

A Feminist Lens On Hummus, And More

Women's issues continue into Week Two of the N.Y. Jewish Film Festival.

BY GEORGE ROBINSON | January 10, 2017, 1:32 pm |

Note: This is the second of two articles on this year's N.Y. Jewish Film Festival. As an old hit song says, sisters are doing it for themselves. That is one of the principal messages to be gleaned from this year's New York Jewish Film Festival. Given the tenor of recent events here and elsewhere (read: Hillary Clinton's defeat), it's a comforting thought that takes multiple forms in the films on display, often in unlikely contexts.

For example, who would have thought that a documentary about hummus would have a strong feminist subtext? "Hummus! The Movie," directed by Oren Rosenfeld, starts out as a slightly giddy look at that Middle Eastern staple, jumping rapidly between restaurants in Ramle, Yokneam, Acre and Abu Ghosh, before settling into an amiable trot, profiling their owners.

They are a variegated bunch, ranging from Jalil Dabit, a Christian Arab from Ramle and a third-generation restaurant owner with ambitions to expand his place to include live music, to Eliyahu Shmueli, a baal teshuvah who now owns a chain of more than 30 hummus-based restaurants across Israel, to Brother Olivier, a Benedictine monk who seeks the best hummus in Abu Ghosh, and, most tellingly, to Suheila al Hindi, a 50-year-old unmarried woman whose life centers on her work in her own restaurant in Acre. Along the way Rosenfeld takes amusing side trips that include a Guinness world-record adjudicator monitoring the battle over the world's largest hummus platter (currently held by the Lebanese tourism bureau at ten thousand kilograms), and the Golden Pita Award for "Israel's hummus genius."

This last extravaganza brings Suheila the recognition she deserves and confounds her chief competitor, an older chef who refuses to accept the idea that women can make hummus, let alone run a restaurant. Beyond its well-wrought feminism, "Hummus! The Movie" is a jolly, good-natured look at one of the few things that seems to bind the Middle East together despite the obvious conflicts throughout the region. My only gripe is that there aren't any recipes. Or samples.

"The Women's Balcony" and "Dimona Twist" make an interesting pair in the female point-of-view-driven vein, while also delivering some interesting observations on the never-ending tensions between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel.

“The Women’s Balcony,” a fiction debut by Emil Ben Shimon, is a nicely observed ensemble piece focusing on a small community of Sephardim in Jerusalem whose lives and friendships are disrupted by a terrible accident that forces the closing of their shul and sends their elderly rabbi into a tailspin. Seemingly sent as an answer to their prayers, the young Rabbi David (Aviv Alush) helps them get the congregation back on its feet, but his agenda imposes rigid Ashkenazi standards of behavior and does not include restoration of the women’s section.

Of course, his presence, at first so welcome, quickly becomes a painful catalyst that divides the close-knit community, particularly (but not solely) on gender lines. Eventually, the women assert themselves, Lysistrata-style, the old rabbi recovers from his breakdown and equilibrium is restored. Ben Shimon handles Shlomit Nehama’s original screenplay gently, with a muted but effective mix of wit and feeling, and the ensemble cast, led by Evelin Hagoel as the most outspoken of the women, is nicely balanced and effective.

“Dimona Twist,” the latest documentary from Michal Aviad (“Invisible,” “Jenny and Jenny”) follows the lives of seven women, six Mizrahi and one Polish, who came to the new desert town of Dimona in the mid-’50s and early ’60s. At the time the first of them arrived, Dimona was little more than a collection of shacks perched among sand dunes. As one of them recalls, her first reaction on seeing her new home was, “I think they’re making a cowboy movie here.” No such luck. Over the course of the film Aviad walks the women through the process of immigration, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, revealing the ethnic schisms in the community, the pre-feminist pressures visited on the women by family, school and social units, and their powerful resistance to those pressures. Taken as an oblique introduction to the fictional world of “The Women’s Balcony,” the film is highly instructive. More than that, though, it is inspiring on its own. The seven women profiled are smart, tough and funny, and the film allows those qualities to shine through quite movingly.

Angel Wagenstein is a name that very few Americans will recognize. The subject of a new documentary by Andrea Simon, “Angel Wagenstein: Art Is a Weapon,” he is a novelist, screenwriter and political activist who has been applauded, suppressed, garlanded and despised in his native Bulgaria. His considerable output in cinema — over 50 feature films written — ought to have won him greater recognition outside the former Warsaw Pact countries; but the vagaries of film distribution, beset by commercial exigencies and political tensions, have left him all but unknown outside Eastern Europe.

Seeing Simon’s graceful, handsome and intelligent film, and being delighted by Wagenstein’s earthy, candid wit, one hopes that the situation can be ameliorated. Wagenstein managed to fall afoul of the Stalinist leadership of Bulgaria repeatedly. His best-known film, “Stars,” made in East Germany by Konrad Wolf in 1959, won a special jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival, but its frankness regarding the racial underpinnings of the Shoah — a taboo subject in the “anti-Fascist” DDR — made the film “inconvenient.” His irrepressible anti-Stalinism and cheeky humor led to his being expelled from the Bulgarian Communist Party not once but twice.

“Art Is a Weapon,” draws on commentary from numerous film and literary figures, most effectively the British novelist Rana Dasgupta, but the heart of the film is the 94-year-old Wagenstein, still a spiky, obstinate charmer and subject worthy of considerably more research.

The New York Jewish Film Festival, which is co-presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Jewish Museum, runs through Jan. 24 with most screenings taking place at the Walter Reade Theater in Lincoln Center. For information, go to nyjff.org.

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