

Movies



In his first foray into sci-fi, Leonardo DiCaprio plays a dream raider in the much-anticipated *Inception*

Man of your dreams

LOS ANGELES — The last time we saw Leonardo DiCaprio he was trapped in a puzzle constructed by his own psyche.

Now just six months after *Shutter Island*, he's starring in *Inception*, about a thief who inserts himself into the subconscious thoughts of others in order to both extract and implant ideas. Pattern, anyone? If there is, it's all in your mind.

"(Are they) bookends?"



KEVIN
WILLIAMSON
Movies

I don't know. These were characters, filmmakers and plot structures, I was compelled to do," DiCaprio, 35, tells a group of journalists at a Beverly Hills hotel. "And I'm lucky to be able to do

them. So I jump on those opportunities. Traditionally, I've always tried to work with the best directors I can. These films that are psychologically dark at times, I find extremely exciting to do because there's always something to think about.

"There's nothing more boring than to show up on set and say a line and know that your character means exactly what they say. It's interesting to have an unreliable narrator

... Both these characters are unreliable to themselves and the characters around them."

Shutter Island, of course, was directed by DiCaprio's repeat collaborator Martin Scorsese. For *Inception*, he teamed with Christopher Nolan, architect of such intensely intelligent thrillers as *Memento*, *Insomnia* and *The Prestige*, as well as sophisticated comic-book adaptations *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.

It's the first time DiCaprio has worked with Nolan as well as his first foray into the science-fiction genre.

"This is my first science fiction film. One of the earliest conversations I had with Chris was that I have a hard time with science fiction. We have an aversion to it because we have a hard time investing in worlds that are too far detached from what we know. That's what's interesting about Chris

Nolan's science fiction world — because it's deeply rooted in visual things we've seen before. It feels like a world we could jump into and is not too much a leap of faith."

Opening Friday, *Inception* is both a cerebral, multi-dimensional jigsaw and a propulsive globe-trotting adventure as DiCaprio's Dom Cobb assembles an elite team, including Ellen

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Inception



Top: Ken Watanabe has Lukas Haas in a stranglehold. Marion Cotillard (right) in Inception.



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Page, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Tom Hardy, to infiltrate the dreams of a corporate heir. But Cobb's personal demons — one of which is personified by Oscar-winner Marion Cotillard — could sabotage the assignment and even threaten their lives. By the staggering finale, the film is piling on multiple, false, physics-defying realities.

"This was an extremely ambitious concept that Chris was trying to pull off," DiCaprio says. "But in *Memento* and *Insomnia*, he's shown that he can take highly complex, highly dense plot structures and give them emotional weight so the audience feels fully engaged."

In researching the role, DiCaprio consulted books about dream analysis.

"I'm not a big dreamer. Never have been. I remember fragments of my dreams," he says. "But then I realized this is Chris Nolan's dream world. It has its own structure, its own set of rules."

The result is like a James Bond movie crossed with, as DiCaprio puts it, "a

giant therapy session."

Which brings us back to the similarly psychological *Shutter Island*.

"In terms of (the characters) both being locked in this dream world and going on a cathartic journey, that's about where the similarities ended. This film couldn't have been more vastly different from the other in its execution."

And he insists how he chooses projects now is the same as it has always been.

"It's if I feel I can be of service to the role, if the script emotionally engages me, if it interests me, and if the director is someone who has the capacity to pull off the ambitious nature of whatever they're trying to do in the screenplay."

Still, he concedes he gravitates toward darker, more challenging material. "I guess a lot of my films have been more serious in tone. I'm a very fortunate person. I get to choose what I do. I have a lot of friends in this industry that don't get to do that. I grew up in L.A.; a lot of my friends are actors. I realize how lucky I am."

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Holy Bat-clout, Nolan!

KEVIN WILLIAMSON
QMI Agency

LOS ANGELES — Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide. So what does he do for an encore? Anything he wants.

