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HEADLINE: **Fighting Words** on the Street

BODY:

IN the documentary "**Protocols** of Zion," which opens in New York and Los Angeles on Oct. 21, the director Marc **Levin** ("Slam," "Brooklyn Babylon," "Whiteboyz") sets out to understand what he sees as a surge in anti-Semitism since 9/11. At times, the film echoes "Roger and Me" in style, allowing its targets to incriminate themselves. But Mr. **Levin's** film, unlike Michael Moore's, provides few clear answers to the questions it stirs, though Mr. **Levin** takes pains to refute the canard that no Jews died at the World Trade Center. The title is borrowed from a century-old tract, "The **Protocols** of the Elders of Zion," which sought to expose a Jewish plot for world domination hatched in a secret graveyard meeting. Mr. **Levin** discussed his work with David M. Halbfinger recently over drinks in Beverly Hills.

DAVID M. HALBFINGER -- I've read a bit about the genesis of "**Protocols**" -- that it started with something an Egyptian cabby said to you in New York -- but why did you feel compelled to make this film?

MARC **LEVIN** -- There's more to that story. When that cabdriver said to me, "The Jews had been warned, the rabbis in Brooklyn warned the Jews not to go to work, 4,000 didn't go to work, no Jews died" -- I had heard that already. And this kid was listening to the Roots, a pretty progressive hip-hop group I know. So I figured, this has got to be a hip guy, I can talk honestly with him. I was like, "You got to be kidding, buddy, you can't believe this." So he said it was all written 100 years ago in "The **Protocols** of Zion."

But the second part of the story is, I flipped out, and I said, "My great-grandfather was at that meeting!" This is only weeks after 9/11, and

any Arab-American was paranoid. So we get to a light. He turns around. And I look at him and say, "I'm going to give you some advice: just shut up and do what we say!"

I'd had a few drinks; I lost my cool. Well, he almost crashed. He pulled over, asked me to get out, went into a coffee shop, and I followed. Then he starts telling me his life story: He was from Alexandria. He loved hip-hop. And every time he bought a rap CD, and the fundamentalists saw it, they would beat him up. Or if he bought a DVD of a European or an American movie. He finally couldn't take it and left. So I'm thinking, he came to New York, wants to get into the music industry, wants an American girlfriend -- this is so bizarre. Twenty minutes ago he was repeating the cartoon lie -- blame it on the Jews, it's written in "The **Protocols**" -- but the guy himself is a victim of fanaticism.

Q. At one point, I wondered, is Marc **Levin** shocked, shocked, to find anti-Semitism in this world?

A. No, I wasn't shocked. But I didn't grow up in a world where you really faced what our parents and grandparents did. I was always fascinated by the history but never thought of it in the present tense. I did a film, "Gladiator Days," with one of the heroes of the white power movement, so I've dealt with a lot of extremists. But I never thought it would become, not legitimate but, somehow, not just fringe. Take "The Diaspora," the [Syrian-made, Lebanese-broadcast] television series, where you see the matzo, the blood libel. Tens of millions of people saw that. So when people said to me, "Why would you want to even bring up 'The **Protocols** of Zion'? You should bury that book -- -- ."

Q. "Is it good for the Jews?"

A. Believe me, I had investors who wanted to do something about anti-Semitism but were uncomfortable with "The **Protocols** of Zion." They were like, it's better that no one knows about it. But if 100 million people on 40 nights are watching during Ramadan, who are you hiding it from? Jews need to find their place in this discussion, and it's very hard, because we're in the cross hairs -- because of Israel, the Mideast, the neocons, all these things. But look at our history as victims of religious-inspired madness for 1,600 years. How are we going to step into this battle, how are we going to defuse and combat this kind of hate? That is the huge question.

Q. I don't know that the film answers it.

A. It doesn't. Quite honestly, I set out to try to get oriented and ask the questions. It was almost like an opener.

Q. You can see this stuff anywhere. You can walk by it in Times Square. Some avert their eyes, or roll their eyes, and think, "I can't waste my time, I can't engage, it's not worth it, these are stupid people if they buy into it."

A. I would've been one of those people who would've walked by it also. But all of a sudden, it was like I was searching -- what's the constellation or road map in this new world? And here in New York City, where this kid or anybody could've been blown up, all of a sudden it doesn't sound the same way as it did before to me. It's like, whose side are you on, if this is a war -- whether it's a war on terror, a war against Al Qaeda or a war of civilizations. To wake up and realize we were in the Middle Ages, where religious warfare, tribal warfare, are a force. I didn't know how to make sense of it. So my way was engaging, just on the street, in talking to people to try to get my bearings again. I don't believe in the ignorance of the street. I believe there is that idea of a street intelligence.

