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A Close-Up of Bias

By Jon Matsumoto

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Neal Slavin first read Arthur Miller's novel "Focus" in 1962, while he was a student at New York's Cooper Union School of Art. Though Slavin went on to a long and successful career as a commercial and fine art photographer, he could never shake his obsessive desire to turn the famed playwright's first and only novel into a feature film.

After rereading "Focus" more than a dozen times during a three-decade period, Slavin finally approached Miller in 1994 about turning his dream into a reality. The creator of such stage classics as "The Crucible" and "Death of a Salesman" was understandably hesitant about turning over his book about anti-Semitism in 1940s America to someone who had never directed a feature-length film.

"I told Arthur, 'Listen, I'm not a kid. I'm not 25 years old,'" recalls Slavin, 60. "I really believed in this story and book passionately. I really was obsessed with turning it into a movie, which I knew I could do. From that point on we kept talking over a period of about a year and a half. Finally, our arrangement was that if I could [come up with a] screenplay that he approved of, I could go ahead and make the movie."

It was veteran English-born playwright Kendrew Lascelles who wrote the script that gained Miller's endorsement. The film was quickly shot in 38 days last year; it opens Friday in Los Angeles with a cast that includes William H. Macy, Laura Dern, David Paymer and Michael Lee Aday.

Besides Slavin's lack of experience as a feature film director, Miller also had reservations about whether the novel's period-specific plot would resonate among contemporary moviegoers. In "Focus," an ordinary office administrator (Macy) faces discrimination after he buys a pair of glasses that supposedly makes him look Jewish. Macy's timid Lawrence Newman character and his wife, Gertrude, (Dern) suddenly find themselves being treated like second-class citizens or worse.

The idea of virulent anti-Semitism existing in multiethnic Brooklyn while American soldiers were fighting Nazi Germany might be a difficult notion to fathom today. But Lascelles says his research indicated this form of bigotry was not unusual.

"Arthur wrote about real things that were going on at the time," says Lascelles. "I have newspaper cuttings from that period. There were big stories of Jewish kids being beaten up and synagogues [being vandalized]. It was very bad. The war put the spotlight off that a little bit, but at the time, the novel [which was written in 1947] was

very timely.”

The theme of visual profiling has actually made “Focus” a very topical film in today’s fear-laden social climate. Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, there have been incidences in which Muslims and those mistaken for being Islamic (oftentimes turban-wearing Sikhs) have faced hostility and discrimination in the U.S.

Slavin says his film’s relationship to current events comes up in just about every conversation he has with those who have seen “Focus.” “It’s such an intense subject now because it’s fraught with so many dangers,” he notes. “How do you keep from racial or visual profiling while trying to get the culprits who are causing these unbelievable problems?”

“What you can’t do is condemn the entire Islamic world because of the actions of a certain number of terrorists.”

Macy first read Miller’s novel after he was approached about playing the Newman character. He loved the book and the idea of turning it into a film. But he originally thought he would be miscast as Newman—he didn’t feel that he could possibly be mistaken for a Jew. Macy’s light brown hair was darkened and his green eyes were masked by colored contact lenses. But his decision to take on the role occurred when he realized that it wasn’t important whether he looked Jewish or not.

“Neal said, ‘I think you’re missing the point. You shouldn’t even look remotely Jewish.’” Macy says. “He saw it almost as a fable. It’s not about who looks Jewish and who doesn’t look Jewish. It’s about the idea that people’s perceptions are often so thin and so prejudicial that something as simple and meaningless as buying a specific pair of glasses can make people feel different about you.”

As a photographer, Slavin has long been fascinated by issues of appearance, identity and perception. He has released several books, including “When Two or More Are Gathered Together” and “The Britons.”

A well-regarded commercial photographer, Slavin has worked on campaigns for a variety of corporate clients that include Apple computer and Reebok. This aspect of his career has also heightened his awareness of how people make quick judgments based on appearance.

In 1994, he decided it was time to leave photography and television commercials to pursue his goal of turning Miller’s novel into a film. Slavin says he lived largely off of his savings during the years he spent developing and making “Focus.”

“I had a wonderful career in photography,” he says. “I had no reason for leaving it. But there comes a time in your life when you have to [take risks].”

He also believes that he brought a clarity, maturity and compassion to “Focus” that may not have been fully realized had he made the film as a younger man.

Slavin, who is Jewish, says he may have been tempted at an earlier age to portray the film’s key anti-Semitic character in more black-and-white terms. Paymer, who plays the neighborhood shopkeeper Finkelstein, is grateful that Slavin and Lascelles didn’t resort to Jewish stereotypes when fashioning his character. Since it’s not clear in the novel whether Finkelstein is an orthodox Jew, Slavin and Lascelles opted to portray him as an assimilated American rather than a character with a yarmulke and beard.

“Finkelstein happens to be Jewish, but he’s an American,” Paymer states. “The things he’s fighting for—his family and his rights to live on that block—are less about him being a Jew and more about being an American.”

But Macy and Paymer say they felt the pull of working on a project connected with Miller when it came to committing to "Focus."

"I met Arthur on the set one time," says Macy. "It was like royalty coming. What a vibrant, handsome man he still is. He's in his 80s, but he's sharp as a tack. He just came out to visit one time. He was remarkably hands-off. He approved the script, gave everyone his blessings and said, 'Go make it.'"

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