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In 'Sixty Six,' director Paul Weiland revisits his bar mitzvah

When up against the World Cup finals, his rite of passage was no competition.

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At his boisterous 50th birthday party, British director Paul Weiland ("Made of Honor") was surrounded by friends and family. It was a far cry from his last big bash -- his bar mitzvah in 1966. It was the day that England was playing for the World Cup. With a soccer-mad nation glued to radios and television sets, no one showed up for his celebration.

Weiland relives that fateful Sunday 42 years ago in the sweetly nostalgic "Sixty Six," which opens Wednesday. Newcomer Gregg Sulkin plays Weiland's alter-ego Bernie, a nerdy 12-year-old who is constantly bullied at school. Helena Bonham Carter and Eddie Marsan portray his parents.

"It was a pretty cathartic experience," Weiland says about making the movie. "In a way, it's so cruel that it's funny."

The idea to turn his ill-fated bar mitzvah into a film was a result of the speech he gave at his 50th birthday celebration. "I had been to quite a few 50th birthday parties. and a few of them were for writers and actors, and they were making pretty good speeches," the filmmaker recalls. "I was thinking, 'Oh, my goodness! What am I going to do at mine?' As a director you are always behind the camera; you are never really performing."

Clearly, he pulled it off. His tale about his bar mitzvah "went down so well there that there were some producers at the party who came up immediately and said, 'We should do this as a movie.' "

To help give the film authenticity, Weiland raided his mother's house for knickknacks. "My mother never threw anything away, so almost everything on the set belonged to my mother. Even the carpet that they roll up at the beginning of the film is an actual carpet that was in my house from the time I was 5 until I left at 20."

Although Weiland says it was a "nice experience" to do the film, "it was quite tough to go back to your old school and stand by the same wall where you were never picked [for games]. All that stuff brings back kind of weird memories."

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Susan King