Daniel Radcliffe stars in "Jungle," the story of Israeli Yossi Ghinsberg, who will appear in person at Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival.

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Star-powered ‘Jungle’ depicts Israeli’s fight for survival in Amazon

BY MICHAEL FOX | OCTOBER 17, 2017

Yossi Ghinsberg’s harrowing weeks in the Bolivian jungle in 1981 are the stuff of nightmares. And now they’re on film.

Ghinsberg published his survival memoir, “Back from Tuichi,” in 1993. In the
ensuing years, he started a clinic in Australia for opioid addicts and a design
studio in Tel Aviv, was a tech entrepreneur in Silicon Valley and a
conservationist in the Amazon, and built a career as a motivational speaker for
corporate events.

That’s a remarkable list of accomplishments, but they are still overshadowed by
his 1981 ordeal in the Amazon. “Jungle,” adapted from the memoir and starring
Daniel Radcliffe as the redoubtable Israeli, will do nothing to alter that situation
when it opens the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival on Oct. 21 prior to its
theatrical release.

“Daniel Radcliffe said, ‘Yossi, I know that on my grave they’re going to write
Harry Potter,’ ” Ghinsberg recounts in a phone interview from New York. “On
my grave, they’re going to write ‘Amazon survivor’ or something like that. I’m
OK with that.”

Ghinsberg, 58, who will attend the SVJFF opening night with producer Dana
Lustig, doesn’t live in the past, nor does he much care what people think. He
Yossi Ghinsberg will attend the West Coast premiere of “Jungle,” a film based on his true story.

does adjust to his audience, though, so he won’t impart the lessons from the Amazon about innovating and finding a niche — as opposed to the old-school practices of competition and exploitation — that he presents to business folks.

“The important thing for me is to draw attention to the Amazon, to the fragility of the Amazon, to the pressures of the Amazon and to the indigenous people that I represent,” Ghinsberg says. “I became a member of the tribe and I have a duty to voice their feelings to the world. Their ancestral land happens to be the richest place on the planet in terms of biodiversity.”

Ghinsberg was born in Israel to Romanian immigrants who had been spared a measure of Holocaust pain: His father spent a difficult five years, the entire war, laboring in a German-run logging camp in Siberia.

Perhaps because he lived in a small country, Ghinsberg contracted wanderlust at an early age.

“When I was in high school and in the army, I just waited for that moment when I could take off and be that great explorer,” he recalls with a mix of nostalgia and self-deprecation.

Stationed on a boat in quiet Sharm-el-Sheikh for his military service, Ghinsberg didn’t acquire combat or survival experience. His service in the Sinai was distinguished by lengthy furloughs when he stayed in the desert, rather than go home, and befriended Bedouins.
Ghinsberg believes that experience was indirectly instrumental in his surviving the deprivation, solitude and challenges of nature. In the span of a couple days in Bolivia, for example, he was attacked by termites and fire ants. “Jungle” only depicts one of those nightmares.

“In real life there was much, much, much more,” he says. “Every day there were so many events. In a lot of movies, you invent things to dramatize, like the real life is not dramatic enough. In this case, the story is much more dramatic and you need to cut it down.”

That didn’t bother Ghinsberg, who lives with his Australian wife and their children on the continent’s east coast. But he was disappointed that the budget and logistics compelled the production to shoot in Colombia instead of Bolivia.

“Most people can’t tell the difference,” he says. “I can tell the difference. It’s painful for me; it was my dream to shoot it on location. But it was explained to me that movies are an illusion, and the director preferred to go where he could control the illusion.”

Still, Ghinsberg is excited about the possibility that “Jungle” will generate a wave of tourism to the rainforest.

“Tourism saves the forest, it doesn’t exploit it,” he asserts. “A dead monkey is worth two dollars in the market. But the tourist who comes will pay much more to see a living monkey. Suddenly the monkey generates more money alive than dead.”

Ghinsberg’s connection to the Amazon is ongoing and permanent. However, the release of “Jungle” fulfills — and concludes — his longstanding ambition to have his story adapted into a movie. Even in a life as full and busy as Ghinsberg’s, that’s bound to leave a void.

“The next dream is to take it to Broadway as a one-man show where I’m going to be on stage [in front of] a general audience,” he says. Besides being “a very
pure format of storytelling,” it would be “immersive theater: Virtual reality and audio reality in terms of the design of the space, and 4-D breakthrough audio technology delivering sound into your head — not through the ears.”

Ghinsberg is already meeting with producers and investors in New York. “There’s always a next dream because if I don’t dream I’m not alive, and I cannot live without a dream.”

“Jungle” screens at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 21 at the Oshman Family JCC, 3921 Fabian Way, Palo Alto (rated R for language and some drug use, 115 minutes). svjff.org

Michael Fox

Michael Fox is a longtime film journalist and critic, and a member of the San Francisco Film Critics Circle. He is the curator and host of the CinemaLit film series at the Mechanics’ Institute and teaches documentary classes at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute programs at U.C. Berkeley and S.F. State. In 2015, the San Francisco Film Society added Fox to Essential SF, its ongoing compendium of the Bay Area film community’s most vital figures and institutions.

Tags: Daniel Radcliffe, Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival