

Tucson Film Festival is a Jewel

By Janet Arnold, January 2015



The Tucson International Jewish Film Festival is celebrating its 24th season this year from Jan. 15 to 24 at several locations around the Old Pueblo. The Tucson Festival is sponsored by the Tucson Jewish Community Center.

“We proudly consider it a jewel in the mosaic of our arts and culture programming,” says Lynn Davis, director of arts and culture at the JCC.

A committee of volunteers meets weekly from February through August to screen films. Lynn says they’re always looking for additional volunteers who have the time, dedication and open-mindedness to serve on the committee.

“Our festival is quite diverse in its themes. We like to look at both the retention and the transition of Jewish values, and sometimes our choices may deviate from what some consider traditional cultural norms,” Lynn adds.

The TIJFF is proud of the fact, for example, that it has incorporated films of particular interest to the LGBT community that used to be separated. “We want to be as inclusive as possible,” states Lynn. “We feel we have films that offer something for everyone.”

Each year’s festival “unofficially” kicks off with a repeat of a popular film from the previous year. For 2015 that film is “The Other Son,” which will be shown at 3 pm on Jan. 11 at the Desert View Performing Arts Center, 38759 S Mountain View Blvd. in Saddlebrooke, with a ticket price of just \$5. The film is a moving and provocative story of an Israeli and Palestinian, who discover they were inadvertently switched at birth. “The film was a big favorite last year, so we’re bringing it back again,” Lynn says.

Official Opening Night of the 2015 Festival will be Jan. 15 at 7 pm at The Loft Cinemas, 3233 E Speedway Blvd. in Tucson. The opening film is the Arizona premier of “Little White Lie” (see review, page 37). Filmmaker Lacey Schwartz will be in attendance.

The remainder of the 12 feature-length films and six shorts will be shown at the Tucson JCC Ballroom, 3800 E River Road in Tucson. Lynn says, “We’re fortunate to have a lovely, comfortable venue to show the films.”

One of the shorter films, the 34-minute “Raquel: A Marked Woman,” is a hybrid, according to filmmaker Gabriela Bohm, who will be in Tucson for the showing on Jan. 18. “Some people call it a docudrama, in that it’s based on a real person in a factual situation, but the elements are re-enacted,” Gabriela said in a recent phone interview from her home in Los Angeles.

Gabriela is an Argentinean-Israeli-American documentary filmmaker. A second-generation Holocaust survivor of Hungarian and Transylvanian lineage, she was born in Buenos Aires. Her family immigrated to Israel when she was 12; at age 20, Gabriela came to the United States to attend film school at NYU. She sees her calling as a documentarian as an opportunity to focus on “Jewish identity and the legacy of trauma.”

“Raquel: A Marked Woman” has won awards at film festivals across the country mostly as a documentary, but also as “Best Latino Film” at the Santa Fe Film Festival. Last year it was featured at the Skirball Museum as part of its Latin Jewish Film Festival, called Translantino.

"Raquel" recounts the remarkable tale of Raquel Liberman, who was born in Lodz, Poland, and in 1922 immigrated to Argentina to join her husband, who was a tailor. Soon after he died of tuberculosis, and Liberman became one of thousands of Eastern European migrant women lured into prostitution by white-slavery syndicates that promised them seamstress jobs.

But after enduring this harsh and degrading life for several years (and hiding it from her two young sons, who were being raised elsewhere), Liberman one day courageously marched into the Buenos Aires police headquarters. To the astonished officers, she offered up personal testimony that would lead to the downfall of the Jewish mafia, Zwi Migdal.

Gabriela began to research sex trafficking in South America in general but decided to focus on Liberman because she prefers character-based documentaries to conceptual ones. The affront existed from about 1890 to 1930. She explains, “There was a lot of development going on in Argentina during that time. Men were coming over from Europe for the good jobs. They wanted women. It was a condition ripe for the Zwi Migdal to move in and lure poor, young women from the Polish territories to South America, even though they would be denied their basic freedoms.

"I felt that Raquel’s story, following her dramatic arc, would give viewers a sense of her ordeal and the heroic aspect of her journey, as well as give us a historical context. She showed remarkable courage," says the director, who will give a talk and take part in a Q&A following the screening. The showing of this film is being co-presented by Women’s Philanthropy, Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona. Also in attendance will be the filmmakers of “The Outrageous Sophie Tucker” at 7 pm on Jan. 17. Susan and Lloyd Ecker spent seven years tracing Tucker’s 60-year career, using her 400-plus recently found personal scrