

No More Tears



Forget about trying to teach Bernard Rachele about iPods; he's still struggling with his CD player.

"Can you get this thing to open up?"

I press the "open/close" button and out pops the Johnny Ray disc Rachele wants to lend me. Rachele, who looks closer to 56 than 66, doesn't carry a cell phone or use the Internet either. Luckily, his business doesn't call for a lot of gadgets, just a lot of patience. After four decades, Rachele, an actor, is finally getting his big break in Spike Lee's, *Inside Man*, a hostage drama starring Jodie Foster, Denzel Washington, and Clive Owen that opens Friday.

Rachele's co-stars weren't even born when he heard his sister playing one of Johnny Ray's records and asked, "Who's the girl singing?"

"It's a guy," she informed him. "He cries."

"Well, I can relate to that," he replied.

Growing up in Washington Heights, in the 1940s and 1950s, Rachele dreamed of performing. His father, a Polish immigrant, didn't want to hear about it, but Rachele resembled the slim, jittery Ray and quickly established himself as an impersonator of the now-forgotten crooner. He juggled his act, which often took him to Catskills resorts, with serious acting, studying under William Hickey and Uta Hagen. At 20, after touring Israel as a singer, he landed a part opposite Topol in an Israeli film called *I Like Mike*.

Back in the States, his career faltered. To support his family, Rachele taught English and theater. In the early 1980s he landed bit parts in a few Hollywood pictures—the John Travolta vehicle *Blow Out*, a Jane Fonda movie—and a recurring role as sleazy pornographer Stu Samuels on *All My Children*. But the phone calls for bigger and better parts never came. And in 1991, when Ray died of liver cancer after years as an alcoholic, Rachele went through a bout of depression.

Last spring, his wife Judy saw a posting online: Spike Lee was looking for someone to play an Orthodox rabbi and Columbia University law professor. Rachele auditioned and Lee quickly called him back to read with Washington.

"In the scene, Denzel, a very tough, threatening character, says to me, 'You're not a rabbi, you're a lawyer.' And so I taunt him back and say, 'Sure. Go ahead. Go nuts. Go *meshuga*,'" Rachele laughs. "That word—*meshuga*—wasn't in the script. But Spike loved it, told me to do that line again."

After the callback, Rachele told his agent, Barbara Andreadis, he'd nailed it. But in the days that followed, he heard the same sound he'd heard on and off for decade: silence.

"What does it *take*? I thought."

After a dark week, Rachele trudged over to Andreadis' office. She somehow thought he'd already heard the good news. Within weeks he was improvising another scene with Washington, in which the Oscar-winning actor tries to play rough.

"'What do you mean you can't hear me?' Denzel says. Then he notices my hearing aids and yells: 'Why's this one brown and the other one's red?' 'Well,' I say, 'It has to do with the ear canal...and then I go on and on about the hearing aids; Spike loved it!' Rachelle says with a huge smile, but then his eyes sadden, and he starts to tear up. "You know, I kept pinching myself then. It was like a dream. This is where I was hoping I'd be someday."

Of course, waking up from a good dream can be disappointing, and Rachelle admits to feeling a huge crash after the film was shot.

"In acting everything ends," he says. "You're always waiting for the next part."

His next role, he hopes, will be in a revival of Arthur Miller's *Incident at Vichy*. He's already been in readings of the Holocaust drama with Richard Dreyfuss. If they secure the rights from the Miller estate Rachelle's next big break may come—this time playing a waiter.

— *Jill Dearman*