

## 21ST VANCOUVER JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL

Reviewed by Marty and  
Martha Roth

**We** only took in a few of the offerings at the 21<sup>st</sup> Vancouver Jewish Film Festival, avoiding the excesses of both Israeli chauvinism and Nazi horror. We would have liked to see the one truly archival film on display, *Der Purimspieler [The Jester]*, directed by Joseph Green, a Polish film set in a Galician *shtetl* and restored by the National Centre for Jewish Film, but it screened only once, at an impossible time for us. Here are our partial impressions of the state of recent Jewish film.

“Film” still means story film to us, but present-day festivals are usually packed with documentaries. Two of the docs that interested us pose the problem of documentaries-at-the-festival. *Dubak, A Palestinian Jew* and *Flipping Out* both looked to us like patched-together footage assembled for a slot at some local television station (“get enough film footage and you’ve got your film”). In both cases we felt that there was nobody’s hand at the wheel, that the raw footage was dragging the director and editors along.

*Dubak*, directed by Ella Alterman, portrays a great good man, a Palestinian Jewish patriarch. He is a religious farmer who mourns his murdered son and teaches troubled youth how to work in their communities to heal historic wounds. With local Bedouins he has set up a search-and-rescue mission for people missing in the desert. *Dubak* lives in the West Bank, under occupation since 1967; he questions both identity and nationhood, and feels rightly

MARTY ROTH is a retired American academic, now living in Vancouver.

MARTHA ROTH is an American writer living in Vancouver and practicing to become a Canadian writer. She appeared in our July/August issue with a review of Aleksandar Hemon’s book *The Lazarus Project*.



*Eskimos in Galilee*

alienated from the Jewish state he so humbly serves: “I have a land, I don’t have a country. I am a Palestinian.” We found the continuity between segments confusing, however, and the overall picture elusive due to unaddressed problems of context and translation, we assume.

After completing their three years of compulsory military service, many young Israelis take their discharge bonuses (about \$4,300) and fly to India where they can unwind. *Flipping Out*, directed by Yoav Shamir, offers a laid-back, strung-out, chilling look at this post-military Israeli culture in India, where undiagnosed trauma and pervasive drug use result in various stages and degrees of mental illness for many young men and women. About two thousand of them “flip out” each year; 90 percent take drugs. Orthodox Chabad houses have been set up to provide spiritual guidance, and Hilik Magnus, an ex-Mossad agent, has been hired by families in Israel to bring their disturbed children home.

The film opens with scenes of soldiers mistreating Palestinians, and these scenes and later interviews convey the unmistakable message that these young Israeli lives have been damaged by their military service. They live in small communities of their own and pass their time consuming drugs. Winters are spent near the Himalayas, and in summer they migrate to Goa. One interviewee

likened the Indians to Arabs, while the Indians regard the Israelis as noisy and out of control, but they depend on the money these visitors bring in.

*Tickling Leo*, a U. S. film, is very dark in two ways: it tells the grim story of a family twisted and torn unto the third generation, and it is the darkest, most underlit film we’ve ever seen. Zak Pressler (Daniel Sauli) is persuaded by his Israeli uncle Robert to intervene in his father’s ongoing descent into paranoid dementia, which leads the father, Warren, to wander naked around his shabby, isolated house in the Catskills. The title is taken from one of Warren’s poetic musings, about government surveillance satellites that tickle the constellation Leo “as they traipse across his thigh.” Zak’s intervention is on Yom Kippur, but the atonement promised has been rehearsed for generations and proven ritually ineffective.

Upon his arrival, Zak is plunged into old family quarrels and divisions that play through his father’s quiet madness. Warren is outraged when Zak dismisses the family’s European history, but he is himself so estranged from his own father he can barely acknowledge his existence. The grandson’s fiancée, Delphina, a Greek-American, is the only sane person in the film because she is detached from the history of betrayal and the poisonous emotion that have torn this family apart—thankfully, because she is carrying Zak’s child.

# The OUTLOOK on Films



**Dubak**

At first we braced ourselves for another tale of unbearable Jewish suffering, only to find to our surprise and (we know the word sounds odd in this context) satisfaction that the Nazis played no visible part: it is Jewish agency and Jewish betrayal that haunt this world and these people like a dybbuk. This film about the poisoned wellsprings of life turned out to be both hard to watch and gripping, not because of Nazi atrocities but because of the terms of one family's escape. The family escaped from the Nazis on Kasztner's train, which bought the lives of a few thousand hand-picked Zionists who could be of service in Palestine at the expense of 750,000 Hungarian Jews.

The film's star name, Eli Wallach (now 93 years of age and looking every minute of it), doesn't appear until the end, bringing with him the film's cheeriest and most sinister madness. The father, Warren, oddly played by Lawrence Pressman, is an aging Hungarian Jewish poet; his brother Robert is played by Ronald Guttman with crass callousness and patently false bonhomie; and Sauli plays Zak as a serious, soft-spoken New York intellectual. Directed by Jeremy Davidson, *Tickling Leo* ends up being a divided film, perceptive in its family explorations and capable of moments of great power, and yet as clumsy at times as the amateur effort it often appears to be.

Two other films, one doc and one fiction feature, addressed the same historical crisis in Israel: the



**Flipping Out**

changes that are taking place in "Zionism" as the kibbutz disappears from Israeli life. The original kibbutzim were collective farms where social experiments could be tried: raising all the residents' children in a "children's house" away from their parents so they wouldn't develop the hang-ups common to children of bourgeois families; communal labour practices, including centralized kitchen and laundry functions; bartering labour for goods so as to avoid inequities. Some kibbutzniks tried to have ethical nonexclusive sexual relationships.

