



ARRANGED

A film by Stefan Schaefer & Diane Crespo



USA/2007/89 mins.

HD/shot with 35mm lenses/16:9/ Color / Stereo

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SYNOPSIS

Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. A young Orthodox woman, ROCHEL MESHENBERG, is about to begin her first year as a special education teacher at the local public school. She is also about to embark on what her father and mother call the “most exciting time of her life” – the process of finding a husband via the time-tested method of using a “shadchen,” or matchmaker.

As the school year gets underway, Rochel meets NASIRA KHALDI, a Muslim woman of Syrian descent. Nasira is also a first-year teacher. The two young women – Rochel in long skirt and conservative blouse, Nasira in headscarf – stand out in this public school context. The principal, a secular Westchester Jew, is forever reminding them that although they are some of her smartest, most gifted teachers, they are also stunted by their outmoded customs, religions, and by their patriarchal worldviews. She tells them of her experiences in the women’s movement and her desire to see them reach their full potentials.

As the school year progresses, Rochel and Nasira realize they share much in common, not least of which is that they are both going through what the outside world would call “arranged marriages.” As their friendship deepens, they are exposed to their respective worlds. They prepare for school at one another’s houses, meet one another’s families, and discuss commonalities and differences.

Meanwhile they are also both meeting potential spouses. Rochel is having no luck. The shadchen is pairing her with men who, although they have good jobs or prospects, don’t match her in intellect, curiosity in the world, or humor. The men presented to Nasira by her family are also not her equal. Rochel begins to question whether this age-old practice is going to work. Nasira has greater faith, as she views her parent’s loving union as such a success.

With the family pressure too great, and the dates continuing to go badly, Rochel storms from the house. She visits an estranged cousin, who left the faith years ago, and is exposed to what a secular life might be. Meanwhile Nasira, concerned at her friend’s state, and having met a promising prospect herself, does the unthinkable. She manipulates the Orthodox matchmaking system on behalf of her friend. The gamble pays off.

As the school year draws to an end, these two women have found their future spouses. They have also developed a friendship that transcends their insular Brooklyn communities and the religions that seem so at odds in the broader world. They share a friendship that will endure as they move on to become wives and mothers, and continue to be modern women with deep religion convictions.

PROJECT HISTORY

ARRANGED is based loosely on the experiences of Yuta Silverman, an Orthodox Jewish woman from Borough Park, Brooklyn. Seeing the Israeli film USHPIZIN, produced by Orthodox filmmakers, gave her the courage and inspiration to try and tell one of her many stories.

With no connections or experiences in the film world, and working from a directory on the IFP website, she began making random calls to New York based production companies. She reached Cicala Filmworks in November, 2005. During a series of meetings – in which she was still using a pseudonym – she told Stefan Schaefer about her experiences of going through an arranged marriage process and also about her friendship with a Pakistani Muslim woman. Stefan, although he found the story elements very promising, would often remind Yuta that he was a man and non-Jew. He offered to write the treatment and then pass it along to his good friend, the director Jessica Sharzer (SPEAK). Yuta responded: “If she’s not Orthodox, it makes no difference to me, you may as well direct it.”

As the months passed, Yuta convinced Stefan to write the screenplay on spec. He did, and, at a certain point, discussed the possibility of producing it through his company Cicala Filmworks, with his partner Diane Crespo as a co-director. Yuta said she could bring some financing to the project and, together with the HD camera package and production services Cicala could provide, the three began to consider shooting the film over the summer. Yuta showed the screenplay to her rabbi and, though he wouldn’t bless it, he did say he was not going to forbid her from moving forward.

When casting directors from Kathleen Backel and Antonia Dauphin said they loved the script, and had several weeks to cast between SOPRANOS episodes, the production schedule began to come into focus. The film was shot in 17 days on location in Brooklyn and New Jersey. In true indie fashion, the primary locations were Yuta’s house in Borough Park, Stefan’s in Park Slope and Diane’s apartment in Brooklyn Heights. The school location was shot at the Jewish Education Center in Elizabeth, NJ, where Yuta’s father is an administrator.

CREDITS:

Crew

Co-Directors	Diane Crespo Stefan C. Schaefer
Producers	Diane Crespo Stefan C. Schaefer
Executive Producers	Andrew Lund Yuta Silverman
Consulting Producer	Olaf de Fleur Johannesson
Line Producer	Isaac Wilkins
Script	Stefan C. Schaefer
Story	Stefan C. Schaefer Yuta Silverman
Cinematography	Dan Hersey
Film Editing	Erin Greenwell
Sound	George A. Lara Allan Zaleski
Original Music	Sohrab Habibion Michael Hampton
Production Design	Keren Kohen
Art Director	Elizabeth J. Jones
Costumes	Beth Kelleher
Hair and Make-up	Christy McCabe
Casting directors	Kathleen Backel Antonia Dauphin

Cast:

Rochel	Zoe Lister-Jones
Nasira	Francis Benhamou
Matan	John Rothman
Sheli	Mimi Lieber
Abdul-Halim	Laith Nakli
Elona	Doris Belack
Principal Jacoby	Marcia Jean Kurtz
Avi	Trevor Braun
Elliot	Daniel London
Ahmed	Arian Moayed
Miriam	Peggy Gormley
Matt	Jake Robards
Leah	Alysia Reiner
Jamil	Sanjit De Silva
Eddie	David Castro

FESTIVALS / AWARDS

- South by Southwest Film Festival, March 2007
- Berkshire Int'l Film Festival, May 2007
 - “Best of Fest” Audience Award, Narrative Feature
- Brooklyn Int'l Film Festival, June 2007
 - Grand Chameleon Award – Best Film
 - Best Feature Film Award

DIRECTORS' BIO AND FILMOGRAPHY

STEFAN SCHAEFER – Writer, Co-Director/Producer

Stefan Schaefer was born in Boston, spent his childhood in Sussex, England, and his adolescent years in Detroit and New York. He graduated from Wesleyan University with degrees in political theory and theater. Following a year and a half in Germany - where he studied as a Fulbright Scholar and worked as a journalist - he returned to New York and founded Cicala Filmworks with Diane Crespo.