Q. As I watched you on film, debating the host on an anti-Semitic talk-radio show, I thought that it was happening to you: that you were getting rolled, that you were caught on your heels, that you were kind of overwhelmed.

A. I might have been.

Q. That may have been the scene that ticked me off the most. "This guy, he goes into the lion's den. How can he go in unprepared, and how can he put it on the screen that way?" You're the filmmaker. You're supposed to get the last word.

A. It's funny you say that, because people often asked, "What was the scariest thing that happened?" and I would say that was. Why? In West Virginia, in the Nazi headquarters, in the prison, even in the mosque, I was prepared, both emotionally and in what I wanted to say. On that radio show, I have to admit, I didn't expect, in St. Louis, Middle America, no hillbilly accents, just regular people calling. I was unprepared, and you sensed it. That was the scariest moment, that you could just be in the middle of our country, and one after another, people calling -- -- .

Q. "I despise you," one said.

A. Right. Maybe it was unflattering, maybe it made me look unprepared. You saw it in my reaction, but because it was so banal or everyday, I thought it was so important to include. I would admit I was not prepared. I was shocked.

Q. But it may take that vulnerability to get in with people.

A. I think it does. Originally, the film wasn't as personal as it became.

Q. It's a really bleak picture of the extent of anti-Semitism. You don't show any positive, countervailing voices. Do you think it's that bad?

A. I think there are a lot of countervailing forces, and I was in touch with a lot of people who are bridge builders. If I was doing a Bill Moyers show, that's where we would've gone. But I wanted to do something that had street credibility. Meaning, why can't you talk about religion, faith, fanaticism, the way you talk about sports, sex, music, on the street? We always hear the Arab street, the street, the red states, vox populi, but then you go out and it's like, "What are you talking to people on the streets for, why aren't you talking in the university or to the professor or to the experts?" I didn't want to do a dry, historic, academic, intellectual -- I wanted it to be emotive.

Q. Are you sounding an alarm?

A. To a certain extent, yes, but not in the sense of crying wolf, the Gestapo's coming. I don't see it like that. We're all Jews, now, who believe in open societies. And so we all have got to figure out how we're going to fight this fight. It's pre-emptive engagement. We better come up with a way, and culture matters: music, art, journalism, painting, literature -- it matters.

Q. It's "I've seen the enemy and it is " who?

A. Exactly. But isn't that what it's about? Just think of the war on terror. The greatest failure? Intelligence. We have no idea how these people think, we have nobody in Al Qaeda. Anybody is a potential victim, don't have to be a Jew. So we're all in this together. And staring into the eyes, trying to get intelligence, and understanding how people think and how people who are intelligent can actually say things, like 'the Jews met in a graveyard, and they've got secrets from

when Moses came down with the Torah,' and believe that -- yeah. So I feel better armed.

Q. In one scene, you're on a cellphone in your hotel room trying to get famous Hollywood Jews to sit around and talk about Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ." It seems like you're trying to imply something pretty heavy-handedly about their refusal to do it.

A. I would say, I was naive.

Q. Did you really think they'd just say, "Sure!"?

A. No. I have tremendous respect for Norman Lear, Larry David, Rob Reiner. These guys are heroes. And not only are they brilliant, but they've gone on the front lines themselves. But I was naive. I did think there would be people who would say: "Hey, let's have a discussion. What does this mean?" At the same time, how could I make a movie, if I was going to sit with all different kinds of people and not at least try?

Q. Why would anybody say yes? I wouldn't say yes. "Who the hell are you?"

A. You're absolutely right, and I did it out of love and respect.

Q. Are you going to persuade anybody that they're wrong, that the world is not what they've been led to believe, or are they going to come away from the movie saying, 'This guy didn't win that argument on the radio show, it must all be true'?

A. It's not going to convert anyone. Hopefully, even the most obdurate or obstinate will say, "Maybe the Jews did die on 9/11, and maybe 'The **Protocols**' is a fraud and maybe this level of stereotypical hate of the Jews is past tense. But the Jews still have too much power," and dot-dot-dot. O.K. But that's a step. That's something.

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

CORRECTION-DATE: October 16, 2005

CORRECTION:

Because of an editing error, the introduction to an interview last Sunday with Marc **Levin**, director of the documentary "**Protocols** of Zion," misstated a word in describing the century-old anti-Semitic tract "The **Protocols** of the Elders of Zion," from which the title was taken. It should have said that the tract, a proven forgery, "purports" (not "sought") to expose a Jewish plot for world domination.

GRAPHIC: Photos: The director Marc **Levin**, next to the camera, interviewing inmates at a maximum security prison in New Jersey for his documentary "**Protocols** of Zion." (Photo by Thinkfilms)(pg. 13)
The director Marc **Levin** said his visit to a talk-radio show was scarier than time spent at Nazi headquarters. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times)(pg. 20)

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