

Family secrets, Oscar oversights, music's healing power

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FULL TEXT

The Boston Israeli Film Festival, which takes place Feb. 7-14 at the Museum of Fine Arts, the West Newton Cinema, and other venues, features a pair of documentaries that search for answers in two family mysteries. One is about a birth and the other about a death —or maybe two.

In his film "Rachel Agmon," Yair Agmon, armed with a camera, accompanies his mother to Ukraine, where she goes on a Great Hebrew Authors tour. He intercuts this excursion with a trip he takes on a cruise ship with his father, Haim. As he questions both about their relationship, it gradually emerges that, when they met, Rachel was single and Haim was married with seven children. Nonetheless, they stayed together for three years, during which time Yair was born. Then Haim returned to his family and Rachel raised Yair on her own.

Both parents are funny, colorful, and full of life, but they tell conflicting stories. One or both is lying. As he persists, Yair's quest calls to mind at least one Greek tragedy, but he wants to know the truth. Why, given their circumstances, did Rachel and Haim have a child? Did either parent want him? Why did they separate? And does any of that matter if both clearly love him now?

"Rachel Agmon" screens at the West Newton Cinema on Feb. 10 at 4:30 p.m. The filmmaker will participate in question-and-answer session via Skype.

In "You Only Die Twice," Yair Lev investigates family secrets that are more convoluted and potentially darker. At the beginning of the film Lev gets a frantic voice mail from his mother. She tells him that a cousin died and left her a small fortune. But her claim to this inheritance is left in doubt when troubling facts come to light. It seems that her father, Ernst Bechinsky, who died in Israel, in 1969, shared the same birth certificate as another Ernst Bechinsky, who died in Austria, in 1987.

Who was the real Bechinsky, and why were there two people claiming the same identity? Lev's search takes him from a cemetery in Tel Aviv to an archive in Innsbruck, Austria, and then to an attic in Zagreb, Croatia. When he turns up Nazi connections, and his contacts turn secretive and hostile, his investigation takes on the sinister tone of a film by Claude Lanzmann, and Lev starts to wonder if he wants to find out the truth after all.

"You Only Die Twice" screens at West Newton on Feb. 10 at 6:30 p.m. . The filmmaker will participate in a question-and-answer session via Skype.

Go to bit.ly/2GdfnCT.

Oscar snubs?

As can be seen in the list of the top 10 highest-grossing documentaries of 2018 in last week's In Focus, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" and "Three Identical Strangers" came in first and third place respectively. In addition, both scored a 100 percent "fresh" rating from Top Critics at Rotten Tomatoes. Neither film received a best documentary feature Oscar nomination. ("Neighbors" also received the Golden Tomato for best reviewed documentary of the year. Better than an Oscar!)

This combined critical and popular acclaim does not necessarily mean that these films deserved a nomination, but it does explain why many fans were surprised and disappointed by what seems an inexplicable snub.

To judge for yourself, on Feb. 12 at 7 p.m. Emerson College's Bright Lights series will screen "Three Identical Strangers," the twisty, wrenching story of triplets separated at birth who are reunited as young men. It's a co-

presentation with the Independent Film Festival of Boston and the Boston Jewish Film Festival. A discussion led by molecular biologist and Emerson associate professor Amy Vashlishan Murray will follow the film.

Go to web.emerson.edu/brightlights/2019/01/05/three-identical-strangers-212-7pm.

Then the moving and morally uplifting "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" about Fred Rogers, of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" fame, can be seen on HBO, HBO NOW, HBO GO, HBO On Demand and partners' streaming platforms. It will also be broadcast on PBS "Independent Lens" on Feb. 9 at 8 p.m.

Go to www.hbo.com/documentaries/wont-you-be-my-neighbor and www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/wont-you-be-my-neighbor.

Class act

On Feb. 14 last year a gunman entered Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Fla., and murdered 17 students and teachers. The 65 members of the drama department were in the auditorium rehearsing a song for their annual children's musical when a fire alarm went off. Thinking it was a drill, they finished the number before beginning to evacuate the school. That pause probably kept them out of the line of fire and saved their lives, as their drama teacher Melody Herzfeld led them to safety in a closet.

Two months later, as seen in Amy Schatz's documentary "Song of Parkland," the students decided to resume rehearsals of the show. The performance was a triumph, bringing joy and healing to the school and community. And to the nation, as they were invited to sing at the Tony Awards, where Herzfeld accepted the Excellence in Theatre Education Award. Nor were their resilience and determination limited to the stage. As Herzfeld notes, 10 of her students helped form Never Again MSD, the political action committee against gun violence founded by survivors of the shooting. The Washington Post credited the group with winning a "stunning victory" against the National Rifle Association when the Florida legislature voted for stricter gun control regulations in March 2018. "Song of Parkland" can be seen on HBO, HBO NOW, HBO GO, HBO On Demand, and partners' streaming platforms.

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Credit: By Peter Keough Globe Correspondent

Caption:

Parkland teacher Melody Herzfeld

Slaven Vlasic/Getty Images

DETAILS

Subject:	Students; Tragedies; Motion picture directors & producers; Documentary films; Firearm laws & regulations; Motion picture festivals
Location:	Croatia; Israel; Florida; Austria; Ukraine; Tel Aviv Israel
People:	Lanzmann, Claude
Company / organization:	Name: Rotten Tomatoes; NAICS: 519130; Name: Public Broadcasting Service; NAICS: 515120; Name: Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School; NAICS: 611110; Name: National Rifle Association--NRA; NAICS: 813410, 813940; Name: Skype Technologies SA; NAICS: 511210
Publication title:	Boston Globe (Online); Boston
Publication year:	2019

Publication date:	Feb 6, 2019
Section:	Arts
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston
Country of publication:	United States, Boston
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2176430424
Document URL:	https://proxy.emerson.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/family-secrets-oscar-oversights-musics-healing/docview/2176430424/se-2?accountid=10735
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Last updated:	2019-04-26
Database:	Boston Globe

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