

# Culture Report

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COURTESY OF MUSE PRODUCTIONS

Igor, who hears voices telling him he is one of the best rappers in the world, on the set of a rap video clip he produced as part of a drama therapy workshop for patients at the Abarbanel Mental Health Center



# Getting under their skin

'Open Ward,' an intriguing documentary, takes a different look at life in a psychiatric institution **By Bernard Dichek**

## Film

Filmmakers have not always been kind to the mentally ill.

Movies that focus on psychiatric patients, such as the 1970s hit, “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” or the recent Italian comedy, “Like Crazy,” tend to poke fun at the antics of the characters. Even if there is a layer of social commentary, such as the way “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” satirizes the iron-fisted regimentation of an American psychiatric institution, or the way that “Like Crazy” suggests that it is exploitive male behavior that leads to the hospitalization of the movie’s heroines, negative stereotypes of the mentally ill prevail. Viewers, too often, inadvertently find themselves laughing at vulnerable people instead of thinking about what life is really like for them.

The new Israeli documentary “Open Ward” tries to do something different. The film follows the lives of three diverse, complex and intriguing people who are patients at the Abarbanel Mental Health Center in Bat Yam. As their stories unfold over the course of three years, the film makes an authentic attempt to get under the skin of each protagonist.

All three seem to live in a world of their own imagination.

Avi Avner, 58, is caught up in a web of laws he has created for himself. If he is on his way somewhere and a policeman is spotted, or if he sees a plane overhead with a red light flashing – and Abarbanel is on the main flight path to Ben-Gurion Airport – he must turn around and wait for at least an hour and a half. Otherwise, he is convinced, something bad will happen. Unable to overcome this self-inflicted regime, Avner has been hospitalized since he was 18.

Igor, 28, who immigrated to Israel from Kyrgyzstan, when he was a teenager, hears voices telling him he is one of the best rappers in the world and a cold-hearted mafioso with a Hollywood starlet at his side.

Avraham Farchi, 58, spent many years on the streets as a beggar and has made numerous attempts to take his own life.

Yet, all three also have other sides to their personalities: they can be very articulate, self-aware and sensitive.

Their lives change when Nati Ardan, an Abarbanel social worker, invites them to join a drama-therapy workshop.

“I was looking for a way to stimulate patients into improving their self-image to feel

better about themselves,” Ardan tells *The Jerusalem Report*. She explains that each member of the group was asked to describe something they dreamed about doing. A professional film crew was hired to produce a short fictional film in which they were each given a chance to act out their dreams.

We had to weigh our desire to protect the patients with the benefits that the patients and everybody else could gain through seeing the kind of work we do

When filmmakers Ido Glass and Yoav Kleinman heard about the drama-therapy project from a soundman friend who was part of the film crew, they decided to approach the hospital authorities and ask for permission to expand upon what was happening in the therapy project. “With a film crew already filming the patients, we felt that this would be an opportunity to work alongside them and do something more in-depth,” explains Glass.

The Abarbanel management consented, as did the patients and their families, and for the first time an Israeli psychiatric institution opened its doors to an independent documentary film production.

In the drama-therapy project, the scope of each protagonist’s dream varies: Igor wants to produce a rapper music video clip; Farchi wants to be able to sing a song played by a radio station; while Avner simply wants to be able to walk out of the hospital gate and successfully buy a pack of cigarettes on his own.

The drama-therapy project leads to a successful film called “Where The Sky Ends” (Hebrew: “*Eifo Shenigmarim Hashamayim*”). The film premieres at the Tel Aviv Cinémathèque in the presence of friends and families and the “stars” are given red-carpet treatment. “Where The Sky Ends” even goes on to win the best short film prize at the Haifa International Film Festival in 2013.

But, behind the scenes, as documented by Glass and Kleinman, some bigger

things are happening.

Avner has not been in touch with his sister Lily for more than 30 years. Their mother Miriam had told Lily that Avner moved to Canada and the family had lost contact with him. But when Miriam dies, the truth about Avner emerges. Thanks to the efforts of Lily’s husband, Yoram, and social worker Ardan, both of whom invest long hours in talks with the two siblings, a reconciliation takes place. At the Cinémathèque premiere, the brother and sister are reunited for the first time in three decades.

