

Israeli Filmmakers Present
**Surprising
Slices of Reality**

This year's crop of Israeli documentaries tackles a wide range of topics that rarely make the headlines, from how Israel copes with Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers to family dynamics to daily life in a troubled city under the shadow of the Arab-Israeli conflict. > by Heidi J. Gleit

Left: Ohad Naharin in *Mr. Gaga*. (Gadi Dagon)



Above: A scene from *Mr. Gaga*. (Gadi Dagon)

Hundreds of people from all over Israel made their way to the Holot Detention Center in a remote corner of the Negev on a hot June afternoon. They stood sweating outside under the blazing sun (and later the stars) to watch the Holot theater group's play and documentary film at the site where they were created. Two other documentaries, both by the Heymann brothers, are attracting thousands of viewers to theaters around the country for special screenings followed by a discussion with the filmmakers and the leading characters. And then there is the award-winning documentary TV series *Between Hope and Despair*, which was so successful that after two seasons on Israel's Channel 8, a documentary

- Between Fences* (2016)
www.facebook.com/BetweenFences
- Death in the Terminal* (2016)
<http://nfct.org.il/en/movies/death-in-the-terminal>
- Mr. Gaga* (2015)
- Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016)
<http://www.mrqagathefilm.com>
- The Settlers* (2016)
<http://cinophil.com/the-settlers>
- Town on a Wire* (2015)
www.townonawire.co.il

film based on it was released and also has been collecting awards and critical acclaim. Documentary films may not be as popular as their fictional counterparts, but this year's

crop of Israeli documentaries is attracting attention, perhaps because more than a few of them tackle fascinating topics in a thoughtful way.

Tomer and Barak Heymann's film *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* tells the story of Saar Maoz's journey from Kibbutz Sede Eliyyahu in the Beit She'an Valley, where he was born and raised, to London's gay scene to Tel Aviv. After being thrown out of his national religious kibbutz at the age of 17 for breaking Shabbat, Maoz's relationship with his family took a turn for the worse. The film, which took five years to complete, explores the reasons Maoz left his family and Israel as well as the reasons for his return and reconciliation after almost two decades of estrangement.

"My older brother Tomer has been doing this for almost 18 years, since 1999," Barak Heymann says. "We grew up in Kfar Yedidya, a small moshav near Netanya, and Tomer studied film at the Camera Obscura art school in Tel Aviv. After two years of studies, he started working as a counselor for teens in Azur. The result is *It Kinda Scares Me*, which came out in 2001 and is his first film. It attracted 50,000 viewers and is about the relationships he developed in Azur. It shows how his relationship with the kids changed as they got to know each other, how he came out to them, and how they accepted that.

It Kinda Scares Me is an educational film that addresses social issues and still is shown in schools today. It has

helped change awareness among teens."

Barak had not originally intended to follow in his brother Tomer's footsteps.

"I wasn't interested in this at first," he recalls. "I had started to study social work and was a counselor at a place for abused kids."

However, the idea of creating a documentary about the establishment of a Jewish-Arab school in the small Arab town of Kfar Kara, prompted him to change his mind.

"I saw what happened," he explains. "I saw how people reacted to *It Kinda Scares Me* and how it attracted so many people to watch it. People simply went crazy, crying and laughing, coming to watch it again and again, and writing us letters saying it changed their life. It was so exciting. It really moved me and so when the idea came up to do *Bridge over the Wadi*, my attraction to art and politics and the idea that it could foster change propelled me into this."

Bridge over the Wadi was released in 2006. The following year, the brothers started their own small company to create documentary film and television programs in Israel and abroad. Most of their films are set in Israel, but they are starting to work on a film set in Kenya soon. They also produce documentaries for other directors and over the past decade have worked on documentaries on a wide variety of topics, such as *Do you believe in Love?* (a 2013 film about a matchmaker who had been paralyzed by



Above: A scene from *Mr. Gaga*. (Heymann Brothers Films)



Above (top): Saar Maoz with his choir in *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (Todor Krastev)

Above (bottom): A scene from *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* showing Maoz during a visit to his kibbutz. (Shuki Guzik)

muscular dystrophy yet had not lost her appetite for life), a television series on families that was broadcast on Channel 8, and *Mr. Gaga* (a 2015 film about Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin that is slated to be released in the US in fall 2016). They currently are working on a film

about Hadash MK Dov Khenin, among other projects.

