"HILARIOUSAND HEARTBREAKING."
–LE PARISIEN

A NICE JEWISH BOY

A FILM BY NOÉ DEBRÉ

FILM MOVEMENT

presents

A NICE JEWISH BOY

a film by NOÉ DEBRÉ

with
MICHAEL ZINDEL, AGNÈS JAOUI, SOLAL BOULOUDNINE

France | 2024 | French with English Subtitles
Comedy | 90 minutes

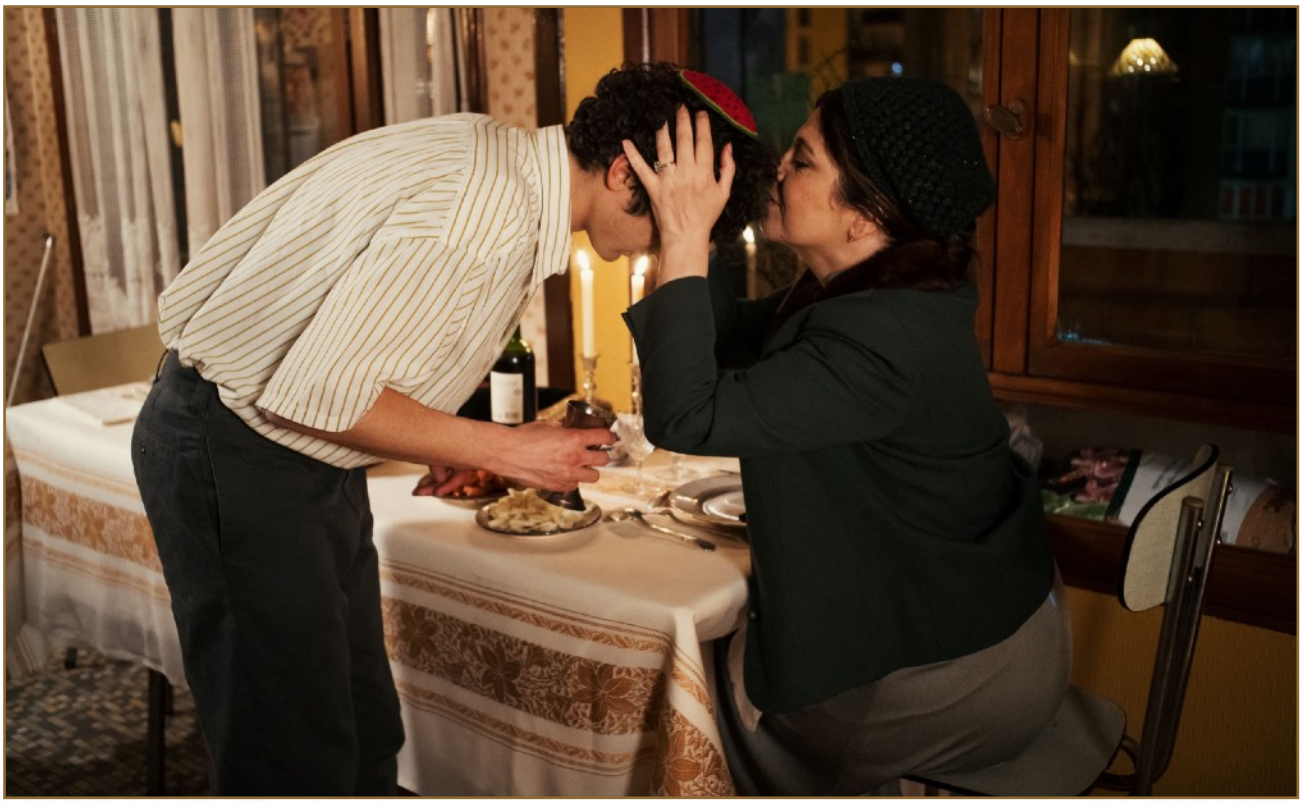
Press Contact
Michael Krause | Foundry Communications | (212) 586-7967 | mkrause@foundrycomm.com

Film Movement Booking Contact
Erin Farrell | Theatrical & Festival | (212) 941-7744 x206 | erin@filmmovement.com

