

THE YEAR MY PARENTS WENT ON VACATION

Brazil, 2008, Portuguese/Yiddish. Directed by Cao Hamburger.

Reviewed by Ralph Seliger

For a North American audience, *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation*—at once Brazilian and Jewish—has to be a curiosity. Think of bearded Orthodox Jewish men jumping for joy in front of a television, *tsisis* aflutter, as Brazil's soccer team triumphs.

The film is set in 1970, during the time of Brazil's right-wing military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. This is also the year of Brazil's third world soccer championship, an event that figures importantly in the



Michel Joelsas as Mauro

Photo: Beatriz Lefreve

plot. Mauro's parents, known vaguely as "leftists," suddenly have to go into hiding. Mauro's father, Daniel Stern, calls his father Motel, a barber, and peremptorily says they're leaving the child with him; the cover story given to Mauro is that they are going on vacation and will be back in time for the World Cup finals.

Daniel and his father are so estranged that the young couple doesn't even wait for Motel to greet them; they deposit Mauro in front of the apartment building as they speed off in their Volkswagen beetle. We

Ralph Seliger is editor of ISRAEL HORIZONS, the publication of Meretz USA and its weblog at www.meretzusa.blogspot.com/.



Michel Joelsas as Mauro and Germano Haiu as Shlomo

Photo: Beatriz Lefreve

later learn, under somewhat humorous circumstances, that Mauro is not circumcised. And this undoubtedly has something to do with Daniel and Motel's estrangement. In fact, the strain of this sudden, unexpected call from Daniel almost immediately afflicts Motel with a fatal heart attack.

I found myself pondering what makes a "Jewish film." It is most obviously "Jewish" when its content is about Judaism, or about Jews as Jews. At other times, it's when the characters are identifiable as Jews, even if only tangentially so. The latter is true of this movie, but less incidentally than in a *Seinfeld* episode, and certainly not mockingly Jewish as might be portrayed by Woody Allen.

Perhaps this should be described as a half-Jewish film, in keeping with the half-Jewish parentage of Mauro/Moishe, the central character — portrayed by a 12-year old actor from Sao Paulo

who, like the child he plays, and like the filmmaker Cao Hamburger, has a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. The two other starring roles are of Jews—Hanna, an 11-year old neighbor who befriends Mauro, and Shlomo, an elderly man who looks after him after his grandfather's sudden death—and they are played by actors who actually are Brazilian Jews.

Shlomo, the deceased grandfather's next-door neighbor, at first has no idea of how to care for an adolescent. One wonders if the filmmaker should have revealed why he is alone and so clueless about children (perhaps a Holocaust-related scenario); but this might also have cluttered the plot with an unnecessary tangent. Still, Shlomo's religiously-informed sense of moral obligation combines with a *menshlich* capacity to grow and form a bond with the little "goy" whom he calls "Moishele."

Mauro's friendship with Hanna is likewise memorable for the authentic feel of the relationship portrayed. Hanna is amusingly enterprising in charging money to Mauro and his friends to gaze through a peephole into a dressing room of the ladies' clothing store her family owns. Yet Hanna and Mauro's friendship is conveyed casually, without any potentially disturbing display of adolescent sexuality between 10-year-olds.

The adult Jewish characters speak at least as much Yiddish as Portuguese, and live unself-consciously Jewish lives comfortably within their Brazilian and multi-ethnic surroundings. The way in which the Jews, along with some good-natured non-Jews, care for this abandoned child, provides this film with a warmth that is mercifully just this side of schmaltzy, and one of several elements that make it a delight.♦