

# West Bank Story

Director **Yuval Adler** is the latest overnight success of Israeli cinema – and it's only taken him 15 years to get there. He discusses the challenges of making his debut feature, '**Bethlehem**,' which is already attracting comparisons to cult TV classic 'The Wire'

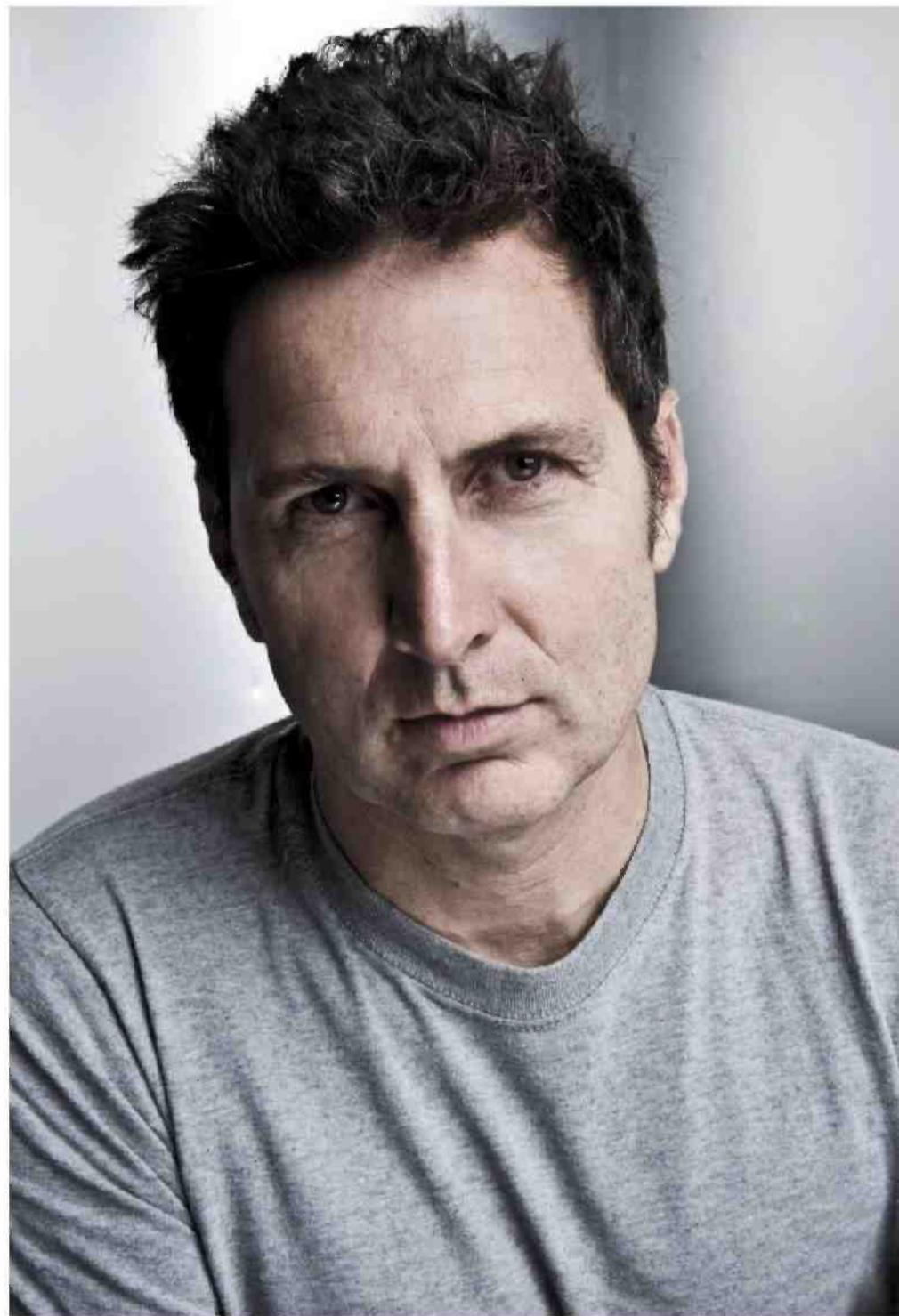
By **Mike Dagan** / Photo by Ilya Melnikov

In 1990, I was a new reservist, a first-year student at Tel Aviv University who had perhaps come back to Israel too soon after a New York-focused year, and certainly returned too soon to the unit's base in the north, a year after my discharge. The base's strongest feature was its forlornness. A helipad in the middle of nowhere, sequestered amid quite unremarkable open spaces, with a few cabins for living quarters, an operations structure and a club. The club's crowning glory was a television set, which played Jean-Claude Van Damme movies almost in a loop. I doubt the base was guarded at that time, but as it was so forsaken, this lacuna wasn't even taken as negligence (or it was skillfully repressed) by the command levels. No hostile elements of any kind were likely to take an interest in the place. Had they done so, they could have picked off the soldiers like the mushrooms the soldiers sometimes went out to pick for cooking, after the winter rains that frequently shut down the helipad.

