

# The Arts

Theater, Books, Music & Visual Arts



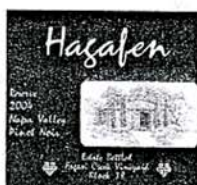
## Judgment At Frankfurt

Using never-before-heard audiotapes, new documentary illuminates the so-called 'Auschwitz trial.' Germany held in the early 1960s.  
**Film 76**



## The Sneaker-Clad Scribe

Tillie Olsen's life of writing and activism brought attention to women's long-silenced concerns.  
**Bookmarks 77**



## Vintage Wine

The best kosher wines of '06.

**Fruit of the Vine 80**

## Film

# The Strong, Silent Type

New York Jewish Film Fest wraps up with top picks, including a new Gitai and four valuable restorations from the pre-talkie era.

**George Robinson**

*Special To The Jewish Week*



In "The Cantor's Son" a janitor abandons his life to become a star cantor.

"What a Wonderful Place" is a complex interwoven drama about an ex-cop's friendship with a Ukrainian prostitute.

The second half of this year's New York Jewish Film Festival features one of the strongest lineups the event has offered in years, with several excellent documentaries including a new film from Amos Gitai, a startlingly bitter but effective Israeli ensemble piece, a delightful comedy from France and four valuable restorations.

The National Center for Jewish Film provides many valuable services to the Jewish community and the film world, but none is of more importance than its preservation and restoration of Yiddish films and Jewish-themed silents. The quartet of retrospectives in this year's festival gives a hint of the range of its work. "Love and Sacrifice," which I was unable to see at press time, is a classic example of "shund," that uniquely Yiddish brand of trash, this time with a plotline that echoes "Madame X."

"The Cantor's Son" (1937), directed by Sidney Goldin, who died during shooting, and completed by Ilya Motyleff, is Moshe Oysher's film debut. In a riposte to "The Jazz Singer," the film

reverses the Jolson trajectory, with its hero abandoning Second Avenue, where he has risen from janitor to star, to return to the cantorate, becoming an even bigger star in the process. Eventually he abandons America altogether, returning to his hometown of Belz, where he prepares to marry his childhood sweetheart (the charming Judith Abarbanel, a ringer for the young Irene Dunne). Shot in the Poconos, the film is as static as a 1929 Hollywood musical, and at this stage of his career Oysher comes across as a sort of Jewish Mario Lanza, gifted with a great instrument but with instincts too coarse to make the best use of it. But it's hard not to feel a certain affection for a film in which a member of an itinerant acting troupe can ask, "How can we perform 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' without a child?"

By contrast, "Hungry Hearts," a 1922 Samuel Goldwyn production based on the short stories of Anzia Yezierska, is a brisk tale of the seemingly thwarted dreams of a family of Jewish "greenhorns" in the "goldene medina." Filmed on location in the Lower East Side, with a script that Yezierska helped craft, the film is quite pleasant if somewhat implausible in its Cinderella-style romance between janitor Sara (Helen Ferguson) and lawyer-turned-rent-collector David (Bryant Washburn). Director E. Mason Hopper, apparently quite an eccentric himself, kept things moving at a good clip, although the story of the film's making, as told by Kevin Brownlow in his book, "Behind the Mask of Innocence," might make an even better movie.



A Jewish girl seeks to play in her school's jazz group in "The First Time I Was Twenty."

"Unzere Kinder/Our Children" is a unique film, one that almost defies detached critical judgment. Made in 1947 by the famed Yiddish vaudevillians Shimon Dzigan and Israel Shumacher, the film places its two director-stars in the company of the actual residents of a Jewish orphanage for survivors of the Shoah. A group of the children have raised a ruckus at one of their performances and challenge their view of daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto, so the duo agrees to visit the orphanage to hear the







"The Rape of Europa" chronicles the Nazi looting of art during World War II.

children's recollections and to entertain. When they get there, they quickly find that everyone at the orphanage, including the director and the kitchen staff, bear some terrible secret wound from the Shoah. The film is filled with strange shifts of tone, veering between slapstick comedy and the darkest tragedy imaginable. "Unzere Kinder" is a film that no aesthetic theory can truly encompass; it is a slice of agonizing reality that is powerful far beyond its meager means and the considerable talents of those involved.

"What a Wonderful Place," directed and written by Eyal Halfon (best known here as the screenwriter of "Cup Final") is a vastly more sophisticated piece of filmmaking and not without its own considerable emotional voltage. "Place" is a complex, circular ensemble piece like "Crash," but without that mawkish film's nauseating mix of sentimentality and smug self-righteousness. In Halfon's world, almost everyone is compromised, lonely and embittered, and those conditions can only be met and alleviated by reaching out to another person, however unlikely the object of that effort may be.