"Everything comes from personal encounters – all the films are people we meet and their stories," Barak says, adding, "We do a film because the story touches us on a personal level.

"Tomer met both Ohad and Saar about 25 years ago. He went to see *Kyr* [Wall] and was amazed by Ohad's work in it. Once he saw more and more of the Batsheva Dance Company's work, he wanted to do a film about Ohad, but it took him years to convince him to agree. Around the same time, he met Saar at a party in Tel Aviv. They stayed in touch and it took Saar a long time to agree to the film.

"We go through a long, difficult, profound process with the heroes of each film," Barak explains. "Usually it is three years and sometimes it takes two years, but it was eight and five years for our last two films. That said, we work on several projects at once so it is not that we spent five years just making one film.

"We want the viewer to go through the same process we went through when watching it, so for example, in *Mr. Gaga*, there are moments when you love Ohad and moments when you love him less and in *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* sometimes you side with the family and sometimes with Saar. The films show that people are complex and lives are complex.

"Our ideology is to respect the audience and the heroes of our film and still create films that are tough and complicated, bring up hard questions, and make you work. Our films are based on what happens to real people in their life, but when we go into the editing room, we relate to it like a fictional film with a drama and a conflict, without taking things out of proportion. We give the viewer an experience that is visual and emotional and very strong while being ethical and fair. That is true in all our films."

The result is documentaries that appeal to a wide-ranging audience and not merely to those who can relate to the specifics of the film.

"The Israeli reality creates many conflicts that are of interest. *Mr. Gaga* is a film about people's need to go to the extreme to find their truth. The film is not really about dance, but about dreams, and *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* is about families," he says.

Mr. Gaga, which is being shown around the world, has attracted 100,000 viewers in Israel alone and more than 60,000 in France since its release there one month ago, setting a new record for an Israeli documentary.

"It began as something small and grew. We went all the way with our desire to make this movie great," he says. "Documentaries like *The Gatekeepers* [2012] and *The Flat* [2011] by [Israeli filmmaker] Arnon Goldfinger also brought many people to the theater and led people to

understand that documentary is not less worthy of their interest than a fictional film. *Mr. Gaga* moves that forward a few steps.

"When people see one documentary, then they will go to see another, so they influence each other," he notes. "The borders are being blurred and there's not such a difference anymore."

This genre is flourishing all over the world, he adds, citing the documentaries *Amy* about musician Amy Winehouse and *Pina* about choreographer Pina Bausch. *Mr. Gaga* was expensive because of the rights to use archival material and music as well as trips abroad, however, today it is possible to create a documentary with a very small budget. Furthermore, technology makes it possible for almost anyone to produce a documentary that looks amazing, he adds, noting, "It isn't like 30 years ago when the quality was less good visually. The award-winning 2012 documentary *Searching for Sugar Man*, which was screened in theaters around the globe, includes sections that were produced on an iPhone."