“It’s very sad that our society often tries to hide people who are ill, which leads to a loss for all concerned,” says co-director Ido Glass, who points out that the lives of both Avner and members of his sister’s family become enriched when they come to terms with each other.

“Open Ward” also follows Igor’s efforts to be released from the hospital in order to live semi-independently in a hostel, as well as Farchi’s struggle to overcome a different kind of disease – he is diagnosed with cancer. Despite his previous suicidal tendencies, he now becomes very eager to live and complies with all of the medical treatments.

Guiding them in their efforts is Ardan, whose modus operandi is quite different than the drug treatments and humiliation tactics employed by the psychiatric nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

“Nati got them to open up about their lives in a way that nobody had done before,” says Kleinman. He explains that Ardan spent a lot of time talking with the members of the drama project about their life stories to help them identify the dreams they wanted to fulfill.

Kleinman, who also served as the film’s cinematographer, notes that, as he went back and forth between filming the patients at the hospital and in the outside world, he was struck by the ironic contrast between the two.

“Often it seemed like the crowded, noisy streets of Tel Aviv with people glued to their cell phones was the more difficult and strange place. Abarbanel, on the other hand, seemed to be an island of calmness, a sort of place of grace, where people could be who they are.”

As the film protagonists went through the difficult stages of trying to realize their dreams, Kleinman found himself identifying with their struggle.

“All of us have this desire to try to do



Social worker Nati Ardan with Avraham Farchi, who spent many years on the streets as a beggar and has made numerous attempts to take his own life

something that we haven't done before, but we are afraid of trying to do it. You fluctuate between desire and worry. In the case of somebody like Igor, it is just perhaps a bit more extreme. One moment he is full of despair, another moment he feels like he is the king of the world."

## It's very sad that our society often tries to hide people who are ill, which leads to a loss for all concerned

Kleinman and Glass also have collaborated in the production of many other documentaries and have a common interest in exploring topics that are on the margins of society. Film subjects they have worked on include autism, a mixed Jewish-Arab group of circus actors, street children and people suffering from Down syndrome.

Despite this varied experience, Glass points out that prior to working on *Open Ward*, he knew very little about people suffering from schizophrenia and other mental disorders.

"I admit that I looked at them as sort of freaks, as people who did all kinds of bizarre

things. But, once I got to know the people we worked with as real people, I discovered that they are simply people with a disease, like other people who have a physical disease. You get to know their strengths and talents, as well. There is much more to their lives, as the film shows, than just their suffering."

When Glass and Kleinman started to work on the film more than three years ago, they self-funded their initial filming, as independent filmmakers often do, in the hope that they would quickly get financial support from one of the local Israeli television stations or documentary film funds. For a long time, there were no takers.

"It was, in a way, like much of the rest of society which wants to keep people [mental health patients] locked up and out of sight," says Kleinman. "But the positive side was that without funding to cover the cost of editing the footage we had we simply kept on filming. In doing so, we continued to get more and more interesting material."

Eventually, they teamed up with veteran Israeli film producer Yahaly Gat and, working together, they obtained the funding needed to complete the production from the Israel Broadcasting Authority's Channel One.

"There were strong personal stories here, and emotional subject matter that the public needs to know more about," says Gat, explaining why he and Channel One were drawn to the project.

Besides reaching a public television audience, "*Open Ward*" is now being used by Abarbanel and other psychiatric institutions as a training film.

"The film could have turned out differently, in a way that we all might have regretted," says Ardan, recalling the long discussions the hospital staff had about whether or not to let the filming take place. "We had to weigh our desire to protect the patients with the benefits that the patients and everybody else could gain through seeing the kind of work we do," she adds. "We decided to take a chance, and today nobody regrets it."

One person who especially doesn't regret making the film is Ardan herself. She points out that the process enabled her to get to know the life stories of the patients in a deeper way than otherwise would have been possible.

"Little by little, I found out more and more about them which made me appreciate them more and made me think of things that I had never thought of before," she reflects.

"I never would have known that Avner could sing and I was very moved by what Farchi told me about having spent years as a beggar. He said he would get up early in the morning and get dressed and washed, viewing it as his job. Since then, it's made me see the people on the street differently. We need to be grateful for what we have and not judge others for needs they may have at the moment." ■