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**Second
City
Tzivi's**
**September '06
Spotlight**
By JAN LISA HUTTNER



Sometimes context changes everything. When we've lived through a summer like the summer of 2006, it doesn't matter when the films in the "Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema" (CFIC) were conceived, created, or chosen for us; it only matters that they're coming to us now. And so, what was once a fairly predictable "coming of age" drama like *SUMMER STORY* now carries added poignancy because it's set in 1982 during Israel's first invasion of Lebanon. And what could earlier be described as a comedy about a "dysfunctional family" now alters entirely when we realize that *JOY*'s father-figure looks just like Ariel Sharon (still suspended in a coma as I write).

Some might think going to the movies is a frivolous activity in such trying times, but not Barukh Binah, Israel's Consul General to the Midwest: "Throughout our history, a thriving cultural scene has been a mainstay of Israeli society. As a nation we take great pride in our creative achievements. Today, even while facing aggression from our neighbors, theaters remain filled and we continue celebrating and supporting our artistic community." If the Israelis can remain so resolute under bombardment, shouldn't we?

According to CFIC coordinator Donna Yates, the CFIC's "mission is to celebrate the growing strength of Israel's film industry, while showcasing the country's multifaceted identity. Through the medium of film, audiences connect with Israeli culture and society in a non-political, artistic way, thereby increasing understanding of and tolerance toward Israel and its people." This cross-cultural exchange is especially critical now, when Israel's image has taken a beating in the world press. Audience members, both Jewish and non-Jewish, will see lives very similar to their own; there are very few monsters or people with horns on display although most of the characters have recognizable flaws just like yours and mine.

NEW THEMES

In prior years, many Israeli films have explored the relationship between the bullies and the bullied (e.g., Joseph Cedar's *CAMPFIRE* from 2004). Only one CFIC film, *MIMON*, addresses that topic this year, but three films are set right before Yom Kippur, and explicitly deal with the meaning of atonement. In *JOY*, a family is banished from its social circle because of a father's transgression. Years later, his daughter wants their various friends to acknowledge their own complicity and heal the breach. In *THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY*, a widow is told she cannot be buried next to her husband. Since he committed suicide, he is buried outside the fence that encloses the community's graves. In *WASSERMAN – THE RAIN MAN*, community members refuse to help a Holocaust survivor unless he agrees to worship with them, but he blames God for the annihilation of his family and will not bend. Who is the bully in these cases? Is the bully an insistent individual or a community which requires conformity? The answer is no longer obvious, and placing these stories within the Yom Kippur context forces all of us to look within for signs of self-righteousness and intransigence.



Three of this year's best films are set during the observance of Yom Kippur. Photo from *WASSERMAN – THE RAIN MAN* courtesy of Hedva Goldschmidt (Go2Films).

Many of the films on the CFIC's 2006 schedule have even more overt religious content. Concerned with negative images in films like Amos Gitai's *KADOSH* (1999) and Eitan Gorlin's *THE HOLY LAND* (2003), Israel's Orthodox community has made the deliberate decision to invest in filmmaking. The result is an outstanding set of new films from *The Ma'ale School of Television, Film and the Arts* in Jerusalem. Each one is evidence of Ma'ale's commitment "to utilize the powerful tool of media in fostering a unique and positive Jewish voice; one that is based upon Jewish values and ideological principles."

Most of the seven Ma'ale films on the CFIC schedule are shorts, little 30-minute dramas that put familiar family dilemmas in a new context. For instance, in both *ELYOKIM* and *A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT* the hero is a brilliant but physically handicapped Talmudist who is having trouble making it through the matchmaking gauntlet. In *FIRST NIGHT*, a new bride wonders why her husband won't make love to her, while in *A SHABBOS MOTHER*, a woman desperately longing for a child tries to cope with the endless kvetching of her heavily pregnant sister.

Like the much loved USHPIZIN (released in local theaters last year and now available here on DVD), all of these films depict real people dealing with a recognizable mix of mundane and spiritual issues. They beautifully convey the constraints of religious life, especially on young people, and they also present parental concerns with great sensitivity. You don't have to be Orthodox yourself to empathize with everyone on screen.

NEW STARS

For a while it seemed like the same handful of actors kept recycling again and again through every good Israeli film. Whenever the script called for an adolescent girl, Maya Maron appeared, and whenever the script called for an offbeat leading man, Moshe Ivgy appeared. No more. True, Yehuda Levi, the heartthrob from YOSSI & JAGGER, plays a critical role in THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY, and AYA KOREN, who pined for Levi's JAGGER in 2002 and then charmed the eponymous hero of BONJOUR MONSIEUR SHLOMI in 2003, works new magic on the young hero of SUMMER STORY. But in the main this year's CFIC schedule is filled with fabulous actors we've never seen before and very few cast members appear in more than one film.

