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**SECOND
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*Coming Next Month
in the
Chicago Festival
of
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- **FIVE DAYS**
- **JOY**
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SECOND CITY TZIVI'S SNEAK PEEK
Coming Next Month in the Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema:

JOY



Special for Chicago Jewish Community Online
by Jan Lisa Huttner

After five years of arduous labor as the publisher of our website FILMS FOR TWO: THE ONLINE GUIDE FOR BUSY COUPLES (www.films42.com), my husband and partner Rich recently announced that he was burning out. "There are maybe a dozen basic movie plots," he groaned after suffering through SUPERMAN RETURNS, "and I've already seen all of them too many times!" He's right. Do you think being a film critic is "fun"? Well, sometimes it is, but sometimes I get so bored my tush starts to ache.

But then I see a film like JOY and I'm back in the game. Still I wonder: Why are most of the things I see "same old, same old" while others are clearly something "more"? What's the difference between a "movie," entertaining or not, and a "film" with artistic merit?

The first time I watched JOY, I was immediately struck by two facts:

- 1.) The plot revolves around Yom Kippur.
- 2.) The actor who plays "Yitzhak Levine" looks just like Ariel Sharon.

Keep these two observations in mind, and I'll return to them later.

IS JOY A GOOD FILM?

Putting on my film critic hat, I think JOY is a very good film, from its fabulous performances to its lovely little design elements. "Joy Levine" (Sigalit Fuchs) is a 35 year old woman who reaches a crossroads in her life: she's single, she works at a dead-end sales support job, and her married boss Shimi uses her for his own pleasure. One day, just before Yom Kippur, Joy becomes mesmerized by a new TV promo – filmed in tight close-up, Tamara, the beautiful star of a reality show called "Gotta Be Happy"

(MUCHRACHIM LEHIYOT SAMECH), keeps repeating these words: “Yom Kippur is approaching and our show is about forgiveness. Listen to your heart. Listen to what it has to say.”

Joy listens to her heart, and it tells her Tamara is speaking directly to her, so she arranges a meeting with Tamara’s producer Maya (Dorit Lev-Ari) and hooks her with a tale that has just the right frisson of titillating pathos. Maya goes into overdrive, pushing Joy to assemble all the players in time for the next program (which is scheduled for the night after Yom Kippur). But there’s a catch: every moment on the broadcast must be “real,” therefore Joy and Maya must operate in secret. Joy’s “victims” (that’s Maya’s word) must act (and react) spontaneously; they cannot be allowed to create “performances” for the camera.

Joy’s “victims” are her nuclear family members: her father Yitzhak (Yossi Polak), her mother Chaya (Rivka Michaeli) and her brother Gil (Tal Friedman). Joy thinks they will only “be happy” if they publicly exorcise a shameful incident kept buried for 22 long years. But “tikkun olam” (“healing the world”) is a delicate business, and forgiving is a two-sided enterprise: one side must forgive and the other side must accept forgiveness. With a gambler’s brio, Joy is betting they will forgive her for tricking them if she simultaneously forgives them for past transgressions. As it turns out, though, they all have new secrets Joy knows nothing about, and their misery, in each case, is far deeper than she realizes.

This dark heavy stuff is told with a light touch; director Julie Shles injects elements of magical realism and uses a brightly-colored TV-toned palette. JOY is a profoundly optimistic film that rewards its eponymous heroine for facing every obstacle with courage, strength, and determination. Shles demands that we look at people we typically turn away from, like a fat girl with sad eyes and silly clothes, and see the soul inside. She has created a love scene for Joy, set in a swimming pool, that’s as sensual as any “sex scene” I’ve ever seen, visually contrasting it with Shimi’s callous brutality.

