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For an Israeli Director, the Oscar Ceremony Gets Interesting After It's Over

By *LARRY ROHTER*

At the age of 43, the American-born Israeli director Joseph Cedar is already a veteran of the Oscar process. Israel has submitted all four of the feature films he has made as official selections. His previous project, "Beaufort," about Israeli soldiers in the waning days of the war in Lebanon, was a nominee for the Oscar for best foreign-language film in 2008, and his latest film, "Footnote," was named this week to the shortlist of nine films contending for this year's Oscar. On Tuesday, he'll find out if he's one of the five nominees.

The two main characters in "Footnote," which won best screenplay at the last Cannes Film Festival, are a pair of rival Talmudic scholars, Eliezer and Uriel Shkolnik, who also happen to be father and son. The story is set in motion by confusion about and competition for an academic prize, but also goes beyond that subject to poke fun at the role of the media and omnipresent security in daily life in Israel.

Mr. Cedar, who was born in Manhattan and lived in Maryland before emigrating to Israel as a child, majored in philosophy and history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, then studied film at New York University. So the academic world is not totally unfamiliar to him; he also did military service as a paratrooper in the Israeli Defense Forces and describes himself as an observant Orthodox Jew and a Zionist. Visiting New York earlier this month, he talked about "Footnote" and his perceptions of the Oscar. Here are excerpts from the interview.

Q.

For a film about such a solemn and weighty subject, "Footnote" has a lot of amusing moments. Can you talk about the tone you were striving for and the way you chose to use humor? Is it there just to leaven the seriousness or does it have a larger purpose?

A.

It's hard to describe a tone and hard to control a tone. You never really know, because it's a result of so many factors. The best image I found to explain it is — this is an expression in Hebrew, I don't know if it's used in English — you say that it's a storm in a cup of tea.

Q.

Sure. In English we'd say "a tempest in a teapot."

A.

Well, we're in a teapot, and that's the context. But if you're in a teapot and there's a storm, it can get pretty dramatic, even dangerous. You can drown. That's what it is. These scholars are isolated in a world that has tremendous rivalries that no one outside will understand. There's something a little funny about that if you're on the outside. If you're on the inside, it's an epic tragedy.

Q.

The part of Eliezer, the father, is played by Shlomo Bar Aba, best known in Israel as a comedian. What made you choose a comedian for such a dramatic role?

A.

He's an eccentric comedian, a stage comedian. He's not a comedian in the sense that he has punch lines and gags. He's more in the area of Peter Sellers or Andy Kaufman in the sense that you never know what to expect from him and that he's capable of anything.

Q.

How much did that figure in your casting?

A.

I had him in mind while I was writing and I thought a lot of the scenes worked because of what Shlomo Bar Aba can do. But then after I had a draft of the script and I was able to meet him, he was just very different from the image I was playing in my head while I was writing. So I went out and auditioned many other actors before I went back to him, finding out that he's the only one who can manage this balancing act of being someone who creates a lot of resistance but at the same time you feel compassion towards him.

Q.

What made you want to explore this particular world of Talmudic scholarship?

A.

In the beginning I was working with a story about a father and son and the confusion that occurs because of an award. I was looking for a field for them to be in and came across the Talmud department. It changed the whole direction of the story and gave the film its shape and content. It's a great department and I spent time gossiping with people from the inside. It's a place that has no limits because of the nature of the people, whose stubbornness is extremely dramatic. Or tragic. I don't know. But I was attracted to these people.

Q.

It's really unusual to see an Israeli film where, at least in the English-language version, you don't hear the words "West Bank" or "Palestine" even once. In your previous films, you've dealt with settlers and soldiers. Did you deliberately want to break from that? What explains heading off in this particular direction?

A.

I can understand why that question would come up, but from my point of view none of my films have to do with the conflict or the region or politics. They've all been about experiences that are very personal to me. But I can see why when you just look at the descriptions, some of them seem to be even exploitive of the politics of the region.

Here there was nothing in the structure or the way the story is presented that has to do with the conflict. But it's consistent with what I've done so far. It does have to do with the relationship between an individual person and the establishment he lives in and wants to belong to, but is ashamed to. So in that sense there is something in this film that is as political as in any other film.

Q.

But politics in a small p sense, no, rather than large-scale politics?

A.

It's so hard to use that word, because everything can be political, and an Israeli movie is political even if it's not political. There's a lot of flexibility in that term, but the relationship between me and the establishment that I belong to is one that is interesting to me and has a lot of dramatic tension in it.

Q.

And when you say establishment, what exactly are you referring to? The cinema establishment, a religious establishment, or what?

A.

A professional establishment, a religious establishment, a national establishment. Just the tension that an individual person has between his needs and the tax he pays in order to belong to the larger entity that allows him to do what he is doing.

Q.

I find the process by which Israel chooses its Oscar nominee to be very interesting. There's no committee, no government ministry. The movie that wins the local Academy's vote for best film is the nominee, as simple and democratic as that.

A.

No one is taking into consideration what the Americans will like. It's a very interesting competition, the foreign-language Oscar. I think it's the only competition left that has a nationality labeled to the film. The big European festivals used to be much more national than they are now, and that has to do with films being less national in the way they are made. It used to be, in the '40s and '50s, that films were representing countries in Venice, Cannes and Berlin. Now that's almost disappeared. This is the last competition in which films are representing countries. I don't know if that's good, but it's a fact, and it's fascinating.

Q.

What have you learned from your experience competing for the Oscar?

A.

A whole bunch of things. One of the hilarious things that happens is that there's a dinner after the Oscars, the Governors Ball, I believe. People really eat, and the reason, I believe, is that the room is full with people who haven't eaten in about a month and a half. Everyone worked very hard to fit into their clothing, and then the Oscar is a five-hour thing where you can't eat, so they get to this meal and they can't think of anything else but food. It's great to see all these beautiful actresses finally eating.