

## Dreyfuss plays one of history's imperfect heroes

Actor's fascination began in childhood

By Suzanne Gill

What's in a name can shape a lifetime's quest. Take, for example, actor-producer Richard Dreyfuss, who long believed himself related to French army captain Alfred Dreyfus, the central character in a 19th-century political scandal that shaped the Zionist movement and led to the separation of church and state in France.

Thanks to the Paul Muni film "The Life of Emile Zola," Dreyfuss (whose family name is Dreyfus) became fascinated with the Dreyfus Affair while still a child. Although he has since learned he has no blood ties to Alfred Dreyfus, the actor has clearly been drawn in spirit to pursue the questions of honor and justice the story raises.

Alfred Dreyfus' Jewish heritage and unbending personality made him a target for fellow officers conspiring to frame him in 1894 as a traitor to the government. Convicted and banished to Devil's Island, Dreyfus became a symbol in France of the movement against corruption in the military, the government and even the church.

In 1898, novelist and social philosopher Emile Zola ("Therese Raquin," "Nana") became obsessed with clearing Dreyfus' name and wrote a tract, "J'accuse," which stirred public sentiment. Meanwhile, Col. George Picquart, the newly appointed head of army counterintelligence, discovered Dreyfus had been framed for crimes committed by another officer. Despite his anti-Semitic sentiments, which were typical of the times, and a personal dislike of Dreyfus, Picquart chose to pursue the truth.

In his own film on the Dreyfus Affair, "Prisoner of Honor," debuting Saturday, Nov. 2, on HBO, actor Dreyfuss plays Picquart, an "imperfect hero," because Picquart stepped out "of narrow, blinkered provincialism, to something greater"—honor.

"What really does fascinate me...with his character...is that nothing is simple. We each have a tendency to compartmentalize ev-

erybody. These are the good guys, and those are bad guys. I find myself drawn, in the films that I develop and in the stories that I want to produce, to people who are a bit more complicated than that.

"It pleases me to irritate those people who say, 'How can you make an anti-Semite a hero?' I like to take that opportunity as much as I can."

Dreyfuss, a political activist and conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, warms to his subject as few actors do. Addressing a room full of reporters, he leaves his seat to pace the small stage as he answers questions. Like a dedicated professor among freshmen, he is fully engaged in the issue at hand, and his enthusiasm carries the hour.

So well does Dreyfuss understand his subject that he was not afraid to introduce other strong influences to the film, not only with repeated screenings of "Emile Zola" and "I Accuse," a 1958 Jose Ferrer film, but in the distinctive style and "camera vision" of director Ken Russell as well.

"I hoped that we would find someone who would bring something eccentric and particular to the film," says Dreyfuss. "And my first thought was Ken. ...That was the reason for picking him."

The supporting cast is similarly strong, with Oliver Reed and Brian Blessed as French generals and Peter Firth as Major Henri. Kenneth Colley ("The Empire Strikes Back") plays Capt. Dreyfus.

For Dreyfuss, making the film was like time travel. There were moments, he says, when "I felt like I had taken a trip back to my own ancestral root." The issues, he notes, remain alive as well, in modern scandals—Watergate, Iran/Contra.

"Anti-Semitism is our eternal comrade," Dreyfuss says thoughtfully. "So, yes, of course, there is relevance because history is always repeating itself. If you open up any newspaper in America, any day in the last ten years or more, you will see events that were born in 1894 in the French army."

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