

Diversity of perspectives at Jewish Film Festival

By ROBERT LEVIN

Things have been supersized at the eighth annual Westchester Jewish Film Festival, which runs March 12-April 2 at the Jacob Burns Film Center. Featuring a robust selection of 29 international films that explore many of the major issues defining the global Jewish community, the festival offers something for everyone. There are serious, introspective dramas, informative documentaries, an irreverent comedy and one revived, indisputable classic.

"By virtue of the fact that we've built up a much greater number of programs, we've really been able to cover all the [thematic] bases," said Brian Ackerman, programming director of JBFC. "There are films in there that are really foreign language films that happen to have Jewish themes, but they're films that we would play under any circumstances."

The festival opens with "The Gift to Stalin," the story of a Jewish boy being raised by a Muslim man and a Christian woman in Kazakhstan in the aftermath of World War II. From director Rustem Abdrashev, the co-production credited to Kazakhstan, Russia, Poland and Israel is steeped in remarkable visuals. It also evokes one of the prominent thematic motifs of the entire program in its hopeful examination of cross-cultural relations.

"It depicts a world that's really far away. It's a faraway time, it's a faraway place, and it's a part of history that's thoroughly forgotten. It's a very beautifully made film and it's a very powerful coming of age story," Ackerman said.

Of the other films with interfaith subjects none intrigues as much as "A Road to Mecca: The Journey of Muhammad Asad." The documentary tells the story of Muhammad Asad, a Talmudic scholar and a

descendant of Orthodox rabbis, born Leopold Weiss, who was moved to convert to Islam in 1921. Anticipating significant interest, the programmers have scheduled three screenings of the film, on March 20, 21 and 23.

Another selection predicated on interfaith relations, "Waiting for Armageddon" explores the powerful pro-Israel activities of the evangelical movement. It vividly raises a dilemma that has caused no end of consternation in the Jewish community: how to cope with fervent emotional and financial support for Israel borne out of the evangelical belief in the End of Times and the Second Coming of Christ. At the WJFF it's one of the four films selected for a sidebar hosted by the Westchester Chapter of the American Jewish Committee, the festival's co-sponsor with The Jewish Week.

For each of the selections the AJC will host a post-screening discussion with prominent experts. After the March 18 showing of "Waiting for Armageddon," Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, the AJC's U.S. Director for Interreligious Affairs, will be interviewed by Gary Rosenblatt, editor/publisher of The Jewish Week. The film also screens March 14 and 15. According to Scott Richman, executive director of the AJC Westchester Chapter, the film perfectly fulfills one of the organization's defining purposes.

"[Our] mission has broadened to be a mission of pluralism, democracy building, interfaith work, interethnic work, diplomacy," he said. "These kinds of activities [that] all create a world that's safer for Jews, safer for everybody."

Recent years have seen a rise in the global prominence of Israeli cinema, with "Beaufort"

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Westchester Jewish Film Festival

When:
March 12 - April 2

Where:
Jacob Burns
Film Center
Pleasantville

For tickets:
www.burnsfilmcenter.org

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and "Waltz with Bashir" having scored best foreign language film nominations at the past two Academy Awards. "The Band's Visit" won three awards at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival and the works of filmmakers like Eytan Fox ("Walk on Water") and prominent author Etgar Keret ("Jellyfish," also a winner at Cannes) have become international successes. So it comes as no great surprise that a significant percentage of the festival's offerings come from Israel, including "Lemon Tree" and "Lost Islands," two films showing on March 13.

The March 22 screening of "\$9.99," another Israeli export, promises to be one of the most exciting events of the festival. A work of stop motion animation written by Keret and based on his short stories, its unique depiction of life in modern Israel earned two nominations at the Annie Awards (given for achievements in animation) and positive reviews during its two week run in Los Angeles last December. It's also part of the AJC sidebar and Keret himself will appear for a Q&A.

"We have an agenda called 'Israel... New Perspectives,' which we started about two and a half years ago. The idea is [that] as part of our Israel advocacy work we will bring an authentic piece of Israel to Westchester, a piece of Israel that somehow helps people to see it beyond the conflict," Richman said. "There will be, as with anything related to Israel, discussions of the conflict, but somehow [in the context of] a more authentic, more everyday experience that an Israeli would have."

However, not every film on the program confronts such weighty issues. "The Deal" features an all-star cast in an irreverent Hollywood satire about an action star (LL Cool J) converting

to Judaism and working on a Benjamin Disraeli biopic set up for him by a high-powered producer (William H. Macy). The movie, screening March 28 and April 2, provides a lighthearted antidote to the more serious business of its counterparts.

"It's a fun, commercial film. It's not very serious in its Jewish themes at all. It's really about Hollywood and making movies and it's a great romantic comedy," Ackerman said. "It was just fun to be able to put it in there."

Hitting closer to home, geographically speaking, "The First Basket" looks at the profound ways children of early 20th century European Jewish immigrants shaped the modern game of basketball. Director David Vyorst



COURTESY JBFC

"The Gift of Stalin" will open the festival March 12.

depicts New York City's rise to prominence as the sport's mecca, looking at the ways basketball was refined on its streets and the impact of the great mid-century City College teams. He interviews everyone from lesser known early ballplayers, who began playing makeshift games while growing up in Brooklyn or on the Lower East Side, to the legendary Red Auerbach. Their stories indelibly recreate an important chapter in the life of one of the world's most popular sports. The film screens March 15, 24 and 26 and Vyorst will appear at a Q&A on the first night.

The festival's other movies cover a similarly broad range of styles and genres. They include a revival of Otto Preminger's classic epic "Exodus,"

a documentary about the Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel that will include an appearance by the famed neuroscientist at one of the screenings, and a small generational drama about a family of Parisian Jews. Given the scope of the Westchester Jewish Film Festival, the willingness of its programmers to incorporate a diversity of perspectives and aesthetics and the intriguing stories being told onscreen, it's not hard to understand why the event has fast become one of the JBFC's top annual draws.

For information and tickets to the Westchester Jewish Film Festival at the JBFC, go to www.burnsfilmmcenter.org.