

Case Study ADAM RESURRECTED - Giving Life to an “Unscreenable” Novel

in cooperation with Frankfurt Book Fair

Transcript: Cineuropa.org

Photos: Silke Heyer



Photo (left to right): **Ehud Bleiberg**, Bleiberg Entertainment, USA; moderator **Peter Cowie**; **Sarah Lüke**, 3L Group, Germany; **Paul Schrader**, director

ADAM RESURRECTED is the adaptation of the - for a long time considered unscreenable - novel of the same name by Yoram Kaniuk, published in Israel in 1968. It is the moving story of Adam Stein, a former circus clown, who was spared from the gas chamber in order to entertain thousands of his fellow Jews on the way to their deaths, and who now, in the early 1960s, lives at a Negev desert asylum populated only by Holocaust survivors, where he struggles to cope in a world in which the border between sanity and madness has been forever blurred. Why did it take so long to make a film based on the novel and what was the reason and trigger for it to finally happen? The director and the producers talk about the intense process of making ADAM RESURRECTED come alive on screen, about the conditions and the obstacles, including obtaining the film rights for this powerful Holocaust fiction.

Peter Cowie: Within the *Berlinale Co-Production Market* there is a cooperation with the Frankfurt Book Fair about books, as so many films originate in books. This case study is presented as a part of this cooperation,

We are happy to have **Paul Schrader** with us today, the director of *ADAM RESURRECTED*, which screened as a *Berlinale Special* with very good reviews.

ADAM RESURRECTED is an adaptation of the novel of Yoram Kaniuk.

Paul Schrader, like European authors has a background in a very perspective film criticism, he started as film critic and with his brother he wrote the screenplay for *THE YAKUZA*, that attracted Martin Scorsese. He came up with scripts for Scorsese, becoming for several years his favourite screenwriter, with films as *TAXI DRIVER*. In '78 he becomes a director himself with *BLUE COLLAR*, and since then he has created a string of different genres of films adaptations, original scripts, social comedies, thrillers including films like *LIGHT SLEEPER*, *THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS*, *AFFLICTION*, and the film presented last year *THE WALKER*, which was very well received.

Sarah Lüke, represents the 3L Group, crucial to this project because they were involved with the production from the very early stages. The company has 3 departments: production, licensing and distribution. Focusing on quality productions, they distributed in Germany films as *MONSTER* and Julie Delpy's *2 DAYS IN PARIS*.

Ehud Bleiberg, head of the international sales company Bleiberg Entertainment, began in Israel where he was involved in other activities as advertising agencies before turning to the entertainment world, producing interesting and prestigious pictures in Israel, as the *THE APPOINTED* which was officially selected at Cannes in 1990, followed in 1992 by *TEL AVIV STORIES* which was a huge hit in Israel and in Europe. Since then he has dedicated himself to this kind of production and is meanwhile based in Los Angeles.

Peter Cowie: Paul, as a creator of the finished film, what drove you to the project?

Paul Schrader: The script was given to me completed, I did not develop it, Ehud developed it with an American writer who had gone to film school in Tel Aviv, Noah Stollman. I was not the first candidate for this project. He had sent the script to a number of established Jewish American directors, and they had told him that it couldn't be done, so he came to me, because I have the reputation of doing things that other people said couldn't be done. I read the script and as soon as I came across the central metaphor, the man who used to be a dog, who meets a dog that used to be a boy, I was captured; for me it was original and fresh, and a powerful metaphor for a survivor, and the survivor guilt, and all this was in the metaphor. It would have been valid even in another background, instead of the holocaust. So the power of the metaphor would not let me go.



Peter Cowie: I was surprised by the comic elements that lighten the mood, which is very good, so more than a story on the holocaust, it is a human story.

Paul Schrader: This is a novel, it's not true, and there were no such institutions. The story does not have the power of history but of fiction, and it was written in the same time of other similar novels, such as CATCH 22 - part of that literary movement of men looking back at the war, with a lot of black comedy and that was the nature of the book, written by an Israeli perspective about an entertainer. The book in the beginning was not received positively in Israel for justice reason, as this is sacred territory. Many Israelis and Jews around the world objected for the lack of reverence towards the subject.

Peter Cowie: Ehud, does this explain why it took so long for the book to reach the screen, or were there practical financial reasons?

Ehud Bleiberg: It was not an issue of financial reasons from my point of view. In the moment that I could free the rights I knew I was going to do it, not matter how long it would have taken.

Peter Cowie: Did anyone try to option the book before?



Ehud Bleiberg: The book had a huge history: Yoram Kaniuk lived in New York in the 50s and wrote the novel in the early 60s. The manual script arrived to Charlie Chaplin who read it and wanted to do it but it didn't get off the ground; later on the book was published in the beginning of the 70s, and in Israel in '69. Ján Kadár wanted to do it and at that time Orson Welles wanted to play Adam, so it has a long history. Also in Israel another director wanted to do it, but the rights went into a limbo and it got to the Supreme Court in Israel to free back the rights to the author. I was suggested the book in 1992, I have a long relationship with the author; my first film was HIMMO, KING OF JERUSALEM based on his book. The rights again got in the limbo and only in 2002, I managed to free the rights and even then, 3 weeks before the shooting we received a call from a person from New York who said he owned the rights for the English translation of the book, so we had to settle the situation also with him.

But from 2002, I decided to start and it took Noah Stollman two-and-a-half years to develop it for the screen. Just before the script was ready, I met the German distributor Werner Wirsing from 3L and we felt that it was something we wanted to do. It took a while to find Paul Schrader, for a project no one wanted to do because they were afraid to.

Peter Cowie: Sarah, the German participation was crucial for the credibility of a project like this, so at what stage did 3L get involved?

Sarah Lüke: I am the head of the distribution company, but I will talk on my father's behalf. Ehud and Werner met a couple of years ago, the script was sent to him in 2004 and he was obviously astonished. When he read it he said that he felt like banging his head against the wall because he couldn't take the emotion the book gave him.

The combination of the Israeli production part and the German one is very important, because it's part of the film, to show the people that there is collaboration between these two and that is also visible through the cast.

Peter Cowie: Where were any scenes shot in Germany or any pre-production work done?

Sarah Lüke: The shooting was done in Romania and Israel, but part of the post-production was in Germany.

Peter Cowie: Paul, when you got the screenplay by Noah Stollman, had the structure of the novel been changed? Would you say the finished film is the replica of the novel or are there fundamental changes?

Paul Schrader: Well, it fundamentally changed; the novel is not adaptable in a conventional sense. It is a great book and literature, that is not necessarily the way a film can be great; it is full of magic realism, of elements that may or may not have happened, it changes the interior voice of the speaker without bothering to tell the reader that a different person is now thinking, it has characters that may or not exist, the character played by Hana Laszlo in the book is in fact identical twins but you never know which one you're really looking at, the character of Adam has a brother that may or not exist, but is there anyway, and the ending of the film occurs about 2/3 the way through the book, so yes many changes had to be done.



We for example shot a scene very true to the book in its very macabre, black humour. But it couldn't be translated into the film because it's so through people, so we had to cut it out.

Peter Cowie: At what point to Jeff Goldblum get involved in what may be the best work he has ever done?

Ehud Bleiberg: I first talked to Paul about the lead in this film, and we had to take in consideration the size of the budget, that was around 10 million US\$. We discussed about how to sell or make a film with such budget, because unfortunately in this industry you need actors that sell in a precise moment, although you don't know what will happen to them in 2 or 3 years; it's always been an up and down. But Paul said from the very first moment that Jeff Goldblum was born to make this role, and I adapted to this idea. I was also offered 3 million dollars to take another actor instead, and although I needed the money I refused, because this film will stay forever and Jeff's work was just unbelievable.

Peter Cowie: Paul, did Jeff know the book the first time you approached him?

Paul Schrader: No, when I read the script the very first time I was about half way through it, I told my wife that there was an actor who was born to play this role, as if was written for him; I didn't know him, but I was reading a script written for him. I felt that way the first time I finished reading it and I told Ehud. And it is true that it produced financing challenges, but I'm glad it's him.

Peter Cowie: And when did Willem Dafoe get involved?

Paul Schrader: Rather late, our quota was that we could have 3 Americans, so they wanted another American name, so me, Jeff and a third person. Actors don't like to play Nazis, and there is no secret about it, so this really came down to a favour. He is a good friend I have worked with before, so I called him and asked him to play this role.

Peter Cowie: Sarah, who is the original publisher in Germany? Were they interested in getting involved in the film either for production or co-marketing with you?

