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Bar Mitzvah was no match for World Cup

Film recalls guests went to '66 football finals

By Martin A. Grove

July 24, 2008



Paul Weiland (left) with actor Gregg Sulkin, who plays Bernie, the character modeled after the young Weiland.

"Independent films originate in many ways, but the story behind Paul Weiland's coming of age comedy "Sixty Six" is as unique and personal as we're ever likely to encounter.

The idea for "Sixty Six" came to Weiland ("Made of Honor") during a speech he gave a few years ago at his fiftieth birthday party. In it he recalled his embarrassment and unhappiness at the age of 13 when his much anticipated Bar Mitzvah celebration in North London wound up being completely overshadowed that very same day by England's participation in the 1966 World Cup Final. Needless to say, just about everyone on his guest list caught football fever -- that's soccer fever, of course, to American readers -- made feeble excuses about why they couldn't attend his Bar Mitzvah and then went to cheer for England as it battled Germany on the field.

That tale combined with the complicated relationship between the young boy and his emotionally troubled father, whose grocery store was failing at the time in the face of competition from a new supermarket down the street, makes for an unusually engaging movie. Directed by Weiland and written by Peter Straughan & Bridget O'Connor, "Sixty Six" is a First Independent Pictures and Working Title Films presentation. It was produced by Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner and Elizabeth Karlsen and executive produced by Richard Curtis and Natascha

Wharton.

Starring are Eddie Marsan ("Vera Drake"), Helena Bonham Carter ("Charlie & The Chocolate Factory"), Stephen Rea ("V for Vendetta") and Catherine Tate (the BBC's "Doctor Who"). The film introduces Gregg Sulkin as Bernie, the character modeled after the young Weiland.

"Sixty Six" opens Aug. 1 in New York and Aug. 6 in L.A. after which it will roll out to other key cities via First Independent Films. The micro-indie distributor headed by Gary Rubin is set up to release four to six unique films annually and get word out about them through grass roots marketing.

After enjoying an early look at "Sixty Six" I was glad to be able to focus recently with Weiland on how he managed to bring it to the screen. "It was a pretty cathartic experience," he told me. "I'm sorry (the film's) taken so long to get to your shores, but I'm really, really pleased it has. Originally, it was due for release before the last World Cup in this country (England) and for whatever reason they delayed the start of the shoot and it got pulled back and it never reached that date. We then came out (in England in 2006) against 'Borat' on the same day. It was like my Bar Mitzvah again (with) this hugely important event film happening. We did pretty well, but we got 'slightly overshadowed' by Sacha Baron Cohen."

With the film taking place in 1966, its delayed arrival in the U.S. won't make much difference: "You know, 40 or 42 years later, it's not really a problem. The period was something that we took particular notice of. The film (stemmed from a speech) I made at my fiftieth birthday party. I had a lot of people and it was a rather lavish (event). I started the speech by saying, 'It's funny because the last important birthday I had, no one showed up.' And then I went on to tell the story -- obviously, not to do too much with my parents at that point -- of how my Bar Mitzvah was fast-tracked and the minute everyone knew that it was on the day of the World Cup a lot of people weren't coming. It's absolutely a true story."

Was it difficult to get such a small specialized film made? "It wasn't too bad getting it made," he replied. "I think in America Bar Mitzvahs are pretty commonplace. Here (in England) people know what a Bar Mitzvah is, but they think, 'Oh, this is going to be a foreign film' and it's not really a foreign film. It might be about a Jewish boy, but I think it's a universal story. It's a rites of passage (story) and it's a love affair, in a way, between the boy and his father."

Most of what takes place in the film is true, he pointed out, although "certain things were changed for dramatic reasons and certain things were changed because I was the director and I should rerun my life and make (the film) end like I would like it. And also I was able to cast (actors to play) my parents, which was no mean feat, and also cast myself in a slightly better light. That boy is a lot better looking than I am. It was total therapy for me.

"We decided we were going to keep it light. It could have been a slightly more intense story because the real story is pretty sad. My dad really wasn't very well and he suffered from this kind of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). The way I coped with it as a kid was to slightly make light of it so that's kind of the approach I took with the movie, as well. It's not really something that's very pleasant to live around. You kind of think it's normal and everyone's Dad does it and it's only when you start visiting other people's homes that you realize you're living in a bit of a mad house."

