

JUF NEWS ☆ OCTOBER 2008



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Jennifer Girard (2007)

Tziviah bat Yisroel v'Hudah (Jan Lisa Huttner) is the managing editor of *FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples* (www.films42.com), a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male and female audience members. Jan writes a regular monthly column for Chicago's *JUF News*. Her award-winning articles have also appeared in *All About Jewish Theatre*, the *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, the *Forward*, *Jewish Film World*, and the *World Jewish Digest* in addition to numerous other non-Jewish publications and websites.

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Tzivi's Guide 2008 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema

By JAN LISA HUTTNER — All photo credits courtesy of Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema.

Chicago's CFIC committee made me work extra hard this year. They not only scheduled 14 new films (most of which have already received awards from worldwide film festival juries as well as nominations in multiple categories from the Israel Film Academy) but they also scheduled five classics in a "Retrospective" series honoring Israel's 60th anniversary. Talk about an embarrassment of riches! I strongly encourage you to attend as many as possible. The festival runs Oct. 29 - Nov. 2 at AMC Loews/Piper's Alley 4 in Chicago and Nov. 3 - 9 at The Wilmette Theatre in Wilmette.

New Themes

Israeli Arabs make their mark this year both in front of the camera as well as behind it. "Amjad," the lead character in the TV comedy *Arab Labor*, works as a journalist in the city, but still lives near his parents in the village. Every single day, he must negotiate the gulf between two worlds. On the home front, ambitious Amjad convinces his wife to help create new Islamic rituals, so they can reciprocate after

attending a seder at the home of one of their daughter's preschool chums. On the work front, he becomes a protocol coach when his Jewish photographer/buddy wants to date an Arab woman. And what chaos ensues when his father sells Passover *chametz* on eBay! *Arab Labor* is based on the real life of creator Sayed Kashu (a *Ha'Aretz* columnist). Like *All in the Family* and other beloved American sitcoms, *Arab Labor* lampoons everyone on all sides with both warmth and wit.

But laughter is in short supply in *Lady Kul el-Arab*, the sobering story of a young Druze beauty named Du'ah Fares. Du'ah is on track to win Palestine's most prestigious beauty pageant ("Lady of All Arabs"), but realizing her potential, the fashion designer for the Lady pageant convinces her to register for the Miss Israel pageant as well. It all seems so simple, but complications quickly spread from Du'ah's family to her village, and ultimately to the highest reaches of the Druze community.

In her highly praised debut film *Paradise Lost* (2003), documentary filmmaker Ibtisam Mara'ana put her own feelings front and center, but here she stays completely invisible, drawing us into Du'ah's dilemma with penetrating skill and great empathy. We want to cheer Du'ah on as she fights for her dream, but maybe the religious leaders of the Druze community have a point. By what right do pageant committees insist on the public parade of young women in "swimsuits" that are little more than G-strings?



Ibtisam Mara'ana, director of "Lady Kul el-Arab"

New Stars

Although Ania Bukstein had a major role in *The Schwartz Dynasty* (my favorite feature in the CFIC '06 line-up), she really shows her range as "Naomi," the main character in Avi Neshet's

new film *The Secrets*. Naomi's father, an Ultra-Orthodox rabbi, reluctantly allows her some time to study in Sfat before settling into an arranged marriage. Students in the women's seminary are forbidden to study Kabala, but walking up and down the same steps as generations of mystics has a hyp-

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notic effect on her. Like Nesher's crowd-pleasing '04 feature *Turn Left at the End of the World*, *The Secrets* ultimately gets a bit too sexed up for my taste, but Bukstein gives a luminous performance. Even as the bubbles in the caldron boil ever more furiously, she maintains an aura of spirituality that's pitch-perfect.

Liron Levo also has prior credits listed in IMDb (the Internet Movie Database) including bit parts in American films like *Munich* and *O Jerusalem*, but he hits a home run as "Eyal Goldman," the lead character in *Strangers*. *Strangers* is kinda sorta like *Before Sunrise*, Richard Linklater's indie hit from 1995, but it's much better in every way: more emotional and resonant as a drama, and hotter and sexier as a love story. I fell hard for Levo, and I hope to see him in more lead roles in future.

Top picks

My top pick in the Narrative Feature category this year is *Strangers*. Eyal (Levo) travels to Berlin with tickets in hand for the '06 World Cup games, but he's also thinking of seeking out



Michal Shtamler (center left) and Ania Bukstein (center right) in "The Secrets"

an old girlfriend. They broke up because he wasn't ready to tell his parents they might one day have a German/Christian daughter-in-law, but "*Mensch trahst; Gott lachst.*" ("Man plans; God laughs.") Once in Berlin he meets "Rana" (Lubna Azabal), a Palestinian woman from the West Bank, and what begins as a casual affair becomes a profoundly deep relationship.

When Eyal arrives in Berlin in early June, he has no idea that war is imminent, but painful decisions become excruciating once Hezbollah attacks an Israeli military patrol on July 12.

I'm just a film critic, so it's not my job to judge Eyal's choices. However, it is my job to tell you that I was thoroughly engrossed in this star-crossed love story. I felt the pleasures and pains of these two characters; I suffered with Eyal and Rana, and suffered for them.

My top pick in the Documentary category is *Lady Kul el-Arab* neck-and-neck with *Dancing Alfonso*, the sweet and totally charming story of an elderly widower. *Alfonso* was directed by Barak Heymann (see sidebar), a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

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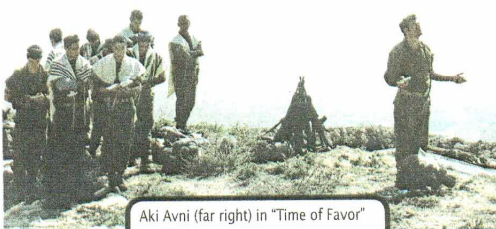
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Tzivi's Guide 2008 CFIC



Aki Avni (far right) in "Time of Favor"

very young man clearly marveling at Alfonso's quest to begin his life anew at such an advanced age. Whereas *Lady* is set in a very specific time and place, Alfonso's story is universal. He could be living anywhere, and yet there's an unmistakably Israeli slant to his optimistic determination.

Our CFIC is also hosting the American premiere of *Waves of Freedom*, a new doc that stitches together historic footage with talking-head interviews of Americans who helped transport Holocaust survivors to Palestine after WWII. While the stories these men tell are dramatic and praiseworthy, the footage itself is familiar to those of us who've already seen *The Long Way Home* (which won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 1998) and other films covering similar ground.

Finally, *Etz O Palestine*, originally released in 1962, is part of the Retrospective series. Many of these images, culled from

hundreds of hours of film shot by Israeli cinema pioneer Nathan Axelrod, are also familiar, but they retain their power to stir our hearts.

Top performances

Ania Bukstein heads my Best Actress list (for her performance in *The Secrets*), but a close second is veteran actress Evgenya Dodina, creating yet another beautifully depicted, sadly displaced Russian character in *Love & Dance*. (Dodina also played a role in *Dear Mr. Waldman*, my favorite feature in the CFIC '07 line-up.) And whatever faults I may find in Avi Neshet's work, there is no doubt he's an expert when it comes to nurturing new talent. Michal Shtamler is wonderful as "Michelle" in *The Secrets*—her very first film role! It would be impossible to love *Strangers* as much as I do without crediting actress Lubna Azabal (as Rana), and I also loved both Mili Avital and Anat Waxman in *Noodle* (directed by Ayael Menahemi).

Liron Levo heads my Best Actor list (for his performance as "Eyal" in *Strangers*). Adir Miller is touching as "Yanki," the surprisingly soulful klezmer musician in *The Secrets*, and Avi Kushnir does a lot with his small part in *Love & Dance*. But the biggest surprise was Sasson Gabbai's strong supporting role in *The Impossible Spy* (originally released in 1987). This well-known character actor has worked steadily since the early '80s, but last year he seemed to come out of nowhere to win awards all around the world for his portrayal of "Tawfiq Zacharya" in *The Band's Visit*. In *The Impossible Spy*, he plays a Syrian general who befriends Israeli spy Elie Cohen, and it's riveting to watch him slowly realize how thoroughly the man he trusted has betrayed him.

About the Retrospective...

There are two ways to look at "classics"—academically and critically. While film scholars write books, essays, and dissertations explaining the importance of specific films in context, I find most people look to film critics for the answer to a relatively simple question: will I like it if I see it now? *Etz O Palestine*, *Hill Halfon Doesn't Answer*, and *The Impossible Spy* all have their good points, but I also think they're all pretty dated. On the other hand,



Tzivi's "Best of Fest"

Best New Feature Film: *Strangers*

Best Documentary: *Lady Kul el-Arab*

Best Retro Film: *Time of Favor*

Best Actress in a Feature: Ania Bukstein in *The Secrets*

Best Actor in a Feature: Liron Levo in *Strangers*

Best Supporting Actress: Michal Shtamler in *The Secrets*

Best Supporting Actor: Sasson Gabbai in *The Impossible Spy*

And here is my personal ranking of the 19 films on this year's schedule (with *Etz O Palestine* appearing in both the Doc & Retro categories):

Narrative Features—Highly Recommended:

Arab Labor
Love & Dance
Noodle
Strangers

Narrative Features—Recommended:

The Secrets
She's Got It
Vasermil

Documentaries—Highly Recommended:

Dancing Alfonso
Lady Kul el-Arab
The Girls from Brazil

Documentaries—Recommended:

Etz O Palestine
Waves of Freedom

Retrospective—Highly Recommended:

Sallah Shabati
Time of Favor

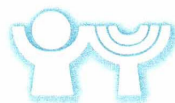
Retrospective—Recommended:

The Impossible Spy
Etz O Palestine
Hill Halfon Doesn't Answer



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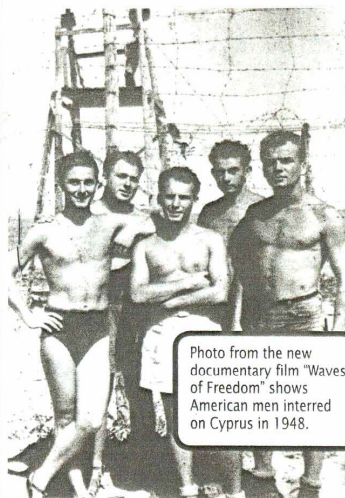


Photo from the new documentary film "Waves of Freedom" shows American men interred on Cyprus in 1948.

Academy awards when it was originally released in 2000, winning a shelf full of Ophir Awards for Cedar and star Aki Avni (one of last year's special festival guests). Cedar's most recent film, *Beaufort*, (just released here on DVD) was nominated for an Oscar and landed in the No. 2 spot on my "Ten Best" list for 2007. I sincerely believe that Cedar is one of the most important filmmakers now working anywhere in the world. So I urge you to take this opportunity to see *Time of Favor* on the big screen.

Sallah Shabati and *Time of Favor* are both terrific films that definitely stand the test of time.

Sallah Shabati is the story of a Mizrahi immigrant who arrives in Israel with a large family and a small (that is, nonexistent) bank account. It's not exactly clear where he's coming from and it's not exactly clear when he's arriving, although writer/director Ephraim Kishon said he modeled the character on a Moroccan man he befriended when they were transit camp neighbors in the mid '50s. Most film scholars treat *Sallah Shabati* as a caricature created for the benefit of the Ashkenazi elite, and I don't dispute that. But time has been kind to *Sallah Shabati* and it's now clear that Kishon was equally clever with all his caricatures, skewering American tourists, Israeli bureaucrats, and Zionist kibbutzniks with equal zeal. Originally released in 1964, *Sallah Shabati* was nominated for an Oscar, won a Golden Globe, and made Haim Topol an internationally loved star.