SYNOPSIS

In a small, working-class Parisian suburb, a naïfish, curly-haired young man named Bellisha (Michael Zindel) lives with his anxious, mildly agoraphobic mother, Giselle (Agnès Jaoui). A nice Jewish boy at heart, the 27-year-old is most comfortable shirking the hallmarks of adulthood. His days are instead spent tending to his mother's needs and keeping her spirits high. The once vibrant Jewish community that surrounded them is rapidly fading, leaving Giselle feeling isolated and wanting to flee. Preferring to stay where they are, Bellisha keeps a positive attitude even if that means lying to her about the anti-Semitic graffiti showing up in their building or the electrician who refused to enter their apartment after spotting the mezuzah on their doorframe. As Giselle's health begins to decline and tensions rise in their community, Bellisha's boyish insouciance will be tested.

Featuring a Chaplinesque turn from newcomer Michael Zindel, A NICE JEWISH BOY is a light-hearted tale about entering adulthood and all the responsibilities that come with it. "Hilarious and heartbreaking" (*Le Parisien*), screenwriter Noé Debré's (*Dheepan* and *Stillwater*) feature directorial debut delights with his bittersweet, irreverent touch.



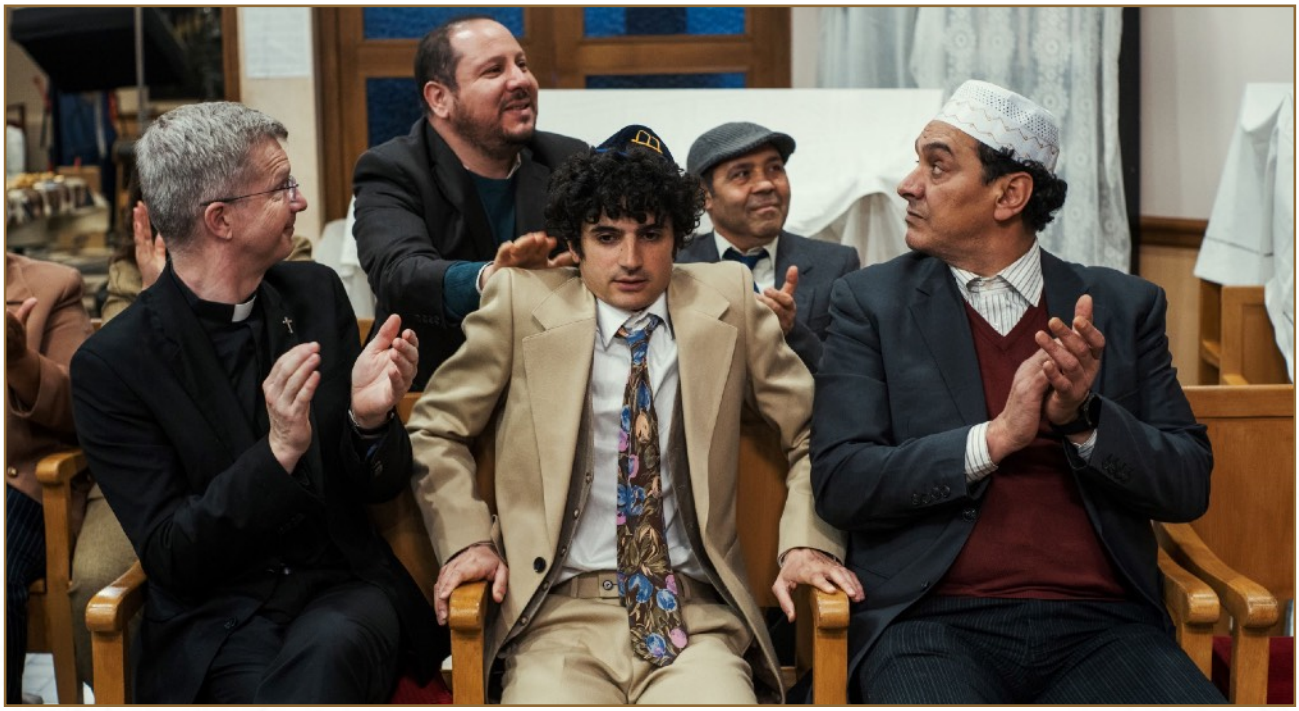
NOÉ DEBRÉ
ABOUT THE FILM

A NICE JEWISH BOY aims to offer a humanistic perspective on the impossible situation we currently find ourselves in – a perspective that also seeks reconciliation.

