

Jewish film festival casts a wide net Uncertainty of identity reflected in slate's strengths and weaknesses

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Who, exactly, is a Jew? It's a question as old as the Diaspora -- scratch that, older than Exodus -- and one that's subject to both Talmudic hair-splitting and deeply personal interpretation. There's no simple answer, or at least one that doesn't involve ancient history *and* current events, spiritual belief *and* secular identity, ethnicity *and* mindset.

This does not make life easy for a film programmer. Each year, the Boston Jewish Film Festival casts a wide net and presents as many facets of the global Jewish experience as it can comfortably schedule. Excellent and lesser movies come and go. Various topics are addressed or barely touched upon. A sense of the uncontainable persists, for better and sometimes for worse.

Now we have the 18th-annual BJFF, running from Wednesday through Nov. 12 at the Coolidge, the MFA, the West Newton, and other venues (see Page N12 for schedule) , and the line up may as well be subtitled "What, exactly, is a Jewish film festival?"

Take "Family Law," the festival's opening-night film at the MFA. It's very good. It's also not particularly Jewish. The story of a 30-something Buenos Aires lawyer (Daniel Hendler) coming to terms with his father (Arturo Goetz), this Argentinean film from writer-director Daniel Burman ("Lost Embrace") is subtle and affecting, and the issues it deals with are universal. Does the fact that once or twice during the film someone slaps a yarmulke on his head make it a commentary on modern Judaism? Of course not, but maybe we should be thankful the film is playing Boston at all.

Or take "Frozen Days," perhaps the most striking movie in the festival. Shot in black and white on a budget made of fumes, it's a creepy, stylish puzzle-box of a movie, with loving nods to classic Hitchcock and Polanski and a knockout performance by a stunning young actress named Anat Klausner. What's Jewish about it? Debut director Danny Lerner is Israeli and the setting is the Tel Aviv club scene; there's a bombing, but it seems more a symptom of free-floating angst than Arab rage. Or is this how life in modern Israel translates to young filmmakers -- as incomprehensible terror filtered through "The Twilight Zone"?

Most of the festival's movies are tethered to a handful of central themes. The modern diaspora is addressed in such fictional films as "Four Weeks in June" (the Coolidge's opening-night presentation) and "You're So Pretty," as well as documentaries like "Sisai," about Ethiopian Jews, and "Origin Unknown," in which Norwegian filmmaker Nina Grunfeld digs for her forebears. Not all of these take a serious approach: "Roots: Families for Sale" is a dark comedy about a con artist who concocts a fake Russian village for returning Jews to visit.

Other offerings deal with World War II and the Holocaust: "Nina's Home" is set in a French orphanage that takes in Jewish children after the war, while the closing night presentation, "The Rape of Europa," documents in epic fashion the Nazi theft of the continent's great works of art and the methods employed to protect, rescue, and recover them.

Still others -- arguably not enough -- focus on life in Israel today. "5 Days," an excellent and heart-rending documentary by Yoav Shamir, gives audiences a close-up view of the August 2005 eviction of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip by the Israeli Defense Force. The endless stalemate between ancient faith and modern statehood is vividly personified here in people like IDF commander Dan Harel and settlement leader Noam Shapira, humane individuals headed helplessly for collision. There are no winners, but the film suggests the outcome could have been much worse.

Documentaries, in general, are the festival's strong suit. "Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik" looks at one 20th-century life and finds all manner of concordances with the larger Jewish experience. Soloveitchik, the intellectual force behind the modern Orthodox movement (and founder of the Maimonides School in Brookline), is presented as an almost tragically conflicted figure, one whose comment that "we are part of humanity at the same time we are alone" applied as much to himself as to his people.

There are docs about well-known Jews old and new -- "Who Was Franz Kafka?" and "Wrestling With Angels: Playwright Tony Kushner." There are films about the many faces of Jewish women, from ultra-Orthodox ("Be Fruitful and Multiply") to ultra-secular ("Sisters") to rabbis ("And the Gates Opened: Women in the Rabbinate"). And there is "51 Birch Street," a much-praised new documentary in which filmmaker Doug Block digs out the complex emotions behind his parents' seemingly happy marriage.

What makes "51 Birch Street" a natural for this festival? The fact that the Blocks are Long Island Jews? The director refers to himself as "the Jewish version of a lapsed Catholic" on his blog, and that distance from roots is a real and thorny subject for a filmmaker to tackle, even if by not tackling it at all. Or is "Birch Street" here because the festival programmers needed movies, and lucky for us they found a good one?

This isn't always the case. "Ira and Abby" is the second film written, produced by, and starring Jennifer Westfeldt of "Kissing Jessica Stein," and it's an unintentional example of a particular animal: the festival movie that's too weak for a real theatrical release but niche-y enough for events like these. A New York "divorce comedy" about the on-again, off-again marriage of two supremely neurotic Upper West Siders (Westfeldt and Chris Messina), "Ira & Abby" plays like a Woody Allen movie with its dither reflex set on stun. Jewish? Sure. Entertaining? Only to the most indulgent audiences.

The Paris-set "You're So Pretty," about three sisters and their lonely hearts friend is similarly frothy but more forgivable -- a Gallic "chic flic" that wears its shallowness well. "Brother's Shadow" is somber to the point of being turgid, but it does touch on why an unpleasant old man (Judd Hirsch, who will be present with director Todd Yellin at the screening) might turn to religion when he believes life and his sons have let him down.

There is a program of comic shorts, highlighted by something called "Jewz N the Hood." There's a special family showing of Carol Reed's lovely, little-known 1955 gem "A Kid for Two Farthings." There's a panel on personal documentaries -- Doug Block will be there -- on Nov. 6 at the Coolidge. The purpose of a festival like this is to throw the doors wide open and offer something for everyone. Inclusion is the key, so, yes, a WWII movie about gay lovers is here, too ("A Love to Hide").

Is there a point, though, at which a themed festival's mission gets diluted by stretching to capture every aspect of its subject? (This isn't a problem with, say, the Independent Film Festival of Boston, whose only mandate is to show good movies.) Ironically, that uncertainty is reflected in some of the best offerings at this year's Boston Jewish Film Festival -- movies like "Just an Ordinary Jew," a tour de force monologue on modern Jewish identity and its discontents by Ben Becker (star of "Gloomy Sunday," o ye West Newton Cinema regulars), the questing, questioning documentary "And Then, Who Are We?," or the splattery comedy of "The Ashkenazim."

Of all the films, "Nina's Home" may be the one that most eloquently holds these dichotomies in its hand. The Jewish children who find refuge in the "Home of Hope" run by the title character come from all over WWII-era Europe, and they represent every kind of European Jew. The young death-camp survivors from Poland insist on kosher meals, while one of their French counterparts blankly asks "What's 'kosher'?" Without forcing the metaphor, the orphanage looks ahead to modern Jewry and modern Israel. The point isn't that these children will all learn to get along. The point is they have to.

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