

Jewish Film World

Volume 3, No. 1 Spring, 2008

Eran Kolirin on *The Band's Visit*
Norman Mailer & His Movies
*Beaufort: A War Movie for
Our Time*
Poster Contest Winners
New Jewish Sounds

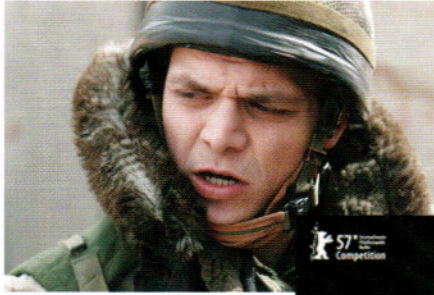
Theodore Bikel
Actor

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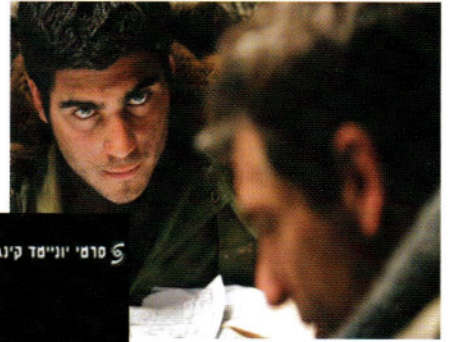


Beaufort: American-born Filmmaker Finds His Historical Moment

By Jan Lisa Huttner



out of synch with events here, *Beaufort* arrives in the United States at the perfect time. With American soldiers bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire, we are very much attuned to the citizen-soldier; and we must acknowle-



Joseph Cedar's new film *Beaufort*, set during the Israel Defense Force's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, is Israel's candidate for this year's "Best Foreign Language Film" Oscar. The Academy Awards' ceremony will be history by the time you read this article, but win or lose, I believe images from *Beaufort* will endure long after most films released in 2007 have faded from memory. *Beaufort* is more than just a milestone in Israeli filmmaking, it's one of the most significant combat films ever made.



commercial success. Only *Beaufort* helps us understand things we really need to know.

Based on Ron Leshem's novel, *Im Yesh Gan Eden*, which won Israel's top literary award, the Sapir Prize, in 2006, *Beaufort* is not an overtly political film in any way. I think calling it "an anti-war film", as other critics have suggested, is incorrect. *Beaufort* is about the last members of the IDF to occupy Beaufort Castle in southern Lebanon. Should these particular soldiers

(Continued on Page 15)



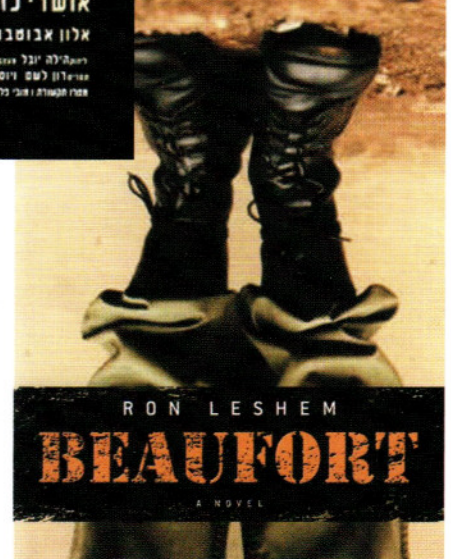
Timing is Everything

Whereas Cedar's earlier works, *Time of Favor* and *Campfire*, reached the United States when they were

dge both who he is and what he does "in our name."

Many highly-praised directors tried to say something meaningful about "the war on terrorism" in 2007, but they all fell short. Consider Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah* and Peter Berg's *The Kingdom*, Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs*, Brian de Palma's *Redacted* and Gavin Hood's *Rendition*; not one was a critical or

WHAT INSPIRED THE AWARD-WINNING FILM



Beaufort: American-born Israeli Filmmaker Finds His Historical Moment

(Continued from Page 8)

be in this particular place at this particular time? This question is irrelevant: the decisions that have placed these young men at Beaufort were all made by other people, many of them long gone before the film's action begins. Soldiers obey orders: they go where they're told to go; they do the things they've been trained to do. Soldiers fight for their friends and grieve over every death.

The main character is Lieutenant Liraz Liberti. Even though he's only 22, Liraz already thinks of himself as an old vet, and he refers to the soldiers under his command as "the kids." In one early scene, the company medic, Koris, tells a newly-arrived demolition expert, Ziv: "Liraz is exactly what the army needs here right now – someone who can't believe the army gave him the job." When Ziv asks what they do all day, one soldier responds: "Guard the mountain, so it doesn't escape." Political realities constrain them. They're not allowed to attack, but their retreat must be calculated. "What are we here for?" Koris asks in a rage. "So they will know we haven't left yet," he's told in reply.

There are many ways in which Liraz resembles Captain John H. Miller, the citizen-soldier Tom Hanks played in *Saving Private Ryan*, but there's a specific Israeli spin to his character. Cedar doesn't explain any of this explicitly, but Israelis watching the film will all know that Liraz comes from a Mizrahi family and the chip on his shoulder is like the chip a bright African-American or Hispanic street kid might have here in the States. These background details reveal themselves in dialogue Liraz has with Ziv in *Beaufort's* opening scenes. Ziv is clearly from an Ashkenazi background, and his

family is obviously much wealthier and better connected. But non-Israeli audiences, even Jewish-Americans who are relatively familiar with Israel's unique cultural stew, will have to listen carefully to catch all of this.

Liraz is played by Oshri Cohen, best-known to American audiences as the teenage hero in *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi*. He also played an important supporting role, that of Rafi, in *Campfire*. For those of us who have watched Cohen grow from *Shlomi* to *Campfire* to *Beaufort*, his performance is a fulfillment of early promise. He has grown from an adorable boy into a young mensch. The long, tight close-up of his face at the very end of *Beaufort* totally broke my heart, even when I watched the film for a third time.

A well-respected filmmaker

Cedar, who was born in New York in 1986 and moved to Jerusalem at the age of six, is one of Israel's most respected young directors. His first film *Time of Favor (Ha Hesder)* was nominated for eleven awards by the Israel Film Academy in 2000, and won five including Best Film, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. His second film, *Campfire (Medurat Hashevet)*, released in 2004, was nominated for thirteen IFA awards and also received five (once again including Best Film, Best Director, and Best Screenplay). *Beaufort* was nominated for the Golden Bear and won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival last February and went on to receive ten nominations and four awards from the Israel Film Academy in September.

Watching *Beaufort* fills us with empathy for specific soldiers, yes, but it creates personal anxiety as well. Combat films used to be about battles, but there aren't many battles per se in "the war on terrorism." On 9/11 ordinary Americans experienced the fear that comes of being the unwitting object of fanatical hatred. But Israelis have been living with this rage for

generations, and Cedar has found revelatory ways to depict the world in which we all now live. "Incoming! Incoming! Impact! Impact!" It's not just "out there" anymore.

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Jewish Film World

Connecting those who make the films with those who use them

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Graphic Design

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Jewish Film World is published quarterly. Subscriptions cost \$19.95 USD, Canada and foreign \$29.95 USD.

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