Screenwriter Omer Tadmor has written a couple of long passionate speeches (“People always talk about amnesia but never about the disease of remembering,” says Joy to the friends who forced her family into exile.) which he counterpoints with several short bitter exchanges (“Yitzhak meet washing machine; Washing machine meet Yitzhak,” says Chaya to her aging, incontinent husband.) and the excellent cast members hit their marks every time. Dorit Lev-Ari is hilarious as the obviously-workaholic Maya; Eliran Caspi is suitably despicable as Shimi; Tal Friedman is heart-wrenching as Gil, the family prodigy; and Keren Mor tackles the difficult role of Gil’s trophy wife Nora with just the right combination of presumption and pique before collapsing into a raw bundle of nerves. There’s also a comic character named Radi (Alex Sandrovich) who injects a graceful note of whimsy. Alas, Sigalit Fuchs will probably spend the rest of her career in supporting roles, and knowing this, she makes her every moment as JOY’s central character count.

SO WHAT ABOUT “THE BIG ISSUES”?

Question: Is JOY just another film about a “dysfunctional family”? Answer: No!

JOY’s screenplay is built around the observance of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) in the world’s only Jewish state, and the actor who plays Joy’s father Yitzhak (Yossi Polak) looks amazingly like Ariel Sharon. Furthermore, the film was made in 2004, so take 22 years away, and you’re back in 1982. Does the year 1982 have specific significance in the life of Ariel Sharon?

In 1982, Israel was at war with Lebanon. In 1982, Sharon was Israel’s Minister of Defense. In 1982, Christian Phalangists massacred Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refuge camps. Coincidence?

We can certainly watch JOY and see nothing more than a well-made dramedy. We can ignore the rituals surrounding Yom Kippur, we can ignore Ariel Sharon’s life history, and we can ignore the tumultuous events of 1982. But if we ignore all this, I don’t think we’re seeing Julie Shles’ movie; we’re only seeing what’s on the surface, and we’re only seeing with our eyes, as if we had neither brains nor hearts.

Most of us appreciate literary devices like similes and metaphors when we encounter them in novels and poems, but we have to work harder at the movies because film is a visual medium and everything appears to happen in “real time.” Furthermore, a simile announces itself. When Shakespeare says about Juliet “Death lies upon her like an untimely frost,” he is comparing two states knowing they are not the same. But metaphors are more subtle and authors depend on empathic audiences. Consider this relevant metaphor from AS YOU LIKE IT:

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.”

My sources tell me that despite its seven nominations from the Israel Film Academy including Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Actor (Tal Friedman as “Gil”) as well as three wins for Best Actress (Sigalit Fuchs as “Joy”), Best Supporting Actress (Rivka Michaeli as “Chaya”) and Best Costume Design, JOY was neither a critical nor a commercial success in Israel. But what a difference one year can make!

When JOY opened commercially on December 1, 2005 (after its July debut at the Jerusalem Film Festival), Sharon was riding high in the polls; he had successfully extirpated Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip, and his new Kadima Party was changing Israel’s entire political landscape. Consider the implications for longtime Laborites. Consider the implications for longtime Likudniks. What were their hearts telling them when Sharon enjoined them to move “forward” on November 22?

No wonder no one cared to notice the resemblance between their sitting Prime Minister and Joy's emotionally-pummeled father. No wonder no one wanted to think about Lebanon, much less the nightmare year of 1982. But that's the thing about art: sometimes the best work appears right at the edge of its time. "Yom Kippur is approaching and MUCHRACHIM LEHIYOT SAMECH is about forgiveness. Listen to your heart. Listen to what it has to say."

The JOY screening is scheduled for 9:30 PM on Sunday September 10 at Chicago's Webster Place Theatre. [Click here for complete details](#) about this year's Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema.

Tziviah bat Yisroel v'Hudah (Jan Lisa Huttner) writes the "Second City Tzivi Spotlight" on local arts & culture, a column which appears every month in the *JUF News*.

See our September issue for additional CFIC details including Tzivi's top picks. Send your comments and/or suggestions for future columns to Tzivi@msn.com.

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