

CRITICAL THINKING

DIRECTED BY JOHN LEGUIZAMO

WRITTEN BY DITO MONTIEL



STARRING JOHN LEGUIZAMO, RACHEL BAY JONES, MICHAEL KENNETH WILLIAMS, CORWIN TUGGLES, JORGE LENDEBORG JR., ANGEL CUIEL, JEFFRY BATISTA, WILL HOCHMAN, ZORA CASEBERE, RAMSES JIMENEZ

PRODUCERS

SCOTT ROSENFELT AND JASON MANDL

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

CARLA BERKOWITZ, HARVEY R. CHAPLIN, EMILIO ESTEFAN. JR

TRT: 117 minutes | USA | Sony Venice

Sales Contact:

Mikey Schwartz-Wright

Schwartz-WrightM@unitedtalent.com

Publicity Contacts:

Hilda Somarriba

Hilda@Prism-mg.com

Emily Lu Aldrich

Emily@AccoladePR.com

SYNOPSIS

It's 1998 in Miami. Rampant poverty, broken families, and a prejudiced system push underprivileged youth to the fringes of society. But for a magnetic group of teens, there's a reprieve. A game where it's not about where you come from, but how you play. That equalizer is chess. Mr. "T" Martinez, a chess militant and passionate coach, leads them to a completely foreign field of battle: the National Chess Championship. With an underfunded school district, Martinez and his team can't just waltz into the arena. They have to fight for it. Chess runs parallel to their own experiences as Martinez teaches them that the power of Critical Thinking can not only save their kings, but also their lives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FROM EXECUTIVE PRODUCER CARLA BERKOWITZ

On Sunday, March 17, 1998, almost 22 years ago to the day, I woke up and saw an article in the Miami Herald's Tropic magazine about the Miami Jackson Senior High School chess team. This team, made up of Latinx young men & women of color from one of the poorest communities in Miami, had been shattering stereotypes of what kind of person excelled at chess, and they had just won the U.S. National Championships in Los Angeles. The image and story was haunting and I felt like I had a quantum shift in my perception of chess and who plays it. Immediately after reading the article, I got in touch with Coach Mario Martinez and began what would be a 20-year love letter to Miami Jackson Senior High School and Miami in the '90s.

After interviewing the players, I chose 5 to focus on. They each had a unique take on chess and their own philosophy. One plays blindfolded against 6 boards and wins every time. One plays with aggression. One plays with more finesse. One is organized and kept the team together... you get the idea. It was a movie even before it actually was.

I wanted to change the perception of who plays chess! I wondered, when these guys are winning these prestigious competitions, beating kids from the most elite schools in America, how many of these prep-school parents would cross the street if they saw one of these boys standing at the corner?

The world needed to see these kids lifting themselves out of the inner-city on the strength of their minds. They drew on their inner-city experiences and used their minds as weapons against the obstacles in their lives. A world that only ever wanted to pay attention when they caused problems had to acknowledge that they had the power to solve them too.

What was absolutely astounding was how deep in this game they were, seeing 10 moves into the future, even as they were trying to predict 10 life decisions ahead before they made them and seeing a way out of the inner-city using kings & queens & pawns & rooks...Securing the life rights and the funds was the easy part, the dance to "make" the movie was another story. As

you would expect after 20 years, many people were in and out of this project. But it wasn't until John Leguizamo and fellow producers Scott Rosenfelt ("Home Alone") and Jason Mandl got involved in 2016 that the film began to take shape. After John committed to star in and direct the movie, shooting began in November 2018 and wrapped in December.

This story has Miami blood, sweat, and tears, and I would never have filmed it anywhere else!

Q&A WITH DIRECTOR JOHN LEGUIZAMO

Can you talk about how you came on board to not only star in the film but also to direct it?

I was asked to star in it by producer Carla Berkowitz and I really dug it. It naturally came to both of us that I should direct. I worked with Dito Montiel who is a monster screenwriter to finesse it so it really brought chess and the intellectual aspects up front.

