Norman

Is a movie about an inveterate hustler worth your time? With Richard Gere in the just-released "Norman," I would argue its worth your time and ticket. Gere, for so long the heartthrob stud, has now, at 66, morphed into a character actor who lately favors New York settings. Most recently he has been a Wall Street magnate in "Arbitrage" (2012) and a homeless guy in "Time out of Mind" (2014). In "Norman" (subtitled "The Moderate Rise and Tragic Fall of a New York Fixer"), he oddly combines those two roles as a desperate Manhattan hustler who seems to have no fixed address. He plays an unsympathetic character who somehow gets under your skin, in good and bad ways.

"Norman" is the follow-up to "Footnote," a film made by Joseph Cedar, the Israeli-American director who scored with that unlikely story of a father and son feuding over obscure Talmudic interpretations. Cedar was born in New York but immigrated to Israel as a child. He has returned as an adult and has given a soulful reading of the city.

Norman Oppenheimer (Gere) is a full-time operator but with little means and less charm. He lives on the margins of New York City power and money (he is characterized as "a delusional name-dropper"). His office is a park bench. In dreaming up financial schemes that never come off, he angles to be everyone's friend, but his incessant networking and perpetual lying leads him nowhere. Ever seeking someone to pay attention to him, Norman smells out Micha Eshel (Lior Ashkenazi), a needy Israeli politician adrift in New York. Sensing Eshel's vulnerability, Norman charms Eshel by buying him an extravagant pair of shoes, a gesture that genuinely touches the politician. When he becomes the Israeli Prime Minister three years later, he remembers and proudly names Norman as his envoy to New York Jewry.

Now connected to a world leader, Oppenheimer finally commands the respect he has always craved. Excited by his newfound celebrity, Norman uses Eshel's name to leverage a series of deals: linking Eshel to Norman's nephew Philip Cohen (Michael Sheen), to Norman's Rabbi Blumenthal (Steve Buscemi), to a Wall Street trader Joe Wilf (Harris Yulin) and his assistant Bill Kavish (Dan Stevens), among others. Then Eshel, pushing a controversial peace initiative back home, must confront a scandal involving a "US businessman" and Norman's elaborate schemes begin to crumble with the potential to create an international financial collapse.

Call "Norman" a comedy-drama, though it starts as mostly drama with Cedar's laser focus on his ineffectual protagonist. As it tumbles to its intricate finale, the comedic elements first sneak in then begin to dominate. Cedar has remarked that he based his story on an ancient archetype that has played out in history and literature for millennia: "the Court Jew," a poor figure who allies himself with a man of power through a favor.

"Norman" has a lively and varied cast, fine actors in good character parts, notable among them Sheen as nervous nelly Cohen who knows Norman's moves all too well, and Buscemi as a gregarious—and comic--rabbi, somewhat soft on Oppenheimer until he senses betrayal in the man's empty promises. Lior Ashkenazi is a noted Israeli actor (he played the son in Cedar's "Footnote") who shines here as a decent yet ambitious political figure who dreams of Middle East peace and cannot give up his sometime "friend" Norman.

On Gere: no longer the comely rogue, here he's a hapless loser, and Cedar and Gere capture that haplessness in his visage: an enclosing camel hair coat, scrunched cap, old school glasses, floppy white hair, and a cavalcade of tics. He is a motor mouth who greets every new contact with "I would be glad to introduce you to..." an influential someone he barely knows. His character is irritating, even infuriating, but appropriate for Norman, and never vicious or treacherous. He wants to help but simply cannot. As Gere described him in a TV interview: "There is no darkness in this guy." Precisely, and Gere nails him.

(*The film opens May 5th, is rated "R" and runs 117 mins.*)

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