Inside the Masterful, Much-Obliged Mind of Joseph Gordon-Levitt

With his new Apple TV+ show Mr. Corman, the Native Angelino Actor, Writer, Director Takes a Surreal Approach to Examining Real Life Problems

By Lina Lecaro
EPISODE

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L.A. TEACHERS UNION WANTS STUDENT VACCINATION MANDATE

United Teachers Los Angeles wants students to have similar COVID-19 vaccine mandates as teachers. LAUSD has taken its vaccination efforts to school grounds, providing on-campus appointments for its teachers and students.

BY ISAI ROCHA

United Teachers Los Angeles, who represents L.A. Unified School District (LAUSD) employees, is asking for student vaccine mandates similar to the ones placed on school employees.

The requirement would extend to students ages 12 to 18, as none of the COVID-19 vaccines have been authorized for younger ages.

The district saw its first COVID-19 outbreak on August 25, with Grant Elementary School in Hollywood confirming 17 positive cases, and sending home the entire classroom to quarantine.

“This is a prudent and necessary safety measure in view of the recent number of positive tests at several schools, the outbreak reported at Grant Elementary, and the fact that students under 12 can’t be vaccinated yet,” UTLA said in an email to members.

On August 13, LAUSD announced a requirement for all employees to be fully vaccinated by October 15, on top of the regular COVID-19 testing being conducted on both staff and students.

The testing will continue for all regardless of vaccination status.

LAUSD Offering COVID Vaccines On School Campuses

LAUSD began offering COVID-19 vaccinations on campuses through mobile clinics on Monday.

Employees, as well as students ages 12 and older, can make appointments online, although students between 12 and 15 years old must have an adult present before taking the vaccine.

“Los Angeles Unified’s mobile vaccination clinics are helping keep our community safe,” Interim Superintendent Megan K. Reilly said Monday.

When LAUSD students test positive for COVID-19, they are escorted to a designated space to be picked up. Students are then given materials to continue distance learning from home. After 10 days of quarantine, they may return to class when cleared. After testing positive, students do not need to be re-tested again for 90 days.

Vaccinated students who test positive for COVID-19 do not need to quarantine unless they experience COVID-19 symptoms. The vaccinated student will then be re-evaluated after five days to see that they are not experiencing symptoms.

Before the start of the new school term, all students in the district were required to take a baseline COVID-19 test, which yielded 3,255 positive cases. An additional 3,500 students were asked to quarantine for being in close contact with those individuals who tested positive.

UTLA was critical of these COVID-19 quarantine procedures, calling them “one-size-fits-all.” The teachers union wants more flexibility in the procedures, as well as more options for teachers and families who have to adopt at-home instruction during these quarantines.

Options that were pitched by the union were placing a live camera in classrooms so quarantining students can learn live, or have office hours where groups of students can have video discussions with their instructors.
WISE SONS JEWISH DELI CHECKS INTO THE BUZZING CULVER CITY DINING SCENE

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

Just in time for the upcoming high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Bay Area-based Jewish deli Wise Sons opens its first Southern California restaurant in downtown Culver City today.

Over the past decade, Wise Sons has earned its reputation for honoring the classics, including hardwood-smoked pastrami, made with hormone and antibiotic-free beef and house-baked goods like bagels, bialy and butter babka filled with Guittard chocolate. The intoxicating aroma of everything bagels and onion bialy wafts its way out onto Washington Blvd. and they definitely deserve a spot on the best bagels list – not too doughy and the perfect vehicle and size for the classic smoked salmon breakfast.

Other menu highlights include the OG Reuben, Matzo Ball Soup made with organic chicken broth, Potato Latkes, Naturally Fermented Sour Pickles, and Bodega Egg & Cheese Sandwich served on bagel or bialy. The smoked trout salad on rye is exceptional alongside their coleslaw (the true test of a good deli).

Unique to the L.A. menu is a classic Diner Tuna Melt with wild albacore, lettuce, tomato, horseradish aioli, griddled with American and Swiss on rye. The No. 19 pays tribute to Langer’s Deli – the untoasted sandwich features Russian dressing and cold Swiss on rye.

"Growing up in Southern California, I have immense respect for the Jewish delis in Los Angeles – some of my earliest deli memories are in the booths of legendary places like Langer’s, Brent’s and Pico Kosher Deli – so this is a bit of a homecoming for me," says Wise Sons Founder Evan Bloom in a statement. "Los Angeles has the best collection of Jewish deli food in the world and we’re excited to join that already existing pantheon."

