

The Seven-and-a-Half Minute Sales Pitch

Bernard Dichek

A YOUNG BEDUIN WOMAN is standing on the stage in a Tel Aviv auditorium filled with filmmakers. She is trying to persuade a panel of about 20 documentary film-commissioning editors from around the world to invest in her film. As a digital wall clock counts down the seven and a half minutes that she is allocated, 19-year-old Yusra Abu-Kaff screens an unsettling film clip showing a teenage Beduin girl hanging herself from a tree outside her family's encampment in the Negev desert near Beersheba. To be called "Burned Notebooks," Abu-Kaff's film is about a Beduin girl who committed suicide after her mother, who believes that it is immodest for women to attend school, burned her daughter's school notebooks.

The skillfully shot scene is warmly applauded by the audience, and as the lights on the stage come up, panelist Mette Hoffmann Meyer of Denmark's DRTV queries Abu-Kaff about how she plans to integrate interview segments with dramatized re-enactments. Satisfied with Abu-Kaff's reply, the Danish television executive tells her: "I think you have a powerful story here and, if you can develop it to fit an hour-long time slot, I'd be interested in discussing it further with you."

Abu-Kaff is one of about 25 Israeli filmmakers who participated in this year's CoPro, an annual marketing event that gives filmmakers a chance to pitch film proposals to decision-makers at organizations that include France and Germany's ARTE television channel, the American ITVS and the Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Canada's CBC, Finland's YLE, the Polish Film Institute, together with numerous others.

CoPro has played a key role in nurturing Israel's documentary film industry by giving Israeli filmmakers access to international co-producers and a chance to improve their marketing skills through openly shared feedback.

"WHEN I FIRST STARTED COMING HERE 11 YEARS ago, there were very few Israeli films shown overseas," says Pat Ferns, a Canadian film producer and film festival organizer in an interview with The Jerusalem Report. "Today Israeli-made documentaries are a top draw at festivals and a staple part of documentary programming at TV stations all over the



THE WORST COMPANY: The humorous documentary about a last-ditch effort to save a failing family insurance company was pitched to CoPro and went on to win the Best Young Filmmaker Award at this year's DocAviv festival in Tel Aviv

world. Ferns serves as CoPro's on-stage moderator, a role he performs with a showman's flair.

Ferns notes that in CoPro's early years, the dominant theme was the Arab-Israeli conflict, but in recent years there has been a shift to films that tell personal stories or deal with social problems that relate to daily life all over the world.

One film that tells such a personal story is "The Worst Company in the World," an hour-long humorous documentary that was pitched by filmmaker Regev Contes at CoPro in 2008. The film went on to win the Best Young Filmmaker Award at this year's DocAviv, the Tel Aviv International Film Festival.

"Worst Company" is the bittersweet story of Contes' last-ditch effort to save his father's insurance company from going bankrupt.

"My pitch at CoPro led to over 10 one-on-one meetings with foreign TV broadcasters," says Contes in an interview with The Report. But even though none of the foreign broadcasters ended up investing, he believes that the CoPro experience contributed in a different way.

"I learned more from the CoPro training sessions than from anywhere else," he says, referring to the coaching and simulation sessions that CoPro staff organize for participants in advance of the event.

In the simulation sessions, veteran Israeli producers serve as panelists and the questions and answers are conducted in English. "They really grilled me and tried to pin me down on who my main

protagonist was. At first I felt like I was at an audition but then it turned into something like a police investigation,” jokes Contes, a diminutive 30-year-old, whose cherry-red glasses cross his bald head like two lines drawn by a cartoonist’s pen, and who has been described in the Israeli press as Israel’s Woody Allen.

“Yes, but *who* is the hero of the film?” they kept asking me every time I would ramble on about the eccentricities of the four characters in my film... my father, his brother, his longtime employee friend, and me,” continues Contes. “I would go on and on about how one character could speak 15 languages including Latin, about another who refuses to sell people insurance he thinks they don’t need, and how they like doing things together like making bank deposits... ‘Yes, but *who* is the hero of the film?’ they kept repeating in a tone of voice that was like, ‘Yes, but where were you on the night of the 15th of June?’”

Contes also acknowledges crucial advice given to him at the CoPro master class, which is conducted several months in advance of the pitching event. During the master class, a group of experienced European producers are invited to review the Israeli filmmakers’ scripts, as well as the rough cuts of their sample film clips.

