



JAFFA

Directed by Keren Yedaya

“Absorbing and Touching!”
-Ray Bennett, *The Hollywood Reporter*



Israeli | 2009 | Drama
Hebrew with English subtitles | 90 min. | 1.85 : 1 | Dolby Digital

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SYNOPSIS

In the heart of the Israeli city of Jaffa, Reuven's garage is a family-run business. The garage workers consist of Reuven's beautiful daughter Mali, his violent and distant son Meir, as well as a young Palestinian, Toufik. No one suspects that Mali and Toufik have been in love for years, and that Mali is pregnant with Toufik's child. As the two lovers secretly make their wedding arrangements, tension steadily builds between Toufik and Meir, who openly voices his disdain and prejudices about Arabs. As these relationships continue to intensify, emotions begin to boil, resulting in an astonishing conclusion.

FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

Nominated – Best Actress, Dana Igvy – **Awards of the Israeli Film Academy**

Nominated – Best Music – **Awards of the Israeli Film Academy**

Official Selection:

Cannes Int'l Film Festival
Toronto Int'l Film Festival
Palm Springs Int'l Film Festival
Rio de Janeiro Int'l Film Festival
Hamptons Int'l Film Festival
Warsaw Film Festival
São Paulo Int'l Film Festival
Warsaw Jewish Film Festival

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Keren Yedaya

What was the starting point of the film?

I began thinking about *Jaffa* when I finished the script for *Or – My Treasure*. I felt the need to do a political film about Israel and Palestine. But I was searching for a much wider audience than the one usually attracted to these "political films." This desire came out of a genuine belief that you can create a piece of subversive art that doesn't give up on that wide audience. This search naturally led me to the popular Egyptian cinema on which I was raised. When I was a child, Israeli television aired Egyptian films every Friday... This point of reference became a fascinating basis to work from, both politically and aesthetically.

Tell me about the writing of the script.

I've worked with two good friends of mine so far: Sari Ezouz on *Or – My Treasure* and Illa Ben Porat on *Jaffa*. Illa had helped me write my first student film. Writing a screenplay is like torture for me...so I prefer to throw ideas around and exchange viewpoints with someone else.

Once again you portray lower-middle-class characters.

Yes. At least for now, I still feel the need to write about characters who are struggling for their basic human needs.

The family members have great difficulty communicating with each other...

Absolutely. I think that this is our tragedy: we just don't listen to each other's points of view. In the film, the characters don't see each other, don't speak to each other, don't listen to each other...On the surface, this family looks completely normal and functional. Deep down, though, they're pretty screwed up...

Can you tell me about the father and the son?

One anecdote comes to mind: while on the set, Moni Moshonov, who plays the father, suddenly realized what his character really embodies. He said: *"I understand now – I am the silent voice. It only seems like I'm the nice guy, not racist, a good father...but I'm really just as guilty as everyone else."* So my belief is that the miserable son, who is racist and violent, isn't any worse than the father. In fact, he only expresses the racism and violence inside all of the characters, perhaps with the exception of Mali.

After Meir's death, the family seems to be more at peace...

Yes, we could say that Toufik, in a way, has done them a favour by killing Meir... They are relieved now that the "bad" son is gone. Originally, Moni's character was supposed to be sick and have a heart attack when his son dies. But then I realized that we should go for the opposite: he's athletic and fit and feels good. Although it is a taboo to speak about the benefits of a son's death, life *is* in a way better now...

How do you view Meir's death?

In my mind, his parents are as responsible for his death as Toufik is. And my belief is that his death is like a suicide. I regard him as a "terrorist" of sorts: he's violent and he's about to explode all the time. He's the only one who shouts, the only one who reveals that the family has serious problems. He's like the black sheep of the family but he's in fact only their mirror. That is the reason for the relief they feel when he dies. Now nobody will force them to face the truth. They can continue to live in their lies.

What about Mali?

Mali feels guilty for Meir's death. This guilt dictates the rest of her decisions.

Why did you decide to set the film in Jaffa?

