

 [Click Here to Print](#)

The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(11/03/2006)

Projecting The Future

Reel Jews Film Festival showcases emerging talent — but offers few fully realized works.

George Robinson - Special To The Jewish Week

Film festivals that are designed to showcase emerging talent are by their very nature a mixed bag and a headache for programmers. Do you pick a film because it shows promise ahead of a film that may be more polished but less ambitious? What constitutes "young talent"?



For seven years the film programmers at Makor have juggled all these issues and plenty of others in putting together their fall Reel Jews Film Festival. This year, they seem to have erred a little too much on the side of ambition and the result is a program that includes very few fully realized works. Still, the event provides plenty of food for thought.

The best of the films on display in this year's festival is a modest 25-minute documentary by Melissa Hammel, "Ilona, Upstairs." Ilona is a delightful artist who dabbles in cabaret (offering a mean Marlene Dietrich impersonation), paints and draws brilliantly and is a classic Greenwich Village eccentric. She is also, the film seems to imply, a Holocaust survivor and perhaps a lesbian. Ilona's portraits, as she makes vividly clear in dialogue with the filmmaker, work by a combination of suggestion and well-chosen detail; one never sees the subject's entire face, but the resemblance is unmistakable and riveting.

Hammel chooses quite artfully to use the same method in her cinematic portrait of her neighbor, and the result is a triumphant picture of an indomitable and quite funny free spirit.

"Ilona, Upstairs" is one of several films on a program of shorts. Of the others that were available for screening at press time, two more are worth a brief look, although they promise more for the future than they can deliver in the present. "Kinetoscope" by Max Goldblatt is a moderately amusing pastiche of slasher horror films crossed with a wildly self-referential framing device that may — or may not — involve a psychotic film projector and projectionist. It's clever, if somewhat limited.

"Cooking for Richard" by Ido Fluk is more eccentric, a tale of a woman who is so bereft by her husband's sudden death that she buys a casket with a closed-circuit video hookup and talks to his ghostly TV image every night. Edgier than "Kinetoscope," it suffers a bit from unevenness of tone, but Fluk is someone who may have a lot more to

say.

"And These Are Jews" is a conventional talking-heads documentary by Ruth Goldman, but it works quite well and at 49 minutes is just the right length for its subject, the history of Cincinnati's German-Jewish upper-class community. This community laid the foundation for the Reform movement in America and is a useful microcosm of the double bind of assimilationism and enmity towards the East European Jews who came to America after them. Goldman gets great interviews with contemporary Cincinnati residents. A favorite moment in the film is a gentleman who states emphatically, "I don't want to go to [synagogue] to hear Hebrew." And Goldman explores the subject in just enough depth to keep the film interesting.

"Naturalized" by Julia Kots, the short playing with "And These Are Jews," is an amusing trifle about a young Russian-Jewish man in New York whose family is outraged by his most audacious attempt to assert his Jewish identity. It's a handsomely shot film with some nicely observed behavioral detail.

By comparison with the other filmmakers in this series, Erez Laufer is a grizzled veteran, which is to say that he has directed half a dozen films, almost all music documentaries (most notably "Jimi Hendrix Live at Woodstock" and "Zehava Ben"), prior to his new work, "The Darien Dilemma," which he made with his father Nahum. The film is an uneasy mix of documentary and fictional recreation recounting a disturbing event in the early days of the Second World War. The then-tiny Mossad was primarily involved in smuggling Jews out of Europe to Palestine, usually sending them up the Danube to the Black Sea and from there by ocean to the Yishuv.

When the Danube froze over in the winter of 1939-40, a thousand young pioneers were stranded in what was then Yugoslavia; the Haganah decided to swap to the British a steamer bought for transporting them, in exchange for vague promises of support for an independent Jewish state after the war. That piece of chicanery left the Mossad agents to choose between Jewish lives and political expediency.

Unfortunately, the Laufers choose to mix the interview footage with scenes of Nahum and Erez working on the screenplay and fictional scenes involving Ruth Klieger, a Mossad agent whose work saved thousands of Jewish lives at the outbreak of the war. The film's forward momentum is constantly blunted by the shift from one mode to another; the fictional sequences consist mainly of Klieger sitting in a series of hotel rooms and add little to our understanding of the events. This is one story, well worth retelling, that might have benefited from a more conventional approach. n

The seventh annual Reel Jews Film Festival will be held at Makor (35 W. 67th St.) from Nov. 6-12. The filmmakers will be present at the screenings. For more information, call (212) 601-1000 or go to www.makor.org/reeljews.

© 2000 - 2002 The Jewish Week, Inc. All rights reserved. Please refer to the [legal notice](#) for other important information.