

Interview: Joseph Gordon-Levitt Invokes Christopher Nolan in Directorial 'Don Jon' Debut

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CHICAGO – **Joseph Gordon-Levitt** is a unique dichotomy. Part independent and part mainstream film actor, he's managed to succeed as both. And with this Friday's release of "**Don Jon**," add to that list a first-time writer and director. But none of it could have been without Christopher Nolan.



Joseph Gordon-Levitt

Nolan – who made his worldwide mark with "Memento," "Batman Begins," "The Prestige," "The Dark Knight," "Inception" and "The Dark Knight Rises" – is credited with making Joseph Gordon-Levitt mainstream.

JGL – as I'll hereafter refer to him because 20 characters is too many and it's almost as cool as Neil Patrick Harris' NPH – has been mentored heavily by Nolan. JGL starred in Nolan's "Inception" (his mainstream breakout role) and then "The Dark Knight Rises".

Entirely of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, only 32 years old and from Los Angeles, this 5-foot-9 "Regular Joe" turned once again to Nolan when he decided to embark on his own project. Nolan encouraged JGL to create "Don Jon," but didn't pussyfoot around his decisions. He challenged them – including why JGL should cast himself as his own lead versus someone else.

JGL, whose brother Dan Gordon-Levitt passed away only 3 years ago, was being filmed in Nolan's "The Dark Knight Rises" while he finished the first draft of the "Don Jon" script.

Now "Don Jon" is nowhere near the complexity of a Christopher Nolan project in terms of its deep story or cinematic scale. Instead, the film lifts the curtains on a man's innermost thoughts. It's said that a man thinks of sex every 7 seconds. In Jon's case, he turns to computer pornography as his constant outlet even more than his hot girlfriend Barbara (Scarlett Johansson).

If you're in the minority on this planet who'd choose your own computer screen over ScarJo, perhaps you'd be willing to go along with JGL's unrealistic ride. The film also doesn't explore the true medical addiction that sex and pornography can be. "Shame" with Michael Fassbender, on the other hand, does a better job uncovering how destructive sexual addiction truly can be.

It's also hard to buy that the character Jon – a muscled-up version of JGL himself – is so absolutely unintelligent and is an inexperienced emotional zombie for no back-storied reason. So when the older lady (Julianne Moore) comes along to MILF our leading man out of his typical playboy and pornographic ways, we're not sure what's in it for her and have a hard time believing his change.

But there's entertainment in JGL's extreme use of the medium, and while most of us never take it that far, many of us can find hidden demons to relate to. HollywoodChicago.com's Adam Fendelman recently sat down with a very chill, deliberate, patient and kind JGL in Chicago to talk all things Nolan and how his debut feature film came to be.



Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Scarlett Johansson in "Don Jon".

Image credit: Daniel McFadden, Relativity Media

HollywoodChicago.com: In my screening, I periodically looked away from the screen to notice the people around me. I saw a 70-year-old lady, an 18-year-old girl and everyone in between. Then it struck me: Nowhere else in life would it be appropriate to gather with these kinds of people in a communal place where we would voyeuristically share in the act of public masturbation.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt: I'm really happy to hear that. That's the beauty of any movie. More than any big screen or special sound system, the reason to go out to the movies is to share a story with a crowd of people – many, most or all of whom are strangers to you. There's a power in that. I like movies that bring stuff to the surface and put on the table things you wouldn't normally talk about. I like movies that start conversations.

HollywoodChicago.com: Had you seen "Shame"?

JGL: (*hesitation*) I had not seen "Shame," actually. I've since seen it, but only after. My movie's really nothing like "Shame".

HollywoodChicago.com: There are definite corollaries between your movie and Fassbender's sexual addiction film that came out only 2 years ago. That said, your film focuses more on one man's secret, innermost thoughts and how they affect real-life relationships. Why'd you want to tell this story?

JGL: I wanted to tell a story about how people treat each other like things more than like people. Perhaps that comes from me feeling that way sometimes. Actors are often treated like objects on the shelf rather than humans. But it's not just actors. Everyone experiences this and we all do it to each other. We put each other in boxes and pigeonholes. We label each other.



Scarlett Johansson in "Don Jon".

Image credit: Daniel McFadden, Relativity Media

I imagine you've had this experience where you're talking to someone but you don't feel like they're really listening to you. They've already decided what you are and where you fit in. Does that ever happen to you?

HollywoodChicago.com: Of course. Flash judgments – and then people often can't forget that box they've neatly wrapped you in to form an accurate picture later.