What is cinema for? To remind us of our shared humanity. Cinema is a collective experience. People don't go to the movies just to see a film on a bigger screen, but to watch it surrounded by others – to laugh and cry together, to share in our humanity. And that is exactly what we collectively need right now when facing a subject as difficult as antisemitism. We need to be able to laugh and cry together.

A NICE JEWISH BOY is the opposite of an identity-based or self-victimizing film. It is a film that aims to awaken in us something universal. The role of cinema and literature is to lift us above an ideological reading of the world. When films succeed, they can steer us away from a generalized, news-channel-type reading of our current events and instead focuses our attention on particular stories and singular yet relatable experiences.

I hope this film will allow us to have a conversation together. That, too, is one of cinema's most essential purposes.



INTERVIEW WITH NOÉ DEBRÉ

Where did A NICE JEWISH BOY come from? From current events about Jews leaving certain neighborhoods?

I saw a German short film, *Mazel Tov Cocktail*, which was screened at Clermont-Ferrand at the same time as one of my own shorts. It's a comedy about a young Russian Jew in Germany. One image struck me: a young man wandering among housing towers, and I realized that the story of Jews leaving working-class neighborhoods hadn't really been told. But immediately I thought that such a film shouldn't be made – that it would be obscene, unsettling. Then I told myself that if I made it with Michael Zindel, who had acted in my shorts, he would take me into a space of comedy and poetry that could help me overcome the difficulty of the subject. I had the title in mind fairly early on, and then a friend shoved Jacques Derrida's book under my nose. I read it and found it fascinating, but Derrida came in at a later stage.

The film's international title (*The Last of the Jews*) evokes a fear of disappearance that exists, to varying degrees, among all Jews?

The question of the "last Jew" is a powerful European theme. That image is deeply rooted in the European collective unconscious. I tried not to mention the Shoah in the film, but obviously it's present even when unspoken. Still, I really wanted to tell a Sephardic story. A few years ago, I read an article by Dominique Sopo, then president of SOS Racisme, about Jews leaving the suburbs. He said there was a misunderstanding: everyone was invoking the memory of the Shoah when talking about Jews leaving these neighborhoods, whereas the real memory at play was the departure from Algeria. Sopo argued that in public debate, antisemitism = the Shoah, while the memory of Jews from these neighborhoods is entirely different. That struck me because my family comes from both histories, but while the Shoah was often discussed, Algeria never was. I thought that after everything that happened around "duty of memory" in the 1980s-90s, there was another repressed element at play – the departure from Algeria, which remains taboo. Derrida's book deals with that. And although I have a grandfather born in Algeria, I know nothing about Algeria or Algerian Jews beyond a few history lessons – not at all from an intimate point of view. I tried to pay attention to that history, even though I'm not from the suburbs and not 100% Sephardic myself.

Is that why the film ends with a song by Enrico Macias?

Absolutely. I was talking about this subject with filmmaker Raphaël Nadjari, who advised me to attend a talk by Macias at the MAHJ (Museum of Jewish Art and History). Macias reflected on his youth and his career, and I found it very moving. It felt right to end the film with him. Another reference behind the title is André Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* (winner of the 1959 Goncourt Prize), an extraordinary book I read quite late, when I began working on the film. That book led me to the theme of the "just," and revealed something about Bellisha – his miraculous side.

What did you find unsettling about depicting Jews leaving working-class neighborhoods?

I was afraid it would target Muslims again, that it would be hijacked by the far right. And cinematically, I was uneasy about representing violence. It's hard for me to articulate, but I think there would be something exploitative about handling this subject in a linear, literal way. I didn't want to make an *American History X* – a film where there's almost a thrill in showing antisemitic violence, which makes me uncomfortable. Maybe it's a sort of modesty? I just didn't want cinema to feed off that.

But A NICE JEWISH BOY avoids a conventional, news-item treatment and instead offers a gentle, poetic, almost burlesque depiction of Jewish life in a suburban housing estate.

