



Off White Lies

A film by Maya Kenig

“Charming...full of wit, [and] sex appeal! Vibrant with juicy young cinema.”
- Yair Raveh, *Cinemascope*



**Israel / 2011 / Drama-War / Hebrew w. English Subtitles /
86 min. / 1.85:1 / Dolby SRD**

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SYNOPSIS

After years of living apart from her dad, Libby, an introverted yet sharp-witted teenager, is sent to live with him in Israel. Her arrival coincides with the outbreak of the second Lebanon war. Libby quickly discovers that her dad, Shaul, is an infantile eccentric and that he is “in-between apartments” (in other words: homeless). Shaul comes up with a creative plan to put a roof over their heads—they pose as refugees from the bombarded northern region of Israel, and are taken in by a well-off family in Jerusalem. Finally in a “normal” household, Shaul and Libby begin to build their father-daughter relationship, but their false identities can’t last forever, especially as Libby unleashes teenage fury at the lies permeating her life, those she must tell now, and those she’s been fed since childhood.

FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

WINNER: Best Actor (Gur Bentwich), **JERUSALEM Film Festival**

NOMINATED: **7 Israeli Academy Awards** including Best Film, Best Director and Best screenplay

OFFICIAL SELECTION:

Berlin International Film Festival
Palm Springs International Film Festival
Busan International Film Festival
Vancouver International Film Festival
Chicago International Film Festival
Toronto Jewish Film Festival
San Francisco Jewish Film festival

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR – MAYA KENIG

How did you first have the idea for OFF WHITE LIES?

Just before the Second Lebanese War broke out I became a mother, and so I found myself breastfeeding while watching the news on TV. The sights were hard to watch, disorienting, as goes with wars, and that's how I got my "baptism by fire" for being a mom in this extreme country- Israel. Amid all the horrors shown on TV, one positive item stood out—Esther, of Kiryat Shmona (the most bombarded city in Israel), was sitting in Yael's kitchen in Tel Aviv, drinking coffee and chatting. The announcer said that until two days before Esther and Yael were complete strangers, but that now they are close friends. Apparently, Yael and her family offered their hospitality to Esther and her family on account of the war, so instead of hiding in the bomb shelter, they were comfortably settled in a safe home. It was beautiful, amusing, and mostly absurd. As the war escalated many families took part in the "hosting" initiative, and this created strange encounters between people from different sections of the population. At that time my dad was homeless (not the kind that lives on the streets- as far as I know). His second ex-wife had sent over their daughter, with whom she did not get along, and so it happened that my dad and his daughter (my half-sister) were hanging around some bizarre places- and it was a blast. I suggested he do what Esther of Kiryat Shmona did, and find a family to host them, courtesy of the war. He laughed, but didn't take me up on it. I decided to make a film about it instead.

Tell me about the writing with Dana Dimant. Was it the first time you worked together?

I know Dana from when I was a teenager, she used to be my little brother's babysitter, and I looked up to her for she was a true non-conformist, very intelligent, and wrote beautiful poems and stories and was generally unique in her way of looking at things. Over the years we kind of lost touch. Then, sometime after finishing film school, I had this idea for the film, which I was very enthusiastic about, and I started writing thoughts, scenes, ideas, vignettes, characters - all kinds of stuff around this idea, but it didn't sum up to a script. I didn't know how to approach this massive project - writing a script for a feature film. And so I thought the best thing would be to write with someone, and she came to my mind first, even though she's not at all from the film 'industry', or perhaps for this reason precisely... She's smart, she likes watching films and does so quite often, she knows me and my family quite well, and the fact we weren't close at the time was also right for the collaboration, because we had a half clean slate to start from. So, I told her my idea for the film, let her read all the bits and pieces I scribbled, she liked it a lot, and we took off. It was a fascinating process. We would meet once a week, usually at her house when her daughter was in kindergarten, for two-three hour sessions in which we would mostly talk and analyze all the topics that rose from the film such as parenthood, open marriages, sex at young age, the political situation, separation, anxiety and more... After the meeting we gave ourselves homework, to write scenes in relation to what we had discussed, and then on the next meeting we'd compare scenes, rewrite together, and sync into another session of endless talking. This whole process took about a year. At some point, I continued working on my own with the help of my husband, Gur, the main actor, and my producers.

Although he could be considered as a "loser" (Libby callshim so at some point), you show much sympathy for Shaul. Who is this guy really? An immature fellow who cannot cope with his being a father? Or a free soul who feels he's been abandoned by his wife?

