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Mysterious Skin Chats

26 May 2005

Gregg Araki's latest film, *Mysterious Skin* will re-enforce his reputation as a provocative director, but there's a new maturity to his adaptation of Scott Heim's novel that has allowed him to do the unimaginable – make a film involving child abuse that is beautiful to look at and makes you laugh.

Mysterious Skin is the story of two boys, both abused as children, who take very different paths of denial as adults. Neil, played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, becomes a rent boy while Brian, played by Brady Corbet, believes that when he blacked out for five hours as a child he was abducted by aliens.

We met up with Gregg and his two leading men - Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who plays Neil, and Brady Corbet who plays Brian - to talk about how they tackled such a serious subject, leading a double life and how Gregg would love to make a musical someday.

You've injected a lot of comedy into a very difficult subject matter. How have audiences dealt with the humour?

Gregg: I was really happy that people in England felt loose enough to be able to laugh. I've been to a couple of screenings where people were a little more rigid. They were kinda laughing at quite the right moments. Everyone here was laughing at everything that I thought was funny.

The UFOs and the relationship between Frank and his mother, Mrs Lackey was very amusing.

Brady: Wacky, she was wacky!

Did you play the humour up or was it pretty much the same as in the book?

Gregg: The script has its share of humour too, I think. Her character is definitely a major part of the script, but the whole interchange between Brian and Mrs Lackey on the couch is straight out of the book.

It wasn't the type of humour you might get in, say, a *Todd Solondz* film, where you find yourself laughing at someone else's misery. The humour was separated from the bad things that happened.

Gregg: The difference between a Todd Solondz movie and *Mysterious Skin* is that there's a real affection for the characters. There's no misanthropic cruelty towards them. Mrs Lackey, I loved that character. Brian's home was a lot like how I grew up, in this really suburban super safe domestic place where there's a feeling of comfort and you're protected. But of course the irony is that Brian isn't protected even though he lives in a warm golden place.

You're quite kind to the nasty people. I felt you portrayed them sympathetically. Would you agree?

Gregg: That's really very much a part of the book. Even the Coach is portrayed in a very multi-dimensional way. There's no real black and white bad guys. Everyone, including the tricks that Neil does, all have a kind of poignant quality to them.

Brady: I think what's really interesting about the surreal and humorous level is that it blends into the heavy stuff. That's the whole reason why the book is so great, and one of the main reasons why I wanted to be involved.

You have this incredible story where the first half leads you down a path that you feel weirdly safe in. The first few 'disturbing scenes' are shot through the haze of the child's eyes and that makes it feel unreal, so you feel like you're alright. In the second half the past catches up with the present, but it's only how the characters remember the past - so consequences start setting in.

It's great. I loved it. And Brian is so well written. When you first see him you never think that he'll explode or see Neil be tender and both of those things come full circle. Emotionally there's a beginning, a middle and a pseudo end. I think the ending's really hopeful.

Neil and Brian have so much in common and have been searching for each other in their own ways for years. Do you think them meeting would change the course of their lives?

Joseph: I think it will be one of those moments that they always remember the before and the after of. I wouldn't be so presumptuous though as to guess at any specifics, but I think Neil would probably become a, erm, chef.

Brady: You have to wait for the sequel to find out!

Joseph: It's kinda hard to guess and there's really no way to know. Neil will go back to New York, Brian will still be in Kansas and who knows from there? Maybe emotionally they've changed, maybe their lives will stay exactly the same.

During the scenes of abuse I was wondering how you managed to get a child to participate. But then I realised that the children and the Coach are never in the same frame. You used clever editing and sound to evoke what was happening. How much of the storyline were the children aware of?

Gregg: They didn't read the whole script. They only performed their scenes from moment to moment. Because I edit my own movies it was all very carefully planned out and storyboarded. It wasn't really until I worked out a strategy of how to shoot those difficult scenes – in particular the critical scene of the Coach and the kid in the kitchen – that I figured out how to do it and that the movie was even possible.



