

Jewish movies are a-changin'

The Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival offers a broad range of topics **By Bernard Dichek**

THERE WAS a time when filmmakers told us life in the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) world was bleak and that the Germans during World War II were all bad guys. As some of the films at December's Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival indicate, times have changed.

Criticism of the Haredim has been commonplace in Israeli films made in the last few decades, ranging from feature filmmaker David Volach's "My Father My Lord" (2007), which depicts a leading rabbi as an insensitive father to Anat Yuta Zuria's documentary "Black Bus" (2009), which lacerates ultra-Orthodox men who force women to sit at the back of buses and suppress their rights in other ways.

Now, along comes Orthodox filmmaker Or Yashar's documentary "Sacred Sperm," a movie that shows the Haredi lifestyle in a positive light, reinforcing the enamored view another Orthodox filmmaker, Rama Burshtein, presented in her drama "Fill the Void" (2012).

Not only does "Sacred Sperm" have good things to say about the Haredim, the film also gives voice to many things you might not expect to hear from the lips of rabbis, such as explicit descriptions of how and when sexual intercourse should be performed.

"One of the many misconceptions about ultra-Orthodox Jews is that they have sex through a hole in a sheet," Yashar tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "But as the rabbi in the film indicates in his pre-marital instruction to a groom, sexual relations are carried out fully naked, though in the dark to preserve a sense

of modesty."

"Sacred Sperm" gets its title from the biblical prohibition of "spilling the seed," a commandment that precludes masturbation or withdrawal during intercourse because of the sanctified role sperm plays in procreation, which is considered to be the loftiest of human acts. In the film, Yashar embarks on a personal journey, speaking with Haredi leaders and educators, including Kabbalists, about the implications of this prohibition and what practical advice they have for avoiding temptation.

"It's hard for people to talk about sex in both the secular and religious worlds," says Yashar, 44, who himself became religiously observant only when he was in his late twenties. "At the time that I started to think about becoming religious, I was a kind of 'beach boy' who seemingly had everything," recalls Yashar, noting that he was a surfing enthusiast, living by the sea in Jaffa, who had already earned himself a reputation as a successful filmmaker with the Israeli television series "Zoom."

"Yet, back then, I had a sense of continuously searching for something. Filmmakers tend to be searching people but my searching was accompanied by a feeling of emptiness," he adds.

Before embarking on the production of "Sacred Sperm," Yashar consulted with his mentor, Rabbi Yisrael Aharon Itzkovich, who appears in the film.

"I was surprised to see how supportive he

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זרע קודש Sacred Sperm

A Film by Or Yashar
Producers Galit Benglas Eado Zuckerman

Script Or Yashar Eado Zuckerman Oded Farber Content Editing Ilan Yechezkel Research Adi Schwartzman
Content Consulting Israel Aharon Itzkovich Recording Amit Shemen Additional recording Ori Chechik Peleg Hajbi Uri Raz
Cinematography Or Yashar Second Camera Gavriel Sharvit Oded Farber Original Music Avraham Abutbul
Sound Design Tomer Koren Itzhak Cohen Editing Oded Farber Coloring Baruch Halak Graphics Meirav Iska bar-lev
Translations & Subtitles Guy & Noa Sade Arye Naftali Line Producer Ilan Yechezkel
Production Manager Yaakov Goldfarb Post Productions Manager Meir Sikron Office Manager Hanita Sharaby
S.H. Channel 8 Commissioning Editor Rinat Klein Maron Head of Programming Dana Lerner Head of Development Adi Arbel



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The movie 'Sacred Sperm' shows the Haredi lifestyle in a positive light

was,” says Yashar, noting that the rabbi felt that producing the film would be an opportunity to counter what he considers to be the wrong ideas about sexual behavior ultra-Orthodox young people today get from viewing uncensored images on their laptops and smartphones.