The exception is Tal Friedman, who has terrific parts in both JOY and THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY, showing his range by taking the first character ("Gil") to the bottom of despair while playing the second one ("Bomba") strictly for laughs. He was nominated for Ophir Awards by the Israel Film Academy both times, and playing Friedman's sister in JOY brought Sigalit Fuchs a well-deserved Ophir Award of her own for Best Actress. Danny Rytenberg was not nominated for his powerful performance as "Eldi" in JANEM JANEM but he should have been. And while none of the Ma'ale actors have been singled out yet, I predict they will be soon. According to Channa Pinchasi, International Relations Coordinator for Ma'ale, secular actors often have to study religious traditions in order to play their parts with conviction. She singled out the excellent cast of A SHABBOS MOTHER as her best example.

NEW FILMMAKERS

In her most recent statistics on "the celluloid ceiling," Professor Martha Lauzen of San Diego State University reported that, for the top 250 films released in the United States in 2005 (as measured by gross domestic box office), more than 90% were directed by men. In contrast, fully 40% of the films on this year's CFIC schedule were directed by women. JOY, directed by Julie Shles, was a 2005 candidate for the Best Picture award from the Israel Film Academy and Shles herself was also nominated for Best Director. LOSE TO HOME, a drama about two young women doing their army service in the Jerusalem Border Patrol, was directed by Vidi Bilu and Dalia Hagar, who received the CICAIE "Forum for New Cinema" award at last year's Berlin International Film Festival. (CICAIE stands for the European organization "Confederation Internationale des Cinemas d'Art et d'Essai.") The thought-provoking albeit melancholy documentary KIBBUTZ was directed by Racheli Schwartz, and WASSERMAN – THE RAIN MAN was directed by Idit Shechori. Most surprisingly, most of the Ma'ale shorts, fully six out of seven, were directed by women. (The exception in this case is STAND AT EASE directed by Ben Katz.) By tackling difficult subjects with strength and compassion, Israel's women directors are leading the world towards a bright new cinematic age.

The "new face" of Israeli film:



Ma'ale filmmakers like Inbar Namdar (left) the director of A SHABBOS MOTHER & Miri Bocker (right) the director of ELYOKIM, are changing the face of Israeli cinema. Photographs courtesy of Channa Pinchasi, International Relations Coordinator for the "Ma'ale School of Television, Film & the Arts" in Jerusalem.

SPONSORS

Kudos to CFIC producers Donna and Mitchell Yates, as well as committee members who decided to exert local control over this year's festival, boldly severing long-established ties with the "Israel Film Festival" still running annually in LA, New York, and Miami. Organizations all across metro Chicago, including AIPAC, American Friends of Hebrew University, American Israeli Partnership for the Arts, American Jewish Congress, American Society for Technion, Anshe Emet Synagogue, AZM Chicago Region, Chicago Chapter Hadassah, Columbia College Chicago, Dawn Schuman Institute, Greater Midwest Young Judea, Israel Aliyah Center, Jewish National Fund, Russian Hillel, Temple Beth Israel, and USD Hagshama, have joined with the Consulate General of Israel to the Midwest and the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago to serve as sponsors. Now it's up to the rest of us to do our part.

TITLES OF FILMS BY CATEGORY

Feature Films (over 60 Minutes):

CLOSE TO HOME
JANEM JANEM
JOY
LIVE AND BECOME
LOVE HURTS
MIMON
OUT OF SIGHT
THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY
SUMMER STORY

Documentaries:

BEHIND ENEMY LINES
FIVE DAYS
KIBBUTZ
SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

Short Features (under 60 Minutes):

BIRKONIM
CHEFZI ON AIR
DIANA'S CHILD
ELYOKIM
FIRST NIGHT
GREEN CHARIOT
LIKE A DISH OUT OF WATER
A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT
A SHABBOS MOTHER
SKIN
STAND AT EASE
WASSERMAN – THE RAIN MAN

**TZIVI'S
TOP
PICKS**

**Best Feature
(over 60 Minutes):**

**THE
SCHWARTZ
DYNASTY**



**Best Short Feature
(under 60 Minutes):
WASSERMAN – THE RAIN MAN**



**Best Featured Actor:
Danny Rytenberg
JANEM JANEM**



**Best Short Feature Actor:
Eli Shimon
ELYOKIM**



**Best
Documentary:
FIVE DAYS**



**Best Featured Actress:
Miryam Zohar
THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY**



**Best Short Feature Actress:
Irit Nathan Bendak
WASSERMAN – THE RAIN MAN**



Tziviah bat Yisroel v'Hudah (Jan Lisa Huttner) is the managing editor of *Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples* (<http://www.films42.com>). For specific program information, check the CFIC website (<http://www.chicagofestivalofisraelcinema.org>). Also check the *Chicago Jewish Community Online* website (<http://www.juf.org>) for "Tzivi's Sneak Peeks" highlighting some of the individual films mentioned above.

Send comments and/or suggestions for future columns to Tzivi@msn.com.

Posted: 8/21/2006



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