What attracted you to this film?

I found the story proof that we Latinx and Black Americans can win any intellectual challenge put on us -- even with every obstacle put in front us. We just need to be given the chance and this true story proves it. These kids came from the most underprivileged of situations and beat the strongest odds.

How has being an actor helped shape you as a director?

Well, I had in my memory banks the work of the greatest directors of our time at my beck and call. I have worked with them and saw how they handled every situation. Plus, I know how to talk to my actors because I respect their process and love their skill set.

Can you talk about the pre-production process? What was the casting process like?

We did lots of rehearsals and practiced chess all day. Basically we were becoming a real chess team. I had the consultants (the real players) coach us and walk us through the actual games they played in regionals, state and National championships. I also let the young actors improvise and make suggestions so that the roles fit them and they became those characters.

What were some of the challenges you faced during production?

Money is the ever present bogeyman; never enough time, never enough equipment. This is especially true when you are dealing with big set pieces of a high school and championships with hundreds of extras and tiny little pieces of chess. The two are opposing forces. How do I get the big sets and crowds and get the actual moves and the beauty of the strategy that is chess?

What do you want the audience to take away from after they watch the film?

The audience is going to walk away knowing that this was possible. That it can be done. This is possible because of the drive of the kids and the brilliance of their teacher Martinez. His love for these kids was

something exceptional and it made the kids believe in themselves and rise to the challenge of reaching the highest goal of National champs.

ABOUT THE CINEMATOGRAPHY WITH DP ZACH ZAMBONI

What was John's approach to the cinematography on Critical Thinking?

John wants authenticity and great performances. He wants a shot to feel cinematic, but also a bit raw, and definitely dynamic. Energy is really important for him, creating and capturing energy and feeling that through the camera. At times he likes creating freedom for the actors and the ability to improvise, and having the confidence that the camera will capture it. I think that's why John wanted my documentary instincts - enhance that energy and help the environments feel authentic and vibrant. The dynamic energy of youth and the unique location of Miami.

What were some challenges for the camera?

Wow. 90's period piece. All practical locations. Fast shooting schedule, low budget. Huge cast! Only a few scenes in the film have two people, most scenes have four to six key players all having great interactions. We often wanted the feeling that comes with capturing moments in a more doc-style way, following and responding to a conversation as it unfolds. We often shot in multiple directions at once, shooting out two sides of a conversation simultaneously rather than the traditional "turning around". We often designed and lit locations to shoot 360 degrees.

What were some techniques for dealing with those challenges?

Being flexible and adaptable was key. Multiple cameras, remotely controlled lighting, pre-rigging wherever I could. Being handheld was also essential. Right from the beginning John wanted a handheld camera that could respond to actors, to be in sync with them as we moved through their world or to punctuate something happening emotionally. I've probably shot in a thousand practical locations so I had a lot of practice with that aspect. I was very fortunate to work with a great lighting crew headed by gaffer, Jim Pescrille and with great production design by Mark Harrington.

Most of all I think John likes my instincts, he knows I'm glued to the moments that the actors are having and I'm shooting it like I'll only have one take - which is the level of attention doc work gives you. I think directors and actors really respond to that. They know I'm right there in the moment with them.

FILMMAKER BIOS

Producer - Scott Rosenfelt

Scott Rosenfelt is one of Hollywood's most successful independent producers. On the strength of such films as Home Alone, Smoke Signals, Mystic Pizza, Teen Wolf and Extremities, Scott has garnered international acclaim and recognition.

Rosenfelt's most recent film, Critical Thinking, about the Latino and African-American Miami Jackson High School chess team that won the US national chess championship in 1998, received early acceptance to the 2020 SXSW Film Festival and will screen in March, 2020. The film is directed by John

Leguizamo, who also stars, along with Michael K. Williams, Jorge Lendeborg, Angel Bismark Curiel and Rachel Bay Jones.

Rosenfelt is currently prepping his newest film, CounterPlay, in the Philippines. He wrote the script and will be producing the film with director Pedring Lopez.

