

CultureReport

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Cinema of reconciliation

"I'D LIKE you to be the first Israeli to see my film," says an Iranian filmmaker, handing over a DVD copy of his feature-length motion picture to an Israeli moviemaker, who arrived at a cinema festival in Italy just after the feature's screening. The film, "The Fourth Child", tells the story of an Iranian aid worker who rescues an African baby in Somalia.

Wait a minute. Stop. Rewind. A goodwill gesture between an Iranian and an Israeli? An Iranian humanitarian mission in Africa? What is going on here?

Actually it's the 17th Religion Today

film festival in Trent, Italy, an annual event that brings together Christian, Muslim and Jewish moviemakers from around the world while showcasing films that deal with interfaith dialogue, cross-cultural understanding and spirituality.

"Trent is really an appropriate place for a festival of this kind," the festival's artistic director Katia Malatesta tells *The Jerusalem Report*, noting that the northern Italian city was the site of a famous 16th century gathering that tried to heal the rift between Protestantism and Catholicism.

"The Council of Trent may have failed in its

mission, but the idea of reconciliation seems to live on in what we are trying to do here," adds Malatesta, a journalist and playwright whose original musical production about interfaith cooperation among World War I chaplains premiered at this year's festival.

Of the 20 countries represented at the festival, the largest number of films, interestingly enough, came from Iran and Israel.

Since Israeli films are not shown in Iran, the festival provided several of the six participating Iranian filmmakers with their first exposure to Israeli cinema. Similarly,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RELIGIONTODAY

'Regina' tells the tale of Regina Jonas, the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi; (center) the Iranian movie 'Rangan 99' breaks down ethnic stereotypes; (left) Iranian actress Mahtab Keramati rescues an African baby in 'The Fourth Child'

Of the 20 countries represented at the Religion Today film festival, the largest number of films came from Iran and Israel **By Bernard Dichek Trent, Italy**

since coverage of Iran in the Israeli media focuses on the political sphere, many of the Israeli participants gained insights into aspects of Iranian society they are unfamiliar with. One of those facets, they were surprised to learn, is the large contribution Iran makes to humanitarian aid in Africa. The mission depicted in "The Fourth Child" stars Iranian actress Mahtab Keramati who, in real life, has worked for UNICEF.

Another Iranian film, a short drama called "Rangan 99," would seem to break down ethnic stereotypes, even in the eyes of Iranian viewers.

Set during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq conflict, the movie opens with an Iraqi prisoner of war being led through the battlefield by an Iranian soldier. When they trip on a landmine, both protagonists respond to the ensuing calamity in a humane way that makes them both come across as heroes. The young Iranian director Tiyaam Yabandeh, 27, tells his story without the use of any dialogue and with a visual flair that calls to mind the works of Iran's Academy Award-winning director Asghar Farhadi. Clearly, Yabandeh has a great filmmaking career ahead of him.

Another feature screened at the festival that tells its story with poetic cinematic language is "Regina," a documentary about Regina Jonas, the first woman in the world to be ordained as a rabbi.

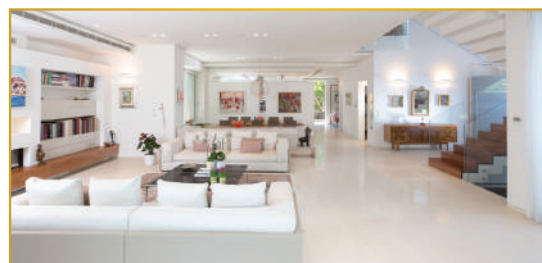
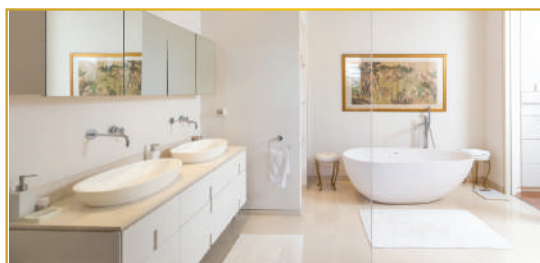
The film depicts Jonas's struggle against the Berlin rabbinical patriarchy in the 1930s, as well as her tireless work as a rabbi before she was deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Jonas later perished in Auschwitz, leaving behind only a single photograph and a suitcase of letters that weren't discovered until the 1970s.

