

# NO ORDINARY JOE

From alien to lothario via president's son, Joseph Gordon-Levitt has risen through the Hollywood ranks. As the actor and writer makes his directing debut, he talks sex, feminism – and how he's out to break the mould

**WORDS** ELAINE LIPWORTH **PORTRAIT** BEAU GREALY

**O**f course I've watched porn. Most people have. I don't think it is wrong or unhealthy,' says actor and director Joseph Gordon-Levitt, in a distinctly matter-of-fact manner. We are having this unlikely conversation in the lobby lounge of the hip Bowery Hotel in New York.

'Has watching porn had an impact on me? Probably,' grins Gordon-Levitt, or Joe, as he likes to be called. 'But I would argue that it hasn't had any more impact than images from the mainstream media. The oldest trick in the book is putting a pretty woman on screen to sell your hamburger or your car.' He leans forward, elaborating on his theme. 'Whether it's X-rated or approved for general audiences, the message is the same: this person, usually a woman, is nothing but a thing, a sexual object.'

The subject of pornography is pertinent, because we are meeting to talk about his latest film, *Don Jon*, which, at the age of 32, he wrote and directed. He also stars in the comedy,





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which revolves around the character of New Jersey barman Don Jon, an archetypal, chauvinistic ladies' man.

Obsessed by body image, addicted to internet porn and casual sex, Jon falls for gum-chewing, voluptuous Barbara (Scarlett Johansson), who has a different but equally hopeless addiction – to rom-coms. No woman can possibly live up to the objectified sexual images Jon indulges in on his computer, and no man can live up to the romantic heroes Barbara falls for on the silver screen. 'It's about how we connect with each,' says Gordon-Levitt of his impressive directing debut. 'I'd call it a really fucked-up love story.'

### Not just a pretty face...

In contrast to its controversial themes, *Don Jon* is, Gordon-Levitt attests, a homage to his mother, Jane Gordon, a long-time feminist. 'I've written a comedy about everything she wanted to instil in me. I think that was partly why Scarlett was keen to play this character,' he adds. 'She's a really smart person, a really talented artist and yet most of what gets talked about is Scarlett's looks and her sex appeal.'

'Frankly, I find it startling how the media leads us to treat people like "things" rather than like people,' he continues. 'If you're too busy comparing real life to oversimplified media images then you're setting yourself up for disappointment. *Don Jon* is poking fun at this.'

We are seated in a corner of the low-lit room, but the actor still attracts attention. At 5ft 10in, with cropped black hair and wearing a plain grey T-shirt and jeans, he looks leaner than his ripped character in *Don Jon*, who spends hours pumping iron in front of the mirror, when he's not glued to porn or picking up women.

'I was 12 pounds heavier.' He bulked up eating protein – 'chicken, fish, nuts, fruit, no dairy or sugar or bread'. He did weights as well: 'Every day: chest on Mondays, shoulders Tuesdays, legs Wednesdays... you begin to feel like a different person,' he says.