A Tale of One City

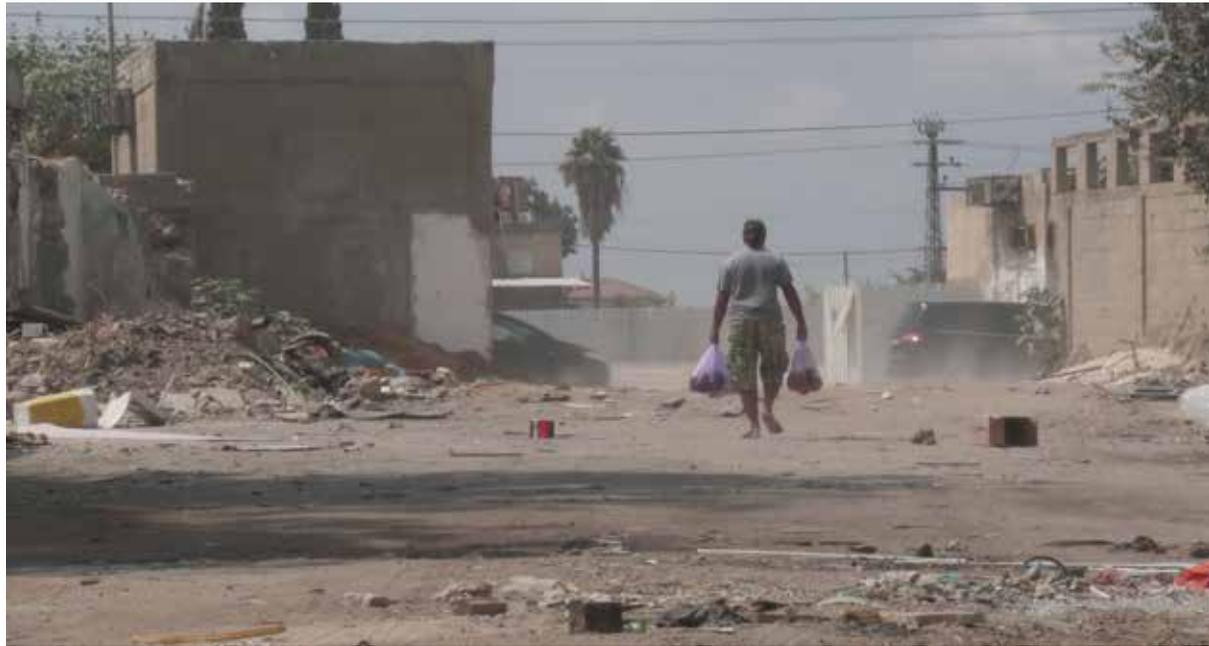
Filmmaker Uri Rosenwaks first arrived in Lod about 12 years ago, when he was working on *Uvda* (Fact), a weekly television program that delves into current affairs. Rosenwaks, who grew up mainly in Beersheba and today lives in Ramat Gan, visited numerous places during the 14 seasons that he spent working as a director at *Uvda*, but Lod stood out.

"We did an episode on people run down and killed by trains in a neighborhood there [where the train ran directly through a residential area with minimal safety measures to prevent people from wandering onto the tracks,] he recalls. "That was when I understood the power of the place. There was anarchy there.

"Lod is a missed opportunity because if the government were to invest in the mixed cities, the people who live there together could be the best examples of coexistence. The difference between what is happening and where the funds and the support are going is significant.

"A few years ago, in 2011, I saw a documentary TV series called *Brick City* set in Newark, New Jersey, about the efforts to make the city a better place. I asked myself if we could do something similar about Lod because there had just been a series of murders there."

The result was *Between Hope and Despair*, an award-



Above and facing page: Scenes from *Town on a Wire* showing a general view of Lod and police collecting evidence in a local cemetery. (Courtesy of *Town on a Wire*)

winning TV series that ran for two seasons on Channel 8 and consisted of a total of 11 episodes. With the support of the New Fund for Cinema and TV and Mifal Hapayis, the Israeli national lottery, Rosenwaks wrote and directed it and Eyal Blachson researched and produced it.

“The goal of our series was to examine how to reform the city and if that is possible. We did not conduct research beforehand – we filmed from the first day and got to all sorts of people,” he says. “We went to the conflict in the heart of the city and its old neighborhoods, to where there was a conflict to resolve, crime rates to lower, and to understand what happened. We could not address every conflict in the city, so we touched the issues that we thought were important: the Jewish Seed Group [known in Hebrew as a *garin torani*, it is an organized group of religious, nationalist Jews that moved into one of Lod’s most troubled neighborhoods with the goal of changing it], the violence, the crime, and how to solve these problems. We focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict because that is the most critical issue to advancing Lod.

“We worked on it, and just on it, for four years,” Rosenwaks says, explaining that afterwards they used the material from the TV series to make the documentary film *Town on a Wire* (2015).

Comparisons to the fictional American TV show *The Wire* inspired the film’s name. While the TV series was created for Israeli viewers and focuses almost exclusively on the present, the movie’s target audience is abroad and so it includes some history to provide context.