“I told them [the master class producers] that I was thinking about doing a scene based on bringing my father to Slovakia,” recalls Contes. “During a research trip, I had discovered that the records of the apartment my father’s family owned in Czechoslovakia before the war were literally ripped out of the registry books in Bratislava along with the records of other Jewish-owned property. Stefano [Tealdi of Italy] said to me that he thought this was an incredible story but that it didn’t belong in this film.

“He was right,” concludes Contes, citing a reviewer of the finished product who observed that the film’s success rests on its ability to walk a narrow line between comedy and tragedy without going over to one side.

ANOTHER FILMMAKER WHO FOUND THAT EXTERNAL feedback helped him stay focused was Amikam Goldman, director of “Long Distance,” an hour-long documentary based almost entirely on showing the conversations foreign workers in Israel have with their overseas family members at public pay phones.

The feedback Goldman received at last year’s CoPro reinforced his idea of doing a film without any commentary. Rather than do an investigative report with facts and figures, his intention, as he stated in his pitch, was to create an emotional experience that would cause viewers “when passing a worker on the street, to pause for a moment, knowing and understanding more about the situation they live in.

“I wanted to let the viewers be moved by what they saw, so that when they came across newspaper reports about the restrictions that the Israeli government imposes on foreign workers, people would open their eyes to what is happening here,” adds Goldman in an interview with The Report.

The main restriction that Goldman is referring to is the refusal of the government to let the workers’ spouses and children accompany them to Israel. In the course of his research, Goldman also discovered that the reason the workers have to make their calls at public pay phones is also grounded in a form of discrimination.

“The phone company as a matter of policy simply refuses to give foreign workers phone lines,” says Goldman.

The emotional toll that foreign workers pay, as a result of being separated from family and friends, is evident in the phone conversations documented in “Long Distance.” We see Gener, a Filipino care-

giver who has been in Israel for nine years, making his weekly phone call on his day off. From a pay phone at a busy street corner in south Tel Aviv he wakes up his wife Brenda in a village in the Philippines, where it is the middle of the night. Each conversation begins with Gener’s face lighting up as Brenda answers, yet his expression grows increasingly tense as she describes her worsening health condition. Gener is torn apart by her refusal to get the expensive treatments that, she says, will deplete their savings and further postpone his return.

Cynthia, a house cleaner from Ghana, is also in a difficult predicament as she wrestles with the consequences of her son growing up away from his father while she tries to save money for his education. She gazes sadly at her 5-year-old son Prince as he becomes frustrated trying to talk to his father on the phone in Ghana. Prince was born in Israel just before his father was deported and does not speak the Ghanaian language of Ashanti. His father does not speak Hebrew, and they are growing apart as they find it increasingly difficult to converse in rudimentary English.

“Long Distance” may not have led to the alleviation of the foreign workers’ plight but, at the film’s premiere, Goldman did find a way to provide them with a bit of recognition. After the screening of the film at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, he invited Gener, Cynthia and the other two main characters in the film, Filipino caregiver Rosemarie and Turkish construction worker Kadir, up to the stage. Each received a white rose and loud applause from a visibly moved audience.

Like Goldman, Abeer Zaibak Haddad also wants to use the documentary film medium to draw attention to a social problem. Zaibak Haddad, an Israeli Arab theater director, has spent the last few years traveling to Arab communities with a puppet show designed to encourage Arab girls to speak up about sexual abuse.

She began her pitch at this year’s CoPro by noting that the subject of sexual abuse remains taboo throughout both secular and religious Arab society. Turning to the panel, she exclaimed: “I want to change this!”

Her puppet show, called “Chocolate,” tells the story of 6-year-old Lala who shares her “terrible secret” with her mother. Following



LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS: Director Amikam Goldman says that his documentary, based almost entirely on the telephone conversations foreign workers have with their families back home, benefited from feedback from the CoPro professionals

performances of "Chocolate" for audiences in both Israel and the Palestinian territories, many adult Arab women have shared with Zaibak Haddad stories about being sexually abused, usually by their own family members, other relatives or parents' friends.

She pointed out that the more women she has met in this situation, the more it has driven her to shed light on the norms that lead girls to be told things like: "Be polite and give a nice kiss to your uncle when he asks," or, "Go sleep at his place to help him until his wife returns from the hospital."

Zaibak Haddad's puppet show is directed at younger girls, but in her film, which she plans to call "Doma," Arabic for dolls, she intends to pay special attention to the situation of educated young Arab women.