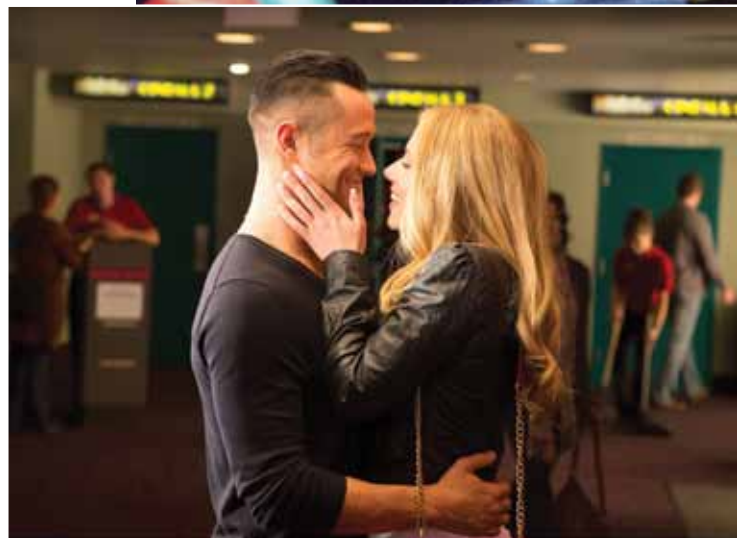
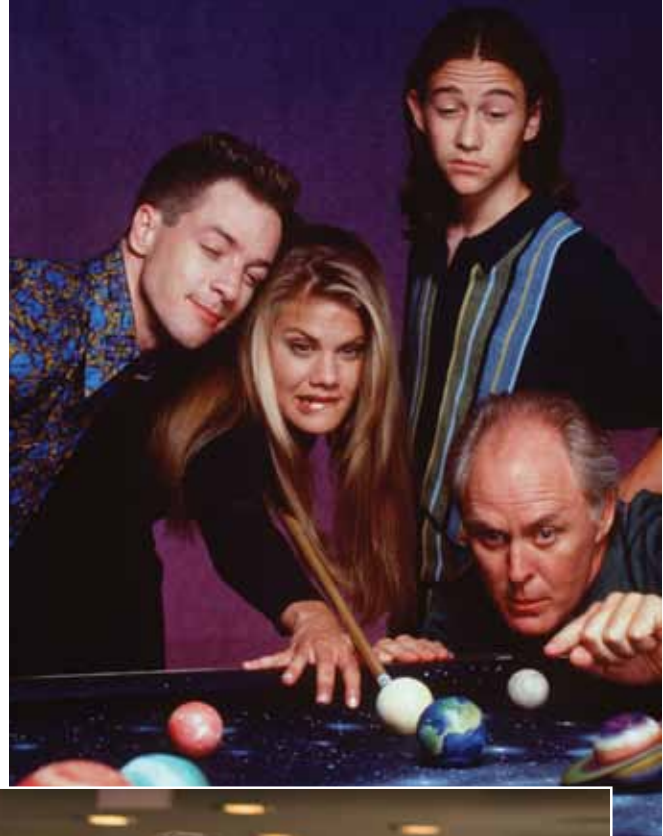
The younger of two sons, Gordon-Levitt was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, close to LA. His parents, Jane Gordon

and Dennis Levitt, met working at a politically progressive radio station. Today his father owns a successful software business. His mother ran for Congress under the banner of the Peace & Freedom Party in the 1970s, before becoming a full-time mother.

'I've learned from a lot of great people, but my mum was the first and most important one,' says Gordon-Levitt, who was involved in community theatre from the age of four. 'Mum asked me: "Do you want to try out for commercials and TV shows?" and I said "Yeah"'. He was approached by an agent and cast in adverts. TV roles followed.

'My parents were smart in how they raised us,' he says. 'My dad instilled a work ethic. I remember waiting to go on set once and playing on an early laptop computer. They called me and I said, "I just want to save the game." My dad closed the computer and said:

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FROM TOP: right on cue in TV sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun*; hands-on with Scarlett Johansson in *Don Jon*; a good cop in *The Dark Knight Rises*

"They have called you. You're working. You have to go." When I think back, I see he was teaching me a valuable lesson: be professional.'

That instruction paid off when Gordon-Levitt became a household name, aged 15, in the long-running TV show *3rd Rock from the Sun*, cast as an old alien inhabiting a young boy's body. He then temporarily quit acting to read French at Columbia University in New York.

His global breakthrough came in 2009 with offbeat rom-com



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**ROLEX**



## Leading ladies...

### Zoëy Deschanel

They first met making *Manic* in 2001 and have been good friends ever since. 'By the time we did *(500) Days of Summer* together we were already close. I think the movie worked because we were really comfortable with each other.'

### Julianne Moore

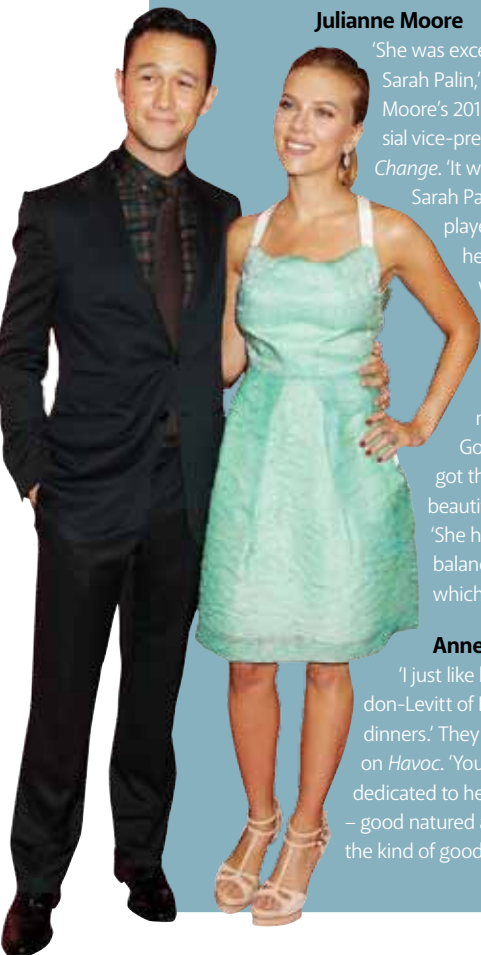
'She was excellent as Sarah Palin,' he recalls of Moore's 2012 portrayal of the controversial vice-presidential nominee in *Game Change*. 'It would be so easy to dismiss Sarah Palin as a bad person. Julianne played her with empathy, treating her as the complicated person we all are. I admired that.'