After the War of Independence in 1948, Lod was home to a mixed population of Jews and Arabs, who lived side by side. The situation in Lod deteriorated in the 1990s, with the arrival of new residents from a variety of backgrounds and the construction of the city of Modi’in and the town of Shoham nearby, prompting an exodus of Lod’s middle class.

Rosenwaks and Blachson began filming in early 2011, around the time that the Israeli Ministry of Interior appointed Meir Nitzan to fill the role of mayor of Lod in order to straighten out the city’s numerous financial irregularities. Nitzan had served for many years as the mayor of the nearby city of Rishon Lezion, which grew into one of the most populous and successful cities in Israel on his watch. After he balanced the budget, in October 2013, elections were held for the first time since the Interior Ministry had taken over management of the troubled city seven years earlier. Attorney Yair Revivo, a native of Lod who served as the municipal director-general under

Nitzan, was elected mayor and he appointed Aharon Atias, a leader of the Jewish Seed Group, to his former post. Both the TV series and the film cover this period, showing how key figures in the city grapple with selected issues during it.

“If you want to make an allegory, Meir Nitzan is the old Mapai party [the precursor of today’s Labor Party] with liberal views in the twilight years of his life,” Rosenwaks says. “That is the allegory of the Ashkenazi elite that is not in power anymore and so others remain – the Jewish Seed Group – and they are the ones who are ruling Lod now. Then you have the Arab minority. The people from these two extremes have more in common with each other than with the old Mapainiks. The Jewish Seed Group also did something serious, something the left did not do: it sent 1,000 people to live in Lod. Neither group is talking about coexistence, but both talk about living side by side with respect. It is a different approach.

“These things take a long time and Lod is influenced by what is happening around it in Israel, like the clash with Gaza in the summer of 2014. Are there good intentions? Yes. Are things changing? It is too early to know, but there is awareness of the need to do something.

“Nitzan had good intentions, but he is not a resident and this change needs to come from the residents. Revivo needs time to grow. He is too new in the role of mayor. We can judge him in five years and see what he has done. I think he wants to do good, but there are lots of problems there. Jewish-Arab relations in general got to a bad place and that can push things back a great deal.”

Atias has changed since becoming the municipal director-general because now he is responsible for the entire city, not just the Jewish Seed Group, and he is taking his responsibility seriously and dealing fairly with everyone, Rosenwaks adds.

The response to both the TV series and the film has been overwhelmingly positive thus far.

“When we had the premier in Lod, people from most sectors of the population liked it. Everyone feels OK with how they are portrayed in it – that their case was heard and they got a chance to say their piece,” he says. “The film also sparked lots of interest in the city and that has done a lot of good for the city.

“I like Lod a lot and am involved there. I still go there once or twice a month, sometimes I go every week. There is something there that pulls you in.”

A Wealth of Subjects to Document

Rosenwaks chaired the Israeli Documentary Filmmakers Forum from 2010 to 2013.

“I studied film at Tel Aviv University,” he recalls. “At first, I wanted to work on fictional feature films, but when I actually tried it, it spoke to me less than making documentaries. Documentaries appeal to me on many levels – intellectually, creatively, and more.”

Over the years, he has directed, produced, and written award-winning documentary films and TV programs on a wide variety of topics, from environmental issues to Beduin women in the Negev to a three-part series on scholar Yeshayahu Leibowitz.

“For 15 years, documentary film has been flowering in Israel,” he says. “The cable and satellite channels have been investing in documentaries plus Israel is a paradise for stories to turn into documentaries and these documentaries are succeeding around the world. The films have gone far. The major festivals all have Israeli films competing in them and the number is rising. Today 120 documentaries are produced in Israel each year.

“What has changed now is that every few years, there are suddenly a few documentaries in the movie theaters. Today this is happening with *Presenting Princess Shaw* and *Mr. Gaga*. More and more people are going to see documentaries. A good film is a good film – and this is true even when it is a documentary. *Presenting Princess Shaw* and *Mr. Gaga* are great films, so they will succeed.”

Another change that Rosenwaks has noticed is that many more people are eager to expose themselves in documentaries today.

“Today when you come to film people, they are ready





Above (top): A scene from *Between Fences*. (Philippe Bellaïche)

Above (bottom): A scene from *The Settlers*. (*The Settlers*)

without prompting,” he says. “Once it was different – you would go through a process with the protagonists before they would open up to you. Today you go to people and they want to tell you everything immediately.

