Premieres aplenty at Silicon Valley Jewish film fest, including Daniel Radcliffe flick

BY MICHAELE FOX | OCTOBER 16, 2017

W ith dozens of local film festivals every year, programmers face a real challenge procuring quality films that haven’t already lit up a Bay Area movie screen.

Bragging rights aside, a festival’s quest for premieres typically derives from the desire of organizers to treat their audiences to new films early in their international life. By that measure, the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival has come through in a big way this year for moviegoers.

Eight of the 24 films in the 26th annual edition are West Coast or Northern California premieres, including the opening night survival saga “Jungle” on Oct. 21 and the uplifting documentary “My Hero Brother,” which is billed as the “centerpiece” film and will screen twice during the 18-day festival.

“This year we were lucky because we had more good films to choose from,” says Margalit Raviv, the festival’s program director. “Films that were in no other festival, films that had never played in the area.”

“Jungle” may be the biggest coup, with Daniel Radcliffe, best known for his role as the title character in eight “Harry Potter” movies, playing Israeli backpacker Yossi Ghinsberg in a harrowing tale of misadventure and endurance in the Bolivian backcountry. The movie will open in limited release on Oct. 20, though not in the Bay Area, before opening nationwide Oct. 27, so this screening will, in effect, serve as a sneak preview.
Ghinsberg, who wrote the popular memoir that provides the basis for the film and has gone on to become an in-demand motivational speaker, is scheduled to attend the opening night screening at the Oshman Family JCC in Palo Alto along with the film's producer, Dana Lustig.

Coincidentally, “My Hero Brother” also focuses on Israelis confronting nature and their own limits; the 78-minute documentary is about a group of young people with Down syndrome who go on an demanding trek through the Himalayas with their siblings, dealing with emotional challenges and various conflicts. Israeli filmmaker Yonatan Nir, who co-wrote and co-directed the successful 2011 documentary “Dolphin Boy,” which was acquired by Disney, is slated to be on hand for talks after both screenings, on Nov. 5 at the AMC Saratoga 14 in San Jose and Nov. 6 at the Palo Alto JCC.

The SVJFF will reprise “Joe’s Violin,” the heartwarming Academy Award-nominated short film about the bond that develops between a Holocaust survivor and a Latina schoolgirl in the Bronx, with a special guest: The beneficiary of Joe’s generosity, Brianna Perez, will attend the free San Jose screening on Nov. 5 and will perform before the film.

An emphasis on Israeli cinema is a SVJFF hallmark, although it is unusual for the festival to program Israeli films in all three of the big-night slots. Festival management has long recognized that Israelis continue to move to the South Bay and Peninsula, many to work in high-tech, and they are eager to see the latest movies from their native land.

In fact, half of the members of the preview committee, which screens and helps decide which movies make the final cut, are Israelis based in the Silicon Valley. But the SVJFF’s selection reflects the superior quality of Israeli films over the last 20 years as much as any other factor.

The contingent of Israeli films includes the splendid documentary “Aida’s Secrets” (Oct. 25 and 30), which traces the reunion between brothers separated after World War II and unearths a haunting family mystery. “An Israeli Love Story” (Oct. 25 and 29), a fact-based historical drama set in pre-state Israel, and “Between Worlds” (Nov. 8), an interpersonal Arab-Jewish drama set in Jerusalem, both make their West Coast debuts.

Germany is well-represented in this year’s lineup, with three local premieres. “Sara Stein — Shalom Berlin, Shalom Tel Aviv” (Oct. 26 and Nov. 4) explores the sizable Jewish presence in current-day Berlin through a murder investigation focused on an Israeli victim and a Jewish investigator. The comedy-drama “The Bloom of Yesterday” (Nov. 2) concocts a romance between two German Jews with dramatic family histories, while “Family Commitments” (Nov. 5 and 9) views the complications surrounding a same-sex marriage of a Jewish man to a Muslim man — their parents’ opposition, notably — through a comic lens.
Also receiving its West Coast premiere is the feel-good Canadian drama “The Second Time Around” (Oct. 23 and 28), which charts the late-in-life romance of two residents of an assisted-living facility.

If there's anything that all these varied films have in common, it's that they provoke both emotion and discussion.

"I have the sense when people come to our festival, they never rush to leave the movie, and then they never rush to leave the theater," says Raviv, who moved to the Bay Area 35 years ago, started volunteering at the festival in the mid-1990s and became program director in 2010.

“People stick in the lobby,” she says. “They say, ‘Should I stay for the next one?’ The festival brings the community together.”

Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival, Oct. 21 to Nov. 12 at the Albert Schultz Cultural Arts Hall, Oshman Family JCC, 3921 Fabian Way, Palo Alto (Oct. 21-26 and Nov. 6-12) and AMC Saratoga 14, 700 El Paseo de Saratoga, San Jose (Oct. 28-Nov. 5). $11-$14 for regular screenings; $20-$45 for special nights. svjff.org or call (408) 498-0904.

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: film festival, Silicon Valley Jewish Film Fest, Daniel Radcliffe