It took me a year to decide where I wanted to find the story I wanted to tell. It seemed more interesting to me to speak about the situation in Israel and not in the territories that are better known as the "Occupied Territories," -- Gaza, Jenin, etc...There, the Palestinian struggle for independence is much clearer compared to the one inside Israel...one much more complicated and less known to the world. The Palestinians that live here ("Israeli Arabs") are indeed Israeli citizens but they are still deprived of some rights, for example, the right to study Palestinian history in schools. By shooting in Jaffa, I am trying to show that the story of Israel and Palestine cannot be solved with a separation fence.

In the film, abortion points to the contradictions of the Israeli society.

That's right. I've tried to show that you can speak freely of abortion because Israel is basically a very liberal society, but that you still have to face a committee and justify your choice if you want to have it for free. Now everybody knows that you can lie about your reasons and no one on the committee will try to stop you from having an abortion if you want to go ahead with it.

Why did you want to shoot *Jaffa* in such a different style?

My main aesthetic idea was to make a film whose package was sweet and inviting – one that on the face of things would look like a popular melodrama...a sweet candy for the audience but with a strange taste. As I mentioned, popular Egyptians films are my main influence. With them, I am trying to question what is considered "high" and "low" art, what is "high" and "low" culture. This is of course not only interesting from an artistic view but also from a political one. In this regard, the most important decision I made was to abandon a dolly and crane – tools considered to be "high," western, and aesthetic – for a zoom, a tool considered to be cheap and "low." The zoom is back....!

What kind of statement did you want to make?

I am trying to renew the debate on what's aesthetic and artistic as opposed to what's cheap, "ugly," and popular...And even maybe to stretch, if only a little, these boundaries that limit us as "artists." I also wanted to show that culturally and aesthetically, it is possible to enjoy another's culture (in my case Arab culture)...not just the European culture which currently dictates that which is considered "artistic."

Was it a hard process for you?

Very much so... Hopefully, the result now looks logical and even pretty and interesting. But I, as well as people involved in the project, had many doubts as to whether this "mix" would work.

The hospital scene is amazing...

Filmmakers usually try to find ways to avoid moments that hard to deal with them. I personally think that those supposedly uneventful moments that take place in between "strong" scenes are the most interesting. So I tried to show the family's grief at great length: I didn't feel like jumping rapidly from the son's death to what happens next.

How did you cast the film?

Actually, it was quite a long process because at the very beginning, roles in the family were reversed: the father was Moroccan-born and the mother was Ashkenazi. Obviously I wanted to cast different actors than those I finally chose... But then something happened: one member of the cast was suddenly unavailable and for some reason it clicked in my head that Ronit and Moni Moshonov would be a perfect match. So I switched the parents' characters and made the father Ashkenazi and the mother Moroccan-born, which seemed just right.

I also wanted badly to work with Dana Ivgy again and I thought it was interesting to cast her as Ronit's daughter once more. What can you do? Why change actors when you can just change the characters...? When I was in the editing room, I even realized that they tend to look more and more like each other! There's a shot of Dana waking up where I thought for a minute that it was Ronit. They're all amazing.

What about the two young men?

I discovered Roy Assaf (Meir) because my husband had directed him in action films and I thought he was a very intense actor. Although he's very charming in real life, I wanted him to look wretched in the film and so he put on weight and he died his hair yellowish. No wonder he's jealous of Toufik...

We spent quite some time to cast Toufik's character until my assistant showed me pictures of Mahmoud Shalaby. He is a very talented musician but he'd never acted before. So I asked him to do a screen test with Dana Ivgy: he improvised and readily took her in his arms and went "*I love you! Don't have an abortion!*" He was so good and credible that I offered him the part immediately.

What kind of music did you want for the film?

It was my first time using music in a film and Shushan, who's Moroccan-born, wrote the score. Our inspiration was Egyptian popular cinema. Like the film, the music is a type of cultural mix.

INTERVIEW WITH RONIT ELKABETZ

This marks the second time you have worked with Keren Yedaya. Did you agree to do it even before reading her script?

