

There is nothing quite like it. A misfit film with a misfit cast by a misfit director filmed in Idaho, of all places (here in Idaho we have a little something called “pride.”). Everything about it is unconventional and out of place. It’s awkward. Straight up dorky. Parts of it don’t really seem to make sense. And yet, 20 years later, it remains a beloved, cult classic. Here is everything you need to know about the film *Napoleon Dynamite*.

But first...

AT&T recently mentioned that 73 million personal records of current and former customers were released and found in places all over the dark web. It made me want to do something to help beef up my personal security. Fortunately there’s a solution to this problem. Enter Aura, this video’s sponsor, which can identify data brokers exposing your information and submit opt-out requests on your behalf. Brokers legally have to remove your info if you ask them to, but they make it super difficult to do. Let Aura handle it for you. Aura also does so much more to protect you and your family from online threats you can’t see. It’s easy to set up. You get parental controls, antivirus, VPN, password management, identity theft insurance, and more all in one app, all at one affordable price. So let Aura do the hard work of keeping you safe online. Go to aura.com/beatgoeson to start your 14-day free trial. The link’s also in the description. Thanks to Aura for sponsoring this video.

Behind the scenes

Brigham Young University, or BYU

2002

Film students Jared Hess and Jon Heder decide to collaborate on a class project. What resulted was a short film called *Peluca*, which follows a dorky high school student named Seth, played by Heder. Hess and Heder submitted the film to the Slamdance Film Festival, where people loved it. One person, in particular, who loved it was Hess’s friend Jeremy Coon, who also attended BYU. He convinced Hess to drop out of college to turn *Peluca* into a full-length, feature film after finding investors to help him pay for its production.

Jared wrote a screenplay for the film with his wife Jerusha Hess, who also was a film student at BYU. Jared later said that much of the script was autobiographical, loosely based on all the awkward experiences he and his five brothers went through growing up as Mormons. Coon and Hess had a difficult time finding investors for the film. Hess later said that many thought it was “too weird or they just didn’t like the character.”¹ Speaking of that character, Heder practically volunteered to play the role of Napoleon, basically a more complex version of Seth from *Peluca*. Napoleon’s last name? Dynamite, of course. Efren Ramirez, who had extremely minor roles in a handful of other films up to that point, played Napoleon’s friend Pedro. Tina Majorino, who had been a successful child actor but had taken time off from acting and was considering not coming back to it, played Napoleon’s friend Deb. Three of the more accomplished and recognized actors were Jon Gries, Sandy Martin, and Diedrich Bader. Gries played Uncle Rico, Martin played Napoleon’s grandma, and Diedrich played Rex, a local martial arts instructor. Gries later said that he likely would have quit acting if not for the role playing Uncle Rico. Diedrich later said that the script for what would become known as *Napoleon Dynamite* was “one of the two top

¹ <https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/here-there-be-ligers-an-oral-history-of-napoleon-dynamite-80125/>

scripts I've ever read."² The other being the one for *Office Space*, which he also starred in, of course. Jared would direct. Coon would produce, joined by Chris Wyatt and Sean Covel.

Long story short, Hess and Coon scrounged up enough money to attempt to film everything in just 23 days in July 2003. It was often hot during filming. Very hot. Hess decided to film it in his hometown of Preston, Idaho...about two and a half hours north of BYU. One of the main filming locations was Preston High School, where Hess graduated back in 1997. They also filmed in Hess's old neighborhood, and the chicken farm where his brothers used to work.

Since they didn't have much money, the Hesses bought nearly all of the actors' wardrobe at thrift stores. He cast many of his friends from school, including Aaron Ruell, who played Kip, Napoleon's older brother. Ruell had never acted in a movie before, and has barely acted in any movies since I should say. Hess's actual, real-life neighbor, Dale Critchlow, volunteered to play the role of Lyle. Many of the students in the movie were actual students at Preston High School. Local Preston residents were incredibly generous to the film crew, providing housing and regularly providing them free food. Oh, and there were few stunt performers.

Yes, Gries really threw that.

