

# Joshua Leonard: Hollywood's go-to guy for daring movie-making

Ever since Joshua Leonard helped reinvent indie filmmaking as a star of found-footage pioneer "The Blair Witch Project," he has been something of a go-to guy for groundbreaking, no-budget cinema. Two decades on he's at it again, in an acclaimed but deeply unsettling role as a stalker in "Unsane"—filmed entirely on an iPhone by Oscar-winning auteur Steven Soderbergh ("Erin Brockovich," "Traffic").

"The only reason I have a career still is that we availed ourselves of new technology and unprecedented techniques 20 years ago with 'Blair Witch,'" said Leonard, 42, enthusing about how low-fi filmmaking appeals to his impatient streak. "I think it's the reason that I was so excited when I got called in to make this project, because I love making films much more than I love waiting to make films," he said ahead of its US release on Friday.

"Unsane" stars British actress Claire Foy, of the Netflix series "The Crown", as Pennsylvania office worker Sawyer Valentini, who has left her hometown under mysterious circumstances. After an online dating encounter leaves her upset, she seeks help from a counselor at a local clinic, who tells her to sign a routine form before she leaves. Within minutes, she is committed to a mental

institution against her will and pumped full of pills.

A fellow patient, whose background may be more interesting than he is letting on, tells her she's been locked away as part of an insurance scam but that if she keeps her head down, she will be released within days. However when Sawyer encounters Leonard's

“ I love making films much more than waiting to make films ”

character, an orderly she claims has been stalking her for two years, the audience begins to question her sanity as well.

#### Kafkaesque

Leonard's nuanced, half-pathetic, half-terrifying performance has been roundly praised since the movie premiered in Berlin's film festival in February, although the acclaim has done nothing for his family life. "I just I

felt terrible that my wife had to watch it, come home and sleep next to me. I want to try to figure out a way that my 15-month-old daughter never sees it when she's a teenager," he says, laughing.

Understandably, much has been made of the iPhone novelty but the medium has overshadowed the message to some extent, with headlines concentrating on how the film was made, rather than what it has to say. Ostensibly a Kafkaesque satire of the medical insurance racket, "Unsane" is as much a part of the #MeToo moment as any red carpet protest since the Harvey Weinstein sexual misconduct scandal ignited.

Foy's brittle, irritable Sawyer isn't believed when she complains about her stalker, those in charge of her care assuming she is delusional. The significance of a woman screaming to be heard in the face of threatening male sexuality, as various characters try to "gaslight" her by telling her the ordeal is all in her head, is not lost on Leonard. "Unsane," he points out, was filmed before Weinstein was accused of litany of sex offenses, but he adds that "anything that furthers the discussion is a good thing."

Ironically, real-life unfair treatment of women has thrust Foy into the limelight



In this file photo, US actor Joshua Leonard, left, and US director Steven Soderbergh, right, pose during the photo call for the film 'Unsane' presented in competition during the 68th edition of the Berlinale film festival in Berlin. — AFP

recently, with the producers of "The Crown" admitting she was paid less for her award-winning performances than co-star Matt Smith. "It's a conversation that is long overdue, and I think we've been operating off an old paradigm for far too long,"

Leonard said. "Bringing some of this information to light, like the pay gap disparity, is the first step in actually making real and lasting change. — AFP

## On manic new album, Jack White dares you to rein him in

Jack White really doesn't want to be known just as that sometimes abrasive guy who plays high-decibel guitar. On a sprawling and unapologetically weird new album, White dabbles with UFO-esque synthesizer effects, sings gleefully about robbing banks and covers a tune by that lesser-known songwriter Al Capone.

"Boarding House Reach," the former White Stripes frontman's first album in four years, veers into funk, electro, gospel and blues as White defiantly demonstrates his range. White's third solo album starts off in comparatively tame territory with "Connected by Love," a sure crowd-pleaser with his signature fuzzy guitar empowered by a gospel backdrop.



In this file photo, US singer and guitarist Jack White performs on stage on the third day of the Eurockennes festival, in the French eastern city of Belfort. — AFP

White quickly finds a fresh portal in his mind with "Why Walk a Dog?," a rumination on humans' relationship with their proverbial best friends. "Corporation" opens with a distant echo of the White Stripes' now-classic "Seven Nation Army" riff before turning funky with conga drums in the back as White vows, with tongue-in-cheek gusto, to aspire to the capitalist dream.

Soon White seems to be daring to be reined in. On "Hyperemisophoniac," White explores his distaste for someone's dental noises as trippy, space-like synthesizers swing back and forth like a yo-yo. White's guitar then kicks in over piano as he sings with non-chalance, "Ain't nowhere to run / When you're robbin' the bank."

#### New artistic freedom

The 42-year-old Detroit native, identifiable for his chin-length swoop of black hair that belies his fair complexion and infamous for off-stage flarings of temper, in the late 1990s led the revival of garage rock with its raw, rough-around-the-edges energy. On "Boarding House Reach," White offers hints that he knows he will be accused of self-indulgence.

One track, recited in spoken word by Australian blues artist C.W. Stoneking, is entitled "Abulia and Akrasia," the latter a classical Greek term for lack of self-control. After two decades of success, White apparently can afford artistic freedom. He has founded his own label, Third Man Records, with a headquarters in Nashville and a major new vinyl pressing plant in Detroit.