Rosenfelt produced and wrote The Jade Pendant, which premiered in Los Angeles in 2017. It is the winner of the Golden Angel Award for the Best Film by an Independent Producer in the 2017 Chinese-American Film Festival.

As writer, director and producer, his documentary, Standing Silent, a recipient of a Sundance Documentary Filmmaker Grant, had its theatrical release on January 25, 2013. It had its World Premiere at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival and has played the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival along with the Doc NY Film Festival as well as having won the Best Documentary at the World Jewish Film Festival in Ashkelon, Israel.

Home Alone, in which Rosenfelt served as Executive Producer, remains the highest grossing live action comedy of all time, generating over \$1 billion worldwide. Mystic Pizza, which he also produced, launched the career of Julia Roberts and went on to critical and commercial success, while Teen Wolf, which Rosenfelt also produced, starring Michael J. Fox, is one of the highest grossing independent films of all time.

At ShadowCatcher Entertainment, he produced the award-winning Smoke Signals. Written by highly acclaimed novelist/poet Sherman Alexie, Smoke Signals was the winner of the Audience Award and the Filmmakers Trophy at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival and was distributed by Miramax Films.

Rosenfelt is a member of the Directors Guild of America, the Writers Guild of America and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He is a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and has spoken at film schools around the world.

Producer - Jason Mandl

Jason has produced and production managed more than a dozen feature films, a television series, and hundreds of pieces of content in the digital space across multiple companies, most notably Maker Studios which later sold to Disney. With nearly two decades of experience primarily in Los Angeles, New York, Europe and China, he has worked successfully in both the independent and studio environments in a variety of settings. While having complete budget accountability for more than \$50M dollars across his various projects, he has earned a reputation of trust, high value producing, and always coming in on time and on budget.

Additionally, Jason started an NGO called The Wandering Samaritan, and enjoys running, hiking, camping, jazz, scuba diving, swing dancing and martial arts.

Director/Star - John Leguizamo

A multi-faceted performer and Emmy Award winner, John Leguizamo has established a career that defies categorization. With boundless and visceral creativity, his work in film, theatre, television, and literature covers a variety of genres, continually threatening to create a few of its own.

Most recently, Leguizamo was seen in *The Infiltrator* opposite Bryan Cranston. Previously, he was seen in *Sisters* opposite Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, action comedy *American Ultra* with Jesse Eisenberg and Kristen Stewart, and *The Hollow Point* opposite Patrick Wilson and Jim Belushi.

Leguizamo has also starred alongside writer/director Jon Favreau in *Chef*, and in the breakout comedy hit *Ride Along* opposite Ice Cube and Kevin Hart.

In addition, he recently wrapped production on the third season of the critically acclaimed, Emmy-nominated Netflix series *Bloodline* in which he plays the role of "Ozzy Delvecchio" and stars alongside Kyle Chandler, Ben Mendelsohn, Linda Cardellini, and Chloe Sevigny. He also recently reprised his role of "Aurelio" in *John Wick 2* opposite Keanu Reeves, Ian McShane, and Common.

Carla Berkowitz

Carla Berkowitz is the Executive Producer of the highly anticipated independent feature film *Critical Thinking*, directed by and starring the Emmy-award winning actor John Leguizamo. She and Harvey R. Chaplin have been partners for 30 years and spent over 20 years developing *Critical Thinking* from story to screenplay to film. Her company, NRSP, is producing *Critical Thinking* and developing other Aspirational projects. She first made her mark on the Fitness Video industry Producing over 15 Internationally sold Fitness Videos from 1991-2005. Anyone who watched BET's *Caribbean Rhythms* in the 1990's knows her Jamaica Me S'wet Fitness Video series. She's also an Audio Engineer, graduating from SAE and specializing in "Demos in a Day". She's also the Founder of Perfect Balance World, a Yoga/Athleisure Brand focused on introducing Physics-Based Yoga clothing engineered to improve your performance on the mat. In 1999 she pioneered the use of hip-hop, rap and indie rock to replace traditional meditative music for yoga. Carla is a mother of four children who have no idea what to do with her. She has Lupus, and it sucks, but creating stuff helps and it's basically the least interesting thing about her. Ask about her Vinyl Wall instead.

