

# JEWSWEEK

OPINIONS

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## To be a Hebrew in Hollywood

Making quality Jewish films in Hollywood is hard. I should know. I've done it.

by Roger L. Simon

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WRITER BEWARE: Jewish screenwriter Roger L. Simon warns that Hollywood may not be as Jew-friendly as you think.

I am writing this short essay on being a Jewish screenwriter in Hollywood at a desk at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst where I am a speaker at their conference on Jewish Cinema. They are showing a film I wrote back in the late eighties, the adaptation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's brilliant Holocaust black comedy *Enemies, A Love Story*.

This film was a big critical success, was nominated for three Academy Awards (including best adapted screenplay) and won the New York Film Critics prize for its director Paul Mazursky. In Jewish circles (and sometimes by the more artistically minded), I am often asked, "How come you don't do more movies like that?" I *wish*, I say aloud or to myself. In today's commercial cinema, making this movie would be about as easy as flying to the moon in a Piper Cub.

Even then it wasn't simple. Here's a Hollywood story for you: When Paul and I turned the script into Disney Studios (they had optioned the book for Mazursky to direct and had paid me to write), Michael Eisner said, "Fellas, this is a very good screenplay, but..." turning to Paul, "...couldn't you update it like you did *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*?"

"But Michael," said Paul. "The Holocaust took place at a very specific time ... during World War II."

"Well, how about another Holocaust. How about the Afghani Holocaust."



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All I can say is, thank God Isaac Singer wasn't there. But then Singer, who had the most refined sense of irony, might have laughed.

Of course, this is almost a parable of making Jewish movies in Hollywood -- a famous Jewish director and a Jewish screenwriter trying to make a film out of a book by a Jewish Nobel prize winner and a Jewish mogul wants us to change the locale, make it not Jewish. Ten years before, when I had been trying to make my own detective novel *The Big Fix* into a movie, I had frequently met with the request by producers and studio executives that its protagonist, Moses Wine, not be Jewish. Naturally, these same producers and executives were themselves of that background.

Is this a form of anti-Semitism? Well, maybe, but it is a soft form. Here is what I think is really going on. You have to start from the basic truth that Jews constitute a very small proportion of the movie-going public. (This is unlike books where Jews constitute a disproportionate percentage of the reading public.) Add to this that the principle target audience of the Hollywood studios is 16-year-old boys. Couple that with the increasing cost of production and distribution (prints and ads) into the mega-millions and it looks like rough sledding for Holocaust films. It's not simply a conspiracy to keep Jewish material out of the theatres; it takes a nearly Herculean effort to get anything serious in front of the cameras.

*Enemies* is a good case in point. The exact same script with the same director and the same cast of Ron Silver, Angelica Huston, and Lena Olin committed to play the leads was rejected by 23 financial entities. This is not exceptional for good films. The production of what we used to call art films (now termed "specialty" films, I suppose to take away the onus of "art") is now rather like raising money for opera -- it's not exactly a profit-making machine and you better have some aesthetic or political purpose in mind, some dream, or in serious need of a tax loss.

For a more detailed explanation of how this works, you could consult my new Moses Wine novel *Director's Cut*, published a couple of weeks ago by Atria Books. While it is a detective story, it is also a satire of independent filmmaking -- in this case the production of a contemporary Holocaust love story in Prague. (I know whereof I speak on this because I directed and co-wrote -- with my wife Sheryl Longin -- the Holocaust love story *Prague Duet*, aka *Lies and Whispers* in its video/DVD incarnation) The major problem of independent filmmaking is not whether or not the content is Jewish; it is whether or not the content is serious. Having Jewish overtones only exacerbates the matter.

That is not to say that a strange queasiness does not exist. I am certain that a good many of the Hollywood-types who are Jewish would just as soon not deal with it in their work. It might be financially risky and these are particularly risk averse times. But Hollywood itself has changed a great deal over the last couple of decades. What was once, in Neal Gabler's words, "An Empire of their Own" is no longer a Jewish business.

Sure, the most powerful person in the movies is a Jew -- Steven Spielberg -- but the entertainment business is now corporate. This accounts more than anything for the bland quality of major motion pictures nowadays. The old Jewish moguls, the ones I used to work with anyway, may in some ways have been obnoxious "vulgarians," but they *loved* movies. The corporate



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people who run the studios now don't even seem interested in film as an art. As it has virtually everything else, the bottom line has completely taken over the Hollywood Studios who, with rare exceptions, no longer even seem interested in the prestige of Academy Awards. And on that, as that famous "vulgarian" Samuel Goldwyn said in another context: "Include me out."



**Roger L. Simon** is a Jewish screenwriter and novelist whose latest book, *Director's Cut*, was just published by Atria Books. He blogs regularly at his site [rogerlsimon.com](http://rogerlsimon.com).



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