The Hesses wrote Napoleon's big dance scene literally because they knew Heder liked to dance. And oh boy could he dance. They approached Heder and told him that his ability to dance would either make or break the film. No pressure.³ Getting the rights to the song Napoleon danced to, Jamiroquai's "Canned Heat," was about half the movie's budget.⁴

You mainly see outdated technology and fashion in the movie, however, because that's how Hess viewed his Idaho hometown- it was always at least ten years behind the times.

After filming, editing mostly took place in the fall of 2003. If it weren't for the Sundance Film Festival, we likely all wouldn't know about *Napoleon Dynamite*. The movie debuted there on January 17, 2004. The folks at Fox Searchlight Pictures were impressed, especially Nancy Utley. Utley became determined to release the movie and promoted the heck out of it. With the help of Paramount and MTV Films, *Napoleon Dynamite* debuted in theaters across the country on June 11, 2004. It slowly became a commercial success.

That said, the film had a somewhat polarizing reception- ya either loved it or just didn't get it. Famous movie reviewer dude Roger Ebert gave the movie just one and a half stars, writing "There is a kind of studied stupidity that sometimes passes as humor, and Jared Hess' "Napoleon Dynamite" pushes it as far as it can go."⁵ The polarizing effect of this film has also

² Kraisirideja, Sandra (July 27, 2011). "[Comic-Con 2011: Diedrich Bader Interview Napoleon Dynamite](#)". *Collider*.

³ *Napoleon Dynamite*-(Commentary by Jared Hess, Actor Jon Heder and Producer Jeremy Coon) (DVD). Fox Searchlight Pictures. 2005.

⁴ Patail, Martin (February 27, 2012). "[Exclusive Interview with Jon Heder of Napoleon Dynamite](#)". *Portland Monthly*. Retrieved August 15, 2018.

⁵ <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/napoleon-dynamite-2004>

made it difficult for streaming platforms like Netflix to know who to suggest it to based on algorithms.

Plot

Napoleon Dynamite indeed takes place in Preston, Idaho. As I mentioned earlier, judging by the fashion, technology, and much of the pop culture featured in the film, it feels like the story is set in the early 1990s. However, the film's opening credits reveal that it clearly takes place in 2004, or the year of the film's release.

While you should definitely watch it yourself, here is the basic storyline. Napoleon Dynamite is a lonely, dorky 16-year old who goes to high school in...yep, Preston. He lives with his grandmother and even dorkier older brother, Kip. In many ways, Napoleon endures many of the same struggles many teenagers go through in high schools around the world. It's clear he has trouble fitting in, but also demonstrates a surprisingly mature confidence in himself, though he often hides that confidence around bullies. And yes, he is often bullied.

After Napoleon's grandma is injured in an ATV accident, she asks Napoleon and Kip's Uncle Rico to look after them, even though they...uh...well, ya know...it doesn't seem like....uh...ok it seems like they're too old to be babysat...but whatever. In many ways, Uncle Rico is just as immature as Napoleon and Kip. He's delusional and naive. He falls for fake time machines and get-rich-quick schemes. He lives in a van. While Kip gets along with Uncle Rico, Napoleon certainly does not. However, he does get friends at school, which is a big freaking development. First Pedro, who transfers to Napoleon's school from Mexico, and Deb, who Napoleon first meets as she's trying to sell him stuff at his front door, but also goes to his school.

A big plot development is when Pedro decides to run for class president, and his main opponent is the popular Summer Wheatley, played by Haylie Duff, Hillary Duff's sister. Meanwhile, Kip's girlfriend that he met online, LaFawnduh, played by Shondrella Avery, arrives in town from Detroit and soon Kip realizes he needs to make big life changes. The climax of the movie arrives as Summer and Pedro present skits to the entire school to persuade them to elect them as class president, with Napoleon...quite unexpectedly...coming to the rescue.

Analysis

Even if *Napoleon Dynamite*'s plot is not groundbreaking, the film's aesthetics and unabashed awkwardness certainly was. And the brilliance of *Napoleon Dynamite* comes not from its plot- it comes from its characters and its script.

There are so many memorable one-liners in this movie. Nearly every single line of *Napoleon Dynamite* is unexpected the first time you hear it, but quotable afterward. That said, many quotes from the film have become so iconic at this point that, odds are, you've already heard at least some of them before watching it for the first time.

