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Jewish film fests foster sense of community
New Jersey to play host to 3 upcoming festivals.

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STAFF WRITER

A middle-aged woman sits in an examination room as her doctor tells her that she must have an immediate kidney transplant.

That scene from the award-winning Israeli film "Three Mothers" will open two upcoming Jewish film festivals in Central Jersey:

- The third annual Central NJ Jewish Film Festival at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Rialto Theatre, Westfield.
- The eighth annual Rutgers New Jersey Jewish Film Festival at 7 p.m. Nov. 4 at Regal Cinema, North Brunswick.

Also scheduled is the sixth annual Jewish Film Series, which kicks off with the documentary "The Jews of Iran" at 9 p.m. Oct. 27 at the Highland Park Conservative Temple -- Congregation Anshe Emeth, Highland Park.

Within the three events, two dozen films will be seen by more than 7,000 ticket buyers, up from six films for 1,700 viewers when the Rutgers fest launched in 2000. The growth is tied to Central Jersey's large, strong and diverse Jewish community not only wanting to see films that reflect their world but also discuss them, said Jeffrey Shandler, an associate professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

"It's kind of like they're viewing globally and discussing locally," said Shandler, one of the committee members who selected the 13 films for the Rutgers fest. "The films are from all over the world, but the discussion is local. You could go anywhere else to see these films or rent them, but to be part of an experience where you hear what is on people's hearts and minds makes these events stand out."

The events, which started in 1980 with the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, number 100 around the world. They are as much a part of Jewish life as a book club, fundraiser, museum or tourism to Israel, Shandler said.

Regina Belowsky of East Brunswick said she likes the film fests' forums because they give her a chance to express her Jewish identity in a meaningful way, while learning about her varied culture's history, heritage, faith and issues.

"I like to be able to ask questions," Belowsky said. "That's the best part of it."

Meeting the directors

In many cases, directors travel from Israel and other parts of the world to discuss their works with Central Jersey audiences.

"Three Mothers" director Dina Zvi-Riklis will be on hand to discuss her feature film, which is loosely based on the personal and political hardships of her mother and two aunts. The emotional movie won the Wolgin Award for Best Israel Feature at the 2006 Jerusalem Film Festival.

"I traveled a lot with the film and realized that the focus on the biographical questions is much stronger than I thought," Zvi-Riklis said. "The story that I wanted to tell is about sisterhood, motherhood, symbiotic relationships, immigration, memories, the connections between cleaning the conscience, which exists in the kidney, and opening the womb. To my surprise, the audience is much more eager to find out if the story really happened, much more than dealing with the philosophic aspects of the film."

The Scotch Plains-based Jewish Community Center of Central New Jersey and Temple Beth O'r Beth Torah in Cranford will close its festival at the Rialto with an appearance by "Dear Mr. Waldman" director Hanan Peled. His feature film concerns Holocaust survivors trying to raise a family in 1960s Israel.

"When a filmmaker is not available, an expert will be booked instead," said Karen Small, director of the Rutgers festival and associate director of the presenting Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. Small said she is looking forward to Ira Berkow, Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times sports columnist, discussing the documentary "The First Basket" on Nov. 4 at Regal Cinema.

"It's an American film about the history of the Jewish involvement with basketball," Small said. "It traces the history of basketball before it became a major sport. Back then, the New York Knickerbockers had a team that was majority Jewish. It weaves American and Jewish history."

A discussion Small said she is anticipating will be between Joseph Cedar, director of Beaufort, and students from the university's Israeli literature and society class.

The Israeli auteur will speak about moral dilemmas in Israeli society to the class on Nov. 12.

"It is always nice to find a receptive and sophisticated audience that is interested to know a bit about the intentions behind the film and the larger context," Cedar said. "The bigger international festivals are mostly about marketing the film and creating good publicity for the industry in a very competitive environment. You end up saying the same superficial mantras over and over again to entertainment journalists, who in many cases didn't even see the film. A good Q & A in a small specialty festival with a curious and smart audience is a great treat that really fuels me."

Beyond a target audience

In the hopes of fostering understanding, all three presentations are marketed beyond the Jewish community, especially films that also concern other ethnic or racial groups.

Udi Shorr, organizer of the Jewish Film Series in Highland Park, said he expects deep discussion about "Strange Fruit," a documentary about the Jewish composer of the classic Billie Holiday song and its impact on the anti-lynching movement. Two years ago, the chat about "Brownsville Black & White," a 2000 documentary concerning race relations in Brooklyn, N.Y., was powerful, Shorr said.

"An hour after the film had closed down, people were still standing around talking about it," he said. "It's a way to bring about change and improve relations between various groups."

"It does make you feel part of a larger community," Small said. "It's important to get along with people."

Not all of the films at the Rutgers fest were made for a Jewish audience, Shandler said.

An interesting screening on Nov. 4 and 8 will be "Just an Ordinary Jew," he said.

"The feature film about the impact of the Holocaust was made for a non-Jewish German audience," he said.

"Most of these filmmakers speak across boundaries and cultural borders," Shandler said. "That film explores the presence of Jews in Germany today, but it was made to speak to Germans, not German Jews. It's about Germans' symbolic investment in Jews in the post-Holocaust period."

Growing film market

Another reason for the growth of film festivals is the rising popularity of documentaries, Small said. The demand for documentaries in the wake of Oscar-winner Michael Moore's success bodes well for festivals hoping to encourage dialogue about issues, she said.

Thelma Purdy, an 87-year-old Clark resident who co-chairs Temple Beth O'r Beth Torah's joint effort with the JCC in Scotch Plains, agreed.

"Documentaries have risen to the top," Purdy said. "They used to be throwaways. Now they're more in demand than regular movies. They're finally getting their due. They're also better, more refined. They're not just home movies anymore."

Most of the films in the festivals and the series are made in Israel, whose film market is booming, Small said. Several have nabbed awards at prestigious international screenings, such as the Berlin and Tribeca film festivals.

"My Father, My Lord," David Volach's directorial debut about tensions in an ultra-orthodox Jewish family, won the Founders Award at the Tribeca Film Festival in May. For Beaufort, Cedar won the Silver Bear Award for best director at the Berlin International Film Festival earlier this year.

"So many features and documentaries coming out of Israel are of a higher quality than they used to be," Small said. "It's phenomenal and really speaks of the large interest in Jewish film."

Jewish-American films, such as the just-released "Golda's Balcony," about Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, usually aren't screened by the festivals and the series because they easily can be seen in mainstream theaters, especially in New York.

Rather than have Central Jersey Jews trek to the Big Apple, the events offer screenings right in their back yard, Purdy said.

"There was a body of people waiting for this to be developed," she said. "It's a sophisticated crowd that probably went to other film festivals and were eager to have one in their own back yard. That's proven by the excellent attendance. People are more sophisticated now. They'll go to New York to see a film if it's not going to come here. It's like going to the theater."

Belowsky said she was going to see the documentary "The Rape of Europa" in New York, but she's going to see it Nov. 4 in North Brunswick instead.

She said she is excited that the screening will include a discussion with Lynn H. Nicholas, author of the National Book Critics Circle Award-winning book on which the film is based.

"I love that you get instant access," Belowsky said.

Shorr said he likes presenting films that are even more obscure than those at the coinciding festivals.

Yet, the popularity of the series has led the synagogue to make a media center part of its reconstruction plans in the wake of a fire two years ago.

"Jewish life now comprises online, film, audio podcasts, all kinds of media," Shorr said. "It's a richer spectrum of Jewish culture that we're making available to people in our area."

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