That comes from Michael, who helps pull the film away from anything too literal thanks to his Chaplinesque presence. That's what allowed me to make this film. There's Chaplin, but also Riad Sattouf and *The Arab of the Future*, where he manages to tell big, difficult history through the eyes of his character, with humor and lightness, without shying away from the harshness of the subject. I also set a rule for myself: everything shown in the film had to be something someone had told me – or at minimum something I had read in serious sources. That reassured me; I didn't want to rely purely on imagination. I didn't want to film fantasies or cinematic clichés.

We sometimes feel that Bellisha floats above – or beside – reality.

The character has something miraculous, like Chaplin. I thought of that Marx Brothers gag where a wall collapses just when the character stops leaning on it. Bellisha defuses violence; he can take hits – like Chaplin, who, after being slapped repeatedly and getting back up, finally collapses *before* the blow comes! He's someone who can take punches without ever losing his dignity.

Bellisha deliberately defuses violence, even for his mother, Giselle – like when he hides an antisemitic graffiti.

I found it moving to have two characters who both believe they're protecting the other. In fact, the mother is really Bellisha: he does the shopping, tidies the apartment, and because he does everything a mother does, he ends up protecting his mother.

About violence: you never show verbal insults or physical assaults – just a few tags. And you also show that Giselle, a Jewish woman in the minority, can have racist thoughts, but again these moments are defused, as when she says "There are more and more Black people in the neighborhood! But where are the Arabs?"

I love these kinds of comic paradoxes. In life, you often hear these little bursts of inconsequential racism – absurd statements. Sometimes Giselle expresses anti-Arab racism that resembles antisemitism, like when she says "All the doctors are Arab, they help each other…" She repurposes old antisemitic clichés and applies them to others, which I find funny. It's just talk, language, without real consequences – then she goes outside and says, "It's actually nice living with Arabs, we feel at home." With Giselle, I wanted to capture people who speak in contradictions without worrying about them, as if words didn't really matter. It's very Jewish: you throw out a remark, then say the opposite five minutes later, and ultimately none of it is very serious.

Another emblematic scene is when Bellisha hangs out with his Black and Arab friends, and one says, "I don't really like Jews, but you're okay." Bellisha points out that he likes another Jew in the neighborhood, and the guy is suddenly thrown off.

That scene was told to me. I know someone who handled synagogue security in Seine-Saint-Denis, and he said, “I can’t count how many times people told me: ‘I don’t like Jews, but you, I like.’” And they don’t see the irony. There’s a similar line in the film when Bellisha’s Arab girlfriend says, “You mustn’t leave, or there won’t be any Jews left – and that’s when people will become *really* racist.” I heard that too: people become truly antisemitic when there are no Jews around. That’s the core of the social tragedy we’re living: antisemitism and racism are fantasies. When you live with people daily, when you know them, prejudices dissolve.

When Giselle dies, the Muslim neighbors come to offer pastries – a beautiful scene that goes against all clichés.

That also came from a real story. I think these relationships are rooted in a shared historical understanding of what it means to live together. What struck me during my research was how deeply people identify with their neighborhood. Their common identity is the building, the block – hat matters more than knowing who is Muslim, Jewish, or Arab. When outside sociological categories are imposed on them, it feels strange to them. It’s the building that matters, not origins. Making this film allowed me to question my own assumptions – and I think that’s what I was after.

Another element that subverts expectations is Bellisha’s affair with a married Muslim woman. Seeing a Muslim woman cheat on her husband with a Jew is doubly transgressive.

Issues around sexuality and gender relations are far more urgent and fraught in the neighborhoods than anything relating to Jews. I often asked people, “If a Muslim and a Jewish person dated, how would that be received?” And they told me: people don’t date. Romantic relationships are underground, hidden. That ultraconservative aspect of gender relations struck me far more – and worried me far more – than attitudes toward Jews. I also didn’t want Bellisha to be too childlike, cute, asexual, the mama’s boy. I wanted him to be sexy, libidinal, with a bit of mischief – it made him more interesting. Hence the idea of giving him a mistress.

Bellisha also writes rap songs full of swear words.

