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'Norman' could be role of a lifetime for Gere

There's not much to say about the story underlying New York-Israeli director Joseph Cedar's "Norman: The Moderate Rise and Tragic Fall of a New York Fixer," that isn't revealed by the title.

As entertainment, the movie — which resides in the intersection where New York and Israeli finance, philanthropy and politics collide — is satisfactory in every respect. As a showcase for the depth of Richard Gere's talent as an actor, the film is extraordinary. Norman may be the role of a lifetime for Richard Gere.

Norman Oppenheimer hovers around the margins of a loosely connected commonwealth of Jewish A-list aspirants in Manhattan. He exaggerates his relationship with its members and represents himself to them as a creditable intermediary.

He is a fixer who can't seem to fix anything without humiliating consequences and strives to become a macher.

(What is the difference between a fixer and a macher? To paraphrase the Jewish-language columnist, Philologos, a fixer is someone who, for a price, will extract a favor for you from someone else. A macher is someone who makes it his job to get other people to do things.)

"You're like a drowning man trying to wave down an ocean liner," Norman's nephew (Michael Sheen) tells him. "But I'm a good swimmer," replies Norman, "as



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long as my head is above water."

Wandering officeless through Manhattan's streets and department stores, with little more than an iPhone and earbuds, Norman's modus operandi is to cajole and wheedle himself into the lives of important Jews. Even while insulting Norman to his face, they

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ultimately complainingly give in, just to get rid of him and because — well, you never know.

When Norman befriends a dispirited Israeli deputy minister, Mica Eshel (Lior Ashkenazi), his fortunes change overnight when Eshel later rises to become the prime minister of Israel. Norman

is a convenient person for Eshel to use.

In an award-worthy performance, Gere empathically embodies the nebbishy Norman so completely that there is never a moment when we are conscious of Gere as Gere. No thoughts of American gigolos or pretty women float to mind. We understand the world Norman is trying to penetrate and we are held in suspense wondering whether Norman will prove worthy of his ambitions when he is hit by this singular stroke of good luck.

Although we are lost in Gere's performance, that is not true for every element of the movie. Scattered among the cast are actors who have become famous as decidedly un-Jewish characters, in the roles of prominent New York Jews.

An enjoyable, if distracting, aspect of this casting against type is the spark of recognition and surprise that is set off when Steve Buscemi appears as Norman's rabbi, Michael Sheen arrives as Norman's nephew and Dan Stevens presents himself as a financier's gatekeeper with close ties to Israel.

We all know a Norman. There is a kernel of Norman in anyone whose livelihood depends on rain-making, connections and deals — which is why we are so invested in his success and feel the pain of his missteps.

We have seen Norman, and he is us.