adults indulging in drinking, dope smoking and carnal congress. Levine and Peck commented on the image of more innocent stars treading onto new territory.

“I assumed already where their interests lie in the material,” Levine said. “I was respectful about their decisions to go maybe where they haven’t gone before. It was never discussed beyond the character scenarios and also not in a larger sense.”

“I think people will be surprised to see me smoking weed and having sex. It was the first time I actually did it (laughter),” Peck related. “I hope the fans of ‘Drake & Josh’ – for example, someone who was 12 years old when I was 15 – will have grown up with me. I’m 21, so they would be 18 now, and I think this movie is right in their wheelhouse.”

The New York City of the mid-1990s becomes an influential character in the story. It’s empty and isolating in the summer before technological connections.



Josh Peck (left) as Luke and Olivia Thirlby as Stephanie in “The Wackness”.

Photo by JoJo Whilden, © 2008 Occupant Films and courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

“The big difference is a world without cell phones and the Internet. It’s a very different world. That allows this movie to be set almost in the Stone Age,” Levine said.

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Levine also discussed showing the World Trade Center: "To me, it is the punctuation mark at the end of the sentence. I'm using that image as a note of bittersweet nostalgia. It has to be handled delicately, but at the same time, it's a very powerful image. I didn't want to shy away from it."

In conclusion, Josh Peck spoke about the challenges of imbibing Luke with a sensibility that's relatable for all older teens making the transition into adulthood.

Peck said: "It was very necessary for Luke to have this sense of vulnerability in the way he carried himself. All his cynicism and answers for things are rooted in the fact that he is lost.

"Becoming an adult at that point (18 years old) seems to be impossible. Without the layers, you wouldn't have cared enough about Luke. [Levine's] writing took care of that character."

"The Wackness" stars Josh Peck, Ben Kingsley, Olivia Thirlby, Mary-Kate Olsen and Method Man. The film opened on July 11, 2008 at AMC River East 21 in Chicago, Landmark's Century Centre Cinema in Chicago, CineArts 6 in Evanston, Ill. and Landmark's Renaissance Place Cinema in Highland Park, Ill.



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