Yes, he can be vulgar. The rap is also to remind us that Bellisha is a guy from the estate. As for his mistress, at first I imagined someone older, in her forties, but I had trouble finding the actress. I wanted a Felliniesque woman, and couldn't find it. Then I saw a short film with Eva, the actress I finally chose – much younger than what I had in mind. But when I saw her, I knew she was right. And there's a representation gap: faces and bodies like hers are everywhere in the street, but hardly ever on screen, because of the sociological pool from which actresses are drawn. Eva isn't just someone found on Instagram – she's an excellent actress, highly intelligent, fascinating. Filming with her was a joy.

Why did you show a family with an "absent" father, when the paternal figure is so central in Judaism?

It's sociological reality: in the housing estates, there are many single-parent families. Financial hardship often comes from a mother raising children alone. Many people I met grew up with their mothers only. It also felt psychologically right for the character: the Bellisha I imagined would live alone with his mother. I gradually realized – without being able to fully articulate it – that there is a strong link between Jews, their mothers, and France: you see it in Albert Cohen, Romain Gary, Proust… I wanted my character to be Cohen-like; it was a way to connect this with Sephardic identity. The slightly grandiose voiceover is a pastiche of Cohen: Sephardic comedic exuberance. The mother-son dynamic fell into place naturally.

The father bursts into the film in a beautiful scene, and we see he is quite religious.

I found it interesting to deal a bit with religion in the context of "the last of the Jews." For that scene of the father's return, I thought of Ulrich Seidl's *Faith*: a woman lives alone, and halfway through, her husband shows up – and he's an Islamist. It's disorienting, and it reconfigures the whole film. That daring narrative twist stayed with me, even though it has little to do with my own story.

What's funny is that the tone and style of your film are the opposite of Seidl's.

A NICE JEWISH BOY is more sentimental than what I'm naturally inclined toward; I tried to go against my own instincts. The father also embodies something sociological and historical that saddens me: the way Sephardic identity is disappearing. In Israel, the Eastern European religious world has won the cultural battle, and this Sephardic father arrives "dressed up" like a Polish Jew. A Sephardic man who looks like an Eastern European rabbi – it's inauthentic. Today practicing Sephardim wear black kippot, imitating Ashkenazi yeshiva students. There's a false idea of "returning to the sources," like when people tell North Africans that dressing like Wahhabis is going back to traditions – even though it's untrue. The same exists among Sephardim who dress like Ashkenazim and believe they're being authentic when they aren't. Pierre-Henri Salfati, who plays the father, understands this world perfectly—he's erudite. I wanted a character who brought authority and gravity in contrast to Bellisha and his mother.

Bellisha has a flexible, even distant relationship to religion. He raises the eternal question: what does it mean to be Jewish?

I liked that the character had something slightly blasphemous. Bellisha is Jewish in the eyes of others. People tell him: "You're Jewish so you have to go to Israel… you must practice… you must study in a yeshiva…" He's the object of a series of injunctions that don't really interest him.

This perspective is close to Sartre's idea that the antisemite creates the Jew.

In Sartre's book, assimilation plays a big role. Today, everyone is pressured to define themselves identity-first. That was part of my initial concern: I was afraid of making an identitarian film, and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. Agnès (Jaoui) and I discussed this in our first conversation: she loved the script but wanted to ensure we were reading it the same way. In the film, religion occupies that space: I wanted Bellisha to resist it.

Giselle, played by Agnès Jaoui, seems more religious and identity-driven than her son.

Yes, but full of contradictions. She locks herself in her room because of halal chicken, but then lights a cigarette from the Shabbat candles. She's paradoxical. When her ex-husband arrives, she says, "Oh, you've dressed up?" She has an acerbic take on religion. Like with racism, she's not bothered by her contradictions, and I liked that inconsistency. She also corresponds to a type of woman I've often seen. The "Jewish mother" is usually portrayed in an obvious way, but these women often have great irony. They perform the idea of the Jewish mother while also being in on the joke. Agnès and I worked to capture that tone – she's very funny, mischievous. She pretends to believe Bellisha, but deep down she knows he's making things up.

Can the title *The Last of the Jews* also be read positively – like the "last" to follow tradition, or the "first" to emancipate himself, someone who will be Jewish in another way?

Yes, and that's Derrida's point. For him, "the last of the Jews" is both the worst Jew and the last true Jew. In the final image, Bellisha with his suitcase evokes the exilic Jew. He's the "last of the Jews" because he's the last one willing to be this exilic Jew who will live with a suitcase. In that sense, yes, the title contains hope. Bellisha is destined for wandering, but he doesn't see it as a tragedy.

