



A soccer game could wreck the bar mitzvah of young Bernie in *Sixty-Six*, starring (from left) Helena Bonham Carter, Eddie Marsan, Gregg Sulkin and Ben Newton.

Retro goofiness part of fun in coming-of-soccer romp

By HAP ERSTEIN
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Coming-of-age and sports themes collide in director Paul Weiland's nostalgic comedy *Sixty-Six*, opening today but seen in last year's Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival. It reaches back 42 years to a memorable season for British soccer fans, which gets merged with Weiland's fictionalized version of his own rite-of-passage bar mitzvah.

Twelve-year-old Bernie Rubens (expressive newcomer Gregg Sulkin) narrates this saga of ascension to manhood, a day when everything should revolve around him. But a business crisis at his hapless father Manny's grocery store threatens to diminish sharply Bernie's party. Worse, the World Cup finals coincide with Bernie's big day and if England defies all predictions and makes it to that game, attendance at the bar mitzvah will drop off precipitously.

Bernie had little previous interest in soccer, but he begins studying the sport at least as diligently as he does his Torah reading, while fervently rooting for

REVIEW

Sixty-Six

B+

Rated: PG-13: For language, some sexual content and brief nudity.

Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes

The verdict: An audience-friendly nostalgic comedy about the trauma of a boy's bar mitzvah potentially coinciding with the World Cup soccer finals.

an English loss in one of several preliminary games.

Ultimately, his bar mitzvah day is close to a total disaster, but Bernie bonds with his father at a Wembley Stadium finale that compensates in sentiment for what it lacks in plausibility.

Told from a youngster's viewpoint, *Sixty-Six* is full of quirky touches barely grounded in reality. Like the way Manny insists on

eating in his underwear so he does not stain his clothes. Or the old blind rabbi with extrasensory sight. And Bernie's kindly doctor (Stephen Rea), who diagnoses him with nerves-related asthma and offers him measured doses of ethnic wisdom.

The most prominent name in the cast is Helena Bonham Carter, who underplays to excess as Bernie's doting mom. She is fine, but relegated to the edges of a story largely about fathers and sons. Pushed to prominence and stealing every scene he is in is Eddie Marsan (Manny), whose gallery of sour expressions succinctly define his character.

Weiland (who directed many of Rowan Atkinson's *Mr. Bean* episodes) gives the film an idealized period look and sound, aided by some terrific archival sports footage and pop music of the mid-'60s. *Sixty-Six* is very audience-friendly and appropriate for all ages, a British-specific story with universal appeal.

Now showing at area theaters.

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