A collection of framed family photos that tells the story of the Bloom family, starting with Evan’s great-grandparents’ Jewish deli outside Boston and a wall of pendants by Scott Richards pays respect to some of L.A.’s more renowned Jewish delis. A mural on the back wall by Berkeley-based illustrator Alexandra Bowman illustrates the colorful and chaotic deli scene at Wise Sons.

The modern deli has indoor and outdoor seating and is already buzzing with lines out the door during their soft opening. There’s no deli counter, but everything is available to go in bulk or prepared dishes – strongly suggest calling those orders in ahead of time. They are taking holiday catering orders now.
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Joseph Gordon-Levitt is a grateful guy. But chatting by phone with the actor, director and content creator last week, we aren’t surprised by how relatable and real he is, talking about himself and his success. If you follow him on social media, his good dude vibes are undeniable. The L.A. native is more than an accomplished actor; he’s a music-maker and a storyteller, into celebrating creativity and connecting with others in a positive way. He even started his own social media platform to do just that. He’s played lots of likable people and stretched himself to play some not-so-likable ones. But Mr. Corman, the new Apple TV+ show he created, stars in, writes and directs, aims for something headier and harder to peg. The titular figure is his most complex character ever, and as JGL (as many call him) tells it, there are a few reasons for that, starting with his own gratitude.

“It really came from me just thinking about my own life a lot, and feeling so grateful for so many things,” he explains. “I found a woman I love and she’s a perfect partner for me. We have our two kids. I have two parents that are cognitive and reliable people. I get to do work that I care about. I’m healthy and I get to live in a safe place... And I think a lot of those things come down to luck. That is something I think about all the time. How much do I deserve any of these things that I’m so grateful for? How much is just luck? It got me thinking about a character who is a lot like me, but who maybe just had a few different strokes of luck. That’s where this character comes from. He grew up the same place I did, went to high school the same place I did – Van Nuys High – and he’s like me, but there are some differences.”

So basically, Mr. Joshua Corman is Mr. Joseph Gordon (minus the hyphenate Levitt) in an alternate universe, but the real point – which becomes pretty clear while watching the show – is he could also be you or me if circumstances/timing/choices were different. Life is precarious and lifestyle even more so. Most of us are damn lucky to be who we are. But, especially in today’s world of self-absorption (and selfies), the exercise of counting our blessings when we feel down or sorry for ourselves doesn’t always work. The show’s not-so-subtle subtext tackles this disconnect and shows how privilege (recognized or otherwise) and mental health problems can create some confusing inner conflicts.

“Anybody who’s able to watch TV or read L.A. Weekly has it pretty good compared to a lot of other people alive on the planet today who are struggling with really big life-threatening problems,” Gordon-Levitt says. “I think that we can all probably appreciate that experience. Still, I can sit here and list off the good things in life and I’m happy a lot of time, but sometimes my brain doesn’t want to let me be happy, and why the fuck not?”

The character Mr. Corman is kind of your typical depressed L.A. millennial – and that’s sometimes as hard to watch as it sounds. A 30-something failed musician turned 5th grade teacher in the Valley, he only seems truly engaged when he’s in the classroom talking to kids or in his bedroom making weird but wondrous soundscapes that will probably never be heard. Every other moment in his life seems to be filled with unease, worry and contentiousness.

It’s not just that the protagonist is unhappy. He is stressed and distressed to the point of paranoia, which manifests with a persistent pounding sound in his head, meant to remind him (and the viewer) that all is not OK with the world. War, a pandemic or a fiery meteor colliding into earth could end it all at any time. And until that happens, humanity’s got plenty of struggle and ugliness, big and small, to contend with on a daily basis.

It’s some dark stuff, but it’s contrasted with moments of exuberance and light, thanks to the smattering of surrealist sequences, meant to convey each character’s thoughts and feelings in intriguing ways. JGL is having a lot of fun visually with this show. Some scenes look like paintings, others like scrapbook pages or collages. There are cool angles, trippy animated components, dream sequences, unique intros and even a couple song and dance numbers. What starts out feeling like a woe-is-me experience, becomes something richer and more exploratory as the first season’s 10 episodes progress, ultimately ending on a figurative and literal high note.

