

'Holy Zoo.' (Katharina Waisburd)



Jewish identity on film

• By PEGGY CIDOR

Opening with a story about a denial and the conflict that it leads to, and closing with a heartwarming message from a movie municipal zoo, the 18th Jewish Film Festival is just around the corner. It will screen more than three dozen local and foreign movies touching on aspects of Jewish Life and artistic creation.

The 40 films in this international gathering include features and documentaries, premieres, special events and encounters with filmmakers. The event takes place December 24 to 29 at the Cinematheque.

Denial, directed by Mick Jackson, is the festival's opening shot. It relates the story of Prof. Deborah Lipstadt, who accused historian David Irving of being a Holocaust denier and was then sued by him. Tracking the trial and the behind-the-scenes intrigues, the film will be screened in Lipstadt's presence, and she will then speak about her experience as depicted in the film.

The closing screening of the festival is to be a Katharina Waisburd film premiere. *Holy Zoo* tells the story of a special place in Jerusalem where Israelis and Palestinians work side by side to create a sort of separate world of cooperation, caring and harmony. After the screening, Waisburd will be on hand for a special event honoring the Biblical Zoo and its staff.

Holy Zoo captures the essence of the local conflict with an opening view of the separation fence that runs on the hills surrounding the city. Noises of mass street protests on the Arab side hint at the violence that clouded the city's life last year. Then, transitioning to a place that seems almost like another planet, the film captures a spot in Jerusalem that is dramatically different – a peaceful place where people share a love of animals, overcoming their own issues in order to work together. Feeding and taking care of the animals, sharing information and concern about them – simple things captured by the camera and Waisburd's sensitive eye are woven into a story rich with humanity.

As always, this year's festival has a theme – an inclusive Judaism and cinema's ap-

'The Dybbuk.' (Film still)



proach to portraying the challenge of contemporary Jewish identities. With the support and collaboration of the Jewish Funders Network and the Bereshit Foundation, a series of films, panels, lectures and performances will expose attendees to key issues: what Jewish cinema is and how Israeli cinema deals with Jewish identity, such as how the growing trend of haredi cinema, mostly driven by haredi women filmmakers, will interface with the secular Israeli Jewish identity and with that of Jews from the Diaspora.

These issues and more emerge in the festival's films. *The Tenth Man* explores what happens when a young Jew comes back to the neighborhood of his youth and reconnects with his father and Jewish tradition after years of separation. *A Time to Say Goodbye* depicts the life of the Jewish community in Germany through the eyes of a teenager. There is also a love story about a forbidden relationship between a

young Jewish girl and a non-Jewish local man during the Nazi occupation of Greece.

The festival also highlights a sampling of old favorites, including restored versions of the legendary *Fiddler on the Roof*, featuring Chaim Topol, and the legendary *The Dybbuk* from 1937.

The festival also includes movies made by graduates of the haredi branch of the Ma'aleh religious film school: *Theater Is Not a Game*, *Laugh Seriously* and *The Girl with a Purple Blouse*.

With *Holy Zoo*, the festival ends with a vibrant message of hope, despite the tensions surrounding this city and its residents from all sides. Israelis and Palestinians work together in good spirits and secular, religious, and haredim meet and interact. All get a chance to see that "others" are not as frightening or threatening as some of us might think.

Film provides escape and entertainment, but it also conveys vision and vital messages. The 18th Jewish Film Festival presents audiences with a taste of everything in some of today's best works.