Sarah Lüke: Yes, they were. The book was re-released on January 14, and they changed the German title that had been different from the film title before, and also, they adapted our art work for the cover, so that was wonderful.

We worked together with the publisher, so this way, we could get all the art work and posters to the book stores, and secondly we had the opportunity to take Joachim Król, who also had a role in the film, to different events, where he read scenes from the book presenting the movie and sequences in Hamburg, Frankfurt and Munich, so people had the opportunity to talk with him about the movie. It was a great chance for us to promote the movie not only in a traditional way, but by doing something closer to the viewer. It is also not easy to watch the movie, you need to be concentrated and open-minded, so it was good to give some background information about it. Also the Jewish community in Germany seems very enthusiastic about it.



Ehud Bleiberg: And, I would like to add, the same day it opens in Germany it opens also in Israel.

Peter Cowie: Who is the distributor in Israel?

Ehud Bleiberg: United King, the biggest distributor in Israel who have also very successfully distributed my previous film *THE BAND'S VISIT*. They are doing cross promotion with the biggest newspaper in Israel and with the biggest publishing house with special promotion initiatives.

Peter Cowie: What was the reaction?

Ehud Bleiberg: Things have changed dramatically: today the book in Israel is one of the masterpieces of a novel, a must-read at high school or university. But it took 40 years to reach this point, and as a result the sales of the book are increasing dramatically. Today people are more open so they see it in a different way. You have to remember that there was not any psychological help to the holocaust survivors, nobody talked to them about it. The first time it started was in 1980 in the Netherlands, but Yoram Kaniuk wrote this book about a mental hospital in the late 50s and beginning of the 60s, creating something that didn't exist before. So people read about something that still didn't exist. During the late 80s in Israel a huge wave of people started talking about the recollection of the mind. I am the first generation of the holocaust survivors. These people started to talk suddenly. So you are like a prophet. Also the place of the book didn't exist and it does now. The reaction so far is very good; I think people will welcome the book and the film at the same time, also with criticisms of course

Peter Cowie: There are many good things in the film that impressed me, as the way you described his life before the war, you packed in to a few black and white sequences everything you have in *Cabaret* it was all there, yet it was done so economically, did that reflect the screenplay or did you work on that yourself?

Paul Schrader: I am a writer so every director who is a writer, is also involved, but not much was changed; the structure was solid but Noah Stollman was a first-time writer so it was unnecessary long in some parts, things were repeated twice - but that's always good so you trim them as a director. So my contribution was in that area.

Peter Cowie: The institution is set in the desert, how did you find that location so essential for the film?

Paul Schrader: That is a plateau near the Dead Sea, a plateau in a place called Le Mirage, we built the interior on stage in Bucharest, and the exterior we built part of the front and the back and we built the rest of it inside a computer. The idea was to set up the brand new Bauhaus hospital in the middle of 360° of an empty desert, with the power of metaphor that is a very important point to make.

Also it was great to be able to design the hospital; a lot of Bauhaus architects went to Israel between the wars and did a fair amount of constructions in Tel Aviv so we could use this as an inspiration.

Peter Cowie: In a way this film fits with your career because you have always been attracted by characters or subjects where the borderline between madness and sanity is quite blurred. You identify with the character but you're not quite sure if they are 100% sane or not and you feel this with Jeff Goldblum's character.

Paul Schrader: The contradiction is the heart and soul of the character, at least for me, "I loved her so much that I hit her" - that's character. I love those that do one thing and then say another or the unreliable narrator, these are figures I'm drawn to.

Peter Cowie: Although 10 million dollars is a big budget, it seems much more expensive, with special effects that might have been difficult to do.



Ehud Bleiberg: My main challenge financially was to structure the project in the most comfortable way for the director to fulfil and execute what is written in the script. To build this institute we had very ambitious ways, after calculating how much it would have cost to work in Germany or Israel, we realised that the budget would have had to be 20 million dollars, so we found a big studio in Romania. We took advantage of Romania becoming part of the EU in 2007, so we could use the money from the co-production to shoot in Romania. There, we found great places to do the shooting, and moneywise it made a lot of sense. To be loyal, we needed the desert so we went to Israel, but basically only seven days because the rest was done in Romania.