“I’ve been privileged enough to work as an artist and I definitely consider that very lucky,” Gordon-Levitt elaborates on his alter-ego vision. “Anybody who is successful as an artist,
a lot of that comes down to luck. Josh is an artist who didn’t get those lucky breaks. He still loves music and a big part of the season is him wrestling and figuring out his relationship to his own kind of creativity. Also, I always thought if I wasn’t lucky to make money as an artist, I’d be attracted to teaching. Teachers are such heroes. I wish we lived in a world where teachers were celebrated more than entertainers.

As an entertainer, Joseph Gordon-Levitt has definitely had some luck over the years, though he worked hard for his breaks. At 14, he was cast as an alien elder stuck inside a human kid’s body in the popular sitcom 3rd Rock From the Sun, working with acting heavyweights John Lithgow and Kristin Johnston for six successful seasons. He also scored a pivotal part in the Shakespeare-inspired teen classic 10 Things I Hate About You alongside Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles as a teen. Then he took a break from acting to go to Columbia University. As an adult actor, he’s turned in several memorable performances, in hits such as Inception, Looper and Snowden. But before he was really busy, it was his role in 500 Days of Summer opposite Zooey Deschanel that cemented his star power. To this day, that film has been the subject of debate. It wasn’t a love story, but an un-love story, with two sides (his and hers) and dueling views of a relationship and why it imploded. But who was right and who was wrong? As a big fan of the film who wonders on its message, we had to ask Joe (which his friends call him) for his take.

“One of my favorite things about that movie is how it plays with perspective and reality,” he answers. “It does some clever but subtle things that show a certain reality and make you think ‘oh, I’m seeing the truth,’ when in fact there’s sort of an unreliable narrator in the mix. You have this very seemingly trustworthy narrator that speaks in the third person, and says… ‘Tom felt that blah blah blah.’ And you trust it because usually, the narrator is telling you what’s really happening. But if you look closer it’s actually not really happening the way Tom thinks it’s happening. And if you look closer you see that Tom has a lot of growing to do. He’s seeing things in a selfish way. I’ve mentioned this before, but the scene where Zooey – Summer – is telling Tom about a dream she had last night… the narrator comes in and just talks over her. And you don’t even get to hear her dream. I think that’s a brilliant way of showing that Tom is not even listening. He’s just thinking, ‘oh she’s telling me her dream. I must be really special, she must really like me.’ And it’s really no wonder that she breaks up with him. A lot of people say to me about that movie, ‘how could she break up with you?’ But if you look closely, the writing’s really on the wall.”

Talking more about the film, we agree that his approach to telling Mr. Corman’s story is similar (in that it shows what’s inside the character’s head) but quite the opposite in approach. In 500, we get an idealized version of his character Tom and his relationship because the story is told from his point of view. In Mr. Corman, we see rather than hear Josh’s thoughts (and he clearly has growing to do as well), but his flaws are on full display. “And we are not hiding that,” JGL says. “It’s definitely two different watching experiences. I totally get that if you’re watching Tom’s idealized understanding of himself, that makes for a dreamy screen presence. But with Josh, you know all of his flaws are exaggerated, especially in the beginning of the season. He’s pretty insecure and has a lot of self-doubt, and that’s not as immediately dreamy. What I was going for in Mr. Corman was something honest above all else. Keep watching and see how he grows. And with each episode, he is getting a better understanding of himself.”

If you’re like us, you might not even like Josh from the first couple episodes, because to paraphrase RuPaul, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell is anybody else going to?” The kind of insecurity Josh reveals to the viewer is a huge turn-off and that’s intentional. Similarly layered new shows such as HBO’s The White Lotus and FX’sDave, for example, ring true in their cringiest moments, making points about privilege and other inequities of humanity that really resonate. The best television right now isn’t always pleasant, but the ultimate payoff can be bigger and better. Still, in the real world, no one wants to show their vulnerability or self-pity to others, they want to project who and what they aspire to be.

Which brings us to HitRecord, JGL’s social media platform that’s really more of a com-
gets his own episode “Mr. Morales,” and it’s one of our favorites of the series, answering the question many of us might have about delivery people and the lives they might lead (he’s a UPS guy) off the clock.

“Joe is the kindest, most thoughtful professional I’ve ever met,” Castro shares of his experience working with Gordon-Levitt. “He takes everyone’s opinions into consideration. Also, his Spanish isn’t half bad so I’m very biased towards getting directions en español.”

Of his character, which is one of the most authentically-written Latino men we’ve seen on TV for some time, he says, “I’ll always be grateful to him for having me on board. Victor is one of the most three-dimensional characters I’ve ever played.”