“The Internet has unleashed the *‘yetzer hara’* (evil impulse) on young people,” Yashar says, noting that “even the mildest Hollywood kiss can be considered immodest behavior.”

In making the film, Yashar, tries to set the record straight and show that sexual restraint pays off, while at the same time dispelling popular myths about life in the ultra-Orthodox community.

To make his case, he frames his story in a very personal way, positioning his conversations with religious figures as an attempt to find the right way to educate his own son. He also is quite frank about his own wayward past and boldly demonstrates in front of the camera how he repents by rolling naked in the snow on a yearly pilgrimage to Mt. Hermon.

Yashar is a polished filmmaker and his visual style is often quite riveting.

“The subject matter is of a delicate and modest nature, so I wanted the cinematographic style to reflect that,” explains Yashar, who keeps many characters in soft focus or only shows partial details of their faces. “But I talk to people in a very intimate way, one on one,” he adds, referring to how interview subjects talk directly to the camera, which is often operated by Yashar, himself, who frequently is the only other person in the room.

OZ YASHAR TRIES TO DISPEL POPULAR MYTHS ABOUT LIFE IN THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX COMMUNITY

A major weakness of Yashar’s polemic is in what he leaves out – very little attention is given to the role and status of women in the Haredi world. He does include a rabbi mentioning the importance of men providing their



In ‘Phoenix’ Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld) fails to recognize his wife Nelly (Nina Hoss), who he believes died in a concentration camp and whose face has been reconstructed

wives with sexual pleasure, and Yashar’s own wife is shown participating in the decision to make the film and as a partner to the sex education of their son, but that’s about it.

For the most part, this is a movie about men and, presumably, for men. It would seem that a thorough film study dealing with female sexuality, focusing on ultra-Orthodox women, has yet to be made.

“Phoenix,” the film that opened the festival, fits into a growing category of German-made films that seem intent on rehabilitating the image of what the German people were like during World War II.

A recent example was “Our Mothers, Our Fathers” (2013), a German TV mini-series that portrays the Nazis as being separate and different to ordinary Germans and presents its young German soldier heroes, who do indeed massacre Jews, as being somehow innocent of responsibility. The series, which was titled “Generation War” when it was shown in North American and Israeli movie theaters, drew exceptionally high ratings during its German television broadcast.

“Phoenix” has been well-received in Germany and abroad but, unlike “Generation War,” it has not stirred up any controversy, mainly because it has been considered by most reviewers to be in the thriller genre, a sort of haunting film noir.

Set in Berlin in 1945, “Phoenix” tells the story of Nelly, a concentration camp survivor whose face has been badly disfigured and who returns to Berlin for plastic surgery.

She is accompanied by Jewish Agency worker Lene who tells her that she has inherited a large family fortune. Following the surgery, Nelly tracks down her husband Johnny who doesn’t recognize her. But, because he notices that she resembles his wife who he believes is dead, he hatches a scheme to use Nelly to help him get his wife’s fortune. Nelly plays along without revealing who she is, despite evidence provided by Lene that it was Johnny who betrayed Nelly during the war and turned her in to the Nazis.

As implausible as the idea of a husband not recognizing his wife may sound, reviewers have been generous in granting the film storytelling latitude.

“If ‘Phoenix’ requires a certain suspension of disbelief to make its contained scenario work, the rewards of such a gamble speak for themselves... it is a fascinating study of Holocaust trauma rendered in intimate terms,” wrote Eric Kohn of Indiewire, the networking site for independent filmmakers, following the film’s premiere at the Toronto Film Festival in September.

What seems to have passed under the radar of Kohn and other reviewers is the disingenuous way in which the Germans in the film are characterized.

