

November 1–8, 2001

Every Picture Tells a Story

Neal Slavin jumps from photography to film with the anti-prejudice fable *Focus*.

by Cindy Fuchs

Coming into *Focus*: Director Neal Slavin.

Neal Slavin sees that the waiter isn't coming, and goes to get coffee for both of us, at D.C.'s Four Seasons Hotel restaurant. A first-time director in his middle age, Slavin is a determined, vivacious personality, and he knows how to get what he wants. He first read Arthur Miller's 1945 novel, *Focus*, when he was an art student at Cooper Union back in the 1960s and decided that someday he would make a movie out of it. "I knew it wasn't among Miller's premier works," he recalls, "but I thought, 'There's something incredible about this book.' I read it at least 15 times, each time absorbing more and more from it. By the time we started making the movie, it was in the palm of my hand."

It might be easy to feel overwhelmed by Slavin's sweeping self-confidence, except that he's equally warm and big-hearted. He's a great talker, and loves to tell stories — about traffic in Italy, why he cast Meat Loaf — that he calls "digressions." The native New Yorker has been a respected photographer for more than 30 years, one of the first Fulbright fellows in photography (in 1968), out of which came his book *Portugal*. Well known for his editorial work in *The New York Times Magazine* and *Rolling Stone*, his photographs are included in the permanent collections of Museum of Modern Art and the International Center for Photography. His other books, *Britons* and *When Two or More are Gathered Together*, have cemented his reputation as a gifted group portraitist. He's also made numerous television commercials over the years, working out of his own production studio in New York.

Slavin describes his lifelong thematic concerns as "identity and perception, public and private personas," though his interest "has never been petty pictures," but rather, "symbolic images" that express emotions and ideas. While we're talking, he is observing continually, noting people's gestures and attitudes, suggesting how he might shoot a certain conversation or light someone's face. And so, *Focus*, which explores anti-Semitism based on appearance: the protagonist, Larry Newman (played by William H. Macy) buys a pair of glasses and is suddenly read as Jewish by neighbors and co-workers who have known him for years.

Though it's his first film, Slavin convinced Miller that he could do justice to the layers of the story. His work in color photography, he says, ensured that

"I already had a visual language in place. I believe that faces are the giveaway, that we communicate through our faces." And so, he cast great actors with amazing, revealing faces — Macy and Laura Dern as Newman's wife, Gert. He says, "The dynamic between them is very interesting. When you first meet Newman, he's a Casper Milquetoast, and Gert, in all her flamboyance, is the truth, honesty, even in the way she walks." Together, he says, they come to realize that even if they can convince their neighbors that they aren't Jewish, "that won't solve the problem. They find out about the connection between perception and prejudice."

These ideas are underlined by the setting and shot designs. Slavin says that while they shot in Toronto, "The houses reminded me of a neighborhood where I grew up, in Brooklyn. It was a middle-class Jewish neighborhood, and the one thing that I remember was that intimacy. Everybody knew everybody and most of the houses were of one type, so you knew what everyone else's house was like inside, the color of the walls, the smells." And yet, he smiles, "There was also a divide, which we show by the alleyways between the houses, a gulf between them."

For Slavin, the film is about difference between knowledge and projection, understanding and fear. He cast Meat Loaf as Fred, the bigoted neighbor who adds Newman's name to a "list" of harassment targets, "because he doesn't look evil. Fred's doing what he thinks is the right thing. If you asked to borrow his lawnmower or his drill, he'd give it to you in a minute." Slavin takes a deep breath: "I loved this book, not because of its insights into anti-Semitism, but because it was a metaphor for all racism, all prejudice and hatred, the blindness of it." He never anticipated how this metaphor would resonate, however. "Oddly enough, since the horror of [Sept. 11], it has become part and parcel of our times. Racial profiling is visual."

Slavin leans forward. "People say the film is beautifully shot, but for me, it's not about beautiful shooting, it's about meaningful shooting. What drives it for me are the visual layers that you don't see in the photography. That's why it was never-ending for me. During the rape [that opens the film], not for a minute do you believe that Newman is the only one watching, and that's what the film is about, watching. When you see shots from inside people's house, looking through their windows at Newman on the street, it's about people watching each other, making ideas up. There are multiple perspectives, always, the characters' and the audience's. I wanted the audience to be seeing what Newman sees, but also what he is not seeing, to see how he is seen."

See Cindy Fuchs' review in [Movie Shorts](#). November 1–8, 2001