

Fresh Images

This year's Jerusalem Film Festival offers more life, less politics – and is attracting increased international attention

Bernard Dichek

MANY OF THE 11 ISRAELI films debuting at this year's Jerusalem Film Festival are refreshing and different: In contrast to the tone of many of the productions in recent years, they either downplay or completely avoid political themes.

"Man Without A Cellular" is just such a film. The movie is a humorous satire telling the story of Jawdat, a young Israeli Arab living in a small village, whose attempts to win the hearts of Muslim, Christian and Jewish girls clash with the conservative values of his father. "There was something very fresh and unique in the script that [writer and director] Sameh Zoabi created," says Amir Harel, a veteran Israeli film producer ("Jellyfish," "Walk on Water"), who produced the film together with Ayelet Kait of Tel Aviv's Lama Productions. "You can probably count on one hand the number of comedies that have come out of the Israeli Arab milieu and this story is not only very funny but also tells us many things about Israeli Arab society that we may not know about," says Harel.

What many people may not know about, Harel tells *The Report* in an interview, is how similar young Israeli Arabs are to young Israeli Jews "in their affinity to high-tech and dating and their disinterest in politics." He adds: "At the same time, there is a large generation gap with older Israeli Arab family members and this provides a good set-up for comic situations."

This is the first feature-length film by Zoabi, who grew up in the village of Iksel, near Nazareth, in Israel's north and studied filmmaking at Columbia University. Qatar's Doha Institute, an organization that promotes the work of young Arab filmmakers, helped finance the film and is listed as one of the film's co-producers.

Among the other Israeli films at the Festival: "Restoration" (directed by Joseph Madmony), a look at father-son relationships and sibling rivalries that unravel when an antique furniture restorer is faced with giving up his long-established business; "The Slut" (directed by Hagar Ben-Asher), a story about what happens to Tamar, a woman living in a small village and sexually involved with several men, when she suddenly falls in love with a newcomer to the village; and "Salsa in Tel Aviv" (directed by Jorge Weller), a romantic comedy about Vicky, a salsa dancer from South America who disguises herself as a nun in order to gain entry and work in Israel and then falls in love with Yoni, a biologist engaged to be married.

Many of these films, like the already-released feature "Footnote" about a rivalry between Talmudic scholars in Jerusalem, deal with themes that are quintessentially Israeli. Yet as "Footnote" showed at this year's Cannes Film Festival where it won the Best Screenplay Award for filmmaker Joseph Cedar, if a story is told in a closely examined and perceptive way, it will resonate with a universal audience.

The festival, which takes place between July 7-16, will also feature a wide selection of documentaries and features from around the world. Some of the films deal with familiar Jewish subjects, such as Joseph Dorman's documentary "Shalom Aleichem: Laughing in the Darkness," which profiles the life of the popular Yiddish writer; while other films, like the Turkish murder mystery, "Once Upon A Time in Anatolia," directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, offer the viewer a glimpse of both exotic scenery and creative cinematic language.

"We expect the 300-plus film screenings that we offer to draw more than 70,000 viewers," Yigal Molad Hayo, the festival director,



