

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Skip the Line at Nikki's Booth

*Michael Johnston on anchoring the \$523 million horror phenomenon *Obsession*, returning to *Little Toni*'s after rewriting box-office history, taking one small step every day from rural North Carolina to the London Tube, and filming *The Mummy: The Book of the Dead*.*

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

For fifteen years, Michael Johnston built an acting career the way he still tells young artists to build theirs: one small, unglamorous step at a time. At twelve years old in rural North Carolina, he stumbled across a behind-the-scenes DVD called *Adventures in Voice Acting*, joined online voiceover forums, and taught himself how to record from home. At eighteen, he packed up and moved to Los Angeles, where his manager gave him a deceptively simple piece of advice before his first on-camera audition: treat it just like a voiceover booth, and don't look into the lens. That step led to his breakout television turn as invisibility-powered chimera Corey Bryant across the final seasons of MTV's *Teen Wolf*, a steady run of major video-game and anime voice roles from *Kingdom Hearts* to *Tales of Zestiria*, and more than a decade of quiet, persistent craft in the independent trenches.

Nothing in those fifteen years, however, could have prepared him for what happened on May 15, 2026.

That was the Friday Focus Features and Blumhouse Productions unleashed writer-director-editor Curry Barker's *Obsession* across American theaters—with Johnston in the lead role of Baron “Bear” Bailey, a shy, lovestruck music-store clerk who snaps a \$6.99 novelty branch called the “One Wish Willow” and wishes that his childhood best friend and co-worker Nikki Freeman (Inde Navarrette) loved him more than anyone in the world. Shot in twenty-some days across the San Fernando Valley on a micro-budget of roughly \$750,000, the film had already ignited a historic \$15 million bidding war at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2025, won the People's Choice Award at Sitges, and blown the roof off Fantastic Fest in Austin. Once moviegoers got their hands on it in May, *Obsession* turned into a once-in-a-generation box-office lightning bolt: surging 39 percent in its second weekend, climbing another 14 percent in its third, earning an “A” CinemaScore and a 97 percent Certified Fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and grossing more than \$523 million worldwide to become Focus Features' biggest movie of all time and the fifth highest-grossing horror film in history.

Now, as Focus Features mounts a major guild and Academy Awards campaign—including a Best Actor push for Johnston alongside Navarrette, supporting players Cooper Tomlinson, Megan Lawless, and Andy Richter, and filmmaker Curry Barker—Paul Salfen caught up with Johnston for AMFM Magazine during a brief window before the actor flew back to London, where he is currently shooting Universal Pictures' blockbuster sequel *The Mummy: The Book of the Dead* opposite Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz.

When Salfen opened by calling 2026 “the year of *Obsession*” and asking whether Johnston can even wrap his head around it yet, the actor didn't pretend to have a neat Hollywood soundbite ready.

“Yeah, I mean, people ask me what it’s like, and I just say, I don’t know, because I don’t have anything to compare it to,” Johnston told Salfen. “Things have changed for me in every single way, and my daily sort of struggles and priorities have completely shifted. Like nowadays, I’m just worried about getting enough rest and, you know, being able to eat, and sometimes even, like, having time to go to the bathroom. I mean, that’s how crazy it’s been lately. And I’m so grateful, and it’s so much fun. And I have a really good team around me, and I’m getting all these opportunities now that a few years ago, I would have been over the moon—and now I’m having to say no to a lot of them. So, you know, it’s really special.”

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RED BILLBOARDS AND THE LONDON TUBE

Part of what made *Obsession*’s ascent so electric is that audiences discovered it for themselves. As Salfen noted in his 97.5 KLAK *Movie Minute* review on opening weekend, the film’s “careful what you wish for” premise starts with a flash of sweet, immediate infatuation that you instantly know isn’t right before spiraling into extreme, edge-of-your-seat psychological terror—anchored by Johnston’s painfully relatable, morally complicated turn as Bear. Because Bear is both the architect of the nightmare and its increasingly panicked prisoner, the entire movie rests on Johnston’s ability to keep the audience inside the head of a self-styled “nice guy” whose cowardice and ego strip the woman he loves of her free will.

Salfen asked what it felt like when the visual footprint of a \$750,000 indie suddenly caught up to its word-of-mouth—walking outside and seeing buses roll by or billboards towering overhead. Johnston pointed out that in the beginning, the marketing was as mysterious as the *One Wish Willow* itself.

“There were definitely billboards, but the *Obsession* billboards didn’t have our faces on them, and we didn’t really get onto buses because, you know, no one really knew—it was a sleeper hit,” Johnston said. “So it wasn’t like they had posters all over the country. But then they did start popping up, and it was that really brilliant red background. And so I thought that was really smart. It really caught your eye because nobody knew anything about the film, and, you know, I liked that. But one of the things that was really surreal was all my friends in England sending me pictures of my face in the Tube. Yeah, that was really cool.”