All of the supporting cast, by the way, is great, especially Debra Winger as Josh’s loving and long-suffering mom Ruth, and Juno Temple as his ex-girlfriend Megan. Temple, who worked with JGL on The Dark Knight Rises but didn’t have any scenes with him, says of the actor, “I remember, when I was younger, watching him in 10 Things I Hate About You and Mysterious Skin and thinking he was one of the greatest actors I’ve ever seen. So, getting to not only be directed by him but also getting to act with him was like a life-long dream come true. He was everything I hoped he would be and more: an extraordinary artist and very special human being.”

Temple gets to sing in the show as well, as the storyline saw the couple in a semi-successful band. The music, which is an essential component of the show, was created by Nathan Johnson, and features other cast members as well, including Winger and the rapper Logic (who acts for the first time on the show). It’s good enough to stand on its own and it does as it’s available as a soundtrack album.

The virus made the show move from Los Angeles to New Zealand for a year to finish filming, but not before capturing plenty of the city in outdoor shots and settings. There are also frequent references to our traffic, landmarks and nightlife (Josh’s deadbeat dad goes on a long reminiscence about performing at the Troubadour, for example). Gordon-Levitt says the city’s energy and presence on the show is intentional. “Los Angeles gets represented in a narrow way. The world image of L.A. is Hollywood. I didn’t grow up in Hollywood,” he stops himself. “Well, I grew up working in the Hollywood industry. But I lived in the Valley. I really wanted to show L.A. in a different light because there’s so much in this city, and I love it dearly. I think if you watch Mr. Corman, you’ll see an L.A. that maybe feels more like an Angeleno made it.”

It does, and its realism is unflinching sometimes. In a few scenes, Josh is shown staring into the night, transfixed by homeless people and encampments around L.A. Most of us don’t need an explanation as to what he’s thinking, and it all goes back to what inspired the show to begin with: any one of us could find ourselves in the same situation if bad luck came our way.

“It’s not exactly light entertainment,” JGL admits. “But that’s my taste. When I watch something, I want it to make me feel, or think or even challenge me. That’s what I was going for. It’s less about an objective telling of a certain plot. When we depart from reality, that’s because real life doesn’t always feel like reality in my experience and sometimes you have these feelings that are just too big to show on the outside. Even if we don’t show what reality looks like, we show you what life feels like.”
FEELING SIIICK
Singer and model Siiickbrain won’t stay silent
BY BRET CALLWOOD

Model, makeup artist, musician, poet – there are apparently no limits to what Siiickbrain, aka Caroline Miner Smith, is capable of. Hers is a combination of talent and determination – a determination to succeed that derives from a lonely upbringing in a conservative North Carolina town.

“I grew up on a farm in North Carolina, and I didn’t have any neighbors,” Siiickbrain says by phone. “I was 20 minutes from everything. I was in the middle of nowhere. In my hometown, it’s really conservative. Everyone was very judgy and wore Ralph Lauren, things like that. I never felt like I fit in, very judgy and wore Ralph Lauren, it’s really conservative. Everyone was very close-minded. Not to say that North Carolina isn’t a great place, because it is. But the town that I was in definitely was hard for me mentally, to grow up in.” So she packed her bags and went to New York. The bright lights of the big city beckoned, and she instantly felt a sense of belonging.

“I just wasn’t happy and I needed more diversity, and that’s what prompted the move to New York,” she says. “I’ve always been really creative. When I moved to New York, I planned on being a makeup artist and I was, I went to school for makeup artistry when I lived in New York, and then worked as a makeup artist. I loved New York so much, it was such an incredible experience. I learned a lot about who I am. Then I moved to L.A. after a year of living in New York, and fell into modeling.”

A move west felt necessary, she says, because she believed that she could further her career in SoCal. Plus, she just wanted to try something new.

“I’m the type of person who loves to try everything,” she says. “I ended up going to school for marketing in L.A. I was doing that as I was modeling and working as a makeup artist. Then all my time got consumed by modeling eventually. I was so excited about it. I was like, wow I just made a song in the studio today that she would be incredible on. So I hit her up and asked her if she wanted to be part of it. I love everything she stands for, so it was so incredible to work with her.”

That principled stance, combined with Siiickbrain’s therapeutic approach to her music, is essentially what she’s all about. Even her name is a play on words related to mental issues.

