Former Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball star Aulcie Perry, seen here at a Brooklyn synagogue, was a cultural icon in Israel before drug addiction and legal troubles interrupted his life.

CULTURE > FILM

Basketball, refuseniks, Shira Haas: Silicon Valley Jewish film fest turns 30

BY ANDREW ESENSTEN | MAY 6, 2021

The name Aulcie Perry may not be familiar to many American Jews, but during the late 1970s and early ‘80s, he was one of the most famous people in Israel. A 6-foot-10 African American basketball player from Newark, New Jersey, Perry led Maccabi Tel Aviv to its first European championship in 1977, and to another one in 1981. He helped popularize basketball in a country that, until then, was devoted to soccer.

Perry was not just a sports star; he was also a cultural icon. He dated an Israeli supermodel, Tami Ben-Ami, and dabbled in acting. Then he further endeared himself to Israelis by converting to Judaism — taking the name Elisha Ben Avraham — and becoming an Israeli citizen.

But his seemingly charmed life began to spiral out of control due to an addiction to painkillers and illegal drugs. In 1987, he was convicted in a U.S. court of conspiring to import and sell heroin and
received a 10-year jail sentence.

“In Israel, he was Aulcie Perry; in the [U.S.] he was just a tall, Black prisoner,” says a commentator in “Aulcie,” a gripping 2020 documentary by Dani Menkin that opens this year’s Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival, which runs from May 19 through June 2 and will take place entirely online for a second straight year.

This year’s lineup includes 30 films — in honor of the festival’s 30th anniversary — from Brazil, Norway, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Austria, Israel, Canada and the U.S. All films will be available to stream for 72 hours after their scheduled release times.

Perry appeared in Menkin’s 2016 documentary “On the Map,” about the 1977 Maccabi Tel Aviv championship team, but the Israeli-born, L.A.-based director wanted to dig deeper into the story of his childhood hero. He filmed “Aulcie” between 2014 and 2019 and captured emotional scenes of Perry reuniting with his adult daughter, Cierra, whom he hadn’t seen since she was a baby.

Menkin described the documentary as “a story about parenthood, redemption, making mistakes and getting second changes.”
Today, Perry lives in Tel Aviv with his Israeli wife and coaches youth basketball. “There's a happy ending to his story, thank God,” Menkin said.

“Aulcie” premiered at Lincoln Center in New York City in January 2020, with the player and his daughter in attendance, but a wide release was delayed by the pandemic. The SVJFF screening will be followed by a pre-recorded conversation between Perry and Menkin.

The other opening-night selection is “Ruth: Justice Ginsburg in Her Own Words,” a 2019 documentary about the late Supreme Court justice from Academy Award–winning director Freida Lee Mock. Ruth’s daughter, Jane Ginsburg, a professor at Columbia Law School, will speak about her mother’s legacy in a post-screening conversation with former U.S. district court judge and Hoover Institution senior fellow emeritus Abraham D. Sofaer.

The centerpiece of the festival is the May 27 showing of Arkady Kogan’s “From Slavery to Freedom,” which tells the story of Natan Sharansky and the Soviet Jewish refuseniks, who were denied permission to emigrate on the pretense that they were spies or knew state secrets and therefore could not leave.

The 2018 documentary (which is mostly in Russian with English subtitles) flashes back and forth between 1970s-80s footage of the worldwide campaign to free the refuseniks and a 2017 visit to Russia by Sharansky, who spent nine years in a Siberian jail and later became a political leader in Israel. In one remarkable scene, he walks into an abandoned building in Moscow that used to be a courthouse and tells a curious onlooker: “Forty years ago, in this very place, I was tried for high treason.”

A recent Zoom interview of Sharansky by Joel and Adele Sandberg, who were active in the movement to free him (and met him during trips to Israel), will be shown after the documentary. The Sandbergs founded the South Florida Conference for Soviet Jewry and organized protests and other activities to
draw attention to the plight of the refuseniks. They even took their daughter, Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, to protests when she was a baby.

Adele said they felt compelled to act because of what happened during the Holocaust. “I remember asking my parents, ‘What did you do to help save the Jews in Europe?’” she told J. “So now here we were, young adults, we were in our 20s, and there were 3 million Jews caught behind the Iron Curtain. They were being discriminated against, and in some cases they were being killed or tortured or sent to Siberia. We took it very personally, and we were totally dedicated to [the cause] until the gates opened in the late 1980s.”

Joel said he hopes the film raises awareness about “one of the great migrations of the Jewish people.”

“Our Jewish youth have heard of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, but if you ask them about the Soviet Jewry movement, very few have knowledge about it,” he said. “It's very important to educate the younger people who weren't around at that time.”

The festival will close with two documentaries that begin streaming on June 2: “Howie Mandel: But, Enough About Me,” about the comedian and “America's Got Talent” judge who struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and “Breaking Bread,” about the first Muslim to win Israel's “MasterChef.”

Other festival highlights include the romantic comedy “Kiss Me Kosher,” in which traditional Jewish Israeli families are shaken by cross-cultural and same-sex romantic choices; the drama “The Crossing,” about the children of imprisoned Norwegian resistance fighters during World War II who help two Jewish children flee Germany; and the documentaries “Leaving Paradise” (a Brazilian couple with 15 children discover they have Jewish roots), “A Crime on the Bayou” (a young Jewish attorney defends an unjustly accused Black man in 1960s Louisiana) and “‘Til Kingdom Come” (examining evangelical Christian support for Israel).

The festival also will pay tribute to Israeli actress Shira Haas, who has emerged as a huge star following her roles in Netflix's “Shtisel” and “Unorthodox.” Two of her films, 2018's “Broken Mirrors” and 2020's “Asia,” will be shown starting on May 22.
Founded three decades ago by Fagie Rosen and Burt Epstein, the SVJFF started as a small, volunteer-run Jewish film series in San Jose. It grew over time into a South Bay cultural institution, but the pandemic — and the closure of movie theaters — put its future in doubt. Executive director Tzvia Shelef said donors, including the S.F.-based Koret Foundation, “stepped up and allowed us to have another year of an amazing festival.”

“I’m excited that we got to this point in time,” added Rosen, 81, who would personally greet festivalgoers before each screening in pre-Covid times. Of Epstein, who died last year shortly after his 91st birthday, she said, “Burt was so very proud of this festival and the people who have worked with it and made it what it is today.”

Shelef said she looks forward to holding another in-person festival when it is safe to do so. “I’m excited about our growth,” she said, “and I’m hoping in the fall to do something in the theaters.”

The Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival runs online from May 19 to June 2. Each film available to stream for 72 hours. Tickets are $10 per film, with passes for patron donors available.
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