The Berlin plastic surgeon who heals Nelly from her wounds and gives her a new face treats her in a very thoughtful, kind and sympathetic way. True, not all German physicians participated in the monstrous ex-



Meshi Olinski and Sarah Adler hide in a forest location in a scene from Amos Gitai's film adaptation of the book 'Tsili' by Aharon Appelfeld

periments that were perpetrated on Jews in concentration camps, but one would assume that there would be at least a tiny bit of tension between a German doctor and a Jewish patient in the days immediately following the war. The two of them, however, are at complete ease with one another and the doctor's bedside manner is impeccable.

Another sub-textual subtlety along these lines can be implied from a scene earlier on in the film where the German plastic surgeon gives Nelly a catalogue of faces from which to choose. He tells her that after the reconstructive surgery she will no longer be able to look like she used to and that she should choose a new face.

Perhaps this is what some of the post-war generation of film directors have decided to do about their country's image. "Phoenix" director Christian Petzold, born in 1960, as well as "Generation War" director Philipp Kadelbach, born in 1974, have seemingly decided to give World War II-era Germans a historical facelift – according to their own choosing.

"Tsili," another film shown at the festival, also relates to the subject of the Holocaust. Based on the novel by well-known Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld, the film has an operatic style that, unfortunately, seems to stray too far from the original story, or really from any story at all, to have much impact.

Filmmaker Amos Gitai reduces the story to its most minimalist terms, indeed to the point where it is hard to tell exactly what is

going on, certainly for anyone who hasn't read the book.

Tsili, in the book, is a Job-like character who goes from one form of humiliation to another. Her family considers her to be slow-witted and ridicules her because she is not as good a student as her siblings. When the war breaks out, unlike the rest of the family, she manages to escape but as she wanders from village to village she is scorned and mistreated because she is thought to be the daughter of a prostitute.

Appelfeld, in telling this tale of a distressed woman in troubled times, as he is able to do in many of his other novels, masterfully evokes the peculiar acrimony of life in Galicia, before and during the war. Using simple language and paintbrush-like descriptions, he transports us to a specific time and place, creating a precise picture of what life was like in a world that has vanished.

This is not the case with Gitai's treatment, which lacks a sense of an authentic time and place. Much of the film takes place in a single forest hiding place that serves as a theater-like setting where Tsili has a long dialogue with a fellow Jew on the run and with whom she eventually falls in love. Even though they speak Yiddish with one another – ironically unlike the characters in the book Appelfeld wrote in Hebrew – the two of them come across in a very dispassionate fashion. They fail to draw us into our hearts or minds.

Gitai was for many years one of Israel's

better known filmmakers in Europe, with seven of his movies competing at the Cannes Film Festival. But the films he has made in recent years have attracted little attention either in Israel or abroad.

An architect before he became a filmmaker, his latest efforts seem to be more about spaces and objects than about people and stories. Indeed his previous film, "Ana Arabia" (2013) consists of a single 90-minute camera shot that explores the interior and exterior of an Arab house in Jaffa more than it does the lives of the people living there. In "Tsili," Gitai uses very little camera movement or editing technique, with the exception of several distracting high-angle bird's-eye views of the action below.

And, if cinematic elements are missing in this movie, equally underutilized is the acting talent of actress Sarah Adler. The star of Israeli hits such as "Jellyfish" (2007) and French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's "Our Music" (2004) is given very little room in which to develop her character.

One festival film that did live up to its expectations was the Italian satire "Ameluk," a slapstick comedy that harkens back to the old days (1960-1980) of freewheeling Italian slapstick comedy.

'PHOENIX' IS A FASCINATING STUDY OF HOLOCAUST TRAUMA RENDERED IN INTIMATE TERMS

The film tells the story of a Moroccan Muslim who ends up playing the role of Jesus in an Easter crucifixion parade in a small southern Italian town. The movie only has a minor character in it who is Jewish and was included in the festival as part of an exchange of films with Italy's Religion Today festival.

In the film, director Mimmo Mancini lampoons the racist attitudes of contemporary politicians toward immigrants and migrants – a timely message in present-day Israel that resonated strongly with the audience at the Jerusalem Cinémathèque. ■