Cinematographer - Zach Zamboni

With his debut feature film premiering at SXSW, Zach Zamboni is known as one the most influential doc cinematographers working in the US. Most noted for his work with Anthony Bourdain, Zach has filmed in 70 countries and won 3 Primetime Emmy Awards for Nonfiction Cinematography, 8 Primetime Nominations, a Peabody Award, and 3 IDA Nominations for Best Documentary Series. With over 150 episodes of primetime and streaming television, his work appears on Netflix, HBO Max, Amazon, and Showtime. Bringing together the best of both doc and narrative approaches, now Zach is all about scripted work.

CAST BIOS

Angel Bismark Curiel

Raised in Liberty City, Miami, Angel Bismark Curiel is a Dominican American actor. Curiel rose to prominence with his portrayal of 'Lil Papi' in the Emmy nominated FX series, *POSE*. His feature credits include *NIGHT COMES ON & MONSTERS AND MEN*. The forthcoming film, *CRITICAL THINKING*, has

allowed Angel to realize a lifetime goal - working with his childhood hero, the film's director, John Leguizamo.

Corwin Tuggles

Corwin Tuggles was born and raised in Harlem, NY. At the age of 10, Corwin made his television debut as the singing voice of Tyrone, on the hit TV show "The Backyardigans." Not long after that he took his talents to a different venue and appeared as Joe Thibodeaux in the Broadway cast of Tony Kushner's, "Caroline Or Change." He also performed in the Broadway production of the musical version of "How The Grinch Stole Christmas." Corwin has been in numerous of commercials/shows ranging from Mercedes Benz, Tostino's Pizza Rolls, Target, Broad-city and more. Special Thanks to God, his family and his agents at FBI (John and Heather).

Jorge Lendeborg Jr.

Jorge Lendeborg Jr. has been cast as the lead of the upcoming Netflix film NIGHT TEETH. He was recently named to The Hollywood Reporter's 'Next Generation 2018' list and is known for starring opposite Hailee Steinfeld in the TRANSFORMERS spinoff, BUMBLEBEE, for director Travis Knight, which earned more than \$450 million at the worldwide box office. Jorge also had a memorable role in both SPIDER-MAN: HOMECOMING and SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME, starring opposite Tom Holland, Zendaya, and Jon Favreau.

Jorge can currently be seen starring as "Jah Son" in Hulu's critically-acclaimed series, WU TANG: AN AMERICA SAGA, produced by Imagine. He just wrapped production on Eddie Huang's BOOGIE for Focus Features, starring opposite Taylour Paige and Mike Moh. Jorge also recently finished production on Amazon Studio's BLISS, starring opposite Luke Wilson and Salma Hayek. Prior to that, Jorge starred in Greg Berlanti's Fox feature LOVE, SIMON alongside Nick Robinson and Jennifer Garner, as well as in Robert Rodriguez's ALITA: BATTLE ANGEL, produced by James Cameron and starring alongside Christoph Waltz, Mahershala Ali, and Rosa Salazar. Up next, Jorge will be seen starring in John Leguizamo's feature directorial debut, CRITICAL THINKING, starring opposite Michael K. Williams.

In 2016, Jorge broke out in a starring role in Stephen Caple Jr.'s debut feature THE LAND for IFC Films, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, earning him rave reviews for his performance. He can also be seen in Dave McCary's BRIGSBY BEAR opposite Claire Danes and Kyle Mooney, which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 2017 and sold to Sony Pictures Classics.