It's hard to define who this guy really is, as it is to do with anyone. We're all just the sum of our actions and way of living, I think. To me he is someone who has good intentions but is very limited in reading other people's behaviors and feelings, and this basic inherent limitation of his interferes in every field of his life: romantic, professional and now parental. At the same time, he is extremely unorganized, lives in his own detached time zone where he loses days like pencils, and so a lot of the time he has to cover his ass for all the damage he's causing. Calling him a free spirit is the romantic way of defining him, but really he is just a chaotic soul who is not sufficiently aware of his own disorder.

Shaul is also an inventor of sorts. Did you intend this as a metaphor?

I wanted Shaul's character to be an inventor because it was clear to me that he is a strange bird who cannot hold a steady job and be part of some functioning system, but at the same time he is creative and capable of doing stuff and is not some bum who prefers to sleep rather than do something, so inventing stuff felt like the right job for him, a job which you have to wake up in the morning and decide on your own schedule because no one's going to do it for you, which is also, in a way, like my 'job' as a filmmaker.

How about Libby? Is she happy about being reunited with her father? Does she have high expectations about the reunion?

Libby is looking forward to being reunited with her father, she is hoping for a better life with him, in a new country- a fresh new start. She's not naive, she knows he has been absent from her life for years, but she believes that the circumstances led to this lack of contact between them, she doesn't take it as if he abandoned her on purpose. So, although she heard enough degrading stories about her dad to lower her expectations, she is determined to give him a true chance, for the source from whom she absorbed those stories is not so great in itself (her egocentric mother and her boyfriend), so she wants to see him with her own eyes and judge for herself.

Why did you choose to tell the story against the backdrop of the Second Lebanon War? Was that your main source of inspiration?

It wasn't my main source of inspiration, but a substantial part of it. The war had a great influence on me, everything felt shaky and unstable, it felt like the whole world was about to collapse and there was no responsible adult to lead the way, and so that blended with the parent figure in the film and effected the whole atmosphere of it.

Do you think Shaul wants to be hosted by a "rich" family from Jerusalem just to take advantage of the situation? Does he have anything else on his mind?

I think Shaul's not that sophisticated, he's not a brilliant strategic that plans his moves ahead of time. He's an opportunist; he recognizes an opportunity coming his way and tries to make something out of it. He is pleased to have 'fallen' on a wealthy family from Jerusalem because it works well for his business, but if he

had fallen on a middle class single mother from Tel Aviv, he would have probably found something to get out of her just the same. That's the way he is.

At first Libby doesn't seem to be willing to take part in his role-playing, but she gradually takes a liking to it. Why?

First, from watching my daughter and her friends, most kids like role-playing, and like it when rules are broken. They're open minded about that, and so even if they were taught that lying is wrong, if an adult gives them a green light to that they will soon join the joyride. Second, Libby is her infantile father's daughter, and so the apple didn't fall far from the tree after all.

What kind of people are the Reichmans? Where do they live?

The Reichman's seem like a good functional family, they're well off, they have dinners together, and they have their safe place in the world to lay their heads each night, but really something crucial is missing in their lives. They have kind of given up on trying to bring back simple joys and warmth to their home. I wanted to explore what happens when you situate this detached pair (Shaul and Libby- an obvious dysfunctional family) in a very stable and secure home, where the tenants are so protected they have become jaded, and though home provides a shelter, it can also be considered a cage.

Ein Carem, the beautiful picturesque village they live in, is situated right next to Jerusalem. It's a very touristy place for there are many holy spots there, churches and fountains. The population is diverse, it moves between artists, religious people, wealthy families and modern hippies.

Do you think Gideon actually believes in Shaul's invention? Or is he just intrigued?

He does believe in Shaul's invention, even if not whole heartedly. He doesn't have much to lose by stepping in and pulling some strings, and anyway those sums of money to invest are no big deal for him. Also, he likes being in this position of the philanthropist who helps the common people.

The film is also a coming-of-age story – for both Shaul and Libby. Was that part of the project?

Indeed, it was always clear to me that by the end of the film Libby is having this realization that she's on her own. I mean, yes, she stays with her father, but in the deeper sense, she has only herself to count on really; a realization we all have to face at some point in our lives, I guess. And Shaul is kind of waking up to reality, to what having responsibility over someone other than yourself means.

OFF WHITE LIES sometimes reminded me of a road-movie and brought back to mind images of PARIS, TEXAS? Is that a reference for you? Any other films that were inspiring to you?

Yes, I think *Paris Texas* inspired me in some non-direct way. *Paper moon* and *Alice in the city* as well, but more in retrospect. First I had this setting in mind of a father and his kid driving around in an old car, and then images from *Paris Texas* floated in my head, and I guess it encouraged me to get excited about creating this world and believe there's magic to it.

How did you choose the filmmaking techniques? How did you go about the lighting and the cinematography?