One case study she will present is that of Basma, a 25-year-old religious Muslim woman from a wealthy Nazareth family, who was repeatedly abused by her cousins in her childhood. When she finally decided to tell her brother about this, he responded by dismissing what she had to say and castigating her for bringing shame to her family.

Another evocative story is that of Miriam, a Druze college student who was date-raped after drinking alcohol for the first time. Miriam was afraid to disclose the incident to her parents, who are both university professors. But she did tell the rapist's parents, futilely begging them to get him to marry her because, as she said to them, "he has my virgin blood."

The CoPro panelists agreed that Zaibak Haddad has an important story to tell but were divided about whether or not she should include her puppet show in the film. Some felt that its inclusion would weaken the film's commercial potential and that she should simply produce an exposé-style program about sex abuse in the Arab world, billing it as "a story never told before."

Inside access to groups with untold stories was a key selling point in a number of the other pitches made by Israeli filmmakers. One of them, about an ominous group of racist extremists in Russia, has already received funding from Israel's Channel 8. To be called "The Fifth Column," the film is based on filmmaker Vadim Antonevich's success in covertly infiltrating the ranks of the group. In his pilot film clip, he showed candid conversations with them that reveal their racist attitudes, and footage of their activities. The group is believed to be responsible for posting a video on YouTube showing the real-life beheading of two youngsters as part of what they call a "racial holy war."

However, the unveiling of Antonevich's project at CoPro may have been a mistake, suggested a U.K. panelist. Aaquil Ahmed of Channel 4 told the Russian-born Israeli filmmaker that he may have spoiled his chances of continuing now that his story was out in the open.

"You can't go back there," said Ahmed, adding, "It's just too risky; once one person knows, then so do two, and so on... I say this as someone who has worked for a number of years as an undercover journalist."

Working in safer territory, filmmakers Ron Ofer and Yohai Hakak also indicated that they believed they were the first ones to gain entry to a group that is usually off-limits to filmmakers. Their project, "Life In a 21st Century Ghetto" is about various ultra-

Orthodox Jewish figures with whom they have managed to establish a rare rapport. Among their subjects are members of the anti-Zionist group who flew to Tehran to shake hands with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

COPRO WAS FOUNDED BY FORMER TV PRODUCER Orna Yarmut, who became familiar with the difficulties involved with finding international collaborators while she was marketing a film about the Rabin assassination some 12 years ago.

"I realized that there was a relatively small number of people in charge of international collaborations and that there was a large untapped potential if we could find an effective way to reach them," she says in an interview with The Report.

The way to most effectively reach the commissioning editors, she discovered, was to set up a marketing foundation that would cover the costs of bringing the decision-makers to Israel on a regular basis. From the first CoPro marketing event 11 years ago, which was attended by just four foreign broadcasters, until the present, CoPro has raised more than \$4 million for Israeli filmmakers and led to about 150 co-productions. Over the years Yarmut has expanded the event to include workshops on producing films for Arab and children's television as well as a parallel marketing event called DocoShuk, which presents more than a hundred completed Israeli documentaries to foreign buyers.

One of this year's innovations included a pitching forum for a delegation of German filmmakers, who faced a panel of Israeli film fund managers and broadcasters.

"We discovered that Germany has invested more than any other foreign country in Israeli films and we felt that it would be worthwhile to make the funding relationship between the two countries more symmetrical," explains Yarmut, adding that a film production treaty between the German and Israeli governments makes it possible for German filmmakers to apply to film funds

that only Israelis are eligible for and that Israelis can do the same in Germany.

One of the German films pitched that received a positive response from an Israeli broadcaster was a project called "Cinema Jenin." In the project, German filmmaker Christian Drewing portrays the struggle currently being waged to reopen the only cinema in the West Bank town of Jenin by Ismael, the movie theater's owner. To succeed he will have to overcome the objections of Islamic fundamentalists and the Palestinian bureaucracy.

Other German films pitched include a project about a Hadassah Medical Center project that trains Palestinian doctors and a look at the controversy surrounding German music composer Richard Wagner's anti-Semitism and the unwritten ban on performing his works in Israel.

Like the films being made by their Israeli counterparts, many of the German projects offer stories with hard-edged social criticism. "This is a good thing," Hans Robert Eisenhauer of Germany's ARTE channel tells The Report. "Documentary films ultimately serve as a kind of audio-visual memory of a society, and they show that in a democracy it is possible to offer a point of view that is critical of society." ●

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