



GEORGE CHRISTY



Celebrity Photo/Scott Downie

Inception's director/writer Christopher Nolan with his producer wife Emma Thomas during the world premiere in London

Obsession is the name of the game with the blogosphere about Warner Bros. \$160 thriller, *Inception*. (Marketing costs may bring the cost to \$200 million.) Commentators and critics on website after website have obsessed with unparalleled excitement, hailing director-writer **Christopher Nolan's** surrealist sci-fi extravaganza as the dawn of cinema's new age.

Cities fold within cities in *Inception*, along with scenes of zero-gravity played on a specially designed 360-degree rotating set. Death-defying leaps and falls, violent fights, car bombs, gunfire upon gunfire, and shoot-the-hell out of whoever's in the way through six countries, Morocco, France, Canada, Japan, U.S. and England with an infinite body count. "Like cracking an egg open," assesses seasoned moviegoer **Carl Hall**, "with one hundred elephants thundering at you."

Leonardo DiCaprio co-stars with **Marion Cotillard**, **Joseph Gordon-Levitt** and **Ellen Page**, and he nails *Inception* as "Memento on steroids." Christopher's 2000 *Memento* was a psychological puzzle starring **Guy Pearce**, a breakthrough film that finally attracted a distributor and became a cult favorite. Christopher moved on to direct the billion-bucks-grossing sequels, *The Dark Knight*, and *Batman Begins*. And now with *Inception* we float through mind-challenging dreams within dreams (Leonardo says that he read Sigmund Freud's analyses of dreams before the filming). *Inception* is an intellectual actioner that you may love. Or wonder what it's about while listening to composer

Hans Zimmer's powerful Oscar-worthy score, and being blown away by **Wally Pfister's** cinematography.

The Wrap's **Steve Pond** describes *Inception* as "a dense, stylish, thorny, dazzling film ... that gives viewers lots to chew on and puzzle through." "A fiendishly intricate yarn set in the labyrinth of the subconscious ... a heist thriller for surrealists ... challenging viewers to sift through multiple layers of (un) reality," says *Variety's* **Justin Chang**. "A con game movie," offers **Kirk Honeycutt** of the *Hollywood Reporter*, "only the action takes place entirely within the characters' minds while they dream."

Inception does have its naysayers. "If a movie wants to connect with an audience, it has to draw viewers into a story and invest them in what's happening to its major characters ... if one doesn't reach out and grab you, it means nothing. And that's exactly where *Inception* falls short," adds *The Wrap's* **Anonymous**. "Call me old-fashioned, but that's what I'm looking for in a movie. No matter how low the budget or how drab the look, give me a plot and characters that pack a wallop – not with their fists – and I'm there."

The Wall Street Journal's **John Anderson** looks upon *Inception* as "the Emperor's Bedclothes ... no one short of an NASA system analyst will be able to articulate the plot ... contrived as an alibi for special effects wizardry."

"Clunky and confusing on four separate levels of reality," says *New York* magazine's **David Edelstein**, "the movie is a metaphor for the power of delusional hype."

The flat voices of Leonardo DiCaprio and Joseph Gordon-Levitt are disappointments – they lack inflection. When **Michael Caine**, who plays Leonardo's father, is on the screen, his voice and speech stand out with exceptional clarity and distinction. Ditto for **Tom Hardy**, who plays the forger. Nothing like that compelling British style of acting – if only more of our American actors were trained that way.

Christopher lives in Los Angeles with wife, **Emma Thomas**, the producer of *Inception*, and their three children. He turns 40 on July 30. Says the movie's genesis was spawned ten years ago, and nixes the idea that the human brain is comparable to a computer. "An inadequate analogy, because the brain is capable of more than we'll ever know. When I'm asked why are you interested in the mind, I say I've always lived in one." Next for Christopher is a Batman movie, and he says he "has an unusual idea about a Superman film."

At Locanda Portofino in Santa Monica, we discovered that employees have been there since its opening in 1995. Which speaks volumes about the owner-management, doesn't it? We've often walked or driven by, and dined there the other night for our first time with **Flo Grace** of GracePR, who says it's her neighborhood restaurant that long attracted a loyal Hollywood crowd.

