



Community service: Michael Zindel (centre) as Ruben Bellisha; Below: Zindel; Zindel with Agnès Jaoui as his mother Giselle

A bittersweet au revoir to a vanishing community

A Good Jewish Boy, which has its British premiere at this year's UK Jewish Film Festival, shines a light on a dwindling Jewish community in a Parisian banlieue. Naomi Gryn speaks to the director Noé Debré about how the film's wider themes of displacement and multiculturalism resonate right now

Noé Debré's directorial debut, *A Good Jewish Boy*, opens as curly-haired Ruben Bellisha (Michael Zindel) learns that the local kosher grocery store is closing. "It's over," says the shop's owner, "the whole community has left." The nearest kosher butchers is in Porte de la Villette or Porte de Pantin, both an hour's walk away. The 27-year-old Bellisha thinks he can fool his mother Giselle (Agnès Jaoui) and instead buys a chicken from a halal store, but she spots the difference.

The pair are two of the few Jews still living in Seine-Saint-Denis, a banlieue on the outer fringes of Paris. Once the burial place of French kings, it is now better known for having the highest proportion of immigrants in France, along with the highest rates of poverty and violent crime.

This bittersweet film is built on ambiguity. Its French title is *Le Dernier des Juifs* (The Last of the Jews), but the comedic beat is lost in translation. "The last," Debré explains, "also means the least. In French, when you say 'le dernier des juifs', you mean the last Jew, but you also mean the worst of the Jews.

Whereas, in English, people were telling me that 'the last of the Jews' sounded very dramatic and sad."

Bellisha resembles a latter-day Ernie Levy, the central character in André Schwartz-Bart's seminal novel, *Le Dernier des Justes* (The Last of the Just) and it's no coincidence that the titles are so similar. "When I read *Le Dernier des Justes*," says Debré, "I thought of Bellisha as a just [man], someone who carries the world on his shoulders without knowing it. If he disappears, the world might collapse, but he isn't aware of it."

The quote at the beginning of the film, "Heureux ceux qui l'attendent" (Happy are those who wait for Him) is from Isaiah 30:18 – "Ashrei kol hokhei lo". The word 'lo' ('for Him') is spelt with the Hebrew letters lamed and vav, and as each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has numeric value, when these are put together, they add up to 36. From this is derived the legend of the Lamed-Vavnik, the 36 righteous or just men in every generation, without whom the world would be destroyed.

"That quote defines Bellisha and

his mother really well. You're waiting for something but there's happiness in the waiting."

One of the Muslim kids hanging around in Bellisha's apartment building jokes affectionately: "Guys, I caught a Jew. Slit his throat and go to Paradise." Bellisha, whose lover is his married Arab neighbour, has a relaxed affinity with the non-Jews around him. His mother, on the other hand, rarely leaves their flat, increasingly worried by the state of the world. "We have to move now," she tells him, mentioning their impending departure three times a day but never making the necessary arrangements.

Attacks on France's Jewish community – the third largest in the world – have been on the rise for some time. Debré was having drinks one day with some friends and the discussion turned to antisemitism. "I was being a bit offhand," he recalls. "[I was saying], 'It's all fine, it's overstated' and a woman at the table said, 'My parents live in a tough banlieue and in the elevator someone had written the words *Vive le Mohammed Merah*.'" Mohammed Merah was the French

SIMON BIRMAN; COURTESY OF SPARKS.CO

jihadi who, in 2012, killed three off-duty uniformed soldiers in protest against France's involvement in Afghanistan. He continued his shooting spree a few days later at a Jewish school in Toulouse, killing a rabbi and three children because, he justified, "the Jews kill our brothers and sisters in Palestine". France, and its Jewish community in particular, was rocked by these events.

"It's a class thing," says Debré. "I grew up in a bourgeois environment in Strasbourg. I never experienced antisemitism. When I talked to that woman, I realised I didn't know what was going on." Thus *A Good Jewish Boy* was conceived.

Debré's artistic collaborator, Élie Benchimol, interviewed Jews in Seine-Saint-Denis and elsewhere. Whenever he came across an interesting story, Debré would then meet the person as well.

He wanted to avoid making the film exploitative and looked instead for a cinematic form that might turn it "into poetry". He found this in Zindel's portrayal of Bellisha, creating an absurdist comedy "like a Charlie Chaplin or Jacques Tati film" he says, adding: "*A Good Jewish Boy* is light-hearted, but everything in it is true. It's not a very violent movie, but you feel the violence."