### Scarlett Johansson

'If *Don Jon* is a rom-com then it breaks the mould that most rom-coms follow,' says Gordon-Levitt, 'and Scarlett got that. She's smart, talented and beautiful,' he says about his friend. 'She has the ability to balance comedy with sincerity, which isn't easy.'

### Anne Hathaway

'I just like being around Annie,' says Gordon-Levitt of Hathaway. 'We hang out, have dinners.' They first worked together in 2005 on *Havoc*. 'You couldn't find an artist more dedicated to her work. She's also a sweetheart – good natured and enormously positive. She's the kind of good friend it's hard to find.'



*(500) Days of Summer*, which earned him a Golden Globe nomination. Two years later he played a young man with cancer in the funny and moving *50/50*.

Art house films were peppered with mainstream hits: *Inception* (2010), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), in which he played Lincoln's son, having been personally requested for the role by Daniel Day-Lewis.

## Meeting the President

'My favourite actors are the chameleons,' says Gordon-Levitt of his Oscar-winning co-star. 'I think Daniel is a phenomenon.' Arriving on set at the start of the shoot, he discovered a note from Day-Lewis written with a quill and ink, signed from Abraham/Daniel. 'But when we physically met, Daniel was the President. I called him Sir and he called me Robert. I only heard his Lincoln voice,' says Gordon-Levitt. He didn't hear Day-Lewis's real voice until after the deathbed scene at the end of the shoot.

'Daniel had been lying in that bed all day playing dead,' recalls Gordon-Levitt. 'Then Steven [Spielberg] came into the room and said: "OK, we're done." Daniel got up and slowly stretched. In that moment, you could see him beginning to shed [his skin]. Then a little bit of an Irish accent crept into his voice.'

Later that night Gordon-Levitt finally got to meet the older actor. 'He strode into the pub, this gentle-mannered, sweetheart of an Irishman,' he laughs. 'He was so excited about having a Guinness – he hadn't had one for a year while preparing for the role. He's a very, very special artist.'

The same could be said about another Daniel, Gordon-Levitt's older brother, a photographer and performance artist who died, aged 36, in 2010.

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The brothers were very close and while the subject is clearly still painful, he is keen to share and celebrate his brother's life.

'He's my big brother. He's my hero, he was my confidante and my best friend,' says

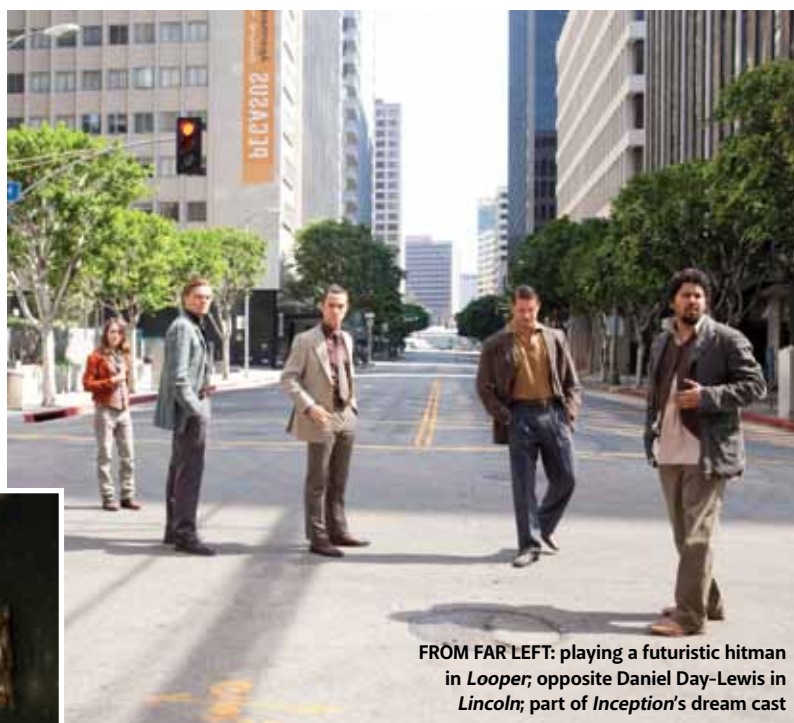
the actor quietly. 'Dan always encouraged people. The biggest kick he got was if he could get somebody to try something new. I was an enormous beneficiary of that spirit – he inspired me to take risks.'

