

# JEWISH NEWS

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### FEATURE

## Politics on the playground

Paradise Valley native returns home to film movie



Scott Kirschenbaum, right, a Paradise Valley native, shoots his film, "Elementary Cool," at Cherokee Elementary School, his grade school alma mater. Here he discusses a scene with Adhieu Cithec, left, who is featured in the film. The movie is about the hierarchy of children on a playground and has political undertones about Darfur. See story on Page 14.

Photos by Josh Scales

Producer Stosh Mintek herds the cast of "Elementary Cool," an independent short film, under an overhang that overlooks the playground at Cherokee Elementary School in Paradise Valley.

"OK, guys," he shouts. "We're going to take the last shot of the day. It's called 'Storm the Jungle Gym.' I think everyone knows what that means."

It is 1:30 in the afternoon, well over 100 degrees outside, and the sweat splashes on Mintek's lime-green T-shirt have grown larger and darker as the day has progressed. This might be the last shot, but the phrase "one more time" has become commonplace. The crew knows that "one more time" will likely turn into four or five.

The production team's operations began shortly after sunrise, and the final shot of the day does not mean that work is done. Crew members must review the day's filming and in between deal with several representatives of the local media.

Arguably, that is not as difficult as monitoring the health and safety of the entire cast, which features no one over the age of 9.

The movie is the brainchild of director Scott Kirschenbaum, Mintek's college roommate — both are Yale graduates, Class of 2003. While at school they took an advanced screenwriting class together and have since taken turns helping each other develop their projects. Last year Kirschenbaum was Mintek's right-hand man as they traveled to Allegan, Mich., Mintek's hometown, to develop "Little Fish," a short film about a high school wrestler. It earned an entry into the Los Angeles International



Adhieu Cithec, who plays Sudanese refugee Agaar, and Scott Slepian, who plays the main character of Jeremiah Thrill, work on a live take.

Photos by Josh Scales

Short Film Festival and will run there this August.

When Kirschenbaum decided he wanted to return home to Paradise Valley to create "Elementary Cool," Mintek was eager to be a part of the project. "I was like, 'Sign me up, man,'" he says, smiling.

The movie was shot at Cherokee Elementary, Kirschenbaum's childhood grade school, and rehearsals were held at Temple Chai in Phoenix.

"I think that I wanted to see how a movie could grow in a community that is not specifically a film community or an arts community," explains Kirschenbaum on why he chose Paradise Valley. "I thought it would be a great challenge to see how the community of my youth embraced (it). ... I wanted to make an unorthodox movie, a non-Hollywood movie, a movie that could be one of those small independent films that could just maybe make it the distance. I wanted to see if I could do that here in town. A lot of it is the fact that I know people here. I know that it's much easier to grow a movie organically here than, say, L.A. or New York.

"I'm a young director and producer, and I think it's natural for me to go to a place where I feel comfortable and with a community that I know about."

Many rehearsals consisted of improvisation exercises and simply playing on the playground so that Kirschenbaum could observe how the children interacted and mold the script to fit the language of 8- and 9-year-olds.

Mintek says that the greatest challenge faced by the movie has not been supervising the cast but rather adjusting to the extreme temperatures while shooting almost entirely outdoors in Phoenix in July. He adds that monitoring the welfare of the children, who are too young to know when they have had too much sun, has also been an important



Scott Slepian, left, receives instructions from director Scott Kirschenbaum in between takes.



Ellie Hoffman, who plays "Fast Dotty," waits for a cue from producer Stosh Mintek.

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consideration.

Casting for the film differed greatly from that for a movie featuring an older set of actors. Kirschenbaum says he tried to type-cast children into their roles so that they would not have to act much to fulfill their characters.

Scott Slepian plays Jeremiah Thrill, an 8-year-old loner who tries to befriend a Sudanese refugee girl named Agaar (Adhieu Cithec). Throughout the movie, he is tormented by his twin sister, Maddy Thrill (Niv Weis).

**‘One of the great messages is, “What happens if children think about global affairs?”’**

— Scott Kirschenbaum, director of ‘Elementary Cool’

Kirschenbaum says he chose Slepian and Weis because they look alike and were already good friends who knew how to playfully get under each other’s skin. Cithec was born in Sudan and moved to the United States when she was 4 months old as a result of political persecution of her family.

Kirschenbaum says his number one goal for the movie is to explore the hierarchy on a playground, but admitted there was a political message concerning Darfur. That message centers on Jeremiah’s main prop, his globe.

“One of the great realizations I’ve had since I’ve been to town was how challenging it is for a refugee to come to a playground,” says Kirschenbaum. “So the underlying layer of this movie is that there is a conflict on the playground. And then the very nec-



Cast members rush onto the playground during the filming of a scene called “Storm the Jungle Gym.”

essary and direct message of this movie is that it’s most difficult and most challenging for a child who has never experienced a playground before, who is new to the States, who doesn’t have any friends and can barely speak English, to acclimate to this environment.

“I really want people to interpret the movie however they wish to. For me, the greater message is that there are conflicts on the playground. ...

There’s a conflict about how countries interacting with Sudan and how countries are interacting with the United States ... there are alliances that are often petty relationships.

“Conflicts burst up and cause national strife and international strife among nations in various countries. And so one of the great messages is, ‘What happens if children think about global affairs?’ that is why the object in this movie everyone is reaching out to find is that globe. There’s Jeremiah’s prized globe. For what he realizes is the great difference through the course of this movie, be where he is on the globe and where everyone is on the globe. And he experiences through his developing friendship with Agaar.”

Although he brought in an occasional speaker to talk to the cast about Darfur resolution and Darfur, Kirschenbaum that he wanted the children in the movie to develop their own understanding of the issues without a direct explanation. It appears to have succeeded, at least some of the cast members.

“Before I started the movie I didn’t know there was a place called Darfur,” Slepian says. “Now I’m very aware of it.” “Elementary Cool” runs approximately 60 minutes, and Kirschenbaum hopes to have the final product completed by the end of August. At that point, he will begin sending it to film festivals, where he hopes to gain interest and find the funding to turn it into a full-length feature film.

“The prospect of working on a film that has a meaningful message that has a cast of kids that are all 9 years old and younger is a really special and unique thing,” Mintek says. “We have a confidence in this film and high expectations where it can go.”

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“Elementary Cool” cast members prepare for improvisational exercises during rehearsal on the playground at Temple Chai. At front, from left, are Scott Slepian (Jeremiah Thrill) and Adhieu Cithec (Agaar).