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‘Made of Honor’'s Weiland tells All in ‘Sixty Six’, a Bar Mitzvah Disaster

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Eddie Marsan, Helena Bonham, and Gregg Sulkin shine in period, coming of age drama. – Three stars ***

By W. H. Bourne

HOLLYWOOD, CA (Hollywood Today) 7/31/08 – “For years, people had encouraged me to do something based around my North London Jewish background,” explains film maker Paul Weiland. “The reaction to my telling the story of my thirteenth birthday was not only a validation of that vulnerable time in my life but also an indication that the story could strike a universal chord.” ‘Sixty Six’ is based on Weiland’s actual Bar Mitzvah disaster when anticipating a huge party in celebration, at which people would shower him with attention and gifts, he discovered his Bar Mitzvah was scheduled to take place on the same day as the World Cup Final - in 1966, the year that England met Germany. Consequently, barely anyone showed up.

“I saw *Vera Drake* and aside from being bowled over by his performance, I thought, my god, he really looks the part,” says Weiland on casting Eddie Marsan as Manny, the family patriarch. “That was very important to me. It had to be believable on all levels. It was very important not to stereotype this family. It’s a film about a Jewish family, but particularly a working class family that has a Jewish cultural background. Eddie fits that bill. He is absolutely perfect,” says Weiland.

“It’s an honest and beautiful tale,” says Marsan. “When I first met Paul and learned it was his story, I realized why there were so many layers to it. It’s so honest. It struck me as such a universal story with so much to say about families and growing up.”

“I’m not Jewish but I grew up in the East End and my accent is basically the same - just without the Yiddish words,” says Marsan. “There’s a danger in playing a Jewish character that you create a stereotype. I’m not playing Jewish - I’m playing a man who happens to be Jewish. That comes from the language and the rhythm and not from specific mannerisms or behavior.”

Working opposite Eddie Marsan was a joy for Helena Bonham Carter. “He’s a brilliant actor,” says Carter, “and he certainly makes me a better one. He’s a great minimalist - he appears to be doing very little and it’s so effective. There’s something so touching about him, particularly in this part. I’ve had a great time working with him.”

After strong performances as Mrs. Lovett in ‘Sweeney Todd’ and Bellatrix LeStrange in ‘Harry Potter’, Carter attempts to be more of a mother as Esther in ‘Sixty Six’. During the

script's development, Paul Weiland began talking to Carter about playing Esther. "There is a remarkable resemblance to my mother as a young woman. She's also one of our finest actresses and I was so keen for her to do it."

"Esther is the engine of the family," says Carter. "I think the key to Esther is that she puts a brave face on, dealing with disaster upon disaster, but never lets it show. In this way she can keep the family going. She can keep the family together."

"I play a mother who neglects to give her son the attention he craves (albeit because her attention is diverted elsewhere) and Paul wanted me to do that sympathetically. That presented quite a challenge," says Carter. Weiland's own mother was quite helpful in that process, and Carter spent time with her before the shoot.

"It was slightly awkward, says Weiland. I hadn't given my mother the script to read and Helena was giving my mother pages to read so she could hear her voice. My mother was so thrilled it was Helena. It's such an exposing story about our family and I think having Helena play my mother really helped her accept it. For her, it was the biggest compliment in the world."

"Working opposite Helena has been a fantastic experience. She's the kind of actor who totally inhabits the character she's playing so even when she's off set she continues with the accent and rhythm of the character. She soaks everything in. It amazed me," says co-star Marsan.

Rounding out the cast is young actor Gregg Sulkin in his debut performance as Bernie. "It was totally unexpected", says Sulkin about getting the part. "I only attended the audition as a bit of fun. My cousin had heard about the audition and suggested I came along too. Not for a moment did I think I would be playing the lead."

"I don't think a boy of that age could play the role with the honesty and texture I knew I'd demand from him unless he was Jewish and could understand something so relevant to a Jewish boy," says Weiland. "He's a real, real discovery. He was focused and word-perfect. He understood when the words weren't right for the character, which is quite extraordinary for a boy who has never acted before".

Soccer fan may think the biggest stars in 'Sixty Six' are the Queen and her players in wonderful historic footage chronicling England's journey to the World Cup. Included are beautifully restored clips that Weiland skillfully intercuts spicing up the family dramady with action packed soccer sequences. And while the script seems to stray at times, the power house performances of Marsan and Carter make up for everything that the film lacks.

"It's a very personal film but it will strike a universal chord," says producer Elizabeth Karlsen. "At the heart of this film is the story of a boy trying to find his voice and reconciling himself with his father. I think that's something a lot of us experience as we grow up."

'Sixty Six'

Running Time: 1 hr. 34 min.

Limited Release Date: August 1, 2008

Rated PG 13 for language, some sexual content and brief nudity.

Distributor: First Independent Pictures