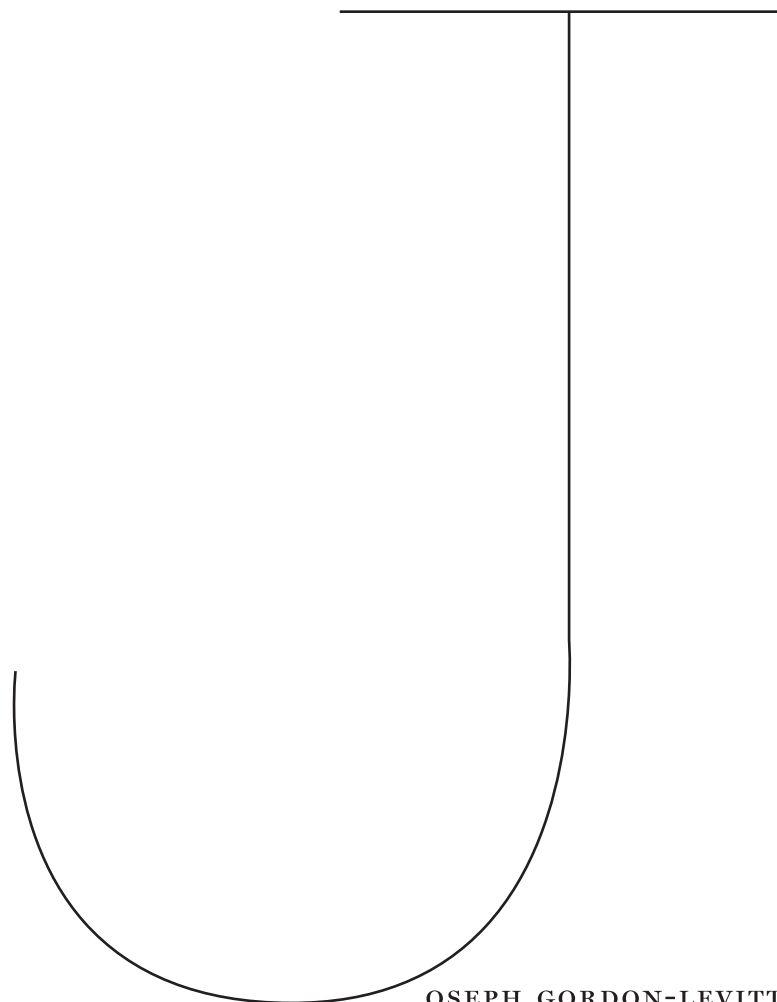


After years of TV sitcoms, then dark and quirky film roles, the actor stars in his first romantic comedy, *500 Days of Summer*—a love story for his generation.

THE FIERCE SENSITIVITY OF JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT



By
**LOGAN
HILL**

JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT is speaking with the zeal of a missionary. “Most love stories that are told in Hollywood are just bullshit, and everyone knows it,” declares the star of the upcoming indie romance *500 Days of Summer*, opening July 17. “You go there expecting to be sold a bill of goods that you know is wrong. And sometimes you go anyway, like if a girl drags you or something...” ¶ Bridezillas, shopaholics, bromances, Matthew McConaughey, the formulaic rom-com—the 28-year-old actor bemoans these cynical tools of an older, more disconnected generation. Gordon-Levitt’s mission? To promote romance we can

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believe in! To bring hope to the cineplex!

"The traditional Hollywood sentiment is contempt for the audience. I've heard executives say, 'Audiences are stupid, kids are stupid,' but that's not going to fly anymore," says the actor, who wore a bright-red Obama T-shirt to Sundance, where the film premiered the week of the inauguration. "I think Obama is great evidence of that. This is maybe a sort of pretentious parallel to draw, but it's the same with how love stories are told in movies. *500 Days of Summer* wouldn't have made sense in our parents' generation. It reminds me so much of 2009."

Joseph Gordon-Levitt is intense. You may have noticed. The word *intense* figures in virtually every conversation about the guy: His *500 Days* director, Marc Webb, originally worried he'd be too intense for a romantic lead in a film where "there's whimsy! And there's fucking dances!" And if you consider the actor's fiercely focused and critically praised roles—the hyper-verbal high-school detective in *Brick*; the brain-damaged bank robber in *The Lookout*; the oddly innocent male prostitute in *Mysterious Skin*—you might worry too.

But ultimately, Webb revised his opinion: "The intensity, I think, is just thoughtfulness." Gordon-Levitt is actually "intensely relatable," says Webb, which is essential to the success of *500 Days of Summer*. Webb, a music-video director, has packed his flashy big-screen debut with gimmicks—split screens, title cards, and the aforementioned dance number. What prevents the gimmicks from becoming, well, *just* gimmicky is Gordon-Levitt's dead-on, Everyguy performance and Webb's disarming conceit.