“Because all our lives are broadcast or photographed these days, a documentary must be more of an art form than ever before,” he adds.

Another trend Rosenwaks has noticed, which is partic-

ularly noteworthy in a time when brief, instant messages are in vogue, is the creation of long, feature-length documentaries that can last for 90 minutes or more.

“People are not used to watching something for such a long time these days, yet because everything today is so speedy, people are looking for an alternative alongside the current media flood,” he notes.

Rosenwaks suggests this is because “documentary today is one of the few places of serious investigation, somewhere you can weigh things and think about them. These things are not happening in journalism today, so the documentary is kind of maintaining free speech. It is one of the few places you cannot insert advertising content into in Israel. So that creates a new place.

“You need perspective and so you cannot say yet what will happen with this genre in the future,” Rosenwaks notes. “The Israeli Documentary Filmmakers Forum still is engaged in a daily battle to protect this genre and allow it to continue to exist. The tycoons and politicians do not like documentaries.”

More than a few documentaries take on controversial topics that do not receive much attention in the mainstream media.

In *The Settlers* (2016), Shimon Dotan and Oron Adar take an in-depth look at the Jews who call the West Bank home. They focus a sympathetic lens on the extreme fringe of the settlers and key figures behind the growth and development of the settlements over the past five decades, shedding light on a far from homogenous group that very little is known about even though it is often in the headlines.

Another issue that caught the attention of several documentary filmmakers is the plight of the approximately 40,000 asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan who ended up in Israel. In *Death in the Terminal* (2016), Asaf Sudry and Tali Shemesh take a hard look at the circumstances that led to the murder of Habtum Zarhum, an Eritrean asylum seeker who Israelis mistakenly assumed was a terrorist during the fatal terror attack at the Beersheba bus station on October 18, 2015. The film raises tough questions about how Israelis relate to those they identify as other, among other topics. The film, which is not easy to watch, won multiple awards at the 2016 Tel Aviv International Documentary Film Festival (Docaviv), including best Israeli film.

While Sudry and Shemesh focus on one horrific inci-

dent, Dr. Chen Alon and Avi Mograbi take a broader look at asylum seekers’ experiences in *Between Fences* (2016) with the hope of fostering change. An actor, director, and political activist, Alon studied the work of Brazilian director Augusto Boal, who founded the Theater of the Oppressed, a process of using theater as a tool to transform political reality and further human rights. Alon has spent more than a decade delving into Boal’s ideas and developing his own version of them, Polarized Theater of the Oppressed, in which he brings together non-actors from rival or polarized groups to create a theatrical work.

“This enables participants to see themselves and their opponent differently, as well as the context in which they live,” Alon explains. “Polarized Theater of the Oppressed is based on a dialogue process that ultimately enables participants to reframe the balance of power between themselves and establish alliances to change their reality.”

In 2014, Alon and Mograbi, an award-winning filmmaker, decided to initiate a project to help African asylum seekers in Israel. They applied the Polarized Theater of the Oppressed process to asylum seekers confined to the Holot Detention Center and Israeli citizens. Mograbi documented the process to create *Between Fences*, a documentary film which shows how the participants gradually become acquainted with one another and work together to create a play that will help Israelis understand and relate to asylum seekers. The film shows the participants engaging in various theater exercises that prompt the asylum seekers to share why they left their homeland, their harrowing journey to Israel, and the many difficulties they encounter in Israel, from Kafkaesque bureaucracy to overt discrimination. The Israelis share their thoughts on Israel’s role as a place of refuge, particularly in light of the fact that Israel initiated the international conventions on refugees in the wake of the Holocaust.

Between Fences also includes selected scenes from the play, so the storyline operates on two levels. It currently is being shown at select venues around Israel, often after a performance of the play, which adds another layer of context. This was the case on World Refugee Day, when the play was followed by the film’s premier at its place of birth, Holot. This combination opens windows into a world that few Israelis see, provoking thought about both Israel’s responsibility to asylum seekers and the role of theater in society. Israeli documentary films are indeed bringing attention to a broad range of complex issues today. ■