

THE BEST OF THE TORONTO JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL AND HOT DOCS, 2009

Reviewed by Tony Wohlfarth

Film buffs were blessed with a plethora of recent feature and documentary films at this year's Toronto Jewish Film Festival (TJFF) and the Hot Docs Film Festival. This review highlights the most noteworthy films of interest to Jewish audiences.

Camera Obscura



Camera Obscura, a beautiful picture directed by Maria Victoria Menis, was the opening night film at the TJFF. Gertrudis (Mirta Bogdasarian) is the daughter of Jewish immigrants arriving in Argentina in the early 1900s. Gertrude is born ugly, and she adapts to her condition by turning inward and obscuring her image in family photos. A generation on, Gertrude is married to an older Jewish rancher and is seemingly a happy, devoted mother, raising a large family in the pampas. Jewish rituals and traditions are rare events amidst the assimilation of the Argentine countryside. When a photographer arrives from Europe, Gertrude is invited to join the family shoot and is attracted to the visitor from the old country.

Menis uses both animation and still photography to evoke the beauty of this distant land. However, this film has little to share about Jewish life in Argentina, a country with considerable Jewish traditions. One is left to wonder why it was chosen to open Canada's most important Jewish film festival?

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Inside Hana's Suitcase



The opening night of Hot Docs featured the world premiere of *Inside Hana's Suitcase*, Larry Weinstein's adaptation of the award-winning book by Karen Levine. Weinstein brings his prowess as a documentary filmmaker (he made *Ravel's Brain* in 2002 and *Beethoven's Hair* in 2005) to this inspiring story of Holocaust education and children who perished when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939.

Fumiko Ishaioka is the founder of the Holocaust Education Centre in Tokyo. She receives from the museum in Auschwitz the suitcase of a young Czech girl, Hana Brady, who perished in the concentration camps. Fumiko sets out to learn all she can about the young girl, an outreach activity which spans three continents and engages her students. The trail leads to Toronto, where Hana's surviving brother George now lives amidst haunting memories of a darker time. Hana and her older brother were first deported to Terezin, where Hana created a number of drawings depicting her life. Fumiko travels to the Czech Republic, where one

and a half million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis. She then invites George and his daughter Lara to come to Tokyo, where the suitcase is on display as part of the important education mission of the centre.

Weinstein uses the juxtaposition of (colour) footage and extensive (black and white) archival material to bring this story to the big screen. George managed to preserve his family photos, and they also figure prominently. The most poignant moments in the film are when George talks about the responsibility he felt to protect his younger sister—the survivor angst is unbearable. Karen Levine's book is ultimately a story of hope and education, and here Weinstein delivers, thanks to a large budget, amazing photography by Horst Zeidler and the work of producer Danny Iron. Weinstein turned to two Jewish composers of Czech origin who were both interned in Terezin for some of the film's evocative music. Dedicated to the children who did not survive, *Inside Hana's Suitcase* will undoubtedly receive a commercial release.

Defamation (Hashmatsa)



Israeli Director Yoav Shamir brought his latest (2009) documentary, *Defamation*, to Hot Docs. *Defamation* is Shamir's fourth documentary. In 2008, he directed *Flipping Out*, about young people who experience mental breakdowns after serving their compulsory military service. In 2005, he directed *Five Days*, about the removal of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip. His first feature film, *Checkpoint* in 2003, was about Israeli soldiers

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manning the security checkpoints in the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

This time, Shamir turns his wit and satire to the delicate question of what is the nature of anti-Semitism in the modern world? As an Israeli-born Jew, Shamir has never experienced anti-Semitism and he brings a fresh, perhaps naïve, perspective to this age-old question. He turns first to his *bubba*, who amazingly, gives voice to the worst stereotypes about Jews. Shamir then travels to New York, where he gains unprecedented access to Abraham Foxman and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). He decides to document what the ADL describes as a recent increase in anti-Semitic incidents. The ADL chooses to define anti-Semitism as any complaint of ill treatment by a Jew. A number of their reports, for example, are from Jews who were not given time off work for Jewish High Holidays (an employment standards issue). Next, Shamir decides to visit Crown Heights, the scene of riots and some very real anti-Semitic incidents involving Lubavitch students. Shamir decides to accompany the next generation of Israeli students on a March of the Living study tour to Poland, and reveals how the young students are exposed to both information and misinformation about anti-Semitism. He interviews a group of young blacks and hears both the usual and some unique stereotypes about their Jewish neighbours.

Back in Manhattan, Shamir then travels with the ADL delegation to Europe for meetings with the Pope, the Ukrainian government, and Israeli Cabinet Minister Isaac Herzog. Shamir discovers how the ADL uses the history of the *Shoah* (Holocaust) to advance the agenda of the current Israeli government. Returning to America, he interviews U.S. academics John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt and the controversial Norman G. Finkelstein (himself the son of Holocaust survivors) and gets a

much different perspective on the role that mainstream American Jewish organizations play vis-à-vis Israel.

Shamir made the film to show how Israel's past is holding it back, and he ends the film by imploring us to "look to the future." In discussing the film, he described the current government in Israel as "the most right-wing government in the West," and said he made the film to raise "things that are hardly discussed." This film focuses almost exclusively on the ADL, and ignores contemporary examples of anti-Semitism such as the statements of Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Shamir's perspective, while refreshing, is also naïve and at times, disturbing.