Rachel Bay Jones

Rachel Bay Jones is best known for originating the role of 'Heidi Hansen' in the Original Broadway Cast of Dear Evan Hansen, and received a Tony Award, Emmy Award, Grammy Award, Lucille Lortel Award, and Drama League Nomination for her performance. She can currently be seen on the hit ABC series "Modern Family," CBS' "God Friended Me," and in the feature film "Ben Is Back," opposite Julia Roberts. She stars in the upcoming feature film "Critical Thinking," directed by and opposite John Leguizamo, and as 'Sherri Nill' in the upcoming Amazon series "Panic." Additional Broadway credits include Pippin, Hair, Women on the verge of a Nervous Breakdown. Off-Broadway & Regional/National Tour include Dear Evan Hansen (Drama Desk Nomination) at Second Stage, First Daughter Suite at The Public Theater, Hello Again, A Christmas Story, Pippin, Sylvia, & The King and I. On Television, Rachel recently appeared on NBC's "Law & Order: SVU," ABC's "The Family," and the FX series "Louie." She is currently touring her new solo concert series "Something Beautiful," and her debut solo album "Showfolk" can be purchased on iTunes and Amazon.

Ramses Jimenez

Ramses Jimenez was born in the Dominican Republic and spent his youth between Santo Domingo and the south side of Chicago. Experiencing two completely different cultures sparked his passion as an artist and he continued his studies at Columbia College Chicago majoring in Film Directing. While there, Jimenez began his acting career quite unexpectedly after an interview for an on-set gaffing position took a surprise turn. Director Marisol Torres convinced him to audition for the lead role in the independent film "Chicago Boricua". The film launched his career as an actor and from there he went on to do various independent films and three studio films Lets Go to Prison, Batman: Dark Knight, Nothing Like the Holidays which all shot in Chicago.

As his career transitioned to television Ramses made appearances such as Law and Order, CSI, CSI Miami, In Plain Sight, Supah Ninjas, Prime Suspects, Code Black, Good Behavior and The Catch. Then he was cast as a recurring character on FEAR THE WALKING DEAD for AMC, WISDOM OF THE CROWD for CBS and VIDA for Starz.

After directing a passion film in Dominican Republic on children's rights, he returned to the United States and is playing series regular 'Detective Eric Castillo' on NBC in a new show called LINCOLN RHYME: HUNT FOR THE BONE COLLECTOR. He's starring opposite Russell Hornsby, Michael Imperioli, Tate Ellington, and Arielle Kebbel. The show is based on the bestselling book series by Jeffery Deaver that was adapted into the 1999 movie starring Denzel Washington and Angelina Jolie.

Most recently, Jimenez starred opposite John Leguizamo, who is also directing, in CRITICAL THINKING, an indie feature based on a true story that takes place in 1998 Miami Jackson Senior High school chess team that defies the odds to become the first urban high school to win the U.S National Chess Championship.

Will Hochman

Will recently made his Broadway debut in Adam Rapp's The Sound Inside, a critically acclaimed two-person drama opposite Mary-Louise Parker, directed by David Cromer. Other theatre includes: Sweat (Mark Taper Forum, LA); The Sound Inside (Williamstown Theatre Festival, original cast); Dead Poets Society (Classic Stage Company, original cast). Film: Let Him Go (Focus Features), Critical Thinking (dir. John Leguizamo), Paterno (HBO). TV: The Code (CBS).

Zora Casebere

ZORA CASEBERE is 21 years old and a senior at Columbia University NYC. She was previously a member of The Arts Effect All-Girl Theater Company where she appeared Off-Broadway in SLUT: The Play directed by Katie Cappiello and Meg McInerney. Casebere also participated in a workshop held by artist Joan Jonas, in which she performed in the video installation THEY COME TO US WITHOUT A WORD, presented at the 56th International Art Exhibition Biennale di Venezia Italy, and made her film debut in Amanda Kramer's LADY WORLD. The role of Chanayah in John Leguizamo's CRITICAL THINKING is her second supporting role. Casebere recently filmed a supporting role in Sofia Coppola's new film ON THE ROCKS.

[OPENING CREDITS](#)

[END CREDITS](#)

###