Debré's father is an Ashkenazi Jew from Alsace but his mother, who is Sephardi, grew up in Tangiers. "I realised while making the film how much it was a story about Sephardi Jews and the departure from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. This still inhabits our psyche a lot.

We are always asking ourselves, 'Is it time to go or should we stay?'"

That theme is shared with another work in this year's film festival, *Once Upon a Time in Algeria* (which also goes under the title of *The Blond Boy from the Casbah*) directed by Alexandre Arcady. The film revisits Jewish life in Algiers on the eve of Algeria's independence in 1962, when 130,000 out of 140,000 Algerian Jews immigrated to France, and the remaining 10,000 left for Israel. The mass exodus of Jews from North Africa – and from rest of the Arab world – has, until now, received remarkably little attention.

"Sephardi Jewish history has been a bit subsumed by the Ashkenazi story and the Holocaust," Debré reflects. "Sephardi Jews are trying to figure out what happened to them and what it means. In France there are many Ashkenazi and many Sephardi

Jews and they're very mixed together, so it creates an opportunity to articulate things differently."

Debré refers to an online essay on the film by the sociologist Milo Lévy-Bruhl, which discusses Al-Andalus, a historic reference to the Iberian peninsula under Muslim rule from 711 until 1492, and a place where Jews, Muslims and Christians once lived together in harmony. "Al-Andalus is an abstract place that keeps moving. It used to be Spain and then, when the Jews left Algeria, it became Algeria. Now the banlieue is becoming the Al-Andalus, the nostalgic place where Jews and Arabs used to live together," says Debré.

When Giselle dies, Bellisha decides to leave their flat. He hands the keys to a council official who points to the mezuzah, asking: "Are you leaving that?". Bellisha apologises and yanks it from the doorpost, instinctively touching the empty space left behind. This symbolic gesture has hidden depths: a Jew should remove his mezuzah only if he knows that the next inhabitant will be a non-Jew.

"Giving up a subsidised apartment is haram, bro," says one of the local Black kids, who fist-bumps with Bellisha before he sets off into the unknown. But Bellisha comes from a people that has learnt not to become too attached to such comforts. Wistful and captivating, *A Good Jewish Boy* nails the zeitgeist.

"My intention was that we should feel it is going to be all right for him. Bellisha is going to survive everything. He has this silent movie quality to him, if the house falls down, he's going to be where the window was, he's not going to feel it. At the end of the film, Bellisha is walking away, but we're not worried for him." ■

Visit ukjewishfilm.org for further details or see *What's Happening*, p54. Naomi Gryn is a writer and documentary filmmaker.



IT'S SHOWTIME FOR ARTHUR MILLER'S STORY

Shira Piven brings *The Performance* to the big screen. Naomi Gryn reviews this timely adaptation

Adapted from an Arthur Miller short story, Shira Piven's stylish and darkly beguiling film follows an American tap-dancing troupe led by Harold May (Jeremy Piven). In 1937, struggling to make ends meet, the group goes on a tour of Europe. At one show, an elegantly dressed German, Damian Fugler (Robert Carlyle), offers the troupe \$2,000 to come to Berlin for a one-off performance. How can they refuse? May, who is Jewish, persuades the others to ignore their misgivings about Nazi Germany and they are received with lavish welcome. The star guest in the audience turns out to be Adolf Hitler, who loves the show and insists they stay.

Despite evidence of Nazi brutality mushrooming all around them, May tries to rationalise this Faustian pact. At first, he conceals his Jewishness but, in the end, revealing his identity becomes the only route out of an even worse fate.

As antipathy towards Jews blossoms again, and with cancel culture threatening to erase those who offend our new ideologues, this is a timely reminder of the dangers of groupthink.

Piven's performance as May simmers with emotional complexity, while Carlyle is chillingly convincing as Fugler. May's fellow tap-stars, Carol (Maimie McCoy), Benny (Adam Garcia) and Paul (Isaac Gryn), bring phenomenal energy to the screen with some glorious dance sequences choreographed by Jared Grimes. The cinematography and richly-layered editing set the film apart from other dramas about the period. This is art-house cinema at its very best. ■

The Performance runs at the UK Jewish Film Festival. Visit ukjewishfilm.org or see *What's Happening*, p54.