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SECOND CITY TZIVI'S SNEAK PEEK
Coming Next Month in the Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema:

THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY



Special for Chicago Jewish Community Online
by Jan Lisa Huttner

Miriam, the Schwartz family matriarch, is no shtetl bubbe. She escaped from Russia sometime in the 1940s with her beloved Yekatiel, made aliyah, and helped establish the B'nei Avraham moshav. While she's easy on the eyes, Miriam has all the steel of Golda Meir; she's a true mother of Eretz Yisrael.

But times have changed. The Ashkenazi founders of B'nei Avraham have all grown old, and their village is now the home of Mizrachim (primarily from Yemen) with very different customs and beliefs. As Erev Yom Kippur approaches, one synagogue in B'nei Avraham will certainly be filled to capacity while the other one will most likely be empty.

Bomba Schwartz, Miriam's son, has been living in a settlement of his own on the West Bank, but he's grown tired of it. He decides he wants to run for the Knesset, so he comes home in search of voters. His plan is to convince all of B'nei Avraham's new Russian immigrants to spend Yom Kippur in the Ashkenazi synagogue. Yekatiel of Blessed Memory was once the cantor, so Bomba wants his son Avishai to lead the services. Once Avishai melts hearts with his melodious voice, Bomba reckons, he can close the deal with his own fiery political rhetoric.

In addition to the three members of the Schwartz family identified above, there are two primary Yemenite characters and two primary Russian characters. The Yemenites are Eliezer and Ronit, and the Russians are Alex and Anna.

Eliezer is a Rabbinical Judge and Ronit is his ex-wife. The screenplay never makes clear exactly when they separated. Did Eliezer leave Ronit because he wanted to lead a more religious life and she didn't, or did Ronit leave Eliezer because she wanted to lead

a more secular life and he didn't? It doesn't really matter. Suffice it to say that even though Eliezer has since remarried, he still loves Ronit.

Alex was a cancer specialist in Russia, but now he runs a grocery store in B'nei Avraham. He marries a Yemenite girl named Ziona and tries to fit in, but the Mizrachim hate him because he insists on selling pork. ("Not everything is chicken," he tells Ziona in a huff. "We Russians eat other things too!") Anna is Alex's niece, the daughter of his brother. Her father asked to be buried in Israel, so Anna's come to honor this last request. But since she isn't Jewish according to Jewish law, Anna's motives are considered suspect.

Obviously Alex has no "influential" friends who can help Anna, but Miriam does. When the two women cross paths, Miriam immediately understands Anna's plight; it turns out that the rabbinical authorities are also interfering with her own plans to be buried next to Yekatiel. Befriending Anna, speaking with Anna in their shared native tongue, reminds Miriam of the courage she once had as a girl, and she decides to fight back regardless of the personal consequences.

If you've read your share of Russian novels, this epic tale of overlapping families will all make perfect sense; if not, you'll need a cheat sheet. (On page five of GOODBYE, COLUMBUS, Philip Roth's hero Neil Klugman describes his cousin Doris as follows: "Doris? She's the one who's always reading WAR AND PEACE. That's how I know it's the summer, when Doris is reading WAR AND PEACE." The first time I read these words, I realized I was "a type;" my guess is there are lots of us.)

The characters in THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY dance around each other just like the Bezukhovs, the Bolkonskis, and the Rostovs, until all is finally resolved in a bittersweet coda narrated in the first person by Avishai. But while the structure of THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY may come from Tolstoy, the plot itself comes straight from Sophocles. Like Antigone (who defies the ruler of Thebes by insisting on a proper burial for her brother Polynices), Miriam has her own concept of justice and she will not be denied. In the Greek world, however, fate weighs heavy, whereas Jewish dramas typically end on the upbeat: "Life goes on."

I'm being deliberately oblique here because I don't want to spoil your fun. THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY has belly laughs as well as tears, so I want you to enjoy this film and discover its nuance for yourself. I have the advantage of having seen THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY twice now, and I will admit that without a cheat sheet, the first time was rough going. But this is a film that stands up to scrutiny, and the more I think about it, the more I like it.

THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY was directed by Shmuel Hasfari, one of Israel's foremost playwrights. The screenplay was written by Amir Hasfari, who also gets co-director credit. The strong theatrical roots of the piece are made vivid by Miriam Zohar's extraordinary performance as "Miriam." Although she doesn't have many screen credits, Zohar is often referred to as one of "the first ladies of Israeli theatre."

Most of Zohar's co-stars, on the other hand, are well-known figures in Israeli cinema. Tal Friedman from JOY has great fun with the role of "Bomba," Yehuda Levi, the heartthrob from YOSSI & JAGGER, plays "Avishai;" and Vladimir Friedman from BROKEN WINGS plays "Dr. Alex Alexandrov." Character actor Amos Lavi ("Eliezer") has a huge list of international credits to his name, while newcomer Ania Bukstein, charming as "Anna," already has several new projects in development. But Zohar is the heart and soul of THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY, and her on-screen presence is magical.

The CFIC's first screening of THE SCHWARTZ DYNASTY is scheduled for 7 PM on Monday September 11 at the Webster Place Theatre in Chicago, and the second screening is scheduled for 4 pm on Sunday September 17 at the Landmark's Renaissance Plaza Cinema in Highland Park.

[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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