

A Film Festival Celebrates a Jewish World That Spans the Globe

There is an old Jewish joke — the definitive old Jewish joke, perhaps — in which a man is stranded for years on a desert island. When his rescuers

finally arrive, they discover that he has built not one synagogue, but two. Why? The answer is obvious: "This one I pray in every day, but that one, I wouldn't go near it."

Anything that dares to call itself a Jewish Film Festival must surely partake of this contentious, eclectic spirit. The question of Jewish identity, after all, exists largely

as a matter of contradiction and debate. There is so much history in so many places, so many moods and forms of expression, that any coherent summary is impossible. And so the 16th annual New York Jewish Film Festival — not to be confused with the Woody Allen retrospective currently wrapping up downtown at Film Forum — presents an engagingly disunified program, with something to appeal to, or alienate, every taste.

Two temples of culture, the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the

Glimpses from the 1920s to today, from Israel to Mexico.

Jewish Museum, one on each side of the island of Manhattan, have collaborated to put together a slate of 31 films, starting today and running through Jan. 25. There are documentaries and features from Israel and

the United States, as well as from Mexico, France, Sweden and elsewhere.

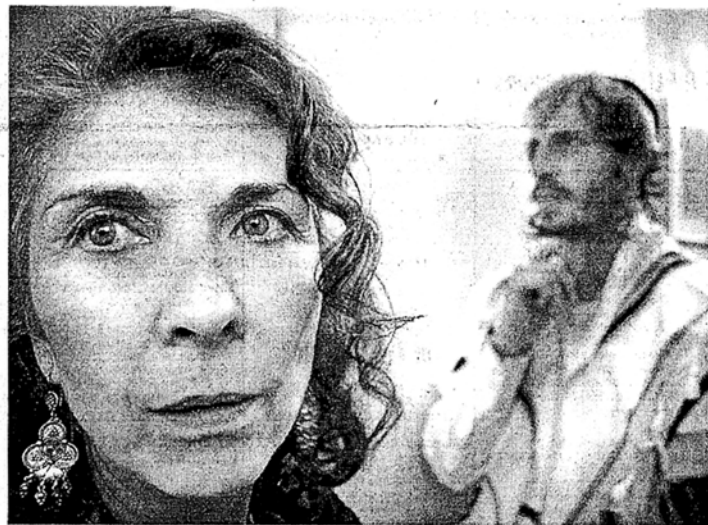
The subject matter covers everything from New York nightclubs to settlements in Gaza, and the tone ranges from the halmish to the horrific. (In the interests of clan loyalty, I'm obligated to mention a seven-minute animated short, "Chronicles of a Professional Eulogist," featuring the voice of my wife's stepfather, a rabbi whose shul is the only one I'd need on my desert island.)

The Holocaust and its aftermath

figure prominently in the documentaries, which include "The Rape of Europa," about the Nazi theft and destruction of European artworks, and "Nuremberg: The Nazis Facing Their Crimes." A documentary directed by Christian Delage with narration by Christopher Plummer, "Nuremberg" reconstructs the post-war trial of surviving Nazi leaders.

The trial, which took place amid the ruins of Nuremberg in 1945 and 1946, was filmed by a Hollywood

Continued on Page 7



Photographs from the Jewish Museum

"The Rape of Europe," left, a documentary about Nazi destruction; right, "My Mexican Shiva," a family drama by Alejandro Springall.

A Film Festival for a Jewish World That Spans the Globe

Continued From First Arts Page

team that included John Ford and Budd Schulberg. It was a sober judicial proceeding with a deliberate element of spectacle, intended not only to punish high-ranking officials of the Third Reich, but also to demystify and discredit their ideology.

The extent to which that ideology survives, in Europe and elsewhere, is the subject of "White Terror," a worried, somewhat credulous documentary about racist, neo-Nazi subcultures. But perhaps the most poignant reckoning with the horrors that be-

fell the Jews of 20th-century Europe is "Our Children," made in Poland in 1948. Thought to be the last Yiddish-language film to be made in that country, "Our Children" is the story of an encounter between two vaudeville actors and a group of orphans.

The film is crudely directed, and its mixture of insistent optimism and sentimentality can be jarring, but its roughness is a mark of its seriousness and authenticity. How to remember the experiences of the camps and the ghettos, and how to move forward — these questions have an immediacy in "Our Children" that later, more polished exercises in memory often lack.

The two adult performers in "Our Children," with their songs and their shtick, are not the only representatives of the Yiddish popular culture

New stories and old alternate between sadness and comedy.

that flourished around the world in the first half of the 20th century.

"The Cantor's Son," from 1937, is a musical about the tensions between show business ambition and religious obligation.

"Love and Sacrifice," a 1936 American film, which will be shown in a restored print at the festival, fuses stage melodrama with some of the conventions of the Hollywood potboiler. And "My Mexican Shiva," a new movie directed by Alejandro Spring-

all, mingles old-style family tsuris with telenovela histrionics, all of it accompanied by a modified klezmer (or perhaps klezmariachi) score.

Music also figures in "The First Time I Was Twenty," a gentle French coming-of-age story, set in the 1960s, that stars Marilou Berry as a 16-year-old bassist trying to join an all-male high-school jazz band.

Ms. Berry, who played an aspiring opera singer in Agnès Jaoui's "Look at Me," is an actress utterly without fear or vanity. Her uncompromising individuality lifts the movie above its cozy domesticity and makes it feel like something sharp and new. And that balance between novelty and familiarity is what characterizes this festival, which at its best manages to find the homey within the exotic, and vice versa.

The New York Jewish Film Festival begins today and runs through Jan. 25. A complete schedule is available at thejewishmuseum.org.

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Movies

Film Series

THE 2007 NY JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL (Tomorrow through Thursday) Among this week's many programs: Lisa Azuelos's "Gorgeous," about a group of North African Jewish women who meet to discuss their new lives in Paris; "Love and Sacrifice," a newly restored Yiddish melodrama shot in New York in 1936 by the director George Roland; and "Our Children," a 1948 comedy starring Shimon Dzigan and Israel Shumacher that is said to be the last Yiddish-language film made in Poland. (Through Jan. 25.) Walter Reade Theater 165 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center, (212) 975-5600, filmlinc.org; \$10. (Kehr)