After going through the "Star Trek"-like time warp that everyone who returns to reserve duty experiences, I went looking for a bed on which to deposit all the remnants of civilization I had brought with. I cruised the packed-gravel grounds between the prefabs, testing one iron bunk bed after another. In one of the rooms I peeked into, remnants

of the civilization I had come from peeked back at me from the floor: a few books by Immanuel Kant were scattered on a large number of notepads containing charcoal drawings in an expressive style. As a student who was then majoring in philosophy, and as a writing novice who was attracted by art, I could not but take an interest in the room's occupant. And so it was that I met Yuval Adler.

After chewing on Kant – and, thank God, it was a real mouthful – for most of those weeks of reservist duty, and probably for a few months afterward, too, it was clear that I had met a remarkable individual. It's not every day you come across someone who completes most of his undergraduate coursework in mathematics during his army service, delves into Kant on his own by reading the original German texts of the philosopher – far from a trivial task – and still finds time to train his hand and eye in drawing, all while fulfilling the duties required by military service. Great minds, we know, think alike. It follows that the late Prof. Yehuda Elkana, who recruited Adler to the multidisciplinary program at Tel Aviv University, thought likewise. (For example, he saw to it that Adler was able to study sculpture at the Bezalel art academy in Jerusalem, in addition to his official track of mathematics-physics-philosophy.) Elkana was one of the engines that propelled the multi-active, multidisciplinary Adler into the world.



Yuval Adler. "I get into something and I learn about it. That's my way in philosophy, in art – I'm a kind of chameleon."

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Here's a brief resume of his flight course. After majoring in analytical philosophy at TAU (while learning sculpture at Bezalel), he pursued a PhD at Columbia. While writing his thesis in philosophy, he started to develop his art in more contemporary directions in the university's visual arts department, under the instruction of artist Judy Pfaff, who taught there at the time. It wasn't long before Adler was showing his work in highly regarded group exhibitions at Exit Art and other galleries, and even had a solo show at a gallery in Soho, which was then the hub of the art scene. He combined installations, sculpture and video works – which, in retrospect, can be seen as a key station on his way to becoming a filmmaker.

To earn a living, Adler did occasional work for the hedge fund run by the Israeli businessman Ephi Gildor, concentrating on the mathematical side of the operation. He made a pretty good living and also forged an important connection with a person of capital who believed in him and would later become the first investor in his debut feature, "Bethlehem." That investment would help open many other doors.

This dense takeoff tale would not be complete without it being noted that, in addition to all this activity, Adler – in the course of familiarizing himself with spaces to create and exhibit art in New York – was involved in a handsome real estate deal in Williamsburg, even before the area's gentrification was complete. Without any capital of his own, he assured himself a space of his own and freedom to create away from that bothersome nuisance called work.

Like a well-scripted story, the twist in the plot comes when everything seems to be flowing in one direction: up. Adler suddenly experiences total satiation, even repulsion ("a kind of bulimic experience," he calls it) from creating art and from his work (today, by the way, he doesn't entirely understand why) today, by the way, he doesn't entirely understand why – and at the same time he completes his doctoral thesis. Like a sign from above, a fire in the building that houses his studio destroys most of his artwork. Even though many top American universities would probably have welcomed him as a faculty member, Adler decides to try and fulfill an old dream – which he also saw as a logical continuation of all his creative work to date – and direct a film.

Fifteen years later (we will return to the intervening period anon), the Israeli film "Bethlehem" has just arrived at your local neighborhood movie theater. In the meantime, "Bethlehem" won the critics' award in the Venice Days strand at the Venice Film Festival and took part in the prestigious Telluride Film Festival in Colorado, drawing praise from Alfonso Cuarón ("Gravity"), currently one of Hollywood's hottest directors. Earlier this month Adler was signed by WME, one of the world's biggest talent agencies, under the co-CEOs Ari Emanuel and Patrick Whitesell. "Bethlehem" has also

been nominated for 12 Ophir awards, the Israeli equivalent of the Oscar.

