The First Cleveland Jewish Film Festival (2007): What is the Role of Women?

Reviewed by Batya Weinbaum

Baltimore, Phoenix, San Jose, Boston, Austin, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Miami, Hartford, Portland, Nashville, Seattle, Denver, Santa Barbara, Cleveland.

What do all these cities have in common? A Jewish film festival.

But Cleveland’s is new this year, in 2007.

The trend started with The San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, the oldest and longest-running Jewish film event in the world. Close to 35,000 people attended the 1999 festival.

Cleveland’s first, presented by the Mandel Jewish Community of Greater, was spread out over nearly a week during October (Oct. 6-14) in Shaker Square and the frequently independent film show case theater, Cedar/Lee.

Although it was difficult to get reviewer’s tickets for even three showings, I would have needed to see more to ascertain and report on what was of interest for women. Of the three films I did manage to wrangle free tickets for, what I concluded was that what Cleveland needed was a Jewish Women’s Film Festival. Now that would have made Cleveland’s new and different, competing with the festivals of longer traditions, both in Cleveland (The Cleveland International Film Festival, something I have covered before) and in the Jewish community, spread out across the country with heritages of 16 and 18 years.

The first film I saw, Rashevski’s Tango (2003, 100 minutes, dir. Sam Garbaski), listed as being from Belgium, France and Luxemburg, definitely included women, but only from a male gaze. Women are to cook, to wed, to act rash and to be attractive. As well as to bed. And they make attractive objects in the unraveling of an interesting story of two brothers, whose father has gone off to Israel to become a seriously-Hassidic rabbi in the desert. Only when he comes back to see the funeral of another suitor of his wife of many years, whom we are led to think he abandoned, do we along with his family learn that in fact she had kicked him out. An interesting portrayal of post-Holocaust survival, and the strains of assimilation, but in terms of women, we are there to be photogenic and to charm men.
The second film, *What a Wonderful Place* (2005, Israel, 104 minutes, dir. Eyal Halfon) included women, but here again what as? Wives who desert husbands and have affairs, women who come to Israel to work and then discover their passports are held and they are to whore if they are attractive enough and to clean only if they are saved by scars on their faces, foreign worker girlfriends of males who take care of Jewish men’s fathers. The focus of the story is on the *mensch* whose cruel and self-centered wife left him; accidentally he discovered a purse on the border of his property that belonged to a woman who was smuggled in and watched while her scar-free friends took man after man, leaving her too poor to send much money home to her daughter back in Russia. The overweight *mensch*/landowner who employs Thai foreign worker eventually returns her purse to her, kind man that he is; she is also kindly rescued by another *mensch*, an ex-policeman who got caught in gambling that led him to leave the force. An interesting portrayal of the New Israel replete with foreign workers, but in terms of women, the message is, we are there to be objects and to give head, as the *mensch*’s wife does to a ranger in the desert, even before she leaves him.

The third film, a documentary (*The Ashkenazim*, Israel, 2005, 52 minutes, dir. Dani Dotan and Dalia Mevorach) provoked good audience discussion. It appeared that the majority of the audience broken into small groups afterwards had no idea that Israel was divided between *Ashkenazi* and *Mizrachi*. Not that any *Mizrachi* spoke for him or herself in the interviews in the film. The focus of the film was again largely on men, in particular the young male founder of the *Ashkenazi* movement in which youth in their twenties and thirties are returning to *Ashkenazi* roots and claiming their heritage, rather than being ashamed of how they were slaughtered in and barely survived in Europe, or of how they treated or were more privileged than the *Mizrahi*. One interesting piece in the film, which I can only speculate we owe to the fact that one of the directors was female, presented the view of a woman singer who dresses in a Jewish-star armband and sings Yiddish songs in electro-music format from a variety of stages in contemporary Tel Aviv night clubs. Her intent, she says, is to show that all those who were slaughtered also had fully engaged lives, filled with love, not only despair. The singer thinks that the *Ashkenazi* who died in Europe have been memorialized in sad, mournful ways merely for being slaughtered. She wants to reclaim that those whom we eulogize as tragically thrown to their deaths also had regularly-lived lives. A second *Ashkenazi* woman tells how she was tired of the *Ashkenazi* seriousness and sadness, and loved the pure joy of belly dancing. But even shaking her hips couldn’t shake the heaviness of her inheritance, she said.
A Jewish woman’s film festival might have had documentaries about Women in Black, Four Mothers, and other active women’s groups working for years with the Palestinians.