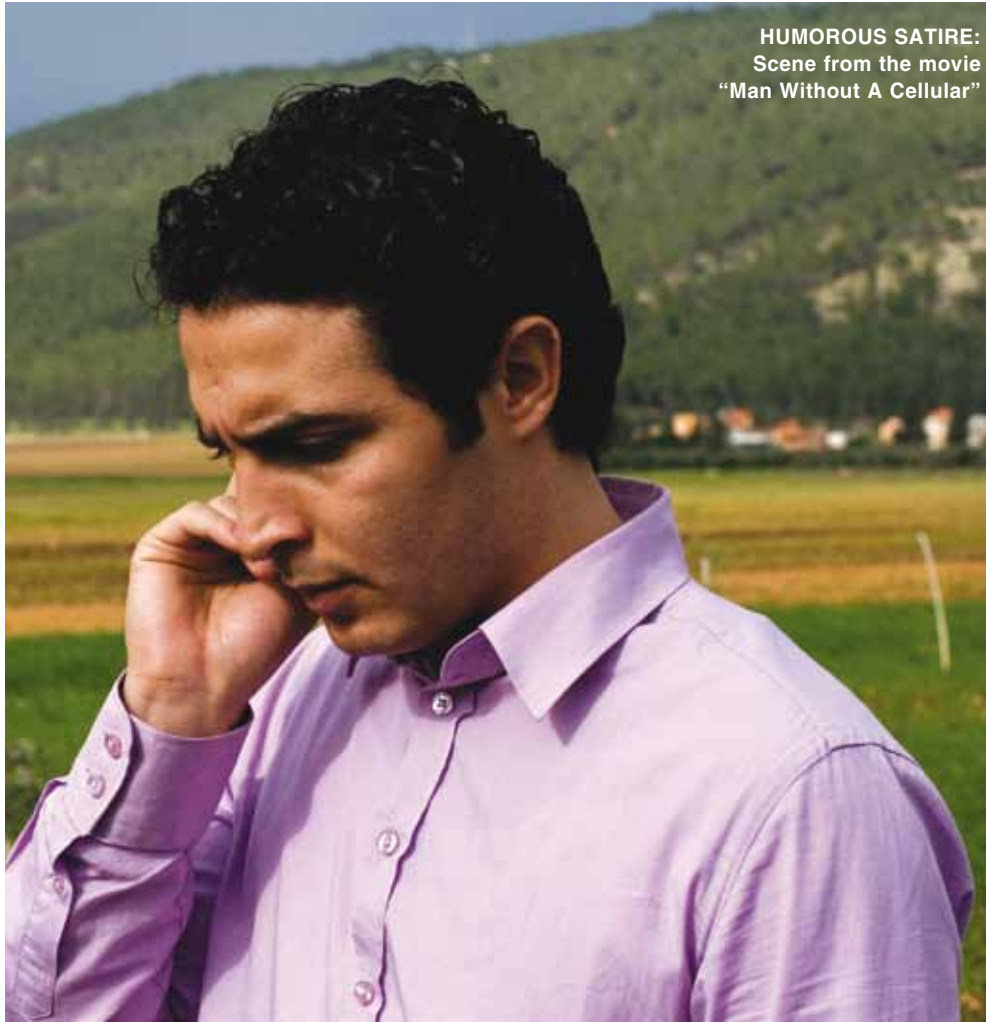
tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

This year's festival will also be the first one under the management of Molad Hayo as the new director of the Jerusalem Cinematheque. Molad Hayo, 52, an experienced administrator, joined the Jerusalem Film Center in 1987 and has since been at the side of founder and President Lia van Leer in top managerial positions.

Molad Hayo points out that in addition to providing an opportunity to see a wide variety of films, the festival is also an important business forum. One key event, open to the public, is the "Pitch Point," where Israeli filmmakers who have obtained at least 30 percent of the budget they need to produce a film, pitch their stories to an international panel of film fund representatives and producers.

"Although cutbacks in the EU for cultural funding will prevent European investors from participating this year, the slack will be filled by American and Canadian backers," Molad Hayo notes.

HUMOROUS SATIRE:
Scene from the movie
"Man Without A Cellular"



COURTESY LAMA FILMS

first Indian-Israeli co-production and suggests that there may be opportunities to do so that extend beyond the Bollywood genre.

"There also is a serious side to the Indian film industry," he tells *The Report*. "The Indian New Wave is a specific movement in Indian cinema, known for its serious content, realism and naturalism, with a keen eye on the sociopolitical climate of the times that is distinct from mainstream commercial cinema and began around the same time as the French New Wave."

Kuman mentions the late Satyajit Ray, a Bengali Indian filmmaker, who created close to 40 films in a very personal style that was widely followed in the West. He suggests that there is a new generation of Indian filmmakers who are following in Ray's footsteps and producing films with social commentary, eager to work with their counterparts in other countries.