Israeli cinema (and Adler is definitely an Israeli, despite the many years he spent in New York before making the film) has probably never before produced a thriller as throat-grabbing, tight and precise in its script and its psychology as "Bethlehem." The New York Times' Roderick Conway Morris noted flatteringly that it offered a "strong start" to the out-of-competition films at the Venice festival. "The murky world of terrorism and counterterrorism, and the vicious circle of suspicion and betrayal in which all the players are locked, are well drawn in this gritty, suspenseful drama," he wrote. And the Times' chief film critic, A.O. Scott, tweeted after seeing the film at Telluride, "a terrific Israeli movie – kind of like a West Bank 'Wire.'"

A preinduction teenage girl seemed to agree with these reviews and reactions, because, before my eyes – and to Adler's embarrassment – she hugged him after a long wait in a line of people who wanted to talk to him after a screening at the Lev Dizengoff theater in Tel Aviv. David Lipkind, from the Israel Film Fund, who saw a rough cut of the film in the editing room, blurted, "Who are you? Where have you been hiding all this time?" Even more impressive was the final reaction of the viewers at the Israeli Academy of Film and Television screening in the Tel Aviv Cinematheque. They just sat there, seemingly dumbstruck, for minutes on end. Not a sound was heard in the hall after the breathtaking final scene. No one got up, and the air itself seemed to stand still.

## Collaborative enterprise

The plot of "Bethlehem" revolves around a series of circumstantially connected events, which lead almost unavoidably from one to the next, rather like Aristotle's textbook on dramatic writing. Razi (played by Tsahi Halevy), a Shin Bet security service handler, recruits young Sanfur (Arabic for "Smurf," well-played by Shadi Mar'i), the younger brother of Ibrahim, the local commander of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, who is responsible for a huge terrorist attack – it's his head the handler really wants, of course.

Another important link in the plot is Badawi (Hitham Omari), Ibrahim's lieutenant. Also starring on the Palestinian side is a senior figure in the Palestinian Authority, with Hamas men in the background. Although the film's gaze is directed at the relations between the Israeli handler and his young Palestinian informant, it offers incidentally a rare inside picture of the territories during the second intifada. There is no way to talk fully about the film's circumstantial chain of events without ruining the viewer's experience. Suffice it to say that the connection between the handler and the informant is depicted in a way never before seen on the big screen, and that members of the Israeli security organi-

zations also marveled at the film's accuracy and power.

*How did you come up with the idea for "Bethlehem" in New York, of all places?*

Adler: "I saw a video of a Palestinian collaborator, an informant, being executed in the middle of a street. People stood and watched as some gang took someone and shot him. You ask yourself, 'What's really going on there?' I always read in the papers about what was happening on the Palestinian side: someone fired a missile. But it's actually because one faction quarreled with another, and someone wanted to screw the PA. The guy who fired the missile isn't really out to liberate Palestine. He has his own agenda. "I was curious about what really goes on in a place where there are so many power centers that are founded on loyalty. You have the PA, then the organizations, and you have the families, and everyone is in competition with everyone else. And in the midst of all that, the Shin Bet enters and runs informants and is able to get the information it gets amid all the chaos. How does that happen? What is a collaborator? How does one become a collaborator? How does it work?"

"We know the cliché," he continues. "You give him money, or you torture him, or you threaten him, and then he collaborates. But it's not really like that, there's a lot more than that. So it started with an attempt to look at everything that's happening there, and to understand it. With that I came to Ali [Ali Waked, a former correspondent in the territories for the website Ynet, who cowrote the script]. I told him I wanted to make a movie about the internal situation there and also about the situation on our side. How the work is done in the light of this internal situation at the level of the Shin Bet, the level of handling informants. And also at the level of assassination; what an assassination looks like when a force enters the territories. I told him, 'Let's make a movie that will not deal with the political conflict, with the big picture, but will zero in on a few characters who are at the center of this, people who lead extreme lives because of it, and see what really happens. A wanted person, say. What does the life of a wanted man look like? An informant. What does the life of an informant look like? A handler. What does the life of a handler look like? Let's get into that, instead of the regular things people usually deal with.'"