JGL: Exactly. This is the basis where the story came from – adding on top of that where those expectations come from and how much the media plays into it. I've always paid a lot of attention to how the media affects the way we see things. That's why I thought a relationship between a young man who watches too much pornography and a young woman who watches too many romantic Hollywood movies would be a funny way of getting at some of these questions.

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you ever met someone you don't know and they immediately look a certain way to you, but then once you get to know them, they look very different – either better or worse based on who they actually are?

JGL: Yes, that's really well put! There you have it. That's exactly the story. For the whole beginning of the movie, Jon doesn't care about anyone or connect with anybody. Everyone and everything is just a thing – whether it's the women in his life, family, friends, church or even his own body. They're just things on a checklist. That's what he thinks life's about. He's just trying to acquire things and check the boxes.

Esther (Julianne Moore), on the other hand, is just the opposite. She can't step outside the present moment. She has no front at all. She's got her heart on her sleeve. That's why she's good for him and why those scenes are funny.

HollywoodChicago.com: I understand what Esther brought to Jon, but I don't see what Jon brought to Esther.



Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Tony Danza (left) in "Don Jon".

Image credit: Daniel McFadden, Relativity Media

JGL: The movie's definitely from his perspective, but she's in the middle of coping with a tragedy. Everyone she knows pities her. Then here's a guy who doesn't know this about her. He probably reminds her of her brothers and her old family, too. Her getting to nurture a person rather than everyone nurturing her is what she needs.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your first time in the writer and director's chair. You learned a thing or two from Christopher Nolan. You're an interesting balance between an indie actor who made it and mainstream actor who also made it. If you didn't make it before Nolan, you certainly made it then. How'd being directed by Nolan influence how you can now do it yourself?

JGL: One of the many things that's strong about Chris as a filmmaker is that – even among these gigantic productions – he always prioritizes the story, the acting and the feeling. On "Don Jon," we didn't have enormous action scenes. But even on a smaller movie like this, it's still a *big-ole production with lots of people and lots of components!* I remembered – even among all that – where the priority needs to go. I thought of Chris during those times.

We spent all this time prepping, scouting locations, figuring out the sets and costumes and shoot lists for the cameras – everything. But now that the day has come to shoot it, all that stuff needs to come lower on the priority list. Now this set belongs to the actors and that's what Chris does. As an actor, that feels great. As a director – and having spent all that time working out those technical components – there's a temptation to keep refining them.

Chris could do that too, but he doesn't. Once the actors are there and it's time to go, all the technicians need to sit down. He demands that they make room for the actors to do what they're going to do. That's what's going to make the audience feel what they're feeling.

But the other truth is – without all the technical components in place – the audience won't feel it. So you have to have that balance. He strikes that balance very well. He's very technically savvy, aware, proficient and at the same time doesn't give too much priority to the technical things.



Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Julianne Moore in "Don Jon".
Image credit: Daniel McFadden, Relativity Media

HollywoodChicago.com: So Chris prepared you for your feature-film debut?

JGL: Enormously. He also explicitly encouraged me. I was shooting "The Dark Knight Rises" while I finished the first draft of this script. I told him about it and he was really encouraging. He asked me some good questions and expressed some valid concerns, which is what a genuine collaborator does. He didn't use the kid gloves and just say "that's great" or "good for you".

He had some real questions that were really important. "Do you think you can do it in that many days?" "Do you think you should act and direct at the same time?" That's a valid question, but I always wrote this role for me. I also was always picturing Scarlett Johansson playing that part.

HollywoodChicago.com: And Julianne Moore?

JGL: The way that went was, well, who would you cast if you could cast anyone? If I could cast anyone, it would be Julianne Moore. But then, who could we really get? I didn't assume that best-case scenario would come true.

HollywoodChicago.com: You'll also get credit for Tony Danza's comeback as your character's dad.

JGL: I hope so, man! He's so good in it. He's also really different in this role. He's got his same charm that everyone loves, but he's just a naturally sweet guy. But this character is such a dick. I kept reminding him that I liked him too much on that take. He had to be more mean, lose his temper and be more lecherous.

"Don Jon" stars Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Scarlett Johansson, Julianne Moore, Tony Danza, Glenna Headly, Brie Larson, Rob Brown, Jeremy Luke, Paul Ben-Victor, Italia Ricci, Lindsey Broad and Amanda Perez from writer and director Joseph Gordon-Levitt. The film, which opens on Sept. 27, 2013, is rated "R" for strong graphic sexual material and dialogue throughout, nudity, language and some drug use. "Don Jon" has a running time of only 90 minutes.



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