How did you work with your cinematographer, Boris Lévy?

I met Boris on my first short; we made three together, and this is also his first feature. With a low-budget film, the advantage is that I could keep my short-film team, which mattered to me. With cinematographers, there's always a risk of formalism, aestheticism, even an advertising look – none of which applies to Boris. The DP's presence is crucial for actors; they like being looked at as characters, not objects. Boris sees actors and comedy in a way that fosters intimacy, and I noticed the actors felt that. My big fear is making something "pretty," because I don't yet have strong convictions about what is "beautiful." Trying to make something "beautiful" often leads to something merely "pretty" – which is nothing. Boris understands this and makes surprising suggestions.

We decided the image should be humble because it's a small film, like Bellisha. We couldn't shoot in scope – it made no sense – nor in 4:3, which

felt like a posture. We chose 1.66: a very 1970s super-16 ratio, perfect for comedy because you see bodies well, but it doesn't call attention to itself. We shot in high definition, which is actually a fairly "poor" process, because I didn't want to sculpt the image through digital grading. I dislike digital filters that imitate 35mm. So we took a risk, choosing a slightly rough format, and you can feel it – the image isn't tricked.

How did the editing go? One senses you avoided the so-called "efficient" edit.

The script was already loose in that way, not built on constant cause-and-effect. I met editor Géraldine Mangenot through Jacques Audiard's films; she's worked on all my shorts, like Boris. I like that she's very autonomous. I don't love the editing phase; I only go in once there's a first cut. I think you have to trust the technicians, and that's the case with Géraldine. Curiously, we didn't have to search for the film as much as I expected. It has many everyday scenes that could have been arranged differently, but an emotional continuity asserted itself naturally – especially around Michael.

Can you talk about the music, which is cheerful and lilting, almost klezmer-like?

It was composed by Valentin Hadjadj. In my mind, I wanted 1960s Italian film music – Italian comedy is one of my references. Valentin composed three themes: the opening, which sounds like a little fanfare; the guitar theme, which is more emotional; and a third, xylophone theme for Bellisha. For the guitar theme, I'd played him the score from *Scent of a Woman* before shooting, and he told me the guitar is an intimate instrument because it's faint. That's why you don't find guitars in big orchestras. I wanted that intimacy. Another musical reference was Tati, but we wanted to avoid imitation.

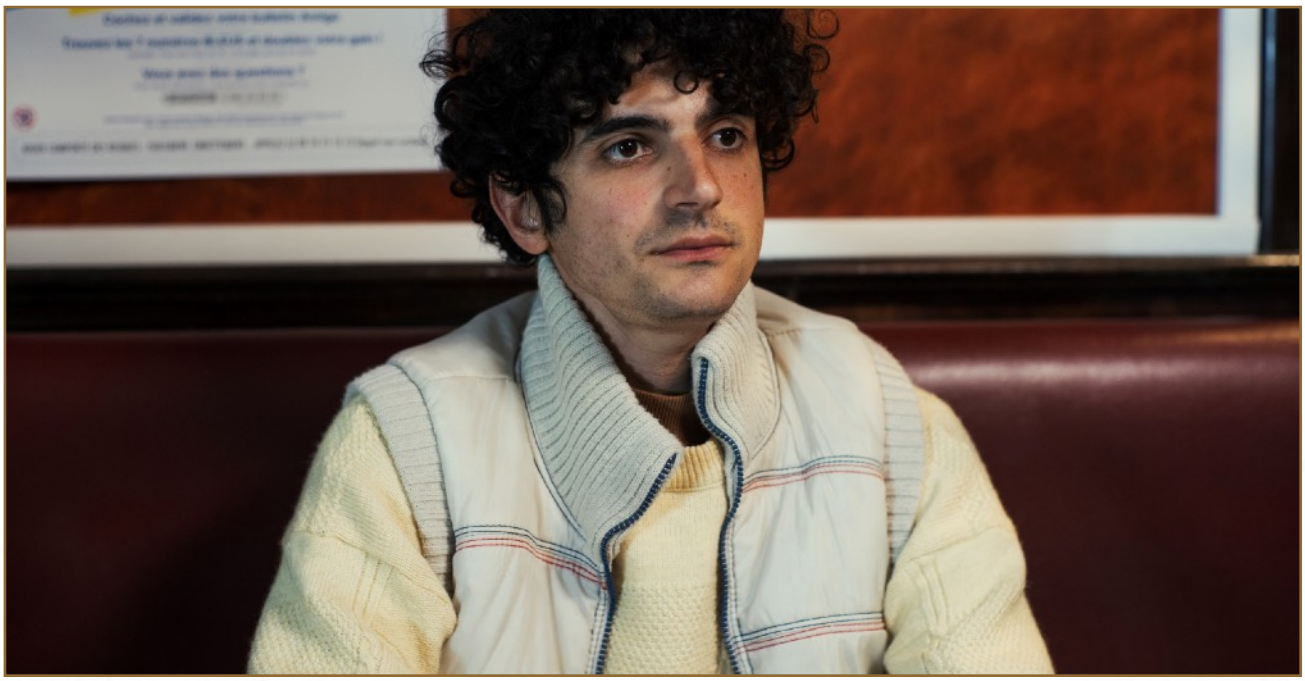
Let's talk about the actors. How did the meeting with Agnès Jaoui come about?