*In the Q&A after the screening I was at, people kept wanting to know whether the script is related to actual events. Does that prove the great significance of the research that was done for the film?*

"Yes. People ask me if I was in the Shin Bet. Look, I don't possess that kind of genius – let's say, the type of humor you find in Woody Allen. I have nothing like that of my own. I get into something and I learn about it. That's my way in philosophy, in art – I'm a kind of chameleon. With me it's radical, because I really have been in many places and I've been quite serious in all of them. Now, for example, I am already working on another film. And with every film I make, I ▶

'With every film I make, I think I will succeed in this, at least: in **entering its world** and getting to know it.'

◀ think I will succeed in this, at least: in entering its world and getting to know it."

*What does that mean in practice?*

"For example, before the film I sat with books and with a private tutor and I very quickly mastered passive Arabic. Mainly to understand. I spent entire days in location scouting, in a Mercedes, in all kinds of areas that weren't necessarily friendly. I didn't have children then. Ali and I met with wanted individuals, we were in Askar refugee camp, in Nablus. Hard-core. Things, by the way, that I wouldn't do today. I read a lot of books about the territories and the secret services. We spoke to a lot of people from both sides, including Israeli security people."

*Shin Bet guys sat with you in cafes and told you things too loudly?*

"I met with one at my place and with another in a cafe. I always said, 'Okay, maybe you shouldn't be telling me this.' They said, 'No, it's alright.' And I said, 'Fine, you don't have to tell me.' And they told me, 'No, no, it's alright.'"

*What's the profile of these people? Are they thirty-somethings?*

"Yes. The handler could even be in his late twenties, early thirties. I met someone who was forty and a bit, but he had been a handler half a decade or a decade earlier; and also someone a lot older, who had been a handler long before. We didn't go into their working methods or their technology; what we were looking to understand is the dynamics between source and handler. Someone who was in the Shin Bet, whom I met with a lot, explained the dynamics of those meetings to me. In fact, that became the heart of the film: the everyday world of a few characters who are at the heart of this conflict."

*From the questions that were asked, and also from talking to people who have seen the film, I notice a certain confusion. People don't understand whether it's a political film, whether it's from the left or right.*

"It's not political and it's not didactic. It's a thriller that shows what happens to a few figures in the territories, and tries to do that as well as possible and to be faithful to reality. The emphasis is on 'shows.'"

*Meaning?*

"Meaning that my goal was to get to the essence, to the heart of the matter, to the truth. Everything we did in terms of photography, casting, directing the actors, research, sound, selection of locations, was intended, on the one hand, to create a good cinematic experience, and on the other, to create the most realistic experience possible. I want to show the life of a handler and of the other characters. "The film does not contain the kind of meeting in which both sides suddenly grasp that 'the other side is also human,



"Bethlehem" photos by Vered Adir

**Adler (right) on the set of "Bethlehem" with young star Shadi Mar'i, the nonprofessional whom the director calls "a phenomenon."**

despite the situation.' I did not set out to make the film with the aim of bringing about that kind of encounter. Ali and I said: Let's write the film in order to show what a handler's life is like, and we will tell the story of this triangle: the handler, the senior figure in the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the kid who is caught between them. What should come out of this story is what will be; so it's not a political film in that sense."

### Chance actors

Although he severed his formal ties with academe, Adler still remains active in that realm. While living in New York, he established a forum for the study of the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the mathematics department of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In

Israel, too – to which he returned two years ago – he was recently in touch with Bar-Ilan University and will teach a course, on Heidegger's concept of the world, in the philosophy department there as an external lecturer in the coming academic year.

It's hard to ignore the connection between the thrust for truth in science and philosophy, the fields you focused on in the past, and the thrust for truth that you talk about in making "Bethlehem."

"I think it's an action film, not in the least philosophical. If there is any point to talking about a connection between philosophy and cinema, then in this case I agree that it's simply because both have to do with who I am. Heidegger talks about a philosophical 'drive,' which prompts one always to ask the most basic things. There is a kind of impulse like that in the film."

## Philosophical question

*What, if any, is the connection between cinema and philosophy?*

"A complicated question. I don't see a direct connection, in the sense that I don't want to make films that deal with philosophical themes directly – I'm speaking here as though I have a retrospective, though I've made only one feature – but I don't think anyone who sees 'Bethlehem' or 'Seduction,' the short film I made before it, will know that I am also occupied with philosophy.

