

# Mid90s (15)

Directed by Jonah Hill



'19 USA 1hr 25mins

Fri 12 March for at least one week

Jonah Hill makes his directorial debut with this spiky coming-of-age story set in 1990s Los Angeles about a teenage boy who finds his scene when he meets an eclectic group of skateboarders.

Stevie (Sunny Suljic) is an awkward LA teen who escapes his home life to find solace in a group of skate punks who take him under their tattered wings. His new friends are older, more experienced, and guide Stevie through their rituals and routines as they skate, smoke, chase girls and talk nonsense around the suburbs of LA, thrusting him into exciting - but also ever-scarier - situations...

Set to a brilliant soundtrack of '90s rock and rap, *Mid90s* is equal parts sweet and sour - an authentic, warm (never nostalgic) celebration of the era, of youth, and seeking refuge in friends (and skateboarding).

*This article by Hannah Woodhead featuring and interview with director Jonah Hill originally appeared on huckmag.com in April 2019.*

Jonah Hill is running late. An Arctic blizzard has been tearing New York City apart, halting his taxi and wreaking havoc with his phone signal. Somehow, he remains calm and collected. "I heard it's colder than the Antarctic in Chicago at the moment," he says, sounding more awed than inconvenienced. "Crazy, right?" There's something disarming about starting an interview with Jonah Hill this way. With no trace of Hollywood bravado, he's just a guy with shitty mobile phone service who cannot believe the weather out there.

As it happens, this moment comes at a pivotal point in Jonah's career: the release of his directorial debut, *Mid90s*. It centres on the daily lives of laconic teenage skaters, chiefly 13-year-old Stevie (Sunny Suljic), who takes up a board as a reaction to his difficult home life in Los Angeles. Through skating, he finds a sense of unprecedented freedom and forms close friendships with a tightly knit group of older kids - who introduce him to the joys of underage drinking, smoking and sex.

Since premiering *Mid90s* to acclaim at the Toronto International Film Festival last September, Jonah's been on an intensive press trail - gracing countless magazine covers in the US and travelling around the world to present the film - without any sign of his enthusiasm dimming. "I feel like I've just gone through this whole process and it hasn't even finished yet," he says. "Whatever happens next is a total surprise."

It's been 15 years since Jonah made his acting debut with a small part in David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees*, but the role he's best

The 18:10 screening of *Mid90s* on Mon 15 April will include Descriptive Subtitles and a short introduction, which will feature simultaneous BSL (British Sign Language) interpretation. Following the screening please join us for a post-show discussion with other audience members which will take place in the Café/Bar and will feature simultaneous BSL (British Sign Language) interpretation.

known for came in 2007, when he starred as high-school loser Seth in Greg Mottola's *Superbad*. That film captured the mid-noughties teen zeitgeist in the same way John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* did two decades prior, turning the movie into a global phenomenon. But overnight fame proved a blessing and a curse for Jonah, who spent the next three years playing roles which largely poked fun at his appearance, relegating him to the role of 'funny fat guy'.

Even after an Oscar-nominated performance in 2011's *Moneyball* marked a turning point in his career, Jonah remained the butt of Hollywood's jokes for a long time. A quick YouTube search of his name brings up a supercut entitled 'Jonah Hill hurts' where a series of interviewers (and his *Moneyball* co-star Brad Pitt) make disparaging comments to his face. It's soundtracked, rather tastefully, to Johnny Cash's version of 'Hurt' and has drawn over a million views. To this day, a headline will pop up to document every time Jonah appears to lose or gain weight. This is the kind of scrutiny that women are routinely subjected to in the public eye, of course, but few male A-listers draw the same level of ire.

Jonah is an anomaly. So how has he found the confidence to keep going when the public and press treat him as such an easy target? "Sometimes you don't!" He laughs. "A lot of times you don't, y'know? I think the best thing I've done for myself is to make this movie, because it's freed me to go forward as a person and as an artist."

Growing up as the middle child in a wealthy suburb of LA, Jonah gravitated to skate culture much like the teenagers in *Mid90s*. He was never as good as them, he clarifies, because he never felt fearless. But what it did offer was a different lens to see things through, influencing everything from his sense of humour and work ethic to his taste in music and film.

"There's this sort of ideology that comes with skateboarding, especially if you absorb it in your formative years," he says. "It's a family outside your home if you don't want to be at home. There's a lot going on there psychologically that goes beyond the comprehension of the 10-year-olds who are doing it... There's no

part of you that thinks, 'Why am I doing this?' I don't think it'd be a childhood if there was. I spend a lot of time analysing stuff like that now, looking back on when I was a kid."

