



Montreal World Film Festival 2011: A path across the cultural gap

BY BRENDAN KELLY, THE GAZETTE AUGUST 18, 2011

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U.S. filmmaker Joel Fendelman's film *David* is in competition at the World Film Festival. He spoke with Brendan Kelly in Montreal to talk about the making of the film.

Photograph by: Dave Sidaway, The Gazette.

MONTREAL - Joel Fendelman knows what it feels like to be a different, which is part of what drew him to the notion of making a film about cultural differences – more specifically the seemingly gigantic gap between the Muslim and Jewish communities in Brooklyn.

"I grew up Jewish in Miami," said the New York-based filmmaker in an interview at a downtown café this week.

"I didn't feel anything like the level of alienation you see in the film, but I went to a predominantly Hispanic high school. That idea of feeling different, I think we can all relate to that. Then I thought – what is the most alienated culture right now? All immigrants struggle when coming to the States, whether they're Chinese, Jewish or Spanish. Right now probably the top of the chart is being Arab-Muslim."

The film is *David* and it has its Canadian premiere this week at the Montreal World Film Festival, where it is the lone U.S. entry in the prestigious World Competition. It screens Friday and Sunday.

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Fendelman had been mulling over issues of cultural identity in recent years, about his own identity as a Jew but also his relationship to Muslim Americans in our post-9/11 world.

"I was in the subway and I saw this religiously dressed Muslim man in a robe and the first thought that came to mind was, 'Does he have a bomb? Is he a terrorist?' " Fendelman said. "A few days later, I was questioning why I thought this. I'm a very liberal person and this is not something I should be thinking. But I did think it. So I decided to investigate that. I realized the only thing I knew about Islam was what I saw in the news and it's usually negative and is focused on Iraq or terrorism."

So he decided to go down to the very Muslim neighbourhood of South Brooklyn, walked into an Arab-American association in Bay Ridge and told the folks there he wanted to learn more about their culture.

"I had all these pre-conceived notions. What are they going to think? And it was interesting to see all these (pre-conceived) ideas crumbling day-by-day. No one had any issues about me being Jewish. I went to the mosque and was very much welcomed."

He ended up spending a year and a half there teaching English to immigrant families, and that's really where the seeds of David began to germinate. In fact, he even met Mishal, the boy who went on to play Daud, at the cultural centre. At the same time, he began writing the screenplay long-distance with Patrick Daly, who was in Singapore at the time and had spent two years in the Palestinian territories. The two had previously collaborated on *Needle Through Brick*, a documentary on the vanishing art of traditional kung-fu.

Mishal had never acted on film before and many of the roles in the film, both Muslim and Jewish, are played by non-actors from the Bay Ridge and Borough Park areas of Brooklyn. Without giving away the ending, it's fair to say that Fendelman's film does not present a totally rosy portrait of the concept of Jews and Muslims happily living together.

"I would call it 'realistic optimism,'" Fendelman said. "I was interested in keeping it as real as possible. We didn't want to tie it up and present an easy answer to a complex question."

David, Brooklyn-centric as it is, also has a strong Montreal connection. Producer Julian Schwartz is a former Montrealer who has worked as a music producer in U.S. film and TV for years. The executive producer, Stephanie Levy, was also born and raised in Montreal, and now calls New York home.

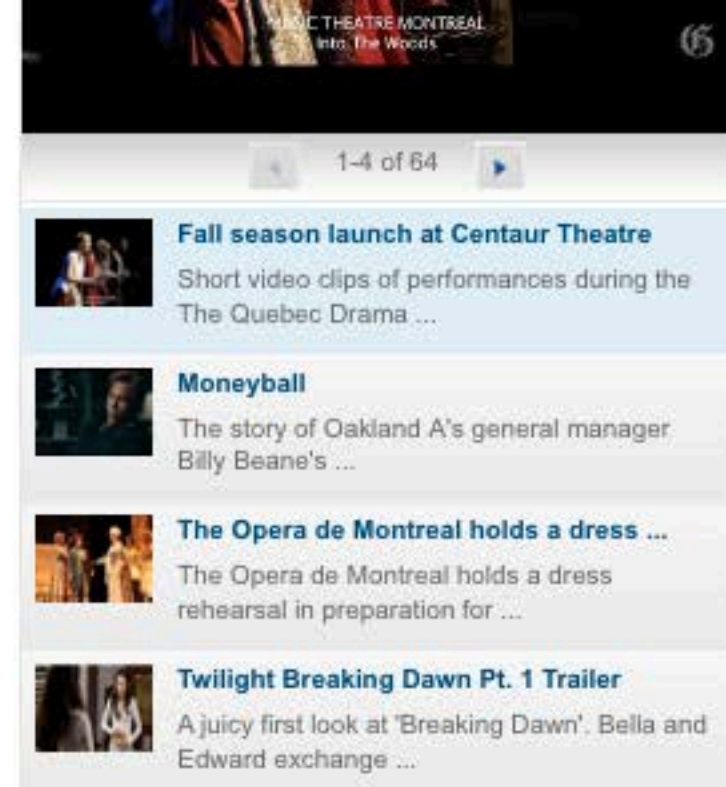
Levy, who went to Wagar High School in Côte St. Luc, said she could easily relate to this story of cultural differences. Her father is a Jew from Egypt who immigrated to Montreal in the 1950s and her mother is also Jewish, but from New York.

"There were definitely cultural differences between the two of them," Levy said. "And as for myself, I look like a real combination of both of them, and I grew up with many Jewish kids, but Ashkenazi Jews from Europe. My skin is dark, my hair is dark, and my eyes are dark and many times they questioned where I was from. From a very early age, I was picked on in class because I didn't have a fair complexion. So this story really resonated with me."

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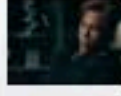


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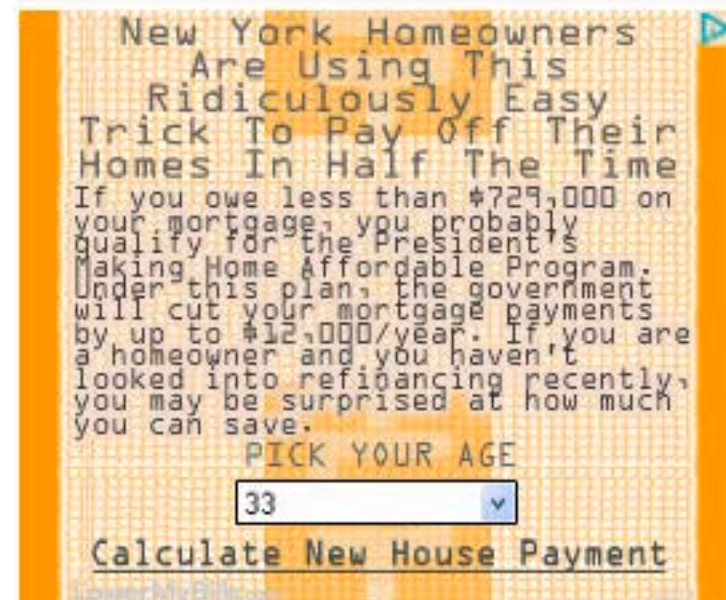
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