In *HaZorea*, German director Ulrike Pfaff interviews residents of a kibbutz in northern Israel on the question of whether they would like to remain a self-managed collective, run on democratic socialist principles, or sell their land and enterprises (including a koi fishery) to the new Israeli entrepreneurs. As older kibbutzniks die off or seek assisted-living facilities, business people buy up their assets, mostly to develop as resort properties or market-rate housing. Most of the youth prefer not to live simple rural lives, at least not in Israel.

The old people of Kibbutz HaZorea were once questing, adventurous youths. They came in the 1930s from Zionist pockets in Europe and North America and in the 1940s from refugee camps, and a few of them still survive to wonder what will become of their idealism and their hard work. One woman remembers that in the ear-

ly days everything was held in common, including household goods and clothes. "It was exciting," she says. "Every week you'd have a different wardrobe." But now groceries and other store-bought goods cost money, not tokens representing hours of work. *HaZorea* comes to no conclusion, but merely raises these questions.

On much the same theme, the fiction feature *Eskimos in Galilee* imagines a kibbutz where the young folks have sneaked away and left the old people to confront the new owners, thuggish rich guys with a whiff of the Russian about them. The old people are

*continued on following page*

Argentinean-Canadian mezzo-soprano

**FABIANA KATZ**

"...a dark, lustrous voice ... affecting..."  
the globe and mail

VOCALIST  
PERFORMER  
VOCAL COACH

Yiddish  
Classical  
Latin American  
Musical Theatre  
Sephardic  
Ladino

778-838-3000

fabiana@fabianakatz.ca  
www.fabianakatz.ca  
www.teachmetosing.ca



# The OUTLOOK on films



*Tickling Leo*



*Arab Labour (Avodah Aravit)*

played by a richly talented crew of Israeli actors, and director Jonathan Paz shows them arising from their beds and chairs, forgetting their stiff joints and rededicating themselves to the livestock, the gardens, and the machines that keep their kibbutz running. In the process they rediscover some of their old Labour Zionist fire, but the process is doomed. Evidently in the Middle East, as in the West, “progress” makes its own demands that cannot be denied.

One woman begins to reminisce about the old days, and says she hardly saw her children when they were growing up—a small suggestion that the people who decamped in the night and abandoned their parents might have felt justified in doing so. In none of these films is there any hint that “the Land of Israel” occupies the territory of another people. Any visible hired help is not Palestinian but East Asian, and none of the people, either in documentary or fiction film, ever mention Arabs, occupation, the Israeli Army, or even Palestine except as the entity to which some of them came as immigrants under the British Mandate. The changes in Israeli society represent the defeat of social ideals by global capital.

So it was refreshing to see three or four episodes of a TV sitcom called *Arab Labour (Avodah Aravit)*, which is a pejorative phrase used by Israeli Jews to describe sloppy workmanship. The stucco on your house is crumbling? “*Avodah aravit!*”

Writer-director Sayed Kashua turns the “Arab Labour” slur inside out in his continuing stories of a family of middle-class Palestinians. Their coping mechanisms for dealing with the absurdities and cruelties of life in Israel reminded us of the critical comedy of the Wayans Brothers on the television show *In Living Color*, back in the 1990s. (That show would not have been possible, of course, without the Black sitcoms that preceded it, notably comic Redd Foxx’s *Sanford & Son*, an adaptation of *Steptoe & Son*, a British sitcom about a [Jewish] London junk dealer.)

These slabs of video, about the length of feature films, turned out to be our favourite entries in the festival. We expected to be turned off by the co-optation of such “hot” subject matter (on the analogy of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*), but while the episodes were played for safe comedy on the whole, there were enough bitter edges to keep us deeply entertained. Kashua is a 32-year-old Israeli-born Palestinian journalist, and his series treats the life, family, and escapades of Amjad, a Palestinian journalist who is an Israeli citizen. Amjad is a bit of a fool in his effort to attain professional status in Israeli society, but the family members and neighbours who surround him are not. They are aware of the injustices and inequities in their world and practice a necessary cunning in order to survive, even prosper. The Israeli side of the river is a little ridiculous, stuffy, racist, and,

to the great credit of the series, feels like a foreign country. The series also holds Arab society up for affectionate ridicule.

In one episode, Amjad expresses his frustration because he is always stopped at the checkpoints. “How do they know?” he wails. “I spend so much money on clothes, on deodorant, on fancy glasses—do they have special radar?”

“It’s your car,” a friend answers. “Old Subarus are driven only by Arabs and settlers. And the settlers have bumper stickers.” Amjad buys a 2000 Rover, and the police instantly wave him through.

The daughter on the show is played by Israeli Arab actress and singer Mira Awad, and the dialogue is in Arabic, with Hebrew subtitles. In Israeli TV only about 2 percent of characters represented are Israeli Arabs. *Arab Labour* bears about the same relation to life in Israel as most Canadian or U.S. sitcoms do to life in North America. The people are improbably fit and pretty, and their homes have the casual elegance of a dressed film set.

The place of Israel in the larger context of the Middle East was not addressed at all in the films we saw, suggesting that contemporary Israelis suffer from the persistent delusion that they live in Europe, or perhaps in North America. The sense of unreality stemming from this denial of history and geography may have a certain odd charm on film, but it can’t be a wholesome condition for the conduct of modern life. ♦