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## The DocAviv Film Festival

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P.O.V. executive director Simon Kilmurry attended DocAviv, a documentary film festival in Tel Aviv. He writes in with a report.

DocAviv, Israel's premiere documentary festival, wrapped up a remarkable 10th anniversary edition on April 12. I attended the festival for the first time this year, and had the pleasure of serving on the jury for the Israeli documentary competition. The festival opened with welcoming remarks by Shimon Peres, the current President of Israel, who emphasized the importance of documentaries in a democratic society. In particular, he noted the emergence of Israel as a source for some very important work.



The 2008 DocAviv Film Festival was held at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque

The opening gala featured the film *My Beetle* by Yishai Orien. The film has some elements that appear staged, thereby opening up the question of what constitutes a documentary. It also has a tongue-in-cheek quality, which the audience seemed to enjoy, but caused some dissent amongst regular festival-goers. Some questioned whether the film had sufficient "weight" to be an opening film, while others liked the film's Spurlock-esque tone. *My Beetle* was preceded by a hilarious tribute video that summed up the festival's programming as consisting solely of films on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Holocaust, and films by Avi Mugarbi. It was a nice light moment in a field that tends to take itself too seriously.

Of course, the reality of Israeli documentary is much more diverse and complex — reflecting the diversity of the region. There have been some remarkable films coming out of Israel over the past few years: *Souvenirs*, *The Cemetery Club*, *Checkpoint*, *Stalags*, *Shayda*, and *Ido Haar's 9 Star Hotel* (P.O.V. 2008, airing on July 22). While I did hear a little grumbling that some of this year's films were not up to those standards, there were some terrific films. I personally think the grumbling reflects the exceptionally high standards we have come to expect of documentaries from Israel. And certainly, the winners were some very distinguished films. Not to mention that the consistently sold-out screenings indicate that there's a real thirst for more high quality docs.



Filmmaker Jason Kohn (Manda Bala) and me in Israel.

The grand jury winner, *Brides of the Desert* by Ada Ushpiz, is an exceptionally intimate look at a Bedouin community and some of the women who struggle with the practice of polygamy. It was exquisitely photographed by Danor Glazer.

The winner of the Young and Promising Award, *Yideshe Mama* by Fima Shlick and Genadi Kuchuck, is a touching, painful and often humorous family story about Genadi's choice to marry an Ethiopian woman and his mother's fierce resistance to the marriage.

Other winners were:

*My First War* by Yariv Mozer — Special Jury Award

*Adama* by Iftach Shevach (one of my personal favorites) — Cinematography

*Sixth Floor to Hell* by Jonathan Ben Efrat — Editing

My fellow jury members were: Thom Powers (Toronto International Film Festival and Stranger than Fiction programmer and Cinema Eye Awards founder), Ronit Weiss-Berkowitz (a remarkable writer, producer and editor-in-chief of Keter Publishing), Laurence Hertzberg (general director of the Forum des Images, Paris), and Eytan Harris (filmmaker of *Abe Nathan: As The Sun Sets*, and one of Israel's finest cinematographers).

Jury processes can be grueling, but this one was stimulating, exhausting and genuinely fun. Quite frankly, this team was one of the most stimulating groups of people I've had the pleasure to spend time with. Special mention must go to Thom for what was one of the most entertaining awards presentations in recent memory.

In the International competition, festival founder and director Ilana Tsur showcased some highlights from the international circuit: *Up the Yangtze* by Yung Chang (P.O.V. 2008), *Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go* by Kim Longinotto, *Manda Bala* by Jason Kohn, and *Wings of Defeat* by Risa Morimoto, among others. The winners in the international competition (which I have yet to see, but heard great things about) were:

Grand Jury Prize: *Iron eaters* by Shaheen Dill-Riaz

Special Jury Award: *A Father's Music* by Igor Heitzmann

Sidebar events at the festival included a tribute to Nicholas Philibert (*Etre et Avoir*) and a presentation by Diane Weyerman of films produced by Participant Productions (*Chicago 10*, *Jimmy Carter: Man from Plains*). Also featured was a screening of *Made In L.A.*, the recent P.O.V. film by Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar, and a panel conversation between me and David Fisher, filmmaker and head of the New Israeli Foundation for Cinema & T.V., on P.O.V. and U.S. public television.

One other film in the festival that struck a chord with me was Esther Hoffenberg's *Discorama* — Signé Glaser, an elegiac tribute to one of France's most influential figures during a classic period of French pop music. The archival footage of Glaser with Francois Hardy, Juliette Greco, and Serge Gainsbourg is breathtaking, and the performances are out of this world.

Non-festival highlights of the week included fascinating and disturbing side trips. The first, organized by the aforementioned David Fisher, was a trip to Nazareth to meet with some filmmakers working out of Alarz TV. While the company focuses mostly on reportage for outlets such as Al Jazeera and Lebanese news, they are also producing longer-form creative projects. It was fascinating to see some of the work that is being produced by Israeli Arab and Druze filmmakers. Some of this work is being supported by The Green House Fund, which mentors filmmakers from across the Middle East. Particularly promising was a work-in-progress by Osnat Hadid which I'm eager to see more of.

The second trip included a tour of the separation barrier and a visit to Hebron, organized by Oren Yakobovich, video department director of B'Tselem. B'Tselem, an Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, is the leading Israeli organization training people to use video and citizen journalism to monitor and document conflict and improve human rights in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The situation in Hebron is very tense and far too complicated for me to explain, but it is eye-opening to witness it first hand.

Tags: Documentary News, Israel, Middle East, Palestinian, film festivals

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