He points out that his own interest in producing films about serious subjects derives in part from his personal background.

"My parents and my younger brother had to leave Kashmir in the dead of the night in January 1990, due to a death threat posted on the gate of our home in Srinagar by Muslim insurgents. My parents left the state of their birth, with just some jewelry, a change of clothes and some cash. We haven't been home since." In looking for projects of mutual interest, he expects to find common ground with many Israeli filmmakers, whose families have experienced religious persecution.

"I am sure filmmakers from India and Israel have a lot of stories that we want to make and it shouldn't be difficult to find producers and teams willing to work together," he concludes.

Unlike Kumar, Supran Sen, secretary general of the Film Federation of India, suggests that the best opportunity for co-productions could actually come in the Bollywood genre. He notes that many Israeli films revolve around family themes and motifs similar to those found in Bollywood films. "Indians are also very sentimental and like emotional films," he observes.

Raj Tilak, a producer and director at Tilak Movies, comments that the two countries can best serve one another by offering "vast, beautiful and rich shooting locations to each

"The Canadian participants will be members of one of several foreign delegations of film industry professionals to attend this year, including, for the first time, one from India," he adds.

REFERRING TO THE INDIAN film industry, Molad Hayo notes that it is one of the largest in the world, with more than 1,000 feature films produced each year. Although few Indian films are shown in Israel, most Israelis are familiar with the Bollywood genre of Indian films. The Hindi-language Bollywood films, emanating from Mumbai (formerly Bombay, hence the name Bollywood), are generally melodramatic musicals with catchy songs and elaborately choreographed dance numbers. The style was successfully imitated in the 2008 Academy Award winning British film "Slumdog Millionaire." The visit of the Indian delegation, initiated through Project Interchange, an institute of the American

Jewish Committee that brings decision-makers to Israel, is an indication of the Indian filmmakers' interest in creating co-productions with overseas partners. This is part of a growing world trend in which filmmakers try to defray costs and increase audiences. Israel, one of few countries in the world with an economy robust enough to maintain a growing film industry, is increasingly sought after for co-productions.

In e-mail interviews with *The Report*, members of the Indian delegation express an interest in advancing co-productions in a wide variety of genres and through utilizing the different skills, facilities and locations that each country has to offer.

One of the leading members of the delegation is Vinod Kumar, managing director of Nirvana Motion Pictures, who recently succeeded in producing the first Indian-Italian co-production—"Gangor," a film that will be shown at the festival.

Kumar feels that the time is ripe for the

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other." Aware of the advances Israeli high-tech has made in developing animation and interactive technologies, he also sees business opportunities for the two countries in the development of new entertainment media.

Interestingly enough, when asked what Israeli films had made an impression on them, both Kumar and Tilak singled out Menachem Golan's film "Operation Thunderbolt," about the Israeli raid on Entebbe.

For his part, Supran Sen mentioned "Disengagement," Amos Gitai's drama set during the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

IN ADDITION TO FILM SCREENINGS and business networking, the festival will also provide a number of

special events including:

- "Remembering Teddy Kollek," a collage of archival images of Jerusalem and of the former mayor during his term in office in commemoration of 100 years since his birth.
- "Rachel," a multidisciplinary event in memory of the early 20th century poet featuring a performance by eight young musicians accompanied by the screening of relevant edited footage from the Cinematheque's archive as well as three video-art works.
- "The Haim Gouri Trilogy," the launching of restored and digitized versions of docu-



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AMIR HAREL: Co-producer of 'Man Without A Cellular'

mentary films created by writer Haim Gouri between 1974-1985 that include the voices of hundreds of Holocaust survivors, speaking in their own languages and telling their personal stories.

- "Documentary Ethics," a seminar with panelists that include Israeli filmmaker Dan Geva, Prof. Brian Winston of Lincoln University and Prof. Garnet Butchart of Florida University.

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