

Film-makers on film: Jonathan Demme



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Interview by Sheila Johnston

12:01AM GMT 29 Nov 2004

Jonathan Demme talks to Sheila Johnston about Jared Hess's Napoleon Dynamite (2004)

"When I found out about this column, it sounded like fun," says the immensely enthusiastic Jonathan Demme. "I was racking my brains for a film to talk about and seized pretty quickly on Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, a masterpiece which I have stolen from shamelessly again and again."

Demme wanted to watch *The Conformist* again before we met, but, like so many other classics, it proved unobtainable on video or DVD. Fortunately he had another title up his sleeve, one he has seen no fewer than four times this year. It is *Napoleon Dynamite*, a no-budget teen comedy which opens here on Friday.

[Mario Monicelli \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/8171433/Mario-Monicelli.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/8171433/Mario-Monicelli.html)

[Neve Campbell will never say never again \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/mandrake/8149822/Neve-Campbell-will-never-say-never-again.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/mandrake/8149822/Neve-Campbell-will-never-say-never-again.html)

[Cameron's no longer dreaming of a Thai Christmas \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/david-ferguson/8148805/Camersons-no-longer-dreaming-of-a-Thai-Christmas.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/david-ferguson/8148805/Camersons-no-longer-dreaming-of-a-Thai-Christmas.html)

[Ladakh: Chasing the snow leopard \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/safariandwildlife/holidays/7164452/Ladakh-Chasing-the-snow-leopard.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/safariandwildlife/holidays/7164452/Ladakh-Chasing-the-snow-leopard.html)

[David Cameron says his vanity photographer was nothing compared to Damian McBride \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/harriet-harman/8141035/David-Cameron-says-his-vanity-photographer-was-nothing-compared-to-Damian-McBride.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/harriet-harman/8141035/David-Cameron-says-his-vanity-photographer-was-nothing-compared-to-Damian-McBride.html)

[How British documentaries made poetry in motion \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/simonheffer/8131254/How-British-documentaries-made-poetry-in-motion.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/simonheffer/8131254/How-British-documentaries-made-poetry-in-motion.html)

Has the director gone from the sublime to the ridiculous? Crisply dismissed by the American trade paper Variety as "an absurdist piece about a rural community of clueless cretins... bottom dwellers doing stupid things that make them look even more idiotic," this film divided audiences and critics violently at its world première in Sundance.

"From a strictly cinematic point of view, the film is, as they say in French, nul, a void, a zero," said Variety's Todd McCarthy.

"So that's what the top dwellers who write reviews had to say. How very interesting," says Demme, 60, glimmering with sarcasm. "To me, Napoleon Dynamite reflects an extremely bold vision, so bold that it alienates some of our august critics. It has enriched my life and brought joy and pleasure into my household."

He was first turned on to it by Denzel Washington, the star of his own latest film, a remake of The Manchurian Candidate. "We were talking last summer and I asked what movie his kids liked at the moment. He said, 'They're obsessed with this film called Napoleon Something.' I said, 'My kids love that movie too.'

"I'm not sure if I would have paid it any attention – it's rated PG [in both the US and UK], which is the kiss of death. But I found myself intrigued because Denzel's kids had gone back to it again; it's one of those repeat movies. So I went to see it and just fell in love with it."

Unconnected to Elvis Costello (who once used the name as a pseudonym), Napoleon Dynamite is centred on two misfits from small-town Idaho, the ginger-frizzed, buck-toothed Napoleon and his even geekier elder brother, Kip. "Their performances are so vividly etched and fully realised that you wonder, 'Was there a script?'" Demme says.

"Every shot is very simply but carefully composed. The cuts to an incoming scene often begin with a straight-on, proscenium shot of somebody set against the neighbourhood, a little in the style of Bill Owens, a photographer who went into the suburbs in the 1960s and '70s and did portraits of working-class people. Much of the film occurs in impersonal houses and these barren, unappealing landscapes with the same desolation that the characters are experiencing within themselves."

However, after some humiliating misadventures, both brothers begin relationships which transform their lives. Napoleon teams up with a new kid at school, while Kip meets the bootylicious LaFawnduh through an internet chat room. "They live in this all-white community, but the guy Napoleon befriends is Mexican and the profoundly irritating Kip just blossoms the moment LaFawnduh, a black woman, steps off the bus.

"It never stops being hilarious, it never starts being remotely sappy, but it's beautiful to watch them emerge out of their little world. I don't think it's patronising. Then, having endured their painful struggle to expand their lives, all the characters are rewarded with a blissfully funny montage of redemption.

"I love the score, too. There's wall-to-wall music of well-chosen pop and a sort of organ music for semi-hopeful moments. I can imagine someone describing it as rinky-dink but it's smartly emotional."

Directed by a 24-year-old first-timer, Jared Hess, *Napoleon Dynamite* confounded reviewers by becoming a cult hit in the States. Five months after it opened there in June, it is still playing in cinemas, and a postscript has been shot for the DVD. "It takes the notion of the happy ending into the ozone," Demme says. "When you talk about the film, it all sounds so serious, but the whole point is that this is an escapist, fun movie."

It's refreshing and surprising to hear a director endorse a film so far on the fringe of the critical canon, and with such modesty. "What I loved as an audience member and was in awe of as a filmmaker was its endless originality. My own recent films have been well-budgeted, super-equipped Hollywood movies and I've been hearing myself say for years that I would love to make a much more daring, idiosyncratic feature.

"For anyone who wishes to do something offbeat, there could be no greater challenge than *Napoleon Dynamite*, made on a shoestring. I hope I find in the next year or two that, yes, I too still have the courage and ability to make a movie like that."