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ATHENS BANNER-HERALD

Jewish cinema shines

By Erin Rossiter - Correspondent

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Lisa Seidenberg shoots straight when she wants to, having framed news with video cameras as a network journalist and producer for most of her life. But today she tells stories her own way, "with an edge."



From left, Tarik Kopty, Hiam Abbass and Ali Suliman star in "Lemon Trees," which was directed by Eran Riklis.



Imagine, then, how her creative radar flashed when hearing about a "Jewish Culture Festival" annually celebrated in Poland. She pictured a swift documentary kick aimed right at the gut of Krakow's stomach-turning past.

"I went there to make fun of it. How can anybody be so crass and tasteless to have a Jewish festival in a country where they had more concentration camps than any other?" she said. "That's the starting point of the film."

Of course, the journey captured in "Ester Street" takes Seidenberg to unexpected places, including Roman Polanski's home and her grandparents' past.

What the 42-minute movie avoids is cliché, a hand-wringing worry for a filmmaker trained to ask questions rather than answer them.

"How do you look back at something? Do you celebrate? Do you cry? Is anything appropriate?" she asked. "I didn't want to do another weepy Holocaust film. It's really an essay film, a personal film. And I hope it raises questions that are universal, not necessarily for a Jewish audience, but for anyone who thinks about history."

"Ester Street" will debut at Ciné as part of the Athens Jewish Film Festival, which opens Saturday with events planned through Wednesday.

Selected from a pool of 130 submissions reviewed, the festival's 15 films touch upon a host of subjects, with a common thread of Judaism and the vast experience of its people, past and present. Organizers expect a diverse audience.

"It's really a cultural festival," said Abraham Tesser, who helped create the festival last year and leads its board. "Yes, there is a Jewish community here and it is an important part of the community and that's useful for everyone. (The festival also) provides a kind of diversity, not the kind we usually see. It brings us art that springs, perhaps, from a different well."

Whereas last year Tesser and the nonprofit's board concentrated on the business details of organizing, the festival's second outing will reflect a stronger programming focus. Moviemakers, experts and dignitaries with connections to the films will accompany each.

Among them: "The Beetle" (52 min., 2008) directed by Yishai Orian, will kick off the series at 8:30 p.m. Saturday and will be introduced by Deputy Consul General of Israel to the Southeast Sharon Kabalo; director Michal Goldman will discuss her "At Home in Utopia" (57 min., 2007); and writer and director Jeremy Davidson will discuss "Tickling Leo" (91 min., 2009).

Additionally, a grant-funded shorts competition will showcase six filmmakers' works during the event's festive close at 6 p.m. Wednesday at Hotel Indigo.

"I think regardless of whether you're Jewish or not Jewish, many of these movies are moving," Tesser said. "They're beautifully done. They tell a story either from a historical interest, but more likely a very contemporary history, especially if you have an interest in world politics."

Traveling to political or warring areas around the world is a major part of Seidenberg's film experience as she worked or produced footage for ABC, BBC, PBS and WTN. She was profiled in the 2007 film, "Women Behind The Camera" (2007) by Alexis Krasilovsky.

She felt pulled to make independent films because of their power to convey ideas.

"Film is a much more persuasive medium (than print)," she said. "I like the technical aspects. It's fun to use music and pictures to tell stories ... documentaries, dramatic films, character, locations, it really comes down to if you have something to say."

"Ester Street," a title that blends a geographical location in Krakow along with Biblical history, delivered her more than she bargained for. Taking her months to edit, she played with length a bit before settling on the tone of her story.

"I think it's really hard to do a film that has anything to do with the Holocaust because almost anything you can think of has been said," she said. "There were aspects of it that were indeed as tasteless as I thought it would be. It had an aspect of being sort of a Disneyland or a fake Indian Reservation with no more Indians. It was a little bizarre. But I came to appreciate it."