

Arts and Entertainment

Representing the *shtetl* on film

By AARON HOWARD

Director Edgar G. Ulmer shot the 1937 Yiddish-language film, "Grine Felder" (Green Fields), in five days at a cost of about \$8,000. So low was the budget, that Ulmer could afford only about 1,500 feet of raw stock, or about two hours of shooting. The entire film comes in at 97 minutes.

When "Green Fields" was released in New York, it grossed more than \$80,000 on one print in a Manhattan theater, over the course of a four-month run. The New York Times critic panned the film, but the Yiddish press loved it. Never underestimate the power of film to draw an audience simply by reflecting the audience's own experience.

The film now is available on DVD in a restored version in glorious black and white, through the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University (www.jewishfilm.org). "Green Fields" is one of four Yiddish Ulmer films now available on DVD.

Based on the 1916 Peretz Hirschbein popular play, "Green Fields" tells the story of a yeshiva scholar, Levy-Yitzchok (Michael Goldstein), who leaves the House of Study to find truth among the simple rural Jews. There really was a Rabbi Levi-Yitzchok of Berdichev (1740-1809). He was one of the early Hasidic masters. But the historical Rabbi Levi-Yitzchok was not one of the *ba'alei shem*, those wandering Jewish teachers who performed miracles and drove out dybbuks by means of the Divine Name. Nor did the historic Levi-Yitzchok

marry a peasant girl, as his film counterpart did.

Viewing "Green Fields" through modern eyes almost 70 years later, one finds that the film's shortcomings are obvious. The pace moves slowly. The narrative lacks tension. The characters represent types, more than distinct points of view.

That said, the film raises many questions. When Hirschbein's play first was written, the rural life of East European Jews already was disappearing. What did 1937 audiences see in "Green Fields"? The story line is propelled along by Levi-Yitzchok's quote

from the Talmud that "a man without land is not a man." By the late 1930s, that message would have resonated with Labor Zionists and all shades of leftist Jews, some of whom subscribed to the ideology that Jews supposedly were socially inferior because they were landless and did not engage in "productive" labor (agriculture and basic industry). Zionists, of course, would have argued for Jewish restoration in Israel. Even Bundists and communists would have agreed that political solutions would be possible only when there were Jewish workers and Jewish farmers.

Did the film reflect a Zionist subtext? Or Bundist or communist (as reflected in the Birobidzhan experiment) subtexts? Or, did audiences simply see the film in terms of nostalgia for the "old country"?

In one review, the writer called the film's characters "virtually a catalog of Yiddish tradition staples (sparring bearded patriarchs, kvetching moth-

ers, skittery maidens)." Yet, these cinema peasants win over the yeshiva student to the point where he decides to marry the peasant girl Tzine (Helen Beverly).

The fact is, outside of the romanticized rural stereotype, class divisions in the old country were stark. Harry Rabinowicz writes, "The scholars had as little in common with the unlettered masses as the Polish nobles had with the peasantry." Moreover, the reality of Jewish country life was mired in mud, grinding poverty and medieval superstition.

So, why were Hirschbein and later, Ulmer, able to idolize the old way of life? To add to the irony, this idyllic Jewish country village was filmed on the grounds of a Capuchin monastery in New Jersey. (This piece of information comes through a 31-minute audio interview with Ulmer conducted by

film director Peter Bogdanovich, one of the few DVD extras.)

The film has been described as "lyrical," "pastoral" and "uncharacteristically light" (compared with Ulmer's other films). This is due to the fact that nearly the entire film is shot outdoors. It turns out that's because Ulmer couldn't afford money for a generator to power indoor lighting.

Sometimes, art doesn't imitate life in the least.

The Yiddish feature film "Green Fields" is one of more than 200 titles related to the Jewish experience that have been restored, rescued or otherwise made available to film audiences through The National Center for Jewish Film. To purchase the DVD or to support the work of the National Center for Jewish Film, go to www.jewishfilm.org. □