"If there is any connection, it is something in the essence of the two activities. I will give you an example. The 'battle cry' of phenomenology in the period of the philosopher Edmund Husserl was: 'To the things themselves.' That means the philosopher has to maintain some sort of openness to things, to the phenomena he wants to investigate, that he has to allow them to show themselves as they are, without (or with as little as possible) of what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called 'worldview.' This is not an empty or trivial statement. In science, for example, you don't have that. In science you approach things with all kinds of rulers and modes of observation. So that same openness can exist in the cinema – or in a certain type of cinema.

"Philosophy is also reflexive. It always has to ask itself the question: What is it to do philosophy? Cinema also possesses that dimension, which is why there is something similar in the historicity of philosophy and the historicity of the cinema – in contrast to the ahistorical historicity of science, for example.

"While researching and writing 'Bethlehem,' we simply tried to observe. We tried to come without an agenda. We asked what the world of human intelligence is. What sort of dilemmas define each player on this field. We truly tried to see what needs to be seen and to listen to people telling or trying to tell us. "It's not necessarily as simple as it sounds. We knew we wanted to make a genre film, a thriller or an action movie, so it's not as though we challenged the cinematic form in any way. We tried to disappear into the genre, but simultaneously to let reality show itself."

*What else was dictated by this thrust for the truth?*

"I started both the casting and the location scouting extremely early. Almost a year before production. We started to look at actors and very quickly realized that we needed nonstandard casting, including the boy."

*Why?*

"Because you don't really find a boy in a talent agency. We saw hundreds of boys. We had a woman who helped the casting people, and they started to bring together groups, mostly in Arab theaters. We visited Nazareth, Rahat, JISR al-Zarqa, a million places. We were always on the move."

*How did you find Shadi Mar'i?*

"He was one of the first we saw. It's always like that: you see no end of people and in the end you go back to the first one you saw. He's from Mishhad, near Nazareth. Do you know what mishhad means in Arabic? It's 'view,' 'scenery,' like scene.

*He's from the village of Scene?*

"Exactly. We would say on the set, 'Time to take Shadi back to Scene village.' Or Hisham Suliman, who plays Ibrahim [the boy's older brother, whom the Shin Bet wants to assassinate] – he teaches acting in Nazareth. We came to him, and about eight kids from his school showed up. No one besides him spoke English and Hebrew. I had the actors do improvisations. Ali played the father and we had Shadi improvise with Ali, and then he left and another boy came in and then another, and then I say, 'Just a minute, where's that one [Shadi]?' They tell me he's still outside. 'Bring him back again.' We did another round with him. We filmed him a great deal. There was something about him that immediately projected sensitivity and need, something touching, though there is also something selfish and violent in the character. "It was very easy to fall into a pit of making him some kind of angel – you know, a kid of 16 and a half who is caught between the Shin Bet and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. But Sanfur, his character, is very complex. He's not easy, not some cute kid. You understand him, because you see the drama in his house and the background to the collaboration. Shadi had that complexity."

*So you did a big round, only to come back to him in the end, and it paid off.*

"Yes, he was amazing. We were stunned by the way he handled himself. He did a great many scenes; he had to run a lot, he stood up to the mental pressure, and amid all that he learns eight pages of Hebrew text from one reading. And then you tell him, 'Shadi, now say it in Arabic, and leave some word in Hebrew so the actor who doesn't speak Arabic will know where you are in the text.' And he just does it. Without any problem. He's a phenomenon."

*Did you also find the actor who plays Badawi (Hitham Omari), Ibrahim's lieutenant in Bethlehem, by chance?*

"Yes, during location scouting. The coproducer, Hamoudie Boqaie, who was in charge of the Palestinian-Arab side in the film, said he had someone I had to see. He brought Hitham. It took a lot of balls to cast him, because he's not an actor and he never acted in his life. He's a news cameraman for Al Arabiya. But still, it was obvious that he has star qualities."

*And then you all fell in love with the idea of casting nonprofessionals?*

◀ “On the Israeli side we looked at a great many professionals, but because we already had Shadi and Hitham, we felt it would be wrong to use a professional actor – he would stand out too much. I made that decision very close to the start of shooting, and suddenly we didn’t have an actor.”

