

## The Jerusalem Post Magazine

### *From art and philosophy to Bethlehem*

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*An interview with director Yuval Adler on his new award-winning film.*



Photo by: Vered Adir

There are few directors who are comfortable referring both to the movie *Grease* and the philosophy of Heidegger when discussing their latest film. In fact, Yuval Adler, who made *Bethlehem*, is probably the only one.

The first-time director, who has conquered many fields, never expected *Bethlehem* to win awards around the world, or to be Israel's candidate for a nomination for Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Awards. It became eligible for that honor when it won the Ophir Award, Israel's equivalent of the Oscar, in September, and received acclaim at the Venice International Film Festival (where it won the prestigious Venice Days Award), as well as the Toronto and Telluride Film Festivals.

"It's almost a genre movie, a thriller," says Adler of the movie, which tells the suspenseful story of a teenage Palestinian informant in Bethlehem and his complex relationship with his Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) handler.

But while these two characters are at the center, their story is placed in the context of intrigue on both sides of the Green Line.

The movie, which was co-written by Ali Waked, marks the first time an Israeli feature film has shown the evershifting reality of life in the West Bank, where allegiances change quickly, there is little government authority in day-to-day matters, and even militia members struggle to get paid.

"It's the kind of movie that doesn't proclaim to tell you something or teach you something, yet it can tell you something and teach you something by being

entertaining,” says Adler.

More surprising is his answer as to which movies influenced him stylistically while he was working on *Bethlehem*.

“Grease. The chase scene in *Bethlehem* is structured formally like the big dance scene in Grease,” he says. “It’s like a movie within a movie.”

The director, 44, has a very unusual biography for a filmmaker, and took an unconventional road to getting started in the movie business.

Born and raised in Herzliya – “Not the part on the beach, the part with the arsim [thugs], it was like West Side Story” – he grew up in an artistic family.

His father is one-third of the Adler Trio (whose website proclaims it “The World’s Leading Harmonica Trio”), and his mother, Malka Adler, is a novelist and family therapist.

Describing himself as a “math geek” in high school, after his army service (in drone maintenance, “nothing to do with intelligence”), he studied math and physics, then went on to a career as a successful fine artist in sculpture and photography, showing and selling his work at prestigious galleries. He also studied philosophy at Columbia University in New York, earning a PhD in a branch of analytic philosophy.

At a certain point, “I just stopped making art.”

But film had always fascinated him – he cites *Scarface* and *Apocalypse Now* as two movies that made him want to go into movie-making.

Attracted by the immediacy of the digital revolution in movies in the early 2000s, “I said to myself, ‘I’m going to make a movie.’” But starting from scratch, “I hit the wall... it was a long, tortured process” to learn the art and craft of filmmaking.

While in his 20s things had come easily to him, in his 30s, “I felt like I was in a desert, I read a lot... Now it makes sense, but then I was facing what Heidegger calls ‘the nothing.’” But he did make a short film and worked hard at writing screenplays. In order to learn how to direct actors, he took classes at the Actors Studio in New York and got actors to perform scenes.

“I watched *Taxicab Confessions*,” a television show in which people allow themselves to be filmed in the back of a cab. “I would write down the dialogue, especially of couples fighting and listen to people, how people really fight, and then film actors performing it,” he recalls.

Eventually, all this preparation made him feel ready to embark on a feature film, and the subject he chose was inspired by news reports of the second intifada he read while living in New York.

The reports were “not so coherent and more complex” than what he had heard in the past.

“I saw a video clip of the execution of a Palestinian informant on the street. People were reacting as if it were something mundane. People stood and looked. They didn’t seem to be in a hurry.”

Adler became fascinated with what went on in this period, and wondered, “How does the Israeli secret service get in there?... I decided I wouldn’t judge it – I would just investigate it,” he says. “I wanted to show the audience something they hadn’t seen.”

Realizing he needed a collaborator, he found Waked, a Palestinian journalist, and they began putting together a screenplay, often via Skype sessions while Adler still lived in New York.

“I clicked immediately with Ali,” who, as a journalist, would get both information and questions from all sides. “Al-Aksa [Martyrs Brigades] militants would send him a text saying, ‘We just shot a jeep, don’t let so-and-so take credit for it.’” Adler also started talking to Israeli security agents “to understand the dynamic of running assets. It startled us how intimate the relationship is between the handler and the asset. It’s usually a long-term relationship. The secret service described how they would find somebody with a hole in his heart, with a need for love, attention and respect. It’s the most exploitive relationship you can imagine.”

The handler often becomes “a father figure. Some of them would say, ‘He [the informant] calls me six times a day. I’m like his shrink.’ It was a duality that’s both very intimate and very exploitive.”

In bringing this intimate relationship and complex reality to the screen, Adler ended up creating three stars.

The first is Shadi Mar’i, who plays Sanfur, the teen Palestinian informant.

“He’s a genius, this kid,” says Adler.

“He’s the center of the film. We found him quite fast, we started auditioning kids who were in Palestinian theater and we saw right away there was something about him.”

The next challenge was to find “an Israeli guy to match him,” to play the part of Razi, his handler. Not only did this Israeli have to be a good enough actor to carry the film, he also had to speak fluent Arabic, since more than half the script featured Arabic dialogue.

Tsahi Halevi had been a contestant on the Israeli version of *The Voice* and had spent his adolescence in Egypt, so his Arabic came naturally. He won the Ophir Award for Best Supporting Actor and his low-key, sexy screen presence seems guaranteed to make him Israel’s next big movie star.

“Tsahi wasn’t how I imagine the secret service officer at first,” admits Adler, who had in mind more of a highly verbal smart-ass, someone more like himself.

“He has a quietness, the way he listens. It’s a different quality than I imagined – but it works perfectly.”

The third actor who has become an unlikely star from the film is Hitham Omari, a news cameraman from the West Bank and another non-actor.

He comes close to stealing the film from the leads with his intense and

menacing performance as Badawi, a militia fighter who becomes dangerous when he is provoked – or when he isn't paid.

“He's amazing, he's a great improviser,” says Adler. “And he's getting offers now from all over the place.”

Once Adler had his cast in place, getting the film financed was another challenge.

Since it was set in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Adler found his first backer in Yoram Honig at the newly established Jerusalem Film Fund, which supports films made in Jerusalem.

Adler was enthusiastic about using the Jerusalem location. “There's something fantastic and beautiful and amazing in this city. This place is crazy, there's insanity in the stones.”

Another backer who came on board early and made a big difference was Ephi Gildor, the international hedgefund founder, for whom Adler had once worked as a mathematician.

“He believed in me and believed in the film,” says Adler. “He put money into it. He was a key person and he gave me a push.”

Adler also considers himself fortunate to have found Talia Kleinhendler, a young producer with an impressive resumé, whose credits include the Oscar nominated Ajami. She co-produced the film and “pulled everything together.”

Adler has worked in – and excelled at – so many fields, it's easy to wonder whether he has found his calling at last.

He says he's certain he has, and is at work on a new screenplay. And his life is not all about work: He is married to a Bulgarian woman who earned an MBA from New York University and they have two young sons.

While he enjoyed his career in art and philosophy, he says he doesn't miss those fields. “When you're focused on philosophy or art, you can be a purist,” he says, and then gives a good-natured shrug. “But with film...”