

ENTERTAINMENT / FILM REVIEWS

JFilm opens April 20 with in-person and virtual screenings

Festival showcases 23 films from around the world

By **CHRONICLE STAFF** | April 17, 2023, 6:30 pm



Still from "My Neighbor Adolf" (Photo courtesy of the Cohen Media Group)

JFilm, the region's long-standing Jewish film festival, opens its 30th season on April 20 with the Pittsburgh premiere of "Matchmaking," an Israeli romantic comedy about an Ashkenazi man forbidden to date his sister's charming best friend because she is Mizrahi.

The Times of Israel wrote: "The take-home in this polished box office hit is that the ultra-Orthodox may take their matchmaking seriously, but love is love, especially in a Haredi rom-com." The film, showing at AMC Waterfront 22 at 7 p.m. will be followed by an opening night party at Bravo at the Waterfront.

The festival, which runs through April 30, features 22 additional films from around the world, four of which can be accessed virtually. In addition to the AMC Waterfront, other in-person venues include the CMU – McConomy Auditorium and The Oaks Theater.

On April 25, at AMC Waterfront, there will be an in-person screening of "The Cure for Hate," the true story of former skinhead and Holocaust denier, Tony McAleer, who traveled to Auschwitz/Birkenau in the spirit of teshuvah. The film will be followed by a Q&A with McAleer, director Peter Hutchison and president of the Eradicate Hate Global Summit, Charles H. Moellenberg, Jr.

A bagel brunch will be held before the screening of "Reckonings" on April 30, at noon, followed by a Film Schmooze, a casual post-film discussion.

As in years past, the festival's films come from around the world, including France, Germany, Israel and Belgium.

Reviews of four films follow. For a complete schedule of events and trailers, visit filmpittsburgh.org.

'Finding Light'

April 23, 4 p.m. | The Oaks Theater

Sponsored by Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre

Followed by a Q&A with director Paul Michael Bloodgood; choreographer and artistic director of Ballet Austin Stephen Mills; artistic director of Pittsburgh Ballet Theater; Adam W. McKinney; and former PBT dancer Christine Schwaner (60 minutes)

How does one tell a Holocaust story through choreography?

Director Paul Michael Bloodgood attempts to answer that question in "Finding Light," making its Pittsburgh debut as part of the 2023 J Film Festival.

The documentary tells the story of choreographer Stephen Mills' creation of "Light/The Holocaust and Humanity Project," which was debuted by Ballet Austin in 2005. The dance depicts the life of Naomi Warren, a Polish Holocaust survivor.

The choreographer begins the film by discussing growing up gay in Texas, and how, while he was unable to feel the pain of a survivor, he was able to understand what it was like to be singled out.

Warren talks about her life, as black-and-white family photos and grainy, harrowing images of the period give context.

"When a survivor shares something that personal and that intimate, it's like a gift," Mills said of Warren's story. "She was pretty insistent that we're all responsible to do our part and that just because I was an artist didn't mean I was absolved of that responsibility. She said, 'You have this. This is my story. Now you have to tell my story.'"

Mills recounts his journey after 9/11, struggling with the relevance of dance to tell universal, meaningful tales and how through a friend he was introduced to Warren.

Warren's life, and Mills' visits to concentration and death camps — and his time spent with survivors in Israel and Houston — informed "Light."

"It was a very difficult journey, some of the most consequential learning of my life," he said.

Footage from early rehearsals when Mills was still making changes to the work is part of the documentary, as are excerpts from a speech given by Elie Wiesel addressing the Austin community at the Bass Concert Hall in the days leading up to the initial performances.

Of particular interest for the Pittsburgh audience occurs shortly more than halfway through the film when Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre Principal Dancer Julia Erickson discusses the work.

The last section of the documentary travels with the production as it tours Israel. Both Mills and ballet attendees discuss the parallels found in the film with the modern-day Jewish state, as well as performing the work in the theater where Adolf Eichmann was tried for his part in the Shoah.

Naomi Warren died in 2016, something Mills spends some of his final moments on film discussing.

"Finding Light" was an Official Selection at the Cannes World Film Festival and San Diego Jewish Film Festival. It was the winner of Best Documentary at the Berlin Indie Film Festival.

— *David Rullo*

'Jack L. Warner: The Last Mogul'*April 27, 7 p.m. | The Oaks Theater**Q&A with Jack Warner's grandson, director Gregory Orr, and editor, co-producer Don Priess**(100 minutes)*

Cinephiles as well as history buffs will enjoy this documentary about Jack Warner and his brothers, the sons of struggling Polish-Jewish immigrants who rose to establish what was arguably one of the most significant cultural institutions of the 20th century: Warner Bros. Studio.

First released in 1993, the documentary was produced by Jack Warner's grandson, Gregory Orr, and is narrated by actor Efram Zimbalist Jr., who was under contract with Warner Bros. Studio during the height of his career. Interviews with film critic Neal Gabler, family members and actors who worked with Warner, including Debbie Reynolds and Shirley Jones, reveal insights into the character of a man whose passion and drive to soar above his station helped define the values and zeitgeist of generations through his work.

