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Film Review: Sixty Six

Bottom Line: This bar mitzvah/soccer comedy scores a goal.

By Stephen Farber

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Venue: Los Angeles Film Festival. Opens: Aug. 6 (First Independent Pictures).

You don't have to be Jewish to enjoy "Sixty Six," but it probably wouldn't hurt.

This British production centers on a boy preparing for his bar mitzvah at the same time that England is competing for the soccer championship in 1966. As bad luck would have it, Bernie's rite of passage is set for the exact same day as the World Cup finals. If England makes it to the finals, will anyone show up to help Bernie celebrate?

Although the subject might sound specialized, the picture is 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. Some of the Jewish humor will go over the heads of gentile audiences, but everyone will respond to the warmth in the portrayal of a neurotic but loving family. The film, which played at the Los Angeles Film Festival, opens Aug. 6.

Paul Weiland, director of the recent "Made of Honor," has confirmed that this film is based loosely on his own experiences growing up. His surrogate Bernie (newcomer Gregg Sulkin) has many problems besides bar mitzvah blues. Bernie's father, Manny (Eddie Marsan), is losing the business he runs with his brother Jimmy (Peter Serafinowicz), and this adds to the stress everyone feels as the big day approaches.

All of the characters are sharply delineated in the screenplay by Peter Straughan and Bridget O'Connor, and Weiland has assembled a top-notch cast. This is shaping up to be quite a year for Marsan, who plays the villain in "Hancock" and appears in the fall in Mike Leigh's "Happy-Go-Lucky." Here, Marsan plays a depressed schlemiel without ever falling into caricature; he highlights the humanity and decency buried within this beleaguered man. As his more extroverted brother, Serafinowicz also gives a marvelous performance.

In her supporting turn as Bernie's exasperated mother, Helena Bonham Carter blends seamlessly into the ensemble. Stephen Rea as an asthma specialist and Richard Katz as a blind rabbi contribute juicy portrayals. But all hinges on the performance of young Sulkin, and he wears his air of sadness with just the right note of hesitant charm.

Telling visual details bring the period to life. The film sags slightly in the middle but builds to an irresistibly touching finale.

Production: Universal, Working Title Films.

Cast: Helena Bonham Carter, Eddie Marsan, Gregg Sulkin, Peter Serafinowicz, Catherine Tate, Stephen Rea, Richard Katz, Ben Newton. Director: Paul Weiland. Screenwriters: Peter Straughan, Bridget O'Connor. Story: Paul Weiland. Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Elizabeth Karlsen. Executive producers: Natascha Wharton, Richard Curtis. Director of photography: Dan Landin. Production designer: Michael Howells. Music: Joby Talbot. Costume designer: Rebecca Hale. Editor: Paul Tothill.

Rated PG-13, 93 minutes.

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