

[Israel]

Emphasizing the Personal

The New Guard of Israeli Filmmakers

By Adam Sacks

Never, even in the long memory of old-time film-goers, had a major film festival accepted as many as nine Israeli films. But such was the case at this year's 53rd International Film Festival in Berlin, known as the Berlinale, which took place from February 6-16. That quality films are being made at all in crisis-ridden Israel is nothing less than astounding. Even more astounding is that three of the films at the Berlinale walked away with prizes. The success has led to a discussion of Israel outside the normally conflict-plagued terms.

"Broken Wings" alone, Nir Bergman's drama about a middle-class Israeli family trying to cope in the aftermath of the father's death, won three prizes: the Ecumenical Jury Prize, the International Confederation of Cinema Arts Prize and the coveted Panorama Audience Award. "Underdog," a short about a boy in boarding school experiencing young love, directed by Eran Merav, received a Special Mention in the Panorama Short Film Award. And "Miss Entebbe," directed by Omri Levy and which explores how a Palestinian and Israeli child become friends in response to the 1976 hijacking in Entebbe, won The Crystal Bear Prize in the Children's Film category.

Despite its rather extraordinary political circumstances, Israel has much in common with other small film nations. First, it too passed through the "navel-gazing" phase of more amateur-looking author films before making the transition to professionalization and technical specialization. Today, being a filmmaker is much more popular. As Lia van Leer, the grand dame of Israeli cinema and founder of the Jerusalem and Haifa Art Houses said, "the days of my son the doctor, my son the lawyer are over; now it's my son the film director."

Like films produced in other small nations, no Israeli film can hope to completely recoup its budget in its country of origin. After putting out some disastrous flops, the Israeli film industry has passed on the temptation to produce films in English. Unlike Holland or Switzerland, though, Israel is not part of any international media program that helps to sustain the film industry in these small countries, and is perhaps uniquely confronted with the question of: "Don't we have more important things to do than waste time and money on making films?"

The Sam Spiegel Film and Television School of Jerusalem and its dynamic director Renen Schorr are, perhaps, most responsible for raising the standards of Israeli films today. All three directors of the award-winning films at the Berlinale are alumni of this school. Founded by the Israeli Ministry for Education and Culture, the school was the first of its kind in the Jewish state. It promotes narrative films that seek to have a strong emotional impact upon the viewer.

The introduction of private channels in 1993 has also been a further boon to the Israeli film industry. Also, since 2001, a new law has

been in effect, which states that 50 percent of all television channels must apply for licensing fees when airing homegrown productions. Another economic boon. The number of films in production has doubled from approximately eight to 15 per year.

The latest generation of filmmakers was born in the 1960s, three generations after Israel's founding. Rather than focusing on political issues, they address more personal problems in their work. The heroic exploits of a soldier, say, have been replaced with depictions of the personal losses that mark an ordinary life. All three Berlinale winners reflect this shift. What unites them is a stark realism that never slides into overt sentimentality.

The new films are also bucking official state narratives on the country's history and daily life. Instead of the "shiny Israel where everything is beautiful," as director Merav puts it, these new films present the "real" Israel, including disturbing images from everyday life. Merav's "Underdog" centers on social outsiders: immigrants and Sephardic Jews living in Netanya. The children of Bergman's "Broken Wings" are all emotionally shattered by the trauma of their father's death. The older son has taken to distributing leaflets in a mouse suit, while the older daughter's musical career is held back by her mother's overbearing emotional needs. The younger daughter refuses any affection, while the younger son seeks to break a diving record by jumping into a pool with no water. At the end, however, the film sounds a note of hope, unreal, yet deeply desired.

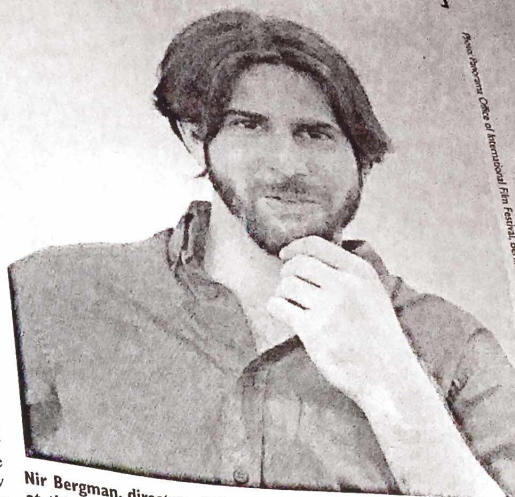
In "Miss Entebbe," the protagonist seeks to save her friend's mom, who is among the hijacked, by kidnapping an Arab boy. All the while, she is aware that she is fighting against the need to be the "good girl" her parents wish her to be. She tries to use adult means for solving problems, which are presented as violent ones in the film. In the end, however, the young girl chooses her own "childish," yet peaceful means.

Other films at the festival included Asher de Bentolila Tlalim's "Galoot" and Udi Aloni's "Local Angels: Theological Political Fragments." They both portray Israelis who chose exile as a way of critiquing Israeli society. De Bentolila Tlalim lives in London and Aloni in New York, where he is known for his skyscraper-length billboards, which have revolutionized New York's urban landscape.

Both artists contend that exile can open eyes. "Galoot" follows de Bentolila Tlalim's family on its way to the Israeli exile community in London. It is in London that the director first befriends Palestinians uprooted by the conflict in the Middle East. As a conciliatory gesture, he allows them uninterrupted monologues in his film, which, paradoxically, reveal how irreconcilable the Israeli and Palestinian national claims actually are. De Bentolila Tlalim's film goes

against the trend of current Israeli film from Israel itself. It was the subject of a near 50 percent of the films made in the 1990s, today it is no longer seen as a commercially viable subject.

Aloni's "Local Angels" views the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through the lens of the director's German-Jewish roots. The film is peppered with allusions to the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, from which it also takes its title, "Angel of History." Aloni also draws upon a famous 1926 letter from Gershom Scholem to Franz Rosenzweig in which the former asks "Will not the holy language open up like an abyss and swallow us whole?" Aloni further uses the film to work out issues with his mother. His mother, Shulamit Aloni, happens to be a founder of the Israeli Civil Rights Movement. The group's contacts with Yasser Arafat and Hanan Ashrawi—a member of the Palestinian Parliament who was very active in peace talks—spark arguments between son and mother, which end with the son accusing his mother of still being "too Zionist."



Nir Bergman, director of "Broken Wings," which won three prizes at this year's International Film Festival in Berlin.

Forbidden love on the Lebanon front is the subject of "Yossi and Jagger," which depicts the homosexual affair between an officer and an enlisted man that gains momentum as the two debate their coming out while their unit prepares for an ambush. The tragic ending in which one of them dies in battle resonated strongly with an Israeli audience, which, director

Eytan Fox explained, barely had time to mourn during the months of the second Intifada, because casualties were so high. Audiences in Israel flocked to the film.

The personal that has gotten the attention of this latest generation of Israeli filmmakers and filmgoers cannot, in the end, separate itself from the political, which permeates every aspect of daily life in Israel.

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