We ran into **Gail Berman**, former chief of production at Paramount Pictures, and husband **Bill Masters**, who are regulars. When she headed the television division at Fox, Gail greenlighted such successes as *American Idol*, *24*, *House*, *Bones*, *Family Guy*. Partnered with **Lloyd Braun** in a production company, she's filming a SySy pilot, *Alphas*, in Toronto starring **David Strathairn**, with **Jack Bender** of *Lost* fame directing. We also caught up with **Marliese Donaldson**, whose husband **Roger Donaldson** is directing the spy thriller, *The Hungry Rabbit Jumps*, with **January Jones**, **Guy Pearce**, **Nicolas Cage**.

Locanda Portofino revived memories of Da Puny near the harborfront in Portofino, where owner Puny's memory recalls hundreds of patrons' names and their favorite dishes. Puny, born **Luigi Mirolli**, serves wonderful food, pesto dishes being specialties, with **Giorgio Armani** and sister **Roberta** and their staffers being longtime diners.

At Locanda Portofino, we met the Serbian-born waiter **Zoran Bena**, there from Day One, as has **Andrea Inio**, who hails from Lake Garda. They affirmed that local Westsiders are regulars. **Reese Witherspoon**, **Steven Spielberg**, **Oliver Stone**, **Owen Theron**, **Paul Haggis** return for Naples-born owner **Florestano Caracciolo's** Italian cooking, who's the skinniest chef in our memory.

Some Beverly Hills living rooms may be larger than Locanda Portofino, where diners like the inviting intimacy. Open for lunch daily (except Sunday) and dinner nightly. At 1110 Montana Avenue in Santa Monica. Telephone: (310) 394-2070.

Dog lovers are discovering *dognewsdaily.com*, founded by Summit Entertainment's former PR executive **Vivian Mayer**, who masterminded that overwhelming premiere of *Twilight*. Vivian and husband **Alan Suskind** created the website that's "the fastest growing and most popular dog news resource and information portal on the Internet."

Included are *Dog Products*, with 1,500 from more than 350 pet manufacturers; *Dog News*, covering junkets and red carpets (such as Warner Bros.' *Cats and Dogs: Revenge of Kitty Galore*); *The Dog Services Directory*, now being uploaded, will include zip code searches for service

providers such as groomers, pet sitters, vets and trainers. Flo Grace was thrilled that her Norwich terrier Redford (named after you-know-who) was crowned Dog of the Day. "The global pet business is out of control," says Flo. "In the billions."

Amid buffet choices in the Grand Ballroom of Hollywood and Highland after the *Salt* premiere, **Wolfgang Puck** served the brioche-wrapped coulibiac of salmon, created for the Russian czars who called it kulebiaka until the French changed the name. A delicious dish with salmon, hard-cooked egg, mushrooms, shallots and dill favored by the horny Catherine the Great. After seeing the movie, you'll understand the Russian connection.

Salt is a film about "sleepers spies," starring **Angelina Jolie**, who was purportedly paid \$20 million. She sprints like a marathoner, leaps off tall buildings, mercilessly murders, and has a hundred lives. Directed by **Phillip Noyce**, *Salt* has a fine thrumming score by **James Newton Howard**. At the after party, guests ogled Angelina and the beardless **Brad Pitt**, with ladies insisting he "looks a lot better, like his old self."

Brad dumped the facial hair to film *Moneyball*, portraying baseball's **Billy Beane**, who was taught to pitch baseballs at an early age by his naval officer dad. Billy became a Major League player, and the Columbia adaptation is based on **Michael Lewis'** bestseller. How, as manager of the Oakland A's, Billy applied computer analyses to track down star players for his baseball club that was on a budget. **Bennett Miller** (*Capote*) directs, with photography having begun this week in the Sports Stadium at Wilson High School in Long Beach.

Online at www.bhcourier.com/georgechristy.cfm



Director Phillip Noyce with son Luvuyo and wife Vuyo Dyasi



Jon Voight and son James Haven



The film's Liev Schreiber with Naomi Watts



Angelina Jolie, stars as the "sleeper spy" in *Salt*. She and Brad Pitt attended the Hollywood premiere.

Celebrity Photo/Janet Gough and Gilbert Flores