

JEWISHWEEK.COM: August 4, 2008: "Bend it like Bernie" by Curt Schleier: Review of the film and interview with Paul Weiland can be found at:
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Bend It Like Bernie

In Paul Weiland's 'Sixty Six,' a bar mitzvah's boy's moment to shine collides with the World Cup final. It's a story the director knows well.

Paul Weiland with Gregg Sulkin on the set of "Sixty Six": "Making the film was like being in analysis," Weiland says. "In a way, you're basically dealing with your demons."

by Curt Schleier
Special To The Jewish Week

When Paul Weiland was growing up in London and his schoolmates chose sides to play soccer, he was always picked last — after the boy with polio.

"I was pretty weedy," he says, on the phone from his London office. "The school was pretty tough, and my skills on the football pitch weren't good. And it didn't help that I was Jewish." There were only two other Jewish children in his year.

Weiland, 55, has done pretty well for himself in the years since then. He's become an important film and television director in the UK, and has crossed the pond successfully with films like "City Slickers II: The Legend of Curly's Gold" and, more recently, "Made of Honor."

But despite

the success and its accoutrements — fame and money — he has never forgotten the humiliation of waiting for his name to be called. It is at the heart of his newest American release, "Sixty Six," which opens here Aug. 1.

The movie is about growing up overlooked — by schoolmates and even by his parents. "My mother couldn't see me," he says. His father had OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), which occupied her almost full time. "My father was the child in the family and we [Paul and his brother] didn't get as much attention as we would have liked."

Paul's *doppelgänger* is Bernie Reuben, whose life finally takes on a purpose as his bar mitzvah approaches. "It wasn't that I was that religious," Weiland says. "The fact of the matter was that I might get some attention. I would perform and get my mom to see me and in that way she would recognize me."

Of course, it wasn't to be. The father has serious financial reverses. The family home catches fire. And the lavish affair young Bernie planned in his head becomes a house party with music by an Irish band. Worse still, despite the predictions of every knowledgeable sports fan, the British team makes it all the way to the World Cup finals — held the day of the bar mitzvah. Even family members develop sudden illnesses and send their regrets.

The film is at once sad, funny and moving. Making it "was a lot harder" than Weiland anticipated. But "at the same time, it was a cathartic experience. It was like being in analysis, really. In a way, you're basically dealing with your demons."

The idea for the film grew out of Weiland's 50th birthday party attended by 150 of his closest friends. "I'd been to quite a few of those kinds of parties where the guest of honor made amazing speeches. I thought to myself, 'My God, what am I going to talk about?' I started out by saying at the last important party in my honor no one showed up. Afterwards a few producers came up to me and said that my speech was almost like a [movie] pitch. They wanted to see a full treatment."

The film was released in the UK in 2006, and one indication that Weiland's poor timing for special events is no one-time fluke is that "Sixty Six" came out the same weekend as "Borat." The next week, the new Bond

film was released. "Slightly bigger events for people to go to," says Weiland.

The streak continues. His "Made of Honor" opened the same weekend as "Iron Man," which broke opening-weekend records. "Sixty Six" (the year the bat mitzvah takes place) opens here today only because of the director's vehement protests. It was originally scheduled to open Aug. 8 — the day of the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics.

Bad opening day aside, "Sixty Six" did well in England, particularly in the Jewish sections of London. "They were queuing around the block and even in the fifth week it was still filling the theater," Weiland says.

"It was a labor of love. I did it in the kid's voice — a kid who really wants his dad."

At film's end, there is a rapprochement between father and son. Sadly, that's not what happened in real life. "This is how I would have liked it to end, but it really didn't. God gives this gift to a film director; you can rewrite your life and make it turn out the way you want it to." n

"Sixty Six" is screening at the Village East Cinema (Second Avenue and 12th Street) and the UA theater (64th Street and Second Avenue). It opens Aug. 6 at the Kew Gardens Cinema in Queens and the Malverne Cinema on Long Island.