TODD Solondz emerged in American independent cinema as it was blooming in 1995.

He releases his sixth film, Life During Wartime, this year as US independent cinema has stalled, if not crashed.

He won the Sundance Film Festival prize for Welcome to the Dollhouse when many smaller films were being made and their breadth of themes and even styles seemed limitless.

Since then Solondz's films, which are offbeat in their treatment of some contentious topics including family dysfunction and sexual abuse, have waxed and waned.

Life During Wartime is a "sequel of sorts" to Happiness, a 1998 film starring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Jon Lovitz, Lara Flynn Boyle and Dylan Baker. And it seems to have reaffirmed his place, at least in some quarters, as an heir to Woody Allen.

That might be so if Solondz weren't so transgressive. This is another deadpan work brazenly focusing on pedophilia and terrorism in preaching the need for forgiveness. Indeed, it was reported the film had been originally titled Forgiveness.

"No, it was originally called Life During Wartime but once misinformation gets out there there's nothing I can do to control that," Solondz says matter-of-factly.
"It is a kind of variation, a quasi-sequel of sorts of many of the characters that appeared in that film. It's a different kind of experience and of course all the actors have been recast. So you don't have to have seen any of my work in fact to follow the story and appreciate it on its own terms."

Solondz updates the characters in a diverse family in liberal ways, to the point of recasting them with an equally stellar band of players including Allison Janney, Charlotte Rampling, Shirley Henderson, Ciaran Hinds, Paul Reubens (better known as Pee-Wee Herman) and Michael Kenneth Williams, The Wire's Omar.

Solondz's punches connect more crisply in several scenes, particularly those with 12-year-old Timmy (Dylan Riley Snyder) that point to prejudices and the ease of misunderstanding.

In that regard, the film - one of 12 vying for the Sydney Film Prize at the Sydney Film Festival, then screening at the Melbourne International Film Festival and in a wider Australian release - is a little softer than some of his recent efforts, such as Palindromes.

"Everyone is going to disagree and I just accept that," he notes of his developing style. "This movie, like all of my work, is a very sad sort of comedy and that balance between the pathos and the comedy is, I think, key to all that I do."

Critics will return to his fascination with sexual abuse. In this film a pedophile, played by Hinds, tries to make amends after being released from prison while the mother (Janney) hides the fact from her young son.

The 50-year-old New Yorker doesn't see sexual abuse as a recurring theme in his movies.

"I wouldn't call it a theme in my films but it was certainly a subject that was dramatised in Happiness and the sequel of sorts Life During Wartime," he says.

"All I can say is the next thing I hope to get financed is, I think, very uncontroversial. I don't see anything controversial about it but let's see if I get the financing."

Is there not a danger his films will be overshadowed by their subject matter?

"The subjects are in the newspapers, TV and [on the] internet every day of the week so there's nothing terribly fresh about the subjects inherently," he says.

"The question is the way in which you approach and tackle the subject matter and I've had a very polarised response always to my work and I accept that as the price that I pay for getting to tell the stories that I like to tell as I tell them."

This story is about the notion of forgiving and forgetting, Solondz says. He believes it is a much more politically overt film than Happiness and "a different kind of experience". "And, of course, one is really the work of a younger filmmaker than the other."

Solondz concedes, a little unhappily it sounds, that he "just gets older and for better or worse I think the movies reflect that".

In what manner he is unsure, or he is unwilling to divulge.

"I'm not quite as self-conscious as maybe you imagine," he says.

He has said previously he wants to expose certain truths. Perhaps he is just doing so in more entertaining ways.

"It's really the way in which you grapple with it, you try to engage the audience in a way to experience things that are familiar yet fresh, odd yet always true to the reality you've created," he says.
His reality has become a little harder as the independent film scene contracted during the past decade. Solondz admits his teaching at the New York University "affords me a certain kind of security and stability that filmmaking doesn't".

"I think [independent filmmaking] is always a struggle," he says. "I'm not sure there's a particular point when it began or ended. There are always going to be independent filmmakers, it's just more difficult to have a forum, to get a theatrical release.

"It's difficult to access an audience one may have taken for granted 10 years ago.

"But today there are different possibilities that exist on the internet that never existed before. I have an open mind and one can be grim and at the same time one can be cautiously optimistic. I'm just happy I got to make the movie and I'm always very happy to survive these things," he says with a sigh. "And you move on."

Life During Wartime screens during the Sydney Film Festival on Friday at 6.30pm and Saturday at 10am, and in July at the Melbourne International Film Festival before a wider national release.