At the outset, the audience is warned: There will be no happy ending for twentysomething office boy Tom (Gordon-Levitt). He will have his heart broken in *500 Days* by his new co-worker, a girl named Summer (Zoë Deschanel). No matter how much they both love the Smiths, or how convinced Tom is that Summer will save him from himself, they are doomed. "Summer isn't just a girl, she's like a phase of your life," Webb says. "A lot of romantic comedies are loyal to a form rather than to people's experiences—but the writers and Joe and Zoë and I all have had one of those these weird, ambiguous relationships that happen in your twenties, when love dodges our expectations."

"You see this guy onscreen, and you say, 'Aw, fuck, man, I know exactly what this feels like!'" Gordon-Levitt says, speaking in his characteristic rush. "Sooo many people! Over and over again this is what I hear—and I love hearing it, people saying, 'God, you got it! That's exactly what I went through. That so exactly reminded me of



Gordon-Levitt in *500 Days of Summer*, top, and on the set of *Hesher*.

my past!' And that's what we wanted."

Deschanel is a longtime friend of Gordon-Levitt's. She's familiar with his fervency, fond of it, and says this is nothing—he has "relaxed a little over the years." When they met, nearly a decade ago, "Joe was really, really burned out. He'd spent all his high-school years working—and you can't reduce a person to a type, really, without it being sort of hard to take."

Gordon-Levitt was born in L.A., and by age 15 he was an experienced vet of TV movies and sitcoms—until his six-year stint on *Third Rock From the Sun* threatened to turn him into a teen idol. He once complained about the "Fascist cult of celebrity." Today he attributes his bitterness to immaturity. Fame made him "selfish," he says. "I was a kid."

He quit acting and California at age 20, moved to Harlem, studied French literature at Columbia, and eventually started over, on his own terms. "I began to care more," he says. "I was asking, 'How do I connect in a meaningful way?' Oh, right—you do that thing that you already know how to do, but you don't just do it for yourself..."

When Gordon-Levitt got back into acting, he went to some dark places—as far

from broad comedy as he could get. "I play these characters, this guy who's been to Iraq [in *Stop-Loss*] or this dude who's been in a car accident, horrible circumstances," he says. "I've never been to a war, but I do know what being brokenhearted is like, and it feels pretty fucking bad. I wanted that feeling to be there in earnest."

In *500 Days*, he gets to play his first romantic lead. Gordon-Levitt is such a die-hard romantic you wonder why it took so long. Online, at HitRecord.org, his scrappy website for fans and artists, his sign-off in blog posts and videos is "Again by heart." As he explains it, "*Cord* is the ancient word for 'heart,' so *record* is just a translation: 'Again by heart.'"

But it also implies repetition, one of the actor's nagging obsessions. For a long time after *Third Rock*, Gordon-Levitt worried about getting stuck in a rut. Lately, though, he's embraced the pluses of doing things over and over—"the way your heart beats," he says. "That's what life is: repetitive routines. It's a matter of finding the balance between deviating from those patterns and knowing when to repeat them."

"Joe isn't interested in the same things that interest other young actors," says Deschanel, something his website (a collection of writing, songs, video diaries, and recordings of users' poems) supports. "That's where he gets his joy," Webb says, "not from parties." (For a glimpse of Gordon-Levitt's attitude about the Hollywood scene, Google the title of his short film about paparazzi, *Pictures of Assholes*.) More unexpectedly, he fell in love with the Russian clown extravaganza *Slava's Snowshow* in 2004, watching dozens of shows, night after night, before signing on as a producer for its New York run and, later, studying clowning himself.

But Gordon-Levitt is fully cognizant of Hollywood Career 101: This summer, in addition to *500 Days*, he'll be starring as the evil Cobra Commander in his first studio tent pole, *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra*—albeit with "so much makeup you can hardly tell it's me." (In other words, if it flops, it won't hurt.) And he's got a nice balance of indie and mainstream lined up again in 2010: The low-budget drama *Hesher*, co-starring Natalie Portman, and the thriller *Inception*, Christopher Nolan's follow-up to *The Dark Knight*.

In the end, it turns out the repetition that obsesses Gordon-Levitt most is shooting a scene. "It's a very ritualized practice: First they say 'rolling' and then they say 'speed' and then they say 'marker,' and they clap the marker, then the camera says 'set,' then the director says 'action,'" recites the actor, as if intoning a poem. "I've heard that sequence of words ever since I was 6 years old. It's powerful. I need that." ■