In 2005, the brothers founded an innovative production company, hitRECORD, which Gordon-Levitt currently runs. 'It's very much what Dan was about – encouraging people to be their best.'

Each day, 2,000 new records, as well as text pieces and artworks, are uploaded on to the site, to be sampled and shared by hitRECORD members, creating original, collaborative songs, stories and short films.

The company's latest project is *HIT RECORD ON TV*. 'It's hard to find a comparison, but the closest thing I've come up with is *Sesame Street*,' laughs Gordon-Levitt. 'It's not for kids but it will have that diverse variety – with cartoons, puppets, films.'

'Traditionally, our media culture teaches us to just sit back and watch rather than participate. The internet is changing all that,' he continues. 'Now anyone can express themselves, raise their voice and participate. HitRECORD is my way to play along with that evolution.'



FROM FAR LEFT: playing a futuristic hitman in *Looper*; opposite Daniel Day-Lewis in *Lincoln*; part of *Inception*'s dream cast



The media is becoming less of a monologue and more of a dialogue.'

Both storytelling and breaking the mould is in Gordon-Levitt's DNA. His maternal grandfather was the lauded film director Michael Gordon (*Cyrano de Bergerac*, 1950; *Pillow Talk*, 1959; *Move Over, Darling*, 1963), who was blacklisted as a Communist sympathiser in the 1950s, following the House Un-American Activities hearings. 'He died when I was young so I never had much of a relationship with him, but I guess some of the stuff is genetic,' he says.

After nine years in New York, Gordon-Levitt has now settled in LA, because 'I like having a space where I can just freak out if I want to', but London is close to his heart. 'I finished my first draft of *Don Jon*

while I was there, working on *The Dark Knight Rises*. What I love is that it's more acceptable in London to be really, really, *really* into the arts.' He clicks his fingers. 'In America, it's considered snobby to care that much. I am generalising, but I feel like a wider swathe of the population is into the arts in London.

When he's in London, you might spot Gordon-Levitt at the British Film Institute, of which he is a fan: 'There's nothing like it in the US. There are cool revival house cinemas in LA and New York, but they're scrappy places and certainly not government-funded.' But like an increasing number of Hollywood actors, he eschews the celebrity goldfish bowl that accompanies his A-list status. He regards success

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PHOTOS: REX FEATURES

(or rather fame) as 'certainly double-edged. It allowed *Don Jon* and *HITRECORD ON TV* to happen. I'm very grateful for that.'

Continuing to grapple with that paradox, Gordon-Levitt simply focuses on the job. He has recently completed cult sequel *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*. With his film career on a meteoric trajectory and the success of *HitRECORD*, there is very little downtime. 'I work six or seven days a week, very long hours and I love it. But the last few years have been extreme.'

Expect to see a lot more of the charming, erudite Joseph Gordon-Levitt, but that presence will be on screen, *not* on the gossip sites.

*Don Jon* is released in cinemas on 15 November.

## ...and likely lads

**Warren Beatty in *Shampoo* (1975)**, about a Beverly Hills hairdresser who beds more clients than he perms. 'This is the closest comparable movie to *Don Jon*. Warren [pictured right] plays a weak womaniser, but you're still rooting for him. It's funny and sincere.'

**Jack Nicholson in *Carnal Knowledge* (1971)**, Mike Nichols' film about the pitfalls of confusing sex with love. 'Jack gives an incredible performance. The way he and co-star Art Garfunkel talk about women is similar to *Don Jon*.'

**In Jean-Luc Godard's *A Woman Is a Woman* (1961)**, about a striptease artist desperate to become a mother, her reluctant boyfriend suggests that his best friend impregnates her. 'It's a very pretty, artsy-fartsy, French movie and I love it!'

**In *Annie Hall* (1977)**, Woody Allen plays a neurotic comedian who falls in love with the ditsy Annie Hall (Diane Keaton). 'He took the romantic comedy form and fucked it all up. It's brilliant!'