Undeterred by the challenge of working



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Film

with these limited materials, Hungarian filmmaker Diana Groo skillfully weaves together early 1900s German archival footage in a novel frame-by-frame slow-motion method with voiceover readings of Jonas's letters. In doing so, Groo is able to suggest that viewers are seeing life in Germany as Jonas would have seen it, leading to an associative emotional impact reminiscent of another stylistically innovative archival-based film, "Children of the Sun," Israeli filmmaker Ran Tal's 2007 epic about kibbutz life.

SEEMINGLY TAILOR-MADE for the festival, "The Jewish Cardinal" is a biopic about Jewish-born Jean-Marie Lustiger who converted to Christianity as a youth and eventually became the Archbishop of Paris. Lustiger continued to maintain close relations with his Jewish family, including his Polish-born, Holocaust-survivor father, while at the same time becoming a confidante of Polish-born Pope John Paul II.

In the movie, French filmmaker Ilan Duran Cohen explores how Lustiger wrestles with his dual identity. Lustiger must deal with the political implications of events ranging from Carmelite nuns who want to build a monastery at Auschwitz to his father's dying request that his son recite *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer of mourning, at his funeral.

Cohen also endeavors to break down the view many people have of cardinals and popes as stiff, one-dimensional caricatures. Using a daring bit of poetic license, he shows Lustiger and John Paul racing against each other in a swimming pool, both clad only in their underwear.

Not all the films screened at the festival paint a rosy picture of interfaith relations, however. The Spanish film "A Forbidden God" tells the story of the Catholic Claretian missionaries murdered during the Spanish Civil War.

My film, an Israeli documentary called "The Kalusz I Thought I Knew" depicts anti-Semitic beliefs passed down by the Church over centuries. In the film, when an 85-year-old Ukrainian farmer is asked why Hitler wanted to kill the Jews, he replies, "The Jews had to be punished because they crucified Jesus Christ."

Raising the subject of anti-Semitism at a film festival in Trent is especially fitting given the notorious event that took place there in 1475 when the dead body of a two-year-old Christian child named Simon was found during Easter Week and rumors



The fresco in Trent, depicting the Jewish ritual murder of a Christian boy

spread that the child was murdered by the Jews so his blood could be used in the baking of the Passover matza. As a result, the entire Jewish community was arrested and forced to confess under torture. Fifteen Jewish men were burned at the stake.

TRENT SHOWCASES FILMS THAT DEAL WITH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND SPIRITUALITY

This seminal event inspired accusations of ritual murders that spread to villages across Europe and led to pogroms that would continue for centuries. Meanwhile, Simon was venerated by the local Catholic community and a chapel was built in his honor.

Today, that chapel, which is located just around the corner from the Teatro San Marco movie theater where the Religion Today film festival is held, is now a private art gallery. On the ceiling of the building, a colorful fresco depicting the alleged murder of Simon can still be seen. In the life-size painting, turban-clad, bearded Jews strangle an angelic-looking young boy as blood is drained from his naked thighs.

In 1992 the Catholic Church finally took steps to denounce the legacy of the Simon

story and, in coordination with the Jewish community, placed a reconciliatory plaque in the center of town.

The city of Trent, even more so than by installing the plaque, seems to be making amends through the Religion Today festival – a unique role model other international film festivals could do well to emulate.

In Israel, the country's three major film festivals (Tel Aviv's DocAviv, the Jerusalem International Film Festival and the Haifa International Film Festival) regularly showcase films dealing with Jewish heritage, but none have a tradition of curating films dealing specifically with other faiths or with interfaith dialogue.

Only the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival can be credited with taking a step in this direction. In recent years, the festival has screened a selection of interfaith films culled from Trent's Religion Today festival. But there are limitations to how far the Jewish Film Festival, scheduled this year for December 16-23, can go in its efforts to facilitate reconciliation, suggests Jewish Film Festival artistic director Daniella Tourgeman to The Report.

"Unless Iranian films have a foreign co-producer, usually European, they aren't available for distribution in Israel," explains Tourgeman, who also served on the international jury of this year's Religion Today festival.

She notes that as neither "The Fourth Child" nor "Rangan 99" has foreign co-producers, viewers in Israel will have to wait for their chance to see these remarkable films. ■