My First War



My First War, the first feature-length film by Israeli Director Yarif Mozer, premiered at the TJFF. Mozer was a captain in the Israel Defense Force (IDF). When he was called up to serve during the Second Lebanon War, he took his camera and interviewed the soldiers, capturing their fears, their anxieties and the growing realization that the IDF was on the wrong end of this David vs. Goliath struggle. Mozer made the film with the knowledge and approval of his superiors, and he was subsequently promoted to the rank of major in the IDF. His interviews with soldiers (in Hebrew with English subtitles) capture the heavy psychological toll of the 2006 war in Lebanon.

My First War was selected by a

jury to receive the David A. Stein Memorial Award by the festival organizers. The jury, under the leadership of CBC journalist Evan Solomon and renowned documentary filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal (*Manufactured Landscapes*, *Children of God*), praised Mozer's film as the best of 91 films from 23 countries selected to screen at the 10-day TJFF.

Chronicle of a Kidnap



Another Hot Docs entry, *Chronicle of a Kidnap* follows Karnit Goldwasser as she campaigns for the return of her husband Ehud, and another IDF soldier, Eldad Regev, who were abducted by Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. The kidnappings started the war in Lebanon. Two years in the making, Director Nurit Kedar accompanies Karnit as she tirelessly campaigns for Gilead's return. Karnit meets with current and former Israeli government and military officials, where she learns her husband's fate is inextricably linked to Hezbollah demands that Israel release hundreds of their fighters with "blood on their hands." She meets both with world leaders and with supporters abroad who add their voices to demand the release of two soldiers. At the United Nations in New York in 2007, she confronts Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and asks that he release the two soldiers. Incredibly, she faces criticism from other Israelis as her campaign questions the Israeli government's conduct on prisoner exchanges. The documentary ends on a tragic note, when the

bodies of Ehud and Eldad are returned to Israel on July 16, 2008.

Directed by Nurit Kedar, *Chronicle of a Kidnap* is an inspiring and at the same time tragic story of love, tenacity, and determination. Kedar's film was made with the support of Channel 10 (commercial television) in Israel. Kedar has been invited to screen her film at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival this summer.

Rachel



Rachel, a new film directed by Simone Bitton, received its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in April, and its Canadian premiere at Hot Docs in May. *Rachel* is the story of the 2003 death of U.S. peace activist Rachel Corrie in Gaza. Corrie, age 22, was crushed by an Israeli military bulldozer as she and other International Solidarity Movement (ISM) activists accompanied Palestinians facing eviction and home demolition near Rafah (at the border with Egypt). Her death on March 16, 2003 sparked international outrage, but in Israel it received little attention and there was no public inquiry into her death. Bitton's film is a "voir dire" investigation, i.e. the public inquiry which ought to have taken place. She presents still photos and interviews with ISM activists, the Israeli military spokesperson, and the military investigator, along with grainy footage from the military, to piece together the circumstances of her death. She dispassionately presents the evidence on both sides of the question as to whether Corrie's death

was intentional or a terrible accident at the hands of a driver under severe pressure from military commanders.

Bitton's previous films include *The Wall (Mur)* in 2004, about the building of the separation fence, which won the Grand Prix at the Marseille Film Festival and a Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival.

End Note

Hot Docs 2009 set attendance records and has been established as one of the preeminent documentary festivals in the world. The 2009 TJFF also saw record attendance, and is one of the leading Jewish film festivals in the world.♦

Outlook Interview with Simone Bitton

On behalf of *Outlook*, I interviewed Simone Bitton following the Canadian premiere screening of *Rachel*:

Outlook: Your film received its world premiere at Tribeca, in New York and I understand Rachel Corrie's parents were there to see the film? How did the New York screenings go and what was their reaction?

Simone Bitton: Rachel's parents saw the film previously at a private screening in Paris. They decided to come with me to Tribeca because they liked it and wanted to support my work. The film was very well received in New York. The screenings were sold out. So I was pleased with the reception we received.

Outlook: In 2003, when Rachel was killed, you were working on *The Wall (Mur)* which went on to receive several international awards. Were you working on your film at the time, and how did you come to make this film about Rachel's death?

SB: We were in pre-production, and Rachel's death had an immediate impact on us. Access to Gaza was already restricted. And within weeks, another peace activist and a foreign journalist were killed, so the situation was impossible. It was a couple of years later when the decision was taken to make this film, and it wasn't easy. It took three years of research. Rachel's parents were very helpful with the contacts of Rachel's friends who appear in the film, and for getting access to places and people in her home town [Olympia, Washington].

Outlook: What are the plans for the distribution of your film? When will it be screened in Israel?

SB: It will be commercially released in France beginning in September, and will be released elsewhere in Europe. We have been invited to screen the film at the Haifa International Film Festival in October.

Outlook: What's next? What are you working on now?

SB: It's too early to say. Right now, I am focused on the promotion and distribution for *Rachel*.

Outlook: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, and congratulations on the release of your new film.

Want to Learn More/Get Involved: The Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice has been established as a U.S. non-profit corporation, dedicated to preserving her memory and continuing her work of peaceful resistance to the occupation. Further information is available at the foundation's WEB site:
<http://rachelcorriefoundation.org/site>.