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Creativity is most important to actor who played in Incendies

By CARA STERN, Special to The CJN

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It's been a successful year for actor/designer Allen Altman, with two of his projects winning a slew of awards including eight Genie Awards, and one Oscar nomination.

Allen Altman [Caitlin Cronenberg photo]

The Montreal native who now lives in Toronto plays an Arabic notary in *Incendies*, the Canadian film nominated for Best Foreign Film at this year's Academy Awards.

The movie tells the story of twins who travel to Lebanon to unravel the mystery of their late mother's past. Altman plays the notary who helps them.



Incendies, shot in Montreal and directed by Denis Villeneuve, also won nine Jutras – the Quebec movie awards – on March 13.

“It's just such a wonderful story of humanity, of letting go of your anger, and all these messages that I think people really often don't want to discuss,” Altman said in an interview. “But when they're put in a tableau of such a beautiful piece of art like this film, then they're discussed in a different way.”

He calls his character, Notary Maddad, one of his most challenging to date. First, he had to learn to speak French with an Arabic accent. For that, he called on his childhood memories.

“I'm a Sephardic Jew, so my mom and dad spoke a little bit of Arabic when I was growing up,” he said. “I knew the tonality that I was looking for, and what I was comfortable with.”

Through mimicking an Arabic friend's accent and extensive training with a dialect coach, he was able to master a convincing accent.

Other challenges included learning the relatively large amount of dialogue that went with the role and not presenting it with a heavy hand.

“I think that was probably the most challenging part, finding the balance between giving justice to the importance of the situation but keeping it light and human,” he said, explaining that his character often had to give intense, life-altering information.

Canadian films are not often nominated for Academy Awards – in the last 10 years, there have only been two others: *The Barbarian Invasions* (2004) and *Water* (2007).

He said the support for the film reminded him of the feelings of national pride in the Olympic gold medal men's hockey game against the United States.

“Everyone was just so proud to be Canadian – and I felt the same thing from the movie,” he said.

In addition to helping him learn the accent, he said being Jewish, as an important part of him, would always affect or influence his roles.

“As a Jewish man, I grew up with traditions and core values that I often had to question, and the same thing happens in the movie,” he said. “Every aspect of my being had a part in this film, and I put all of that in there.”

His other recent roles include a profiler who helps capture a serial killer in a TV film called Wandering Eye.

“I really like to tell a story in that manner,” he said, adding that his hope for the future is to go to Vancouver for a few months, and he would like to get a regular lead on a criminal or law-based television series.

When Altman’s not acting in films or television, he practises Bikram yoga, a form of hot yoga done in a heated room.

“Often, life goes really, really quickly, and you need to find way to slow everything down and focus on yourself,” he said.

He also runs an interior design company called Allen Altman Design, which he said is not so much a way of making money as another method of channelling his creativity.

“It all comes from the core essence of creativity, and for me... that’s probably the most important aspect of my life,” he said. “If I’m not creating something or working on something, I don’t feel like I’m completely alive.”

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