*I remember you told me a consideration was that he had to speak Arabic well.*

“Not exactly. I tried to figure out how we would go about looking for actors in the time that remained. We said we would create a criterion – let’s say, someone who speaks Arabic, even though a non-Arabic speaker could have fit the bill, too. Then I asked all the people whom I’d spoken to during the research whether they knew people of that age who spoke Arabic and possessed a presence of some kind. We’re already close to the start of shooting and I’m making the rounds of people. Everyone tells me, ‘I know this one and that one from my unit,’ and Avi Issacharoff [former Haaretz correspondent for Arab affairs], who along with [Haaretz defense correspondent] Amos Harel helped me with the research, gave me a few names, one of whom was Tsahi Halevy, and we had them all audition for us.”

*So it was simple casting – actor in exchange for actor – and you moved on?*

“No. Ali and I changed the character for him. In other words, I really went with his warmth and charisma, and with something a lot less verbal than I had imagined for the character. And by the way, we cast him before he was accepted to [television reality show] ‘The Voice.’”

*Your producer didn’t slash her wrists when you switched lead actors two months before shooting started?*

“Look, it was all processes. It’s not that I came on the first day and said suddenly, ‘Let’s switch.’ Everything happened gradually, with a great many auditions and lots of discussions. But yes, the producer needed plenty of courage, because this was my first feature, and not such a simple movie, you know – not a movie about four friends at dinner. It involves a great many people and plenty of action and lots of filming on both sides.”

*Well, there’s an 18-minute battle scene.*

“Yes. That was complicated. As a scriptwriter you can write, ‘Int. Space Shuttle – Day.’ It’s no problem for you to write it.”

*You wrote a check for \$10 million without noticing.*

“Yes.”

*The producer jumps out the window.*

“So I tell the producers, Talia Kleinhendler and Osnat Handelsman-Keren: ‘Suddenly this is not only a first film for the director, it’s also the first film for three nonactors.’ So we made sure we had super-experienced people around us: the cinematographer Yaron Scharf, the editor Ron Omer. Everyone involved is really tops in the industry. The film was also shot like a regular movie, with one camera. When you use two cameras the actors can improvise, and at most you can intercut between the cameras in the editing. When you shoot everything on this side, and then everything on the other side, the script has to be tight and closed; you can hardly improvise at all.”

*You’re saying you made these people, who are not actors, stick to the script.*



**Tsahi Halevy, who plays a Shin Bet security service handler in “Bethlehem.” Warmth and charisma.**

“Yes. It was hard, but I really wanted, despite everything, to choose people with star quality. Tsahi is something of a star. You don’t feel that I just took just anybody. In general, there was something in the film that suddenly made everything fall into place, even though it was hard at very many levels.

“At some point you say, ‘The movie, what’s happening with it, has a logic of its own.’ I got into this situation in which I’m shooting in another seven weeks and I don’t know who my actor will be. But I know it will work out. Because by now this movie has a life of its own, and it will happen. There was a moment when we suddenly felt that we have to flow – even with the accidents and with the things that don’t look like they’re going well but will somehow be for the best. For example, we had incredible luck with the weather. We shot in December, in a very rainy winter, and I wanted our exterior scenes to have sun. And just that day we got sun. Everything worked out, everything worked.”

## Facing the void

It was only close to the end of the production process that Adler was infused with the “everything will work out” feeling he talks about now. But after he left academe and the art scene and tried to enter the film world, he endured many years in which the meteoric rise to which he had become accustomed in every endeavor just wasn’t there.

“I didn’t know how to do what, how to raise money, for what project,” he says of those lean years. “In art everything went quickly for me, too quickly, but in film I felt I was at an impasse. I didn’t know whether to write, to adapt something or to let someone else write. I succeeded quite easily in making money for a living, and, in general, when I started something I was used to things moving along. So I crashed. I had a terribly hard time with myself well into my thirties. I wasn’t part of any framework; I was in a vacuum that’s hard to imagine, because I was no longer a philosopher, nor an artist and not yet a director, I was this nothing. And I was no longer a kid.

“When I was young, I led my life as though I would live forever. Suddenly I

‘I saw a video of a collaborator, an informant, being executed in the middle of a street. People stood and watched as some gang took someone and shot him. You ask yourself, “What’s really going on there?”’

was no longer young, suddenly I was no longer any of those things. I told myself I was going to crash, that nothing would come of me, I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. When you’re not part of some framework and you’re not working, only trying to write, or even to learn how to write, and also like me, alone, you are, as they say, facing the void, the great nothingness. I did not have a world through which to understand where I was. On top of that, I was abroad, in New York, and not in Israel. I was cut off from my family.”

