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Comic rewrite of bar mitzvah fiasco fuels 'Sixty Six'

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(From left) Helena Bonham Carter, Eddie Marsan, Gregg Sulkin and Ben Newton star in "Sixty Six." Photo by Giles Keyte

British director Paul Weiland dreaded making the speech at his 50th birthday bash -- a lavish weekend of candlelit banquets, champagne on tap and celebrity guests arriving via helicopter to his 18th-century country mansion.

The 45-acre estate swarmed with British film luminaries befriended by the loquacious Weiland, England's leading director of commercials and of television hits such as "Mr. Bean."

Helena Bonham Carter turned up with her domestic partner, American director Tim Burton; and actors Rowan Atkinson and Stephen Rea -- among others -- mingled with the creators of "Four Weddings and a Funeral," "Notting Hill" and "Love, Actually."

Still, Weiland fretted.

"Lots of my writer and actor friends had made fantastic speeches at their 50th parties, and I thought, 'My turn's coming, what am I going to do?' the now 55-year-old director says of his birthday nerves.

He managed to collect his thoughts and thank the 250 guests for attending, explaining that only a handful of people had showed up to his last major party -- his bar mitzvah -- because it chanced to fall on the same day as England's fight for the 1966 soccer World Cup. Even close relatives had begged off with lame excuses (they had flu, or a funeral) so they could stay home and watch the game on the telly.

"It was one of the most hilarious speeches I had ever heard," Bonham Carter recalled of Weiland's spiel. "Afterwards Paul was absolutely mobbed with people who thought he should turn the story into a movie. And I asked if I could play his mum."

Bonham Carter does indeed portray the Jewish mother, Esther Reuben, in "Sixty Six" -- a comic take not only on Weiland's disastrous bar mitzvah but also on the childhood years during which he was plagued by a bullying older brother, a nervous wreck of a father and a mother too preoccupied with her high-strung husband to pay much attention to her youngest son.

In the film, asthmatic nerd Bernie Reuben (Gregg Sulkin) obsessively plans his bar mitzvah because he imagines it will be the day he finally will be noticed and feted by his family. When fate lands the rite of passage on the same afternoon as the World Cup -- and the British team seems poised to make the finals -- he becomes perhaps the only Brit rooting for the team to lose. One amusing scene depicts Bernie trying to chant his Torah portion as revelers watching a game drown out his voice.

The film meticulously recreates Weiland's childhood in Southgate, a Jewish area in North London (he even used his own bar mitzvah RSVP cards -- inscribed with the lame excuses -- on the set).

But the comedy-drama -- by the producers of the "Bridget Jones" movies -- has a light touch and a feel-good ending, which Weiland says was very different from the real 1966 event.

"My uncle, who was supposed to be the photographer, went off to the match, so there is not one single photograph of myself at my own bar mitzvah," he said.

Weiland's family dynamics proved more like a Mike Leigh film than a "Bridget

Jones" movie. His father, a grocer, did not suffer from a lovable (if annoying) misbegotten, but from a debilitating form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. "He was fixated on lights and locks and especially heaters, because he stashed all his cash in the house, and he was terrified of fire. He would constantly check and recheck these things, sometimes 20 times, sometimes 100 times. He used to crumble under pressure and his ulcers were constantly erupting. We could never properly book holidays because he would get sick over the idea of leaving his store."

Early on, Weiland says, he realized he needed "an escape route from home. I would try to attach myself to people who could be my heroes -- imagining I could grab onto their coattails and get dragged out of my life."

At 16, Weiland began working in the mail room of a London advertising agency; he went on to direct more than 600 commercials as well as television shows starring A-list British actors such as Miranda Richardson and Jonathan Pryce. (His Hollywood films include the not-so-well-received "Made of Honor," starring Patrick Dempsey.)

"I love directing because, as a filmmaker, you have the power to rewrite history -- in this case, my own," Weiland said. While he was working with the writers on "Sixty Six," he added, "they were the psychiatrists and I was the patient."

But making the movie wasn't as cathartic as he would have liked. In Britain, the film was released in 2006 on the same day as "Borat" and the same week as the James Bond film, "Casino Royale."

"Art imitated life," he said, glumly. "I was invisible yet again."

In the United States, however, "Sixty Six" has been well received on the Jewish film festival circuit and was picked up for distribution by Gary Rubin's First Independent Pictures. A July 8, 2008 review in The Hollywood Reporter lauds the movie as "engineered with such skill that it transcends the ethnic details to become a universal story of a boy trying to find his place in an inhospitable world."

Weiland concurs. "It's not so much a bar mitzvah film as the story of a boy who is desperate to be noticed," Weiland said.

'Sixty Six' opens in Los Angeles on Aug. 6. Weiland will conduct a Q-and-A session after the Aug. 6, 7:30 p.m. screening at Laemmle's Royal Theatre in West Los Angeles.

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