At the center of the film is the burgeoning friendship between an ex-cop whose gambling habit has forced him into working for a local gangster (Uri Gavriel in his most nuanced performance to date) and a Ukrainian woman who he helped smuggle into Israel to work as a prostitute (Evelyn Kaplun). A local farmer suffers from compulsive overeating while his wife is dallying with a local park ranger. The ranger is dead-set on catching the farmer's favorite Thai guest worker poaching, but is totally reliant on a Filipino guest worker to care for his handicapped father. The home-care worker is a compulsive gambler whose desperate need for money puts him on a collision course with the gangster.

Told this way, "Place" sounds simplistic, and there are moments in the film when one fears that Halfon is going to slip into a veritable trench of pathos. But his footing is quite sure, he moves between his various stories deftly. The result is a surprisingly dark film, but one that is not without a certain guarded optimism.

"The First Time I Was Twenty," on the other hand, is all optimism, as befits a sweet, light French comedy based on a young adult novel. A first feature for TV director Lorraine Levy, "First Time" tells the story of Hannah Goldman (Marilou Berry), a chubby Jewish girl whose major goal is to play bass for her school's much-heralded jazz group. When she succeeds, becoming



the first female so honored, she finds herself on the receiving end of a lot of hostility from her male bandmates. Of course, since this is YA material and a comedy, things work out rather nicely for almost all concerned, but Levy's light touch and Berry's wonderful performance raise the film to a somewhat more elevated level of ambition and achievement.

Amos Gitai always operates at an elevated level of ambition and more often than not succeeds in meeting the goals he has set for himself. His latest film, "News from Home/News from House," marks a return to his roots in documentary and architecture, completing a trilogy that he began in 1980 with "House" and continued with "A House in Jerusalem" 18 years later. In each of the three films he has used a single house in West Jerusalem as a lens through which he views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Once owned by a prominent Palestinian family, now by a French Jew, the house is actually more interesting as a vehicle for Gitai to explore the lives of the workers and inhabitants than as a metaphor for the Middle East. I suspect that familiarity with the two earlier films would help an audience to appreciate the final chapter of this trilogy, but it is compelling even without such knowledge.

"The Rape of Europa" is a much more conventional talking-heads documentary, written, produced and directed by Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen and Nicole Newnham. Using Lynn Nicholas' book of the same title as their jumping-off point, the directors tell one of the less-known stories of World War II, the Nazis' systematic looting of Europe's great art collections, with a particular animus directed towards Jewish-owned art. As one interviewee says, the Nazis were "the greatest thieves" in history, guilty of looting on an industrial scale. Even more fascinating is the story of the U.S. Army officers who were assigned to find, preserve and return these treasures, and one yearns to hear more about them. The film's producers include Oregon Public Broadcasting, and there are times when it starts to degenerate into a run-of-the-mill PBS documentary, but for the most part "The Rape of Europa" is a reminder of just how good such films can be when the subject is compelling and the talking heads are worth hearing. ■

The 16th Annual New York Jewish Film Festival, sponsored by the Jewish Museum and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, will run through Jan. 25, with most screenings held at the Walter Reade Theatre (70 Lincoln Center Plaza). For a detailed schedule and other information, call (212) 875-5600 or go to [www.filmnyc.com](http://www.filmnyc.com) or [www.thejewishmuseum.org](http://www.thejewishmuseum.org).

## EDMOND J. SAFRA HALL

Wednesday, Jan. 17, 7 P.M.  
**Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America**  
(Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

Author Nick Kotz in discussion with Sam Freedman, Columbia University School of Journalism  
Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nick Kotz provides the first definitive account of the relationship between these two great leaders and the outcome of their alliance — the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.  
\$5 off tickets, free for members

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Wednesday, Jan. 24, 7 P.M.  
**Prisoners: A Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide**  
(Knopf, 2006)

James Bennet, editor, *The Atlantic Monthly* in discussion with author Jeffrey Goldberg  
The author discusses his friendship with a rising star in the PILO in this remarkable book that confronts the issues dividing the Middle East.  
\$10 adults, \$5 student/senior, free for members



Sunday, Jan. 28, 2:30 P.M.  
**Ostani Etap (The Last Stop)**  
(1942, 110 min., 16mm, Polish with English Subtitles)  
Post-screening discussion with Professor Stuart Liebman, CUNY Graduate Center  
Filmed on location at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1947, this powerful feature film focuses on the lives of a group of women inmates. Don't miss this rare screening.  
In commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz, January 27, 1945.  
\$10 adults, \$7 student/senior, \$5 members



Wednesday, Jan. 31, 7 P.M.  
**The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million**  
(Warner, 2006)  
With author Daniel Mendelsohn  
In this literary tour de force, Daniel Mendelsohn embarks on an epic journey across three continents to uncover the fate of relatives who disappeared during the Holocaust.  
\$5 all adults, free for members  
This program is part of the Museum's new series, "From the Heart: The Photojournalism of Ruth Gruber," featuring and moderated by its associate editor, Daniel Mendelsohn.

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