That process of personal excavation has brought up a few uncomfortable truths. Jonah is known to be evasive about his life before films (his mother was a costume designer, his father an accountant for Guns N' Roses), though he does admit to witnessing a lot of unpleasantness growing up among the other young men he hung out with. "But it wasn't black and white," he's quick to add. "There was a lot of beauty, too. It was about love and connection as much as it was about dysfunction."

In Mid90s, he doesn't shy away from showing misogyny and homophobia – particularly through the language its characters use with each other, such as the correct use of the word 'faggot' and whether or not it's "gay to say thank you". It feels jarring to hear teenagers having these conversations in 2019 – but for Jonah, it's an accurate depiction of how he grew up.

"I hoped that by showing the misogyny and homophobia as rampant and blatant as it was, it would show how ugly it was," Jonah explains. "It makes me so upset that people might think I'm condoning that language, because when you're reflecting on the way people talked to each other, in that hyper-masculine environment which skateboarding was at that time, it would be completely offensive to change it. It's upsetting to think about, but that's how we talked. That's the point of showing it, y'know? It doesn't mean the kids weren't there for each other."

The experience of making Mid90s has inspired Jonah to go deeper in challenging the version of masculinity he was taught – traditions his entire generation inherited – and to show how flawed those ideals were. "The thing for me is that it wasn't cool to express emotion," he says. "I look at the actions of this generation of men who were taught it was feminine to emote and now that repression is coming out in all these fucked-up ways; there are all these horrific things that happened as a result. But y'know, punk – for example – is about dealing with the aftermath... it's riding the wave that comes after it."

For Jonah, that means rethinking how he fits into the movie landscape 12 years after breaking into mainstream consciousness. It helps that he's made films with some of the biggest directors in the business, from Martin Scorsese to the Coen brothers, while befriending the likes of Harmony Korine and Spike Jonze along the way.

"Spike's been a real mentor to me," he says, the admiration evident in his voice. "He was writing this movie that I was going to be in while I was working on my script; we would explain to each other the story of our films every day as an exercise, so the other could point out holes and help. I still do it every day with what I'm writing; just tell someone the story if they're willing to listen. You'll learn so much about what's working and not working. You'll realise what you're passionate about."

Trepidation follows any actor who decides to move into drama after making their name in comedy, and similar scrutiny follows those

who move from being in front of the camera to behind it. Having navigated both of those transitions, Jonah seems acutely aware of how the public perceive him. He knows that the 'dumb bro' comedies that he made his name in contributed to the same toxic masculinity he grew to resent. He's conscious of the privileged place he comes from, even with all the challenges it's thrown up. These are things that often play on his mind.

"I realised over my own life and career, I was seen as the polar opposite to who I really am as a person," he says. "The biggest admission I had to make to the world is that I'm deeply, deeply sensitive, and when someone says something unpleasant to me, it hurts – just like it would everybody else. I was a sensitive kid who grew up in this world, which involved a lot of unpleasant language, and it caused a lot of damage."

"The greatest lie we all tell is that we're all okay all the time," he goes on. "My cool job doesn't exempt me from feeling scared or hurt or silly or... you know what I mean?" He sighs. "At 35, it's nice to feel okay being the same person I am behind closed doors as out in the real world, making my movies and all that stuff." But when asked if getting through that difficult process and finally figuring out who you are brings any respite, Jonah can't help breaking into another laugh.

"It's not 'through' it, we're in it! ...That's how life is. We're so trained to be like, 'I'm goooood!' And then your Instagram's like, 'I'm awesome!' But that's not what life's like. There's no end, there's no winning. There's just, 'Cool, this is what I am right now. And I'm comfortable being that. And there's good days and bad days.'"

This isn't Jonah trying to host a pity party for himself. He feels like the luckiest person in the world, he says, and the fact that he gets to make art out of all this is something he genuinely enthuses about. "And I hope I get to keep making movies that reflect the vagueness and delicateness and insanity of being a person," he says finally. "I think there's so much more I can explore."

*You are welcome to take these film notes home with you. However, in an effort to minimise the amount of copies we print, now that you've finished reading them, if you no longer require them please return them to a member of staff or to the programme note holders outside the cinema so that others may use them. Thank you for your assistance.*

## MILLENNIUM SQUARE CAR PARK

**Watershed ticket holders pay just £4.50  
for car parking in Millennium Square**

*From 17:30 - midnight, 7 days a week*

Validate your parking ticket at Box Office  
when you collect your cinema tickets.