*It’s not that you stopped being productive.*

“But I found myself plunged into destructive, bad behavior. It’s very difficult for me to explain how hard those years were. I did so many things and I have nothing. Suddenly I am nothing.”

*You certainly could have tried to launch an academic career in any of your three fields of expertise.*

“I could have, but I didn’t think of that as a means. I cut myself off from everything. The question wasn’t how I would make money. I could make money. I always felt I had some sort of mission in life, that there is something I want to do and say. Suddenly I didn’t know what I was doing. I was lost and cut off, alone much of the time.”

*What rescued you, finally?*

“In the end, what stabilized me was the meeting with my amazing wife. [Adler is married to Aglika Dotcheva,

of Bulgarian origin, and a graduate of NYU’s school of economics; they have two boys.]

“Professionally, what I did in this period is learn a great deal – I read an unbelievable amount. Lots of literature and philosophy, and Freud and Jung, and plays and fairy tales – Marie-Louise von Franz on the interpretation of fairy tales, for example – and German history and all of Shakespeare and True Crime books and comics. I would focus on something and read thousands of pages. Mostly, though, I watched movies. I saw a great number of films in those years, and I studied acting at the Lee Strasberg school.”

*You once told me you went there so you could understand how to direct actors.*

“Yes. It was an incredible experience. I found it very hard, it was actually having to stand and act in front of an audience. I can’t begin to explain to you how hard the first time was for me. There was an Italian teacher, Dan Grimaldi, who was in ‘The Sopranos’ [he played the Parisi twins]. He had this song-and-dance exercise. It’s a seemingly dumb drill ... let’s say there are 30 students, so in the first class you have to face the class and introduce yourself, but in a dumb way – let’s say by dancing and singing ‘I’m Yuval and I’m here to study acting’ [does frenetic body gestures]. Get it? I’m sitting there and tell myself I can’t do it, I can’t do it. It’s a deliberate exercise to make you feel like an idiot in front of people.

“Well, I am the biggest worrier there is, the guy who tries to be in control. It was terribly hard for me. None of my friends, or even my wife, has ever seen me acting. I am not an actor, I never was an actor, but I learned a great deal about how actors work. I learned how to work with them, I learned what’s hard and what’s not. You don’t see that as a director. You don’t meet with actors a lot, even if you are a director who works all the time – and here, suddenly, for two years I saw how they work.

“I made short, experimental films of a few minutes with actors from my class and I edited them. That’s how I learned the work. It was really good. You take two actors, and I would even take dialogues from ‘Taxicab Confessions’ – an American series that used hidden cameras in taxis, and then a couple gets in and for ten minutes, say, you see a dialogue of a quarreling couple. It’s amazing. I learned the trade. I just sat down and transcribed it, and I learned how people talk. Instead of writing, I would take the transcript to the actors and they would do it.

“I would film them in a hotel room, say. I would come with a cameraman and soundman – you pay them \$20 – and film the quarrel and practice how to film in a room in an interesting way. Then I edited it. I made a film with a 10-minute scene and it cost me \$100. I made a few like that, and I learned from them how to cover a scene.

“In short, I learned a great deal in my thirties, but it was a rough period – it’s hard to describe how rough it was. It’s getting up every morning and as though to create, to situate, to sustain yourself – create alone what you usually get from being part of a world. I would call Ofer, my brother, who is a year younger than me. [Ofer, the middle of three brothers, is a founder of IncrediMail, which ▶

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'My goal was to get to the essence. Everything we did in terms of photography, casting, directing the actors, research, sound, selection of locations, was intended to create the **most realistic experience** possible.'



Hitham Omari (left), who plays a member of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades in the movie. Omari is a news cameraman by day.

◀ is traded on NASDAQ, and is one of the most highly regarded Internet entrepreneurs in Israel.] I would tell him, 'I can't go on, I don't know where it will all end.' He would always tell me, 'No, keep going, write, it'll be alright.' And I would think, No, he only believes in me because he's my little brother, he doesn't really see me."

*You said there was also something else good you learned at Lee Strasberg.*

"The second thing is that it really helped me with writing. Actors and writers do the same thing: they try to see the world through the eyes of the character, they invent biographies for the character. You understand what he really thinks, what he will really say, how he will say it. The experience very much improved me as a writer."

*You want to do your things, not those of others?*

"Overall, yes. Even though I am always looking for books – I very much want to do an adaptation of something. But I learned how to write dialogue, I learned structure. In contrast to philosophy and mathematics, it took time. At first I was terribly slow."