That blood-red campaign—and eventually Johnston’s and Navarrette’s faces plastering London Underground platforms as Universal Pictures International rolled the film out across the U.K. and Europe—turned out to be an uncanny preview of Johnston’s own autumn address. Within months of commuters spotting Bear in the Tube, Johnston was riding through London himself to report to set on one of Universal’s crown-jewel adventure franchises.

RETURN TO LITTLE TONI’S

Before heading back across the Atlantic, however, Johnston got to experience a full-circle Los Angeles night that captured just how deeply *Obsession* has embedded itself into pop culture. Since the movie’s May release,

fans on TikTok, Reddit, and Letterboxd have turned the film's real-life San Fernando Valley shooting locations into pilgrimage sites—flocking to The Green Man metaphysical shop in Burbank (where Bear buys the One Wish Willow) and walking seven minutes down the road to Little Toni's, the family-run Italian restaurant at 4745 Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood that has been serving pizza and pasta since 1956.

It was inside a vinyl booth at Little Toni's, on the final day of principal photography, that Johnston and Navarrette shot the film's unforgettable first-date centerpiece—the scene where Bear's probing questions trigger a chilling, public meltdown as a possessed Nikki rises from the table screaming “No!” over and over before crying, “*I thought we were having a nice date.*” All summer and fall, diners have been lining up down Lankershim Boulevard waiting just to sit in that exact booth.

When Salfen asked Johnston for a favorite memory looking back at the production, the actor revealed he had just walked back through Little Toni's doors the night before their interview.

“I would say last night, you know, we had a mixer, and it was at the Little Toni's restaurant, which is where we filmed *Obsession*, and it was the first time I'd been back,” Johnston said. “The whole place had been renovated, so I'm really happy that their business is booming. And luckily they kept the booth there with the date scene the exact same. And it was such a joy to see everybody, to reunite with the cast and to just be there again. And if I would have known that when I was there, I don't know what I would have done. I think the pressure would have just been too much. Yeah, that was a pinch-me moment, going back to the restaurant. I still never had a meal there.”

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Salfen couldn't believe it: even at a celebratory cast mixer inside the restaurant he helped make world-famous, they didn't feed him?

“Well, there was no time!” Johnston laughed. “Everybody—I was talking, talking, talking. I didn't have time to eat. But I will go back one day and have a proper meal there. They told me I can skip the line to sit at the Nikki's booth.”

ONE MILLION STEPS, ONE STEP A DAY

For every young actor, voice artist, or independent filmmaker watching Johnston go from self-taping in North Carolina to commanding a half-billion-dollar theatrical phenomenon at age thirty, the obvious reaction is the one Salfen voiced next: *See, that's what I want to do.* Even Johnston's booking of *Obsession* came from years of invisible preparation—an hour-long Zoom conversation with Curry Barker unpacking attachment theory and Bear's psychology, followed by chemistry reads with every contender for Nikki until he and Navarrette locked into the frequency that made the film sing.

Asked what advice he would pass along to someone trying to follow in his footsteps, Johnston started with the work itself—and then caught the practical daily habit that actually carried him through the lean years.

“Shoot, I’d say, you know, however you can, just keep making art, even on the smallest scale, even if no one’s going to see it, just to kind of hone your craft,” he said, pausing for a beat as he searched for the second half of the thought. “What else would I say? I had something and it went away from me. But yeah, I think that would be it—to just keep doing what you love and have goals. That’s what I wanted to say: set a goal and work toward it every day. Even if it would take you a million steps to get to your goal, just take one step. It can be the smallest thing. That’s how I did it. You can’t skip steps. Just the tiniest thing to get to—like, if you’re, ‘Oh, I need to set up my studio,’ okay, well, go buy the thing and set it to do one thing. Check. If you do one thing every day, you’ll be headed in the right direction.”

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It is the kind of advice that only comes from someone who has actually wired his own microphone cables, edited his own reels, and learned not to let the size of a dream paralyze the work of a Tuesday afternoon.

WHY DOES THIS STORY NEED TO BE TOLD TODAY?

Once the million steps deliver you to the top of the call sheet, however, the challenge flips. Instead of fighting for any audition in town, you are suddenly fielding offers from every corner of the industry. Salfen asked what Johnston keeps in mind to stay on the right path now that his career looks completely different than it did a year ago.

For Johnston, the compass is two-part: trusting the people in his corner to protect his bandwidth, and interrogating the cultural purpose of a script before he ever signs on.

“Having a really good team around me to help filter all of the opportunities and, you know, manage my schedule is really helpful,” Johnston said. “And then I think just staying connected to and getting involved with the stories that I feel are really relevant and need to be told today. So, like, more than just connecting with the character, I also want to know: why does this particular story need to be told? Why would this be relevant today? And I think that kind of helps me to kind of narrow it down in a way.”