Which explains why Warner Bros. gave the 39-year-old writer-director a reported \$150 million to spend on *Inception*, a wildly ambitious action thriller about dream raiders who pilfer the minds of unsuspecting marks.

Admittedly, Nolan is in a position that, depending on your perspective, is either very enviable or extremely daunting. But despite being a self-confessed pessimist, he prefers to look on the positive side of things.

"I'm asked a lot if after *The Dark Knight*, that puts pressure on the next one. And it's not really the case. It's a responsibility. It's not that often you get to have a large commercial success and then have something you want to do that you can excite people about. And so it's a great opportunity ...

"We were in a position where the studio was prepared to put a lot of faith in us and trust us to do something special. Those opportunities are rare for filmmakers."

And it's hard to imagine that, without that equity, *Inception* would have been made so easily. Opening Friday, it's not a sequel or a reboot. Nor is it based on a video game, toy line, 1980s TV show or comic book.

Then again, considering how disappointingly some of this summer's "pre-sold properties" have performed — *The A-Team* and *Prince of Persia* among them — perhaps now is precisely the time to give audiences something wholly original.

Nolan clearly hopes so, buoyed by a recent history. After all, it has only been six months since another big-budget science-fiction adventure entitled *Avatar* obliterated box-office records.

"It's difficult to draw trends. I suppose the media has to interpret trends, but in a period when James Cameron's *Avatar* has come out and made God knows how much money, the idea it has to be a sequel or it's a risk to be original, it seems strange to me. But at the same time, there is definitely a difficulty marketing a film, putting a film out there, that people don't have a frame of reference for."

A greater challenge than making it, however,

may be how to market it. Nolan and Warner Bros. have been exactly careful about how many of *Inception*'s multitude of secrets to reveal in their trailers and advertising.

"My most enjoyable movie-going experiences have always been going to a movie theatre, you sit down, the lights come down and the film comes on the screen you don't know anything about," Nolan explains. "I want to be surprised and entertained. We don't want to give everything away."

Certainly, he's had plenty of time to consider all of this. He began circling the concept

around the time he finished 2002's *Insomnia*. However, it took him nearly a decade to crack it.

"I started out writing a heist movie and then realized that the heist movie genre is a little limited because it tends to be deliberately superficial and surface, and not have a massive emotional investment. Because we're dealing with dreams and the mind and the subconscious, you can't have an unemotional story. It has to be about emotions."

That said, it doesn't skimp on spectacle. Cast and crew spent seven months last year shooting in locations ranging from Paris and England to Tokyo, Morocco and Calgary.

Yet the question persists: Is the movie, with its mind-warping narrative, too smart for audiences accustomed to turning their brains off during the summer months?

Nolan's wife, Emma Thomas, who has produced all his films, doesn't think so.

"I think that audiences aren't given enough credit. People do like to be challenged. The other thing I feel very strongly about this film is that it can be appreciated on many levels."



CHRISTOPHER NOLAN



Walking on air

LOS ANGELES — Part-Fred Astaire, part-*The Matrix*, one of *Inception*'s standout moments is a zero-gravity sequence in which Joseph Gordon-Levitt pinballs weightlessly through a dreamscape.

The actor, who had a musical montage in last year's hit (*500 Days of Summer*), laughs at the Astaire comparison. "It's sort of how *Sesame Street* and *Star Wars* both use Jim Henson puppetry. It's a similar technique, but to very different effect."

Says director Christopher Nolan, "We had a stunt guy who looks exactly like Joe made up and he stood there on set every day and

didn't do a thing because Joe did absolutely everything himself, except for maybe one shot. Everything else he did himself. He did the most incredible job on these rigs, these torture devices."

Not that Gordon-Levitt minded. "It was about the most fun I've ever had on a movie set. It was probably the most pain I've been in physically on a movie set. But I guess it's the way athletes must get where they put on the pads and wrap their ankles and get a little beat up. But that's just part of slamming yourself into walls and jumping around all day."

— Kevin Williamson