The structure was that we used a crew from Romania, one from Germany and one in Israel, according to the regulation of Israel, being an official co-production between Germany and Israel. Because my partner 3L is from Dortmund we managed to get funding from North-Rhine Westphalia, and we agreed to do the post-production part there, so we did the sound in Dortmund, all of the special effects in Düsseldorf. The Federal Fund in Germany supported part of the budget, the Israeli Film Fund, the Rabinovich Fund and the cable company participated from Israel, making it a real co-production not only from a financial point of

view, but by all means. At the end me and my partner 3L still had to invest money in the project ourselves, but my company is dealing also with presale. When we started shooting the film, we didn't have the entire budget, but we started to shoot the film anyway.

Questions from the audience:

Question: What influence did the author of the book have on the script?

Ehud Bleiberg: The relationship I have with Yoram Kaniuk is very particular. I have in fact known him for more than 25 years, I've always been very influenced by his books and it's actually thanks to his books that I started making films, so I understand him and his way of thinking.

He was a soldier in 1948 during the Independence war of Israel. He was wounded, and he suffered a lot. As most of the soldiers from his generation, nobody talks about it. Also my father was a war prisoner in Egypt in 1948 and I fought too in 1973 and 1982, and when you return from a war, things seem different.

The essence of this book, of ADAM RESURRECTED, is to take things to the extreme.

He had a weapon, I had a weapon, but the holocaust survivor, he had nothing.

How can we resurrect ourselves in the mind? I wasn't interested in the physical aspect.

The question was: can we resurrect ourselves? This was a big, big question - and what kind of a life do we have when we actually resurrect ourselves. So I understood Yoram and he trusted me. But Yoram's a tough cookie, and he can be cruel. Everyone was afraid of Yoram's reaction but I was sure he would like it, and he is actually behind the film big time. He also did read the script before, although he says he did not.

Question: Paul, you talked about Jeff being the perfect actor for the character, could you say anything about his reaction, how was it to work with him?

Paul Schrader: We tried, but he didn't obtain an Academy Award nomination, although he deserved it.

There are many things about Jeff: physically his height and age, but he is also the charismatic leader of this hospital, with a background in comedy, as a dancer and musician and magician. And he had lived long enough to give a real performance. All these things attracted me to him. While I was trying to bring Ehud on board with Jeff, I got hold of his personal representative who had worked also in TAXI DRIVER, but is now a Hollywood mocker, and I sent him the script, to know if Jeff would have been interested in the project. I heard through a backdoor that Jeff agreed it, so then I could push to get him involved.



Question: What was exactly the involvement of 3L?

Ehud Bleiberg: They were co-producing. There were several things. They were very initiative in the casting, for the German crew, all those things that had to be dealt with from the German point of view, so 3L took a lot of the work from my shoulders there. They were involved from A to Z, including in the post-production, also on a daily operation.

Before making the film there was a creative involvement regarding who and what to pick up, which actor to choose and even if I had the final say, I never did anything without them, because it was very important to hear their opinion.

Sarah Lüke: I think you answered the question perfectly because I believe the work was done in three parts, the creative part, the initiative part between Werner and Ehud, who are having a very personal story. They often talk to each other like brothers and for them it was a very emotional project to work on; and then the handling of the production group from the German side.

Question: You talked about having three people as American quota, how does that effect co-productions?

Ehud Bleiberg: I am an Israeli living in the US. This film couldn't be done as a regular Israeli project because of the budget's size: Israeli films are usually between half a million to 2 million dollars because the maximum subsidy reaches 1 million, so I knew from advance that the project had to be done internationally.

In the USA, the local states have now started to give a refund if you shoot in their territories as tax incentive, but they are not funds like in Europe that really support art or films. In order to make it as an official co-production, I had a book written by an Israeli author, a writer who lives in New York but is Israeli, and me, an Israeli as well, so I had partners in Israel who were the official co-producers that I worked with on three other films.

In order to have an official co-production you have certain segments to fulfil, and one of them is that you cannot take more than three people to cover three roles to work on the project, as actors or musicians, other than the original countries where you do the co-production. As Paul was the director we could only chose other two people for the remaining roles. Paul also wanted another editor he worked with before, but we couldn't take her because it wasn't on the quota, and you risk the official co-production, because you must have an official stamp from the government. But we found the way in Romania to use non-German or Israeli staff because it is part of EU and we could follow the law.