That filter makes total sense coming from the lead of *Obsession*. Underneath its supernatural jolt and pitch-black humor, Barker’s film is a razor-sharp dissection of modern male entitlement, parasocial longing, and the delusion that love is something you can wish into submission rather than earn through honesty. Audiences didn’t just scream at *Obsession* in theaters; they argued about Bear and Nikki all the way to the parking lot.

FROM FREAKY NIKKI TO THE MUMMY: THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

With the world now wide open to him, Salfen asked what audiences will see Johnston in next. The answer is one of the most anticipated studio tentpoles on the 2027 calendar.

“Yeah, well, I’m currently filming *The Mummy: The Book of the Dead*, and it’s going really well, and I’m just so excited for everyone to experience it,” Johnston said. “And after that, you know, I have a bunch of really exciting projects that are on the table, and we’ll see how it goes and how that all falls into place.”

Directed by Radio Silence filmmaking duo Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett (*Ready or Not*, *Scream*) from a screenplay by David Coggeshall and produced by franchise veteran Sean Daniel alongside Project X Entertainment, Universal Pictures' *The Mummy: The Book of the Dead* (slated for theaters October 15, 2027) reunites original Academy Award-winning stars Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz as Rick and Evelyn O'Connell alongside returning fan favorites John Hannah, Oded Fehr, and Kevin J. O'Connor. Johnston—who famously salvaged a technical-disaster Zoom audition when his laptop speaker and AirPods died mid-scene by asking the casting room for one more take—plays a brand-new character in the adventure sequel and has spent months in boxing and stunt training as production shoots across London and Morocco.

Ironically, spending October on a London soundstage for *The Mummy: The Book of the Dead* meant Johnston had to miss out on one of the coolest Halloween honors *Obsession* received back home in California. At Universal Studios Hollywood's 2026 *Halloween Horror Nights*, creative director John Murdy and Curry Barker brought "Freaky Nikki"—dressed in her blood-soaked final-scene black dress and boots, clutching a brick, and speaking dialogue pulled straight from Barker's script—onto the streets of the Upper Lot to roam the park, trade secret Instagram passwords with fans, and hand out limited-edition One Wish Willow cards bearing a phone number voiced by Barker himself.

When Salfen closed by telling everyone to revisit *Obsession* for Halloween, Johnston admitted the one thing he was bummed to miss while shooting overseas.

"And I know, I'm so sad that I'm missing Halloween Horror Nights here," Johnston said. "I really wanted to go and find Nikki, because I'd be really curious how she'd react to me. I'll be in London instead."

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Salfen offered the ultimate consolation prize: "You found a mummy. It's okay."

Johnston grinned right back. "Yeah, all right, that's fine. That's good. All covered in blood—they almost look the same."

With a warm thank-you and a promise to talk again soon, Johnston signed off to head back into the whirlwind—hopefully with ten minutes to grab a bite before the next call time. A kid from North Carolina who bought one piece of studio gear at a time, an actor who turned a \$6.99 wish into a \$523 million cultural landmark, and a leading man who now has a permanent front-of-line pass to Nikki's booth at Little Toni's whenever he finally gets a night off to eat.

FIND OBSESSION

Written, Directed, and Edited by: Curry Barker

Produced by: James Harris, Haley Nicole Johnson, Christian Mercuri, Roman Viaris

Executive Produced by: Jason Blum, Leonora Darby, Mark Lane, David Haring, Ruzanna Kegeyan

Associate Producer: Cooper Tomlinson

Starring: Michael Johnston (Baron “Bear” Bailey), Inde Navarrette (Nikki Freeman), Cooper Tomlinson (Ian), Megan Lawless (Sarah Harper), Andy Richter (Carter)

Cinematography by: Taylor Clemons · **Music by:** Rock Burwell · **Production Design by:** Vivian Gray · **Costume Design by:** Blair James · **Casting by:** Skyler Zurn

Distributor: Focus Features (United States) / Universal Pictures International · **Production Companies:** Blumhouse Productions, Capstone Studios, Tea Shop Productions, Under the Shell

Story: After breaking the mysterious “One Wish Willow” to win his crush’s heart, a hopeless romantic (Michael Johnston) finds himself getting exactly what he asked for—but soon discovers that some desires come at a dark, sinister price.

Release & Streaming: Following its September 5, 2025 world premiere at TIFF and its May 15, 2026 theatrical release (\$523M+ worldwide; 97% Certified Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes; “A” CinemaScore), *Obsession* (109 min., Rated R) is available now on Digital/PVOD (Prime Video, Apple TV), on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray, and DVD via Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, and streaming exclusively on Peacock.

Up Next for Michael Johnston: Johnston is currently in production in London on Universal Pictures’ *The Mummy: The Book of the Dead*, directed by Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett and starring Brendan Fraser, Rachel Weisz, John Hannah, Oded Fehr, Kevin J. O’Connor, Michael Johnston, and Numan Acar, arriving in theaters October 15, 2027.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, October 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.