Joseph Cedar's first film, *Time of Favor*, swept the Israel Film

Reminder: Language is often the best clue you have to a character's full identity, so you must also listen carefully as you watch. Most often the characters speak Hebrew, of course, but some of the characters in this year's films also speak one or more of the following: Amharic, Arabic, French, German, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish. Today's Israelis live in a multicultural stew! ■

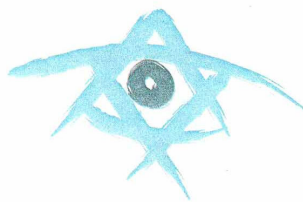
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For more information on the festival, visit www.chicagofestivalofisraelcinema.org.

Jan Lisa Hutner (Tzivi) is the managing editor of *Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples*. Visit her CFIC '08 webpage for full reviews of all top picks as well as interviews with Aki Avni, Joseph Cedar, and Ayalet Menahemi: <http://www.films42.com/columns/cfic-08.asp>.



Lubna Azabal and Liron Levo in "Strangers"



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A chat with Barak Heymann

By JAN LISA HUTTNER

BARAK HEYMANN, one-half of Israel's remarkably prolific Heymann Brothers Films company, has two documentaries in this year's Festival! So I called him in Oregon to discuss his remarkable career.

Jan Lisa Huttner: What draws you personally to new documentary topics?

Barak Heymann: It's never like: "Okay, let's have a meeting and see what our next thing is going to

be about." No, it's always something to do with our inner world, mine and my brother Tomer's. It's a long process, usually three years for each film. So if I don't fall in love with my main characters then I cannot follow them for so long so intermittently. If I'm staying as an outsider, as an observer, then I'm afraid my viewer will be as well.

You directed *Dancing Alfonso* (which you produced with Tomer). What drew you to Alfonso when you first met



him?

The first time I interviewed Alfonso, I knew right away that he was going to be my hero. Even though I'm still a young man in the beginning of my life, I felt in my body the hope and the inspiration that this old gentleman gave me. We all look for companionship; being in relationship, this is the biggest thing in our lives, more than any political issue.

You produced *Lady Kul El-Arab*, a film directed by a Palestinian woman named Ibtisam Mara'ana. Why?

Ibtisam, as a human being as well as a director, she is one of the strongest people you will

ever meet. Even though they're so different and have such different dreams, Ibtisam could feel how powerful is Du'ah Fares and how important to focus on Du'ah's struggle to be able to lead her life like she wants. So I think this is something about both of these women that needs to be really reflected. No?

You also produced *Paper Dolls* (directed by Tomer) about guest workers from the Philippines. It was one of my Top Picks in last year's festival.

Paper Dolls showed how terrible and racist and unthankful and ugly is this place called Israel; at the same time it shows how amazing this place is, how beautiful, how free, how liberal! When you watch *Paper Dolls*, you have such complicated feelings! It's not about black and white; it's about showing the many different layers of our lives. It's touching very political and social issues in a very personal way.

What's coming next from Heymann Brothers Films?

Our next project is another personal film that Tomer is direct-



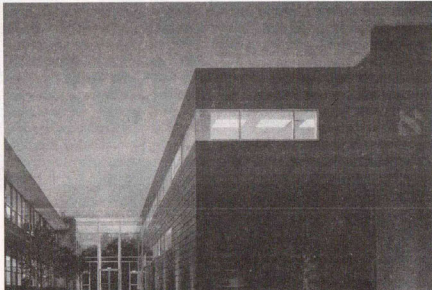
Documentarian Barak Heymann

Courtesy of Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema

ing and we are both producing dealing with identity questions, with homosexuality, with family issues. Myself, I'm working on a new film about the Samaritan Community (the Shomronim) living in Israel. There are only 700 people now, very religious.

So what are you doing in Oregon?

I'm visiting my brother and his family. We are five brothers, no sisters. I'm the youngest, and the most restless. Tomer is the one before me, but three and four are twins. Our mother is one of the main heroes of Tomer's new film! ■



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DOCUMENTARIES
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