I'd told her I would do the part for her first feature, *My Treasure*, before reading the script. So of course I told her I'd do the part again for her second feature. I totally trust her and I'm so excited about our work together. What we do together is a great, multifaceted experience both professionally and personally. It's been this way ever since we met. We're so lucky!

What attracted you to the script?

When I do a part I get involved in every aspect of the film: the storyline, what the director is trying to get across, whether it be hidden or obvious, and how it can teach us something about ourselves or about the society we live in, how I can increase my knowledge about the medium of film etc. I'm also deeply fascinated by the disturbing quality of the plot. And by my role as a matter of course. What I like more than anything is embarking on a "journey" to get familiar with my character.

Once again you portray Dana Ivgy's mother. Has this created a special connection between you both?

Ever since I met Dana we've established a strong, quiet bond and a deep chemistry. We know each other well by now but we're as excited today as when we first met. We don't have to talk about things over and over again. The strength of our relationship is obvious. For me it's pretty natural to keep portraying Dana's mother in a new life experience and I'd be thrilled if we had more opportunities to work together in the future.

How can you describe your character?

Some mothers sacrifice themselves for their children and some others, including Osnat, only think about themselves. I had to figure out why she was so "wicked", so cold, so cruel, so selfish and so blind... It's tough but as always the "secret" behind her behaviour lies in a concealed wound. Her painful past doesn't explain it all. She's a grown-up and she could have overcome her suffering to be a better mother to her kids. But she can't. This is why also she loves almost no one but her husband. She has an existential fear that the world is against her. This is why she's so domineering. Her take on society goes back to a wrong upbringing. On the one hand she seems to be excited by the fact that her daughter may be having an affair with a married man. On the other she has preconceived ideas about the Arabs because she's afraid of and angry with the world and because she was taught simplistic ideas – she was taught to look down on and be wary of the Arabs.

She seems to literally worship her husband.

She only trusts this man, whom she met in the Army where he was her superior officer. He's the only one who can calm her down. She pays attention to him. He does whatever she likes. They are almost self-sufficient. In a way he saved her life. He protects and comforts her, he gives her strength and all she needs: the father she lost and the love she never had. Were it not for him, God knows how she would have ended up. She loves him passionately. It's been thrilling to play opposite Moni Moshonov who's a great actor.

She has a neurotic relationship with her son...

Her relationship with him is disastrous. She got pregnant with Meir by accident, when she was still very young. She didn't want to have this child, who was about to overshadow her, but she didn't dare to have an abortion. Meir grew into a suffering, rebellious child because he knew she didn't love him enough. His distant, fruitless relationship with his mother made Meir violent towards himself and the people around him. And so Osnat became even more hostile to him. Osnat behaved as if this child wasn't hers. He was a nuisance to her.

On the other hand she has a more peaceful relationship with her daughter.

Osnat doesn't have a problem with her daughter Mali. Unlike Meir who rebelled and constantly reminds her of how horrible a mother she was, Mali never rebelled. She just gave in. So Osnat doesn't feel threatened by the "kind" and obedient Mali. This is why she loves her. With her, Osnat is a mother all over again and she behaves more kindly. With Mali, Osnat feels like a worthy mother.

How did you get into the character?

I'd never portrayed a woman like her. To do so I tried to understand her needs, her disarray and her suffering, but also her charm and her humanity despite her extreme ideas – without ever being judgmental. As with all the characters I've played it's been a long research. This woman hurts other people but she doesn't think she does the wrong thing – she only tries to protect herself. This is how I built the character – by protecting myself! From then on I really enjoyed working on this character who has so much freedom and whose complexity has amazed me.

How does Keren Yedaya work with actors?

For Keren the script is just a starting point that is bound to develop. She waits until she meets the actors to develop and improve the script and to get the most out of it uncompromisingly. We work on it on a daily basis during one to two months, or even longer, and this process doesn't stop until the very last day of the shoot.

You portray a Sephardic woman married with an Ashkenazi. How important is this mixed couple in the film?