The DP and I had many talks about the coloring of the film, for a time we thought of shooting it in black and white, to turn the “off white lies” theme of the film into something visual, and paint all the different locations in one unified light, but then we left this conceptual line and went along with the colorful vivid characters. So eventually we chose to go in the other direction of deep colors, sometimes a notch beyond realism, to bring out the greenery in the Reichman’s garden, the red in the sleazy motel, the blue in Libby’s eyes, the grey in the pavement beneath Orly’s house, etc. Another decision was to be loose with the camera, so even when it was on a tripod we made sure most of the time that it was still ‘breathing’, and not all the way steady. I love close-ups, they are very important to me. I always had it in my mind, for example, that in the beginning, when Libby’s in the car with her father for the first time in years, you will be able to see from very close all the mixed feelings she’s experiencing.

What about the cast? Are they all professional actors? What about the young girl who portrays Libby?

The cast in the film is combined of professional and non professional actors. The guy who plays the lead role, Shaul, is Gur Bentwich, who is also a film director (who plays in his own films) and my companion in life (in other words husband, although we never got married.) And so he is a non-pro, but you can say that acting and drama is rooted in his being. The Reichmans are proper and very talented (in my opinion) actors, except for the son who is a trumpeter in real life. Orly, the woman from the balcony, is a total non-actor (and Libby’s mom in real life), and last but not least, Elya, who plays Libby, is just a teenager who had no prior experience in acting apart from playing in her older brother’s avant-garde short films he made during high school.

How did you direct them? Did you give them any leeway on the set? Could they improvise?

I didn’t come with any predisposition or solid ideas or techniques to perform the craft of directing actors, and so when we started reading and working on the text, we kind of carved the characters together, the actors and I. I would listen to them playing my lines, and whenever something made no sense, or sounded fake, we would stop and try to figure out what’s wrong with it. A lot of the time, in rehearsals and sometimes on the set, we would change the text and knead it until it sounded natural. In rehearsals, we would improvise a lot around a scene until we felt like it was right, and then we’d have it written down, just to nail it, you know.

Tell me about the score. Is it only original music?

The music in the film is a combination of original music written for the film and many different songs and pieces I like and felt worked well with the images and story; for example one by Robert Wyatt, one of my favorite musicians. I like this mix of different styles and instruments. I think it’s a bit like the film itself. Many different diverse styles put together to create a new style of its own.

BIOGRAPHIES and FILMOGRAPHIES

Maya Kenig - Director

Maya Kenig was born in 1979 in Israel. She studied at the London Film School and at the Sam Spiegel Film School in Jerusalem. Throughout her studies she was awarded numerous grants for excellence. Her short films *Top of the World* (2005, fiction, 14 min.) and *My Mom* (2005, Documentary, 15 min.) were screened at festivals worldwide and broadcast on TV in Israel and Europe. Since graduation she co-directed *In Utero* (2006, fiction, 36 min.) and *Around Trip* (2008, fiction, 20 min.).

OFF WHITE LIES is her first feature film, produced with the support of the Israeli Film Fund and The Jerusalem Film Fund.

Gum Films: Aurit Zamir and Yoav Roeh – Producers

Gum Films is a Tel Aviv based production company house for feature films and documentaries, founded by Yoav Roah and Aurit Zamir. Their latest narrative feature, OFF WHITE LIES, premiered at the Jerusalem Film Festival in July 2011, where it won the Best Actor Award. It was also nominated for 7 Israeli Academy awards.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2011 **UNDER THE RUG** (DocAviv 2011, Best Cinematography)
- 2010 **LONG DISTANCE** (Fipa Silver prize, London Doc Film Fest, San Francisco Film Fest)
- 2010 **MAMA** (DocAviv)
- 2010 **THE LAB** (IDFA Forum, Hotdocs)
- 2010 **MANPOWER** (Cinemart)
- 2010 **FRIENDS** (Copro)

CREDITS

CREW

Director	MAYA KENIG
Producers	YOAV ROEH, AURIT ZAMIR
Production Company	GUM FILMS
Script	MAYA KENIG, DANA DIMANT
Music	UDI BERNER
Editor	OR BEN DAVID
Director of Photography	ITAI VINOGRAD
Sound Editor	MICHAEL GOOREVICH
Still Picture Shooting	ITAI VINOGRAD

CAST

Libby	ELYA INBAR
Shaul	GUR BENTWICH
Gideon	TZAHY GRAD
Yuval	ARAD YEINI
Helit	SALIT ACHI-MIRIAM
Supporting Actors	SHIMON MIMRAN
	RONI KUBAN
	SIGAL ARAD INBAR
	URI AVRAHAMI