“I felt like my brain was wired wrong in a sense,” she says. “At the same time, I could see that coming through with my creativity. ‘Sick’ is like ‘cool.’ So it’s a play on words, and I did the three is because I thought it looked cool. That’s been my name on social media for years and years. Whenever I started music, I just decided to leave it because I like it.”

Her last single was “Silence,” which she says is about toxic relationships.

“When you’re so deep in a situation and in love, infatuated and everything, you get blind to all of the negativity and all of the negative parts of the relationship,” she says. “All the toxicity in it. You yourself can ignore how you’re feeling about a situation when you’re so blind by love.”

With that out, there’s plenty more to come from Siiickbrain, including a new single.

“My new single coming out on the 30th is called ‘Hellslide,’” she says. “It’s a song about an internal battle between good vs evil. I’m so excited about it. I’m shooting the video on Friday. That’s the next thing, and then I have a bunch of shows coming up. Playing some festivals throughout the rest of the year. And some more collaborations that I’m excited about but can’t really say yet. I’m really excited.”

As are we. Siiickbrain’s single “Hellslide” is out now.
AT

**JIM JARMUSCH’S SLICES OF LIFE**

The acclaimed filmmaker’s paper collages turn history into art

**BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT**

A small but substantial book bound in beautiful, thick brown paper is filled with almost miniaturist images composed largely in black and white and occupying the chestnut pages like a turn of the century estate sale photo album. But the clippings and photos in this volume have been interfered with, disambiguated, spliced and diced, and transformed into surrealist collages that are smart, creepy, witty and poetic – not unlike, say, a film by their creator, the director Jim Jarmusch.

Some Collages (Anthology Editions) collects scores of such works, culled from an archive of many hundreds, spanning years of Jarmusch’s collage practice and some 200 years’ worth of printed matter amassed and stored for this purpose. The works are small because they are life-sized, faithful to the original newspapers and magazines. But still the effect of the small ring and cheerful motif throughout the book, as is the lampooning of ridiculous and/or hypocritical politicians and their power posturing. A lot of the individual works are genuinely funny, especially the proliferation of Warhol ones – almost analog memes really – which are never not hilarious. Philip Glass and Salman Rushdie playing golf is pretty good too. You can’t lose with animal heads on fancy people. Most of the works, however, are far more subtle, nuanced and many cleverly function as social critique, while still others are completely unsettled with war and pathos.

The beguiling effect of the works is not only down to Jarmusch’s unassailable compositional eye and wry humor, but also to the evocative qualities of his chosen medium – newsprint. Rife with nostalgia and history, an assertion of accuracy, susceptibility to subsequent interpretations and a unique materiality of its own, as Randall Kennedy writes in his gorgeous essay for the book, “The simultaneous significance and worthlessness of newsprint – a practically negligible distance between knowledge and garbage – has always constituted its chief allure.”

“I remember as a kid, I received a microscope for my birthday,” says Jarmusch. “The first thing I examined through its lenses was a tiny scrap of torn newspaper. I was astounded. Instead of a single, solid sheet-like material, it was in fact a tangled mass of threadlike fibers, a chaotic jungle of microscopic pulp. Ever since, the fragility and inherently temporary nature of this particular (and now nearly obsolete) material has attracted me. Even when watching an old movie and I see the big ‘presses rolling’, my newsprint neurons fire up immediately.”

The word collage comes from the French verb coller, Jarmusch reminds us, “meaning to paste or glue things together [and it] appears to have been coined by Braque and Picasso in the very early 20th century. Anyone can make them... but many of the most innovative artists have used this form for well over a century, including the Cubists, Dadaist, Surrealists, Expressionists, Pop artists, minimalists, punk artists, street artists, etc. Now, of course, we also all are familiar with the cut and paste functions we employ daily on our digital devices.”

One interesting subtext running through the works is how the newspapers and magazines themselves change physically over the years. For example, the introduction of color into a mostly black and white world and the appearance of photography into a world of drawings. Even as it tracks the flourishing of early technology, in its resolutely analog form, these works and this book hold the line against a total digital surrender. But then again, there is no better way to describe the essence of our modern visual culture’s hyperactive post-everything dynamic than collage. These are the kinds of poetic paradoxes that Jarmusch’s work sets up, and leaves to the viewer to resolve.

Some Collages will be released in September. A corresponding solo show of Jarmusch’s original artwork opens at James Fuentes Gallery, New York from September 29 - October 31.
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