We always tend to believe that the Sephardic-Ashkenazi issue is dead and buried, but it surfaces all the time. So I thought to myself: how much are we still concerned by this legitimate yet absurd issue in today's Israel? And what does it tell about us? The encounter between the two communities was incredibly tense. So we have to be very accurate when it comes to the social reality of this country. As a result, and as Keren wanted to thoroughly question the Israelis' position towards the Palestinians in today's context, she had to go back in time to understand how it all began. Today's Israel is a pretty complex place. For those who claim they got along well with the Arabs in North Africa, things somewhat changed when they came to Israel. And the early European immigrants, aka "Ashkenazi Zionists", fought against the Arabs while they were building up this country: "leftists" who claimed to be "favourable" to Arabs were to be found among this group – and yet all the while they intensified the occupation and the abuses of Arabs by Israel. Anyway, when it comes to the true relationship with the Arabs, there's no use speaking of left-wingers vs. right-wingers, or Ashkenazi vs. Sephardic in Israel. In *Jaffa*, Keren has tried to address with subtlety the true emotional condition of both communities through a love story. And to have a "Sephardic-Ashkenazi" take on the issue.

What did you think about the film?

Whether you like it or not, this film reminds us that there are people who live further South or further East, no matter how much we want to forget about them. Keren wanted to make a popular yet disturbing film which addresses issues we overlook in our daily

lives, and even more so in art. She's trying to reach out to the Israeli audience, to establish contact with them and to do so with love, tenderness and humanity. Her complex yet simple cinematic language allows us to go beyond the confines of cinema and to get to the core of life in order to bring about a real debate.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY

Confirmed feminist, member of the association for the struggle for women's right, she also militates in protest groups against Palestinian occupation. Her movies represent well her political actions. They are portraits of women who struggle for their dignity in a man's world, divided in classes, ruled by the military. Keren Yedaya studied at the Camera Obscura School in Tel-Aviv. Her school film *Elinor* (1994) describes daily humiliations against a young Israeli army girl. In her second short movie, *Lulu* (1998), she deals for the first time with the subject of prostitution. In 2000, she shoots her third short movie *Les Dessous*. She directs her first feature *Or-Mon trésor* in 2003, and wins the camera d'or and the Grand Prix de la Semaine de la Critique at the Cannes film Festival in 2004. In May 2009, *Jaffa* is presented the Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival.

FILMOGRAPHY:

Jaffa (2009)

Or (2004) aka "Or (My Treasure)"

Les dessous (2001)

Lulu (1999)

Elinor (1994)

CREDITS

Crew

A film by

Keren Yedaya

Written by

Keren Yedaya with the collaboration of Illa Ben Porat

Executive Producers

Bizibi (France) / Jérôme Bleitrach - Emmanuel Agneray

Transfax Films Productions (Israel)/Marek Zozenbaum

Rohfilm (Germany) / Benny Drechsel - Karsten Stöter

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Director of Photography</i> | Pierre Aim |
| <i>Editor</i> | Assaf Korman |
| <i>Sound Recordist</i> | Jörg Theil |
| <i>Sound Editor</i> | Carola Richter |
| <i>Mixing Editor</i> | Dominique Delguste |
| <i>Production Manager</i> | Eyal Sadan |
| <i>Production Designer</i> | Avi Fahima |
| <i>Costume Designer</i> | Lee Alembik |
| <i>Sound designer</i> | Jörg Theil |
| <i>Original Score</i> | Shushan |

Cast

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|----------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Mali</i> | Dana Ivgy |
| <i>Reuven</i> | Moni Moshonov |
| <i>Osnat</i> | Ronit Elkabetz |
| <i>Toufik</i> | Mahmoud Shalaby |
| <i>Meir</i> | Roy Assaf |
| <i>Hassan</i> | Hussein Yassin Mahajneh |
| <i>Shiran</i> | Lili Ivgy |
| <i>Naima</i> | Zenabh Mahrab |
| <i>Evtesam</i> | Suma Zenabh |
| <i>Suzi</i> | Dalya Beger |
| <i>Ebtisam</i> | Suma Zeinab |