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## Kicking around in Cao Hamburger's mind

The filmmaker revisits soccer and uncertainty in the Brazil of his childhood for 'The Year My Parents Went on Vacation.'

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*Special to The Times*

For many Brazilians, 1970 was a time of both outsized national pride and overwhelming fear. The country's soccer team was competing in the World Cup, with a squad that included the legendary Pelé. However, the ruling military junta was silencing dissidents, and runaway inflation was pummeling the economy.

The uneasiness of the era is embodied in Mauro, the soccer-obsessed boy hero of the new film "The Year My Parents Went on Vacation" from Brazilian director Cao Hamburger. After Mauro's parents hastily depart on a mysterious trip, he finds himself abandoned at the doorstep of his grandfather's apartment in Bom Retiro, a Jewish neighborhood in São Paulo. But the elderly man has suffered a fatal heart attack, and it falls to a crotchety old neighbor, Shlomo (Germano Haiut), to care for the boy.

Mauro eventually makes friends with the locals, but every day he waits for his parents to return, every night he sleeps by the telephone. Most of all, he hopes they'll be reunited in time to watch the World Cup final together.

In several key ways, Mauro's story mirrors Hamburger's own experiences growing up in Brazil. He was passionate about soccer and, perhaps more profoundly, was the product of a multicultural environment — his father was a German Jew and his mother an Italian Catholic; both taught physics at the University of São Paulo — and was directly affected by the turbulent politics of the day.

"I remember that period like this," Hamburger, 45, begins. "When my parents went on vacation — when my parents were arrested — it was so mysterious, it's a mysterious age in my mind. They weren't dissidents, but they helped people [who were]."

Hamburger's father disappeared

for two weeks, and his mother was gone for one. Upon her return, the director says, "she had some kind of breakdown." It's a period that still creates some pain, clearly, as he finds it hard to discuss even a quarter of a century later.

Hamburger is a large, burly man with a thick head of black hair and an easy smile. His English is halting, and a translator steps in now and then to help Hamburger articulate

from my childhood. I also had ideas about the mixing of cultures, how Brazil is good in this, how we live together in a multicultural society."

The film's narrative really began to come together in 2002, when Hamburger teamed with his co-writer, Claudio Galperin, who had grown up in Bom Retiro, where Hamburger set his tale. The pair spent months refining the screenplay, but both realized that finding

Michel Joelsas and Daniela Piepszyk, though neither child resembled the characters as described in the initial script.

In Michel he saw a resilience that would give Mauro a deeper dimension. "He was strong inside, he had strength as a boy," Hamburger says. "That would help Mauro survive without his parents."

In Daniela he noticed a spunky charisma that would convey Hanna's bright spirit.

The director set up two months of workshops with them, but to keep their acting as natural as possible, he wouldn't let them read the full script. Instead, he talked through each scene with Michel and Daniela, sometimes incorporating the dialogue they suggested.

"You have to respect children as intelligent human beings," he says. "And character is as important as the talent."

Production was finally launched in 2005.

After making its European debut in competition at last year's Berlin International Film Festival, Hamburger's tale was ensured a worldwide release. "Right after the first screening," says co-producer Fabiano Gullane, "we sold to over 25 countries."

At home, the film took in some 500,000 admissions — "that was much better than we expected," Hamburger says — and it became Brazil's official entry for consideration in the Oscars' foreign-language category. The film was shortlisted, meaning that it was among a select group of movies from which the eventual nominees were chosen, though it did not ultimately receive an Academy Award nomination.

Hamburger says what's most pleasing is that Mauro's story seems to be resonating strongly with a diverse swath of audiences.

"One of the most important lessons is to understand how we need to be connected with others," says the director, "and he learns it in this film."



his thoughts about "The Year My Parents Went on Vacation," his second feature, which opens in limited release Friday.

He explains that the idea for the screenplay started to take shape while he was working in London in 2001, following the release of his 1999 debut, "Castle Ra-Tim-Bum," a family film about a young wizard. "In this kind of exile, a stranger in a strange land," he says, "I found myself looking back to my roots. I started to write down some ideas

the right actors to play Mauro and Hanna, the neighborhood tomboy with the big personality who befriends Mauro, would be challenging.

Hamburger spent half a year looking for the two child leads — there were 1,000 auditions for the part of Mauro and 200 for Hanna. He deliberately sought kids with a Jewish background so that they would innately understand the background of the characters they would play. The parts were eventually won by

IN PORTUGUESE, HEBREW AND YIDDISH WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

# THE YEAR MY PARENTS WENT ON VACATION