There are so many memorable CHARACTERS in this movie. Characters that are just not typically seen in movies. One of the characters is Preston, Idaho...itself. By capturing this small

Idaho town so well, the film also captures Middle America so well, a strange term for the American heartland that I guess is HERE, ALSO not typically seen in movies. Several critics have claimed that the characters in *Napoleon Dynamite* are over the top, but I'd argue you could find characters like these in every single small town in America. In fact, it's rare to find such AUTHENTIC characters in a movie.

Many critics have also complained that *Napoleon Dynamite* doesn't have a plot, and I used to also believe this, but that's not true at all, man. It has a plot. It's a classic underdog story. The misfit finds new friends, gains confidence and overcomes his fears and awkwardness, and shines to help his friend, all while finding out his true identity along the way. Heck, the same can be said about most of the main characters of this film.

Legacy

Even though *Napoleon Dynamite* had a budget of just \$400,000, it has since made approaching \$50 MILLION at the box office and more than \$130 million in home video sales not to mention all the merchandise sales.⁶ Heck, Jon Heder, reportedly only got \$1,000 for his role⁷, which means that most of the rest of the cast likely got squat for their performances.

The movie arguably led to a sharp rise in major film companies investing in indie flicks, particularly those set in Middle America, and particularly those that did well at Sundance. It also led to a phenomenon known as the Napoleon Dynamite effect, a term that has even appeared in academic journals. It describes anything that adds a lot of uncertainty to a model.⁸

Indeed, it was a risky film, being so unconventional. Today, we simply don't see Hollywood take risks anymore on films like this. But hey, I get why. In 2012, Fox Broadcasting Company thought it WASN'T taking a risk when it released a TV show based on the movie...but that show completely flopped. Fox canceled it after just six episodes. Regardless, the film has continued to resonate with younger generations. Each year, its popularity continues to rise.

At first glance, it doesn't make much sense why *Napoleon Dynamite* has done so well. Its sense of humor is kind of weird. The plot is kind of basic. It is the opposite of glamorous. Every moment is painfully awkward. It's a film without any major Hollywood stars. When you go to the Wikipedia pages of all the actors in this film, for pretty much every single one, it says something along the lines of "best known for their role in *Napoleon Dynamite*." That's because before and after the movie's release, these actors were not famous. In fact, many before and after the movie's release, HAVEN'T ACTED MUCH AT ALL. That's kinda crazy when you really think about it. But yeah, anyway, every person tied to this film, even the film's primary creator, Jared Hess, will forever be strongly associated with *Napoleon Dynamite*.

⁶ <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/Br6JL1dZrol>

⁷ <https://www.grunge.com/169834/heres-how-much-money-jon-heder-made-for-napoleon-dynamite/>

⁸ <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1401.3413v1>

But they should all be proud of that, because it's a masterpiece. *Napoleon Dynamite* is a Hollywood film unlike any other Hollywood film in history. No offense to *The Outsiders*, but *Napoleon Dynamite* features the REAL outsiders.

It takes a bunch of characters that don't fit in and are often in the background and makes them the stars. These characters are not charismatic. I mean, they're boring...and some argue are not easy to relate to. They are straight up...WEIRD...man. We just don't often get characters like this, especially in a Hollywood film. I mean, if we're lucky, we might get to watch characters like this on YouTube, but again. NOT IN FREAKING HOLLYWOOD. *Napoleon Dynamite* was a blockbuster Hollywood film that was the opposite of a blockbuster Hollywood film. It wasn't supposed to be a success, but the fact that it was so successful is proof that not only is Hollywood so out of touch, but that we crave so much more out of films than spectacle. But I argue that, despite their quiriness, these are characters we CAN relate to. Why? Because our lives are awkward. Most of us DON'T have charisma. Most of us have a hard time fitting in. Most of our lives are weird, man. We don't always crave fantasy in films. We often just crave reality. And it's WEIRD that Hollywood often doesn't realize that.

June 11 marks the 20th anniversary of when this film hit theaters across the United States. And I gotta say, 20 years later it holds up remarkably well. It's definitely one of my favorite ten films of all time. So which movie should I cover for this series next? Let me know down below, and thanks for watching!

Sources/further reading:

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