Pittsburghers may be interested to learn that the brothers Warner lived their formative years in Youngstown, Ohio, where the family embarked on a variety of entrepreneurial endeavors, including operating an ice cream cone machine and running a bowling alley.

In 1903, they pawned their horse to buy a kinoscope, an early motion-picture device in which the images were viewed through a peephole, then soon thereafter opened a movie theater in New Castle, Pennsylvania. That was the humble beginning of a film empire that would include creating classic works of cinema and blockbusters such as "The Jazz Singer" "Casablanca" and "My Fair Lady."

Jack Warner is painted as a complicated character in this film. Unfaithful to his two wives, estranged from his son and a capitulator to the House Un-American Activities Committee, his moral failings are laid bare. But beyond the Hollywood excess and glamour and ethical ambiguities, is a rags-to-riches story that will resonate with many — the unlikely tale of an impoverished, uneducated son of immigrants, whose legacy is not just an oeuvre of brilliant motion pictures meant to entertain, but which deeply influenced the very culture of our society.

— *Toby Tabachnick*

'Paris Boutique'*April 28, 7:30 p.m. | CMU – McConomy Auditorium**April 21-April 30, virtual**(82 minutes)*

Five months after Hallmark's "Hanukkah on Rye" delighted a demographic of romantic comedy lovers, "Paris Boutique" should provide Pittsburghers with similar satisfaction.

"Paris Boutique" adheres to genre norms with 82 minutes of scenes depicting budding friendships, dissolving relationships, misunderstandings, delicious-looking meals, beautiful architecture, new paramours and the possibility of personal change.

Nominated for six Israeli Academy Awards (Ophirs), "Paris Boutique" stars Nelly Tagar ("Zero Motivation" and "The Art of Waiting") and Joséphine Draï ("Nu" and "Belle belle belle") in a film directed by Marco Carmel. Tagar plays Neta, a penniless driver, who believes financial bliss is one con away. When Louise (Draï), a French Jewish lawyer, arrives in Israel to finalize a real estate transaction, Neta concocts a series of lies and exaggerations to continue the relationship beyond a single cab ride.

Neta's farcical ruses initially work, given Louise's inability to speak Hebrew, but as the Israeli driver continues mining Louise for subsequent payouts, viewers discover there's more to Neta than her plotting. The seemingly irresponsible Israeli single has a backstory that allows for growth and alteration. As Neta's engagements evolve, the French lawyer experiences her own transformation.

Though initially presenting as a buttoned-up wealthy traveler, Louise packs more than matching Louis Vuitton suitcases. While scouring Jerusalem for potential property purchasers, the Jewish visitor finds something that can change everything about her seemingly perfect life at home.

Tagar and Draï deliver the heft of “Paris Boutique,” but Moris Cohen (Avi) and Batel Moseri (Yaffa) are the scene stealers. Whether by mixing popular Israeli dishes with humor and flair or speaking truth to friendship and love, Cohen and Moseri help “Paris Boutique” become a delightful treat. The film ends with several questions about love unanswered, but “Paris Boutique” is a reminder that friendship — even unexpected — goes with everything.

— Adam Reinherz

‘My Neighbor Adolf’

*Sunday, April 30, 4 p.m. | CMU – McConomy Auditorium
(96 minutes)*

Mr. Polsky doesn’t care for his new neighbor, Mr. Herzog.

A day after moving next door to Polsky’s isolated South American home, Herzog’s dog digs a hole beneath a fence dividing the two properties and destroys several of Polsky’s black roses, planted in memory of his wife murdered in the Holocaust. The act begins a simmering hatred between the two neighbors.

It is when Polsky, a Holocaust survivor, confronts Herzog, that he notices a likeness between his new neighbor and Adolf Hitler.

The Polish immigrant tells a government official that he met the Nazi leader during a 1934 chess tournament and is convinced the eyes of his neighbor and the dictator are the same.

After finding no one from the Israeli embassy willing to investigate Herzog, Polsky begins the work of a gumshoe and opens an investigation to prove his neighbor is Hitler.

Polsky reads “Mein Kampf” and other books to identify facts about Hitler, spends time photographing his neighbor, observing suspicious activities like painting and the comings and goings of guests he thinks resemble Nazis, and notes Herzog screaming, which he thinks sounds like the former führer.

This evidence, though, doesn’t convince the Israeli embassy. When Polsky spies Herzog playing chess and voices his opinion on the game, the pair begin a relationship that continues to build uncomfortable comedic tension, disagreements and a slowly unraveling mystery.

A dark comedy, “My Neighbor Adolf” is a worthwhile retelling of the classic story of two neighbors who might have more in common, and a greater need for one another, than either would like to admit. **PJC**

— David Rullo