Over the past ten years he has written, directed and produced feature films, documentaries, music videos and TV commercials. CONFESS, his debut narrative feature, premiered at the 2005 Hamptons Int'l Film Festival, where Stefan won the Best Screenwriter award. The political thriller – starring Eugene Byrd, Ali Larter, Melissa Leo, William Sadler and Glenn Fitzgerald – has a foreign distribution deal with New Films International, and a North American deal with MTL.

In 2006 he directed and produced the one-hour television documentary CONTESTED STREETS, which looks at what New York City can learn from London, Paris and Copenhagen in terms of organizing its streets and public spaces. The film will be broadcast nationally via FreeSpeechTV in 2007.

In April-May 2007 he was on location in Iceland, where THE HIGHER FORCE, a feature he co-wrote, co-produced and acted in, was helmed by Olaf Johannesson. The film stars, among others, Michael Imperioli from the SOPRANOS.

Other narrative films in the works include:

- WINNIE (working title) - a late-in-life empowerment story written for Bumbershoot Productions (CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES), with Shirley MacLaine attached to star.
- FERTILITY (working title) - a family drama/comedy he will co-direct and produce with Diane Crespo. They plan to shoot the film in late 2007/early 2008.

Awards include: Best Screenwriter at the Hamptons Film Festival (2005), Grand Prize in Digital Filmmaking from Panasonic and Apple (2004), the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Screenwriting (2003), and selection to attend the Talent Campus at the Berlin International Film Festival.

DIANE CRESPO – Co-Director/Producer

Diane was born and raised in Queens. Drawn to the dramatic arts at a young age, she received a B.A. in theatre from Roger Williams College, and studied at the graduate level at the London School of Dramatic Arts.

Following a brief stint in L.A., where she worked at Canon and New World Pictures, she returned to New York to work in theatre. She met Stefan working off-off Broadway, where she directed a series of one-act plays he had written. They went on to form the production company Cicala Filmworks, where their initial focus was creating short documentaries for clients such as the Guggenheim Museum, the NYC Department of Education, and Roundabout Theatre. As the company grew, she also produced and directed numerous music videos and commercials for clients such as Ben Folds Five, 1-800 Flowers, Virgin Records and 97.9 La Mega.

Documentary credits include: CONTESTED STREETS, TAKING A RISK IN EDUCATION, a two-part film on educational reform; and RISE TO THE CHALLENGE, a three-part documentary on successful parenting created for the College Board.

Other films in development include:

- FERTILITY (working title) - a family drama/comedy she will co-direct and produce with Stefan Schaefer. They plan to shoot the film in late 2007/early 2008.
- Drawing on her own biography, Diane is developing a coming-of-age story about a Puerto Rican kid who discovers her sexuality – and the fact that she is lesbian – while watching a 4th of July parade. ARRANGED is her narrative feature film debut as a director/producer.

CAST'S BIOS AND FILMOGRAPHIES

ZOE LISTER-JONES – A native of Brooklyn, Zoe graduated with honors from NYU Tisch School of the Arts, where she studied at the Atlantic Theatre Company Acting School. She wrote and starred in the critically acclaimed one-woman show "Codependence is a Four Letter Word", which premiered at P.S. 122. She has had guest starring roles on shows such as LAW & ORDER and appears in the forthcoming films TURN THE RIVER, GOYBAND and the MARCONI BROTHERS.

FRANCIS BENHAMOU – A graduate of NYU, Francis appears in the forthcoming film NEAL CASSIDY, and has appeared on TV shows such as THE BRONX IS BURNING. Of Moroccan descent, Francis grew up in Miami.

JOHN ROTHMAN – A veteran of film, TV and theatre, John has recently appeared in films such as THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA, UNITED 93, and RIME.

LAITH NAKLI – Born to Syrian parents, Laith grew up in England and Damascus. He studied acting at the William Esper Studio and is a member of the Arab American Comedy Festival troop. TV credits include: THIRD WATCH, LAW AND ORDER CI, SOPRANOS, RESCUE ME and TRAVELER. Film credits include: LIPPERY SLOPE, SADIQ, and PIECE OF AMERICA. He will participate this year at the Sundance Directors Lab, working with director Braden King.

MIMI LIEBER – A veteran of film, TV and theatre, Mimi has had roles in films such as BULWORTH and THE THING ABOUT MY FOLKS, as well as recurring roles on LAW AND ORDER. She was in the original cast of GREASE on Broadway.

MARCIA JEAN KURTZ – Marcia Jean has had memorable roles in such influential films as DOG DAY AFTERNOON, REQUIEM FOR A DREAM and INSIDE MAN.

DANIEL LONDON – Daniel starred in the critically acclaimed OLD JOY. He has also played supporting roles in films such as PATCH ADAMS and MINORITY REPORT.