I didn't know her personally but admired her work. I didn't have her in mind while writing, but her name came up quickly during casting discussions. She'd

acted very little in “Jewish” roles, so I knew she wouldn’t fall into clichés, which appealed to me. I also believe a lot in comic presence: Agnès is aware of her clown and can deploy it. I didn’t want Michael to be the only comic presence while the others simply supported him; every role needed to be able to make me laugh. At first I was intimidated, but we got past that quickly. She was extremely tactful – this was a first feature with a very young crew, and she was patient, never condescending. I think she also enjoyed meeting Michael. Agnès isn’t afraid to play aging women; she has a political stance about it, lamenting the lack of roles of that kind. And it’s the first time she dies on screen! That wasn’t easy emotionally, but she was very generous.

Michael Zindel is a discovery. Where does this dreamy actor who carries the film come from?

I met him while casting my second short. He’s the cousin of a friend. She told me, “My cousin wants to be an actor, he’s struggling – would you see him?” He stunned us at the audition with his comic instinct and extraordinary presence; it was striking. In my shorts, he played supporting roles, but I knew I’d someday build a film around him. When the “last Jew” idea came up, it was obvious the role was for him. He’s a true natural – but not only that. Michael is also an excellent actor, he really interprets the text. He has a very particular voice, which I love. I think he’s capable of many things – he’s going to surprise people.



CAST

Bellisha	**Michael Zindel**
Giselle	**Agnès Jaoui**
Asher	**Solal Bouloudnine**
Mira	**Eva Huault**

CREW

Written and Directed by	**Noé Debré**
Produced by	**Benjamin Elalouf**
Coproduction	**Nathalie Dennes, Noé Debré**
Director of Photography	**Boris Levy**
Editor	**Géraldine Mangenot**
Set Designer	**Thibault Pinto**
Costume Designer	**Élisa Ingrassia**
Sound by	**Gaël Éleon**
Mixing by	**Clément Laforce**
Music by	**Valentin Hadjadj**
Casting by	**Judith Chalier**

ABOUT FILM MOVEMENT

Founded in 2002 as one of the first-ever subscription film services with its DVD-of-the-Month club, Film Movement is now a North American distributor of award-winning independent and foreign films based in New York City. It has released more than 300 feature films and shorts culled from prestigious film festivals worldwide. Film Movement's theatrical releases include American independent films, documentaries, and foreign art house titles. Its catalog includes titles by directors such as Hirokazu Kore-eda, Maren Ade, Jessica Hausner, Andrei Konchalovsky, Andrzej Wajda, Diane Kurys, Ciro Guerra and Mélanie Laurent.

In 2015, Film Movement launched its reissue label Film Movement Classics, featuring new restorations released theatrically as well as on Blu-ray and DVD, including films by such noted directors as Eric Rohmer, Peter Greenaway, Bille August, Marleen Gorris, Takeshi Kitano, Arturo Ripstein and Sergio Corbucci.

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