Asked how he worked with the writers given the personal nature of the story, Weiland explained, "Richard Curtis is a friend of mine. (Among Curtis's many credits are writing 'Four Weddings and

a Funeral' and 'Notting Hill,' co-writing 'Bridget Jones's Diary' and 'Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason' and writing and directing 'Love Actually.')

He was at my birthday party and he made a speech to me. Normally, his speeches are amazing and get the biggest laughs. But on this occasion his paled by comparison. He'd always been (telling me) that I should do an autobiographical film about a Jewish kid being brought up in the North of London. They didn't really see it (working as a film) like that, but then when I introduced this concept and the whole World Cup thing it seemed like nothing like that had ever been done before.

"So that's what we went for. I spent like three days (with Curtis) and then he wrote a treatment and Working Title approved that. And then he was too busy to write the actual movie. I gave it to Peter Straughan, who then wrote it with his wife. I'd worked with Peter Straughan before. They did a pretty good job. And then Richard came back on and rewrote it."

Casting the picture posed some challenges, particularly in terms of finding the right boy (Gregg Sulkin) to play the character based on 13 year old Weiland. "I was actually looking for a much more wimpy character," he noted, "but in the end I couldn't find someone who was slightly more goofy. So we basically put some funny teeth in the boy's mouth and gave him a perm (hairdo to make him less attractive) because he's quite a good looking boy and he really is very good at football (unlike the young Weiland). He was kind of the opposite to what I was. He'd never done anything in his life (in terms of) acting. It's always a risk because the whole thing really does depend on the boy. He had a good cast around him. Helena Bonham Carter and Eddie Marsan are terrific and really propped him up. And he was good. He turned out to be very talented."

Did Weiland rehearse a lot with his actors? "Not really," he replied. "I'm not much of a rehearsal person. I don't really like doing it. It depends -- with a lot of actors maybe they demand it -- but as a director I much prefer things to be happening for the first time when the camera is rolling. I just think that if you over rehearse something you lose the spontaneity. I'm constantly changing things anyway. I quite like the defense of a camera and the video monitors. That's my front line and then I go in and attack and make changes and come back to my place again. We did a bit of rehearsal, but only to get the accents right. Helena had never played working class before. She's quite well known for her slightly plummy English roles. So it took a while for Helena to get the voice right. I didn't want a stereotype Jewish accent. I wanted to make (the parents have) working class London accents and I wanted to avoid (making) Jewish people cartoony in their accents."

Shooting took place over a period of about 10 weeks, he said: "The challenge for me is that it was meant to be (taking place during) the height of the summer and we shot in the depths of winter. So I was constantly avoiding trees (with bare branches). I wanted to be as authentic as I possibly could. On the day of the World Cup -- I don't think anyone would remember it -- what we had to match to was that it had been raining and it was (then) very bright sunshine. I shot that around November and on that one particular day the sun shone all day so it was amazing."

Moreover, he added, "You know, Wembley Stadium has now been pulled down. We were very lucky there was just a piece of it (still standing at the time of filming). They were pulling it down at the time and rebuilding and there was just one little corner that still existed that I could shoot. Obviously, the (action in the) stadium was shot in a different place because all the seats were gone. The way we married the old footage and the new footage together is kind of seamless."

There wasn't a lot of money to spend on props, Weiland recalled, so what he did was go to his mother's house to borrow what he needed. "She basically never throws anything away," he told me. "My mum's still alive, my dad's not. I went to her house and I even removed her wall lights."

Even the mezuzah on the door (in the movie) belongs to her. All the cards I received that were there on the day of the Bar Mitzvah were the cards actually on the set. The carpet that we were treading on and they were rolling up (to protect it from guests) was the carpet (his parents) used to roll up. And all those ornaments (in the house), those are the actual real things."

His mother agreed for the film to be made, he observed, "the minute I told her that Helena Bonham Carter was playing her. She was absolutely fine with that."

Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel
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