*So how many things did you do before "Bethlehem," roughly? I remember you hooked up with a writer of comics, Annie Nocenti.*

"Yes. She wrote 'Spider-Man' comics and 'Daredevil.' We wrote something about a group of traders who plan a heist based on the discovery of a mathematical pattern in Las Vegas roulette. It started from my work on Wall Street. After that I wrote another screenplay about an abusive love story between people who are relatives but don't know it."

## Going berserk

Adler's most compelling work in this period was a half-hour short film, "Seduction," which he wrote and directed. The thriller, which took part in a few festivals, including the 2006 International Short Film Festival at Clermont-Ferrand in France, shows Adler's abiding interest in human psychology and motives. The plot revolves around a locksmith who is given a safe to open from a man who is going abroad for a month. Unable to open the safe, he takes it home in order to work on it more intensively.

Finally, he manages to open it and finds a huge rifle inside. He starts to play with the weapon and aim it at objects. He ends up firing the rifle out the window and murdering someone, for no reason, only because he happened to have the rifle at home. But because of the random nature of the killing, no one looks for him and he begins to unravel. The seduction, then, is provided by a murderous object that impels a person to act, simply because it is there.

*Were you not pleased with the film?*

"It has something interesting as a story, but as a film, no. It is a film that is very hard to connect to. I was looking for a film to redeem myself, and that was really not it."

*You started to work on this film after "Seduction"?*

"On 'Bethlehem,' yes. Now I am writing more scripts, but 'Bethlehem' took a great deal of time because of the research and because I was flying back and forth between New York and Israel."

*It's no small thing to direct a film.*

"On the set, the person who is closest to you as the director is the cinematographer. Our cinematographer, Yaron Scharf, not only did amazing work, but was also a true partner to me every day on the set. It was like having someone with me who I felt was making the film together with me. That's what you need most in that very difficult situation. But there is no doubt it is an extreme situation. There are scenes in the film when you, as a director, go somewhat berserk."

"I remember once working on a short film in New York. We were shooting in Brooklyn, when suddenly I hear this noise – someone is playing Puerto Rican music. This goes on for an hour, and I go berserk and say, 'I'm going over there to shut them up.' It's a small production, so it's not like you send someone. It's me, so I go. I run over there, trying to figure out where the noise is coming from, and a production assistant comes running after me to stop me. We enter a building. 'Here it is, it's coming from the basement.' No. Then where is it coming from? Suddenly, you walk into a basement filled with Puerto Ricans who are drinking, and I say in an authoritative voice, 'Uh – excuse me, ex-

cuse me, I'm shooting a movie here, so turn down the music.' They look at me, like those ex-jailbirds you see in movies, completely covered with tattoos, who say, 'Who this honky geek comin' in here, telling us to turn down the music, like? That what's goin' down?' They were so shocked they didn't know what to say. And I didn't even notice the situation. You know, you're so berserk when you're a director that you get like the Terminator, you don't care about anything."

"Or while making 'Bethlehem,' for example, I'm in the field, looking for the perfect place for my concluding scene. I went down into a wadi between [the southern Jerusalem neighborhood] Har Homa and Bethlehem, with agricultural terraces – an incredible place. So I go down there and I say, 'This is where I want to shoot the scene, here.' I'm with a guy from production, from the side of Hamoudie, who speaks Arabic, an Arab from East Jerusalem who is supposed to watch over me a little in places like that. We go down there, and I say, 'This is where I want to shoot.' And then I come to the production people and I tell them, 'I want to shoot it here.' Well, you need a key to get there, because the trail that leads down there is connected to Har Homa, and only the municipality has a key."

"What happened is that the production fought the city for months, and managed to get the key. Now it's the day of the shoot. That means you start shooting at 5:30 in the morning. Everyone arrives at 4:30 for breakfast. The camp has already been there since 3:30. This is December, there's rain and mud, and we go down – it's hard for me to explain it to you – into this hallucinatory valley. I get up in the hotel at around 4:30 to go and film this place. At 5 A.M. I come to some hole, which, just to go down there with the trucks in all that mud, is madness. And I go down to the bottom, and there are trucks there, and a camp has been set up. A tent is erected, you know, and there is breakfast for 50-60 people, who are standing and shivering in the cold at 4:30 in the morning. And you say, 'What?! All this is only because I said I wanted to shoot here? Why are you taking me seriously? Are you crazy?'"