For a five-month tour in support of the album, White—annoyed, like so many, at the constant distractions in modern-day concerts—will require fans to leave their phones at the door. In an interview in the latest issue of Rolling Stone, White seemed to fantasize about a long-dead music industry in which powerful executives could stop his ideas. "Hey, the label won't let you do that," he told the magazine, adding, "What cool problems to have!" — AFP

## Selfies banned on red carpet at Cannes film festival



In this file photo Chinese-Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh poses for selfies during the opening ceremony of the 70th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

The head of the Cannes film festival said Friday he was banning selfies on the red carpet, claiming they caused "unwanted disorder" before premieres. Thierry Fremaux tried once before to ban the "ridiculous and grotesque" practice at the world's most prestigious film festival in 2015, before backing down. Instead he pleaded with filmgoers, who are usually dressed to the nines in tuxedos and evening gowns, to contain themselves as much as they could.

But this time there would be no reprieve, he said. "Selfies will be banned for spectators on the red carpet," Fremaux told the Film Francais magazine. But it was unclear whether the ban will also apply to the cast and crew of the films being shown. "The triviality and slowdown caused by the unwanted disorder created by the practice of selfies harms the quality of the climb up the steps, and so the entire festival," he added. Hollywood stars have also been known to take selfies of themselves on the Cannes red carpet.

#### Critics revolt

Fremaux also raised the hackles of some film critics with major changes to the timings of press screenings, which were traditionally held before the gala red carpet premieres in the evenings. But critics will now have to wait for the next morning to see half of the films in the main competition, while others will be shown at

the same time. The Guardian's critic Peter Bradshaw led the revolt against the move, tweeting, "Whoa! Why not just have an embargo? Is it that hard to enforce?"

"I can't help thinking Cannes is saving up grief for itself with this!" Variety's Guy Lodge warned that some critics would inevitably be shut out of the evening screening. He said that the rival Berlin film festival "successfully enforces an embargo between morning press screenings and evening premieres. Critics get more time to write more considered reviews, and the films don't get their buzz stomped on. Everybody wins. Why can't Cannes do this?"

Cannes has always been notorious for the reaction of the critics, with some booing films, which can damage their prospects long before they are released. Lodge said the change would ultimately lead to publicists showing films to select critics ahead of time—"not quite the great leveller that Fremaux has in mind." The festival's director had earlier hinted to Screen magazine that a major change was in the offing.

"Don't you think that it could be better to have the press screening and the gala screening in the same day, in the same moment, in the same hour, in order for the film team to arrive in total innocence, to make both the gala screening and the press screening two big world events?" he said. — AFP

## 'Pacific Rim: Uprising' sets sights on 'Black Panther'

Fresh from his confirmation as the crown prince of feel-good fantasy, Guillermo del Toro is cranking the volume up to 11 as producer of the sequel to smash-'em-up blockbuster "Pacific Rim." "Pacific Rim: Uprising"—an altogether brasher, more rambunctious sci-fi tentpole than the Mexican filmmaker's Oscar-winning 2017 opus "The Shape of Water"—is tracking to top the domestic box office with upwards of \$22 million this weekend.

Del Toro—who helmed the original—has handed directing duties to TV creative Steven S. DeKnight ("Spartacus," "Smallville") for the sequel, which is not expected to turn the kind of profit of the 2013 film. Box office observers are wagering nevertheless that even a modest debut weekend could be enough to end the historic reign of Marvel's "Black Panther," which has begun to slow down after five weeks at the top.

"As 'Black Panther' has week after week dispatched a string of high profile newcomers, 'Pacific Rim' likely has the goods to unseat the undisputed king of the box office," Paul Dergarabedian, senior analyst at comScore, said. "It's a testament to the power of 'Black Panther' that at six weeks into its run it still has everyone wondering if it could lead the charge once again."

Set 10 years later, the sequel follows a new generation of pilots of the first film's giant "Jaeger" military mechanoids—don't call them

robots—fending off the truly enormous Kaiju monsters aiming to end humanity. It has had mixed early reviews, and the San Francisco Chronicle's description of "a lot of pounding, smashing and driving, purely functional" a fair reflection of the more luke-warm write-ups. — AFP



## Vampire Weekend re-emerge for Lollapalooza festival

Vampire Weekend, whose indie rock fusion has found critical and commercial acclaim, will play their first full show in four years at Chicago's Lollapalooza festival as the band readies a new album. Announcing the lineup on Wednesday for the August 2-5 festival, Lollapalooza—conceived in the 1990s as a celebration of alternative culture-named headliners who are among the biggest mainstream names.

Bruno Mars, the funk revivalist who swept the latest Grammys, and R&B sensation The Weeknd top the billing for the festival in

Chicago's lakeside Grant Park, which will also feature high-decibel garage rocker Jack White, indie rock favorites The National and rappers Travis Scott and Logic. But the name that caught particular attention was Vampire Weekend, whose members have been saying for two years that they are working on their fourth album.

Vampire Weekend, former Columbia University students who have merged world music into their indie pop, last released an album in 2013 — "Modern Vampires of the City"—which won the Grammy for Best Alternative Music Album. The band has not played full concerts since 2014, although it made two brief appearances in 2016 to campaign for leftist presidential candidate Bernie Sanders.

Frontman Ezra Koenig has said, perhaps jokingly, that the next album will be called "Mitsubishi Macchiato" and in September tweeted that it was "80% done but the last 20% is always the hardest." The album will be the first since the amicable departure of keyboardist and co-songwriter Rostam Batmanglij, who last year put out a solo album that brought an ethereal feel while delving deeper into sonic experimentation. — AFP