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The parents had read the script and we had extensive discussions with them about how everything would be shot. Those scenes are so important to the story I didn't want to just do a TV movie version and have all that stuff behind closed doors.

Plus, the story sheds a light on stuff that happens all the time, all over the world. But people just don't want to think about it. To me, the real power of the story is that it puts you in the place of the kids. You go through this experience with them in a way that, before I'd read the book, I didn't think would be possible.

Joseph, your character has a very gung-ho attitude towards sex and he seems to take pride in being a hustler. How do you think he really felt about the abuse he suffered?

Joseph: He's in a great state of denial. Almost as great as someone who thinks he was abducted by aliens. They're both under illusions. Brian thinks Neil is the great love of his life.



But I think Neil reveals a lot about people who are sure of themselves on the outside. They often aren't. I like that about him. I think a lot of movies portray the really confident, good-looking sexy guy, but probably even James Bond had something horrible that happened to him in his childhood.

Well most people have something they don't want people to know.

Joseph: Yeah, they do. You know what I mean? I like the fact that Neil takes this sexy strong character and shows part of what's really behind it all.

Gregg: It was always my theory that Neil, in a way, was more damaged than Brian. Brian was more on the surface and Neil was a much more internalised character.

Brady: Neil's fighting an internal battle with himself. I mean you know you're supposed to regard abuse as this terrible thing, but your body and your mind cope in different ways. And if you find yourself having romanticised or sexualised it, you can enjoy that only for a moment, because you have constant guilt as well. Not only do you feel the victim, but you almost feel that, "well, I must have had it coming".

I think it's great that all this is explored. Whether people love it or hate it, I think you have to love it or hate it for complicated reasons. *Mysterious Skin* really puts itself out there in a very specific and different way, which is due to Gregg because Gregg has a unique vision and style.

It's a depressing subject matter, but it's not a depressing film.

Gregg: It's a very odd bird, in a sense that it's dark, it's disturbing and uncomfortable taboo material. But the experience of watching it, because it's shot poetically, with a gorgeous score, is almost oddly pleasurable.

Thinking about it in contrast to other movies that are dark and disturbing like *Irreversible* or *Kids*, most of those movies are hard and unpleasant to watch. They're provocative and challenging, but the experience of watching them is very different. This film is oddly dreamlike, it sucks you in.

What sort of feedback have you got from people who've seen the film?

Gregg: The response to the movie has been amazing. Not just from 20-year-old college kids who are into edgy cinema, but a lot of older women in particular loved it. People have been very responsive and I think the film stands out in that way.

Brady: The film ultimately isn't about child abuse. It's about subjectivity and how two people can experience the same thing, but come apart in very different ways. And I think that's another thing that makes it less of an endurance test.



Gregg, you've said that you'd love to do a musical or an action movie like *Face/Off*. You're always very involved with your films and I was wondering how concerned you would be about a lack of autonomy on a high-profile project?

Gregg: A lack of autonomy wouldn't be too troublesome as long as there was an ability to maintain enough creative control so my vision wasn't lost. There are certain faceless Hollywood directors, who I don't want to name, that have no vision. They're just like hats essentially. Their work has no personality or individuality.

As a filmmaker I'm really interested in different genres of movies, so it would be great to make a musical so long as it wasn't a run of the mill nothing. I believe that it's possible even within the studio system to do interesting work. I don't think that all studio movies are bad and all independent movies are good.

I can't imagine you ever being a conveyor belt director.

Gregg: No. I don't think that would ever happen. Every movie has a scale. *Mysterious Skin* couldn't be made as a studio movie and still be as strong and uncompromising as it is. If you make a big movie it needs to have elements in it that appeal to a larger demographic and make its money back. It would have to play by certain rules, but I don't think that it's impossible to make an interesting movie within that framework.

Read our review of [Mysterious Skin](#) and why not find out what we thought of his other queer themed film, [Totally F****ed Up](#).

***Mysterious Skin* is released in the UK on 20 May 2005**

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