

Written by Mike Schulz  
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## **DON JON**

Writer/director/star Joseph Gordon-Levitt's *Don Jon* casts its auteur as a New Jersey bartender obsessed with pornography, and you can view the film as an extremely raunchy romantic comedy, or an untraditional coming-of-age saga, or a mostly lighthearted exploration of the perils of addiction. But I prefer to think of Gordon-Levitt's sprightly, confident filmmaking debut more as a modernized *Pinocchio*, in which, through lessons learned and a touch of magic, a creature made of wood – or rather, one sporting wood – eventually becomes a real live boy.

As with *Pinocchio*, this hardly seems possible at the tale's outset. Speaking to us, in voice-over, with an exaggerated bridge-and-tunnel accent, Gordon-Levitt's titular ladies' man spends the film's early scenes detailing his weekly ritual of bodybuilding, tense family dinners, carefree hookups, and endless masturbation, climaxing, so to speak, with Sunday-morning confession and a clear conscience. (When his behavior dictates fewer Hail Marys and Lord's Prayers than usual, Jon performs a celebratory fist pump.) Yet while these introductory sequences are entertaining, and Gordon-Levitt, as a screenwriter, clearly has a gift for aggressively crude comic banter, the staging doesn't initially suggest much beyond easy caricature, with the intentionally repetitive visualizations of Jon's church-going and Web-surfing activities becoming less and less engaging the more they're repeated. Meanwhile, *Don Jon's* characters, amusing though they are, all seem to have hatched from a dirty-minded yet fundamentally uninspired sitcom. Jon and his loquacious-alpha-male drinking buddies (Rob Brown and Jeremy Luke) might as well be auditioning for an

### *Entourage*

spin-off, and Jon's ceaselessly squabbling parents – despite fearless, funny turns by Tony Danza and Glenn Headly – could headline an R-rated take on

### *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

(Poor Brie Larson, who plays Jon's constantly texting younger sister, is stuck with such a one-note role that you can feel audience members growing increasingly hostile toward her, and the one thing audiences should never feel toward Brie Larson is hostility.)

Happily, though, *Don Jon's* situation improves dramatically, and comedically, with the arrival of Scarlett Johansson (utterly spectacular here), whose Barbara Sugarman becomes Jon's first true love, and who proves as unhealthily obsessed with the fairytale, wish-fulfillment fantasies of Hollywood rom-coms as Jon is with porn. (Kudos to Anne Hathaway and Channing Tatum, by

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the way, for their delightful, in-joke cameos on one of Jon's and Barbara's first dates.) Through his attempts to woo, and hold onto, this young woman who we gradually realize doesn't deserve him, Jon slowly begins to shed his armor of cultural stereotype, and Gordon-Levitt begins to allow real, recognizable feelings to permeate *Don Jon's* universe.

Without pushing his points or fighting the movie's comedy, the star makes you understand and empathize with an unapologetic hedonist who really, *really*

wants to be a better man, and his efforts prove all the more touching with the introduction of an older woman (the earthy yet ethereal Julianne Moore) who's everything Jon has always feared and might secretly need.

*Don Jon*

, even when it's a bit too blithe for its own good, is continually enjoyable. By its finale, it also packs considerable emotional punch. Leave it to Gordon-Levitt, that seemingly bottomless talent, to make a movie about porn in which you might need tissues for your *eyes*

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## **BAGGAGE CLAIM**

*Baggage Claim*, in which Paula Patton plays an airline hostess who can't find a date to her sister's wedding, is the sort of willfully sentimental and silly romantic comedy that Scarlett Johansson's *Don Jon* character would absolutely adore. The rest of us,

however, might find writer/director David E. Talbert's outing less formulaic rom-com than unadulterated sci-fi. Did I mention this is a movie in which

*Paula Patton*

, of all people,

can't find a freakin' date?!? Yet for all of the interior groaning I did at the film's witless plotting and embarrassing contrivances – with Derek Luke playing perhaps the most thuddingly obvious yet routinely ignored romantic option in its genre's history –

*Baggage Claim*

at least kept me smiling with every appearance of second bananas Jill Scott, Adam Brody, and Taye Diggs (supremely hysterical as a dementedly controlling congressional candidate). And Patton, despite her mostly humiliating role, has never been looser, flakier, funnier, or more actively present on-screen than she is in

*Baggage Claim*,

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which alone almost makes the film must-see viewing. Almost.



## ***CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALLS 2***

I loved its animated forebear so much that I was practically giddy with excitement at the prospect of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs 2*, the Cody Cameron- and Kris Pearn-directed follow-up that finds our nebbish hero Flint's FLDSMDFR invention responsible for a new race – several new races, actually – of living foodstuffs in a

*Jurassic Park*

-y environment. I will consequently blame my falling asleep in its second half on the heavy meal I ate prior to my screening, and not on this visually enticing but narratively empty sequel's labored gags, wheezy puns, generic action scenes, underwhelming nemesis, and depressing vanilla-zation of formerly hilarious figures voiced by the likes of Bill Hader, Anna Faris, James Caan, and Neil Patrick Harris. Without question, I hope that filmmakers bring on

*Cloudy 3*

post-haste. And when they inevitably do, I hope the results don't suggest a meal composed solely of fast-food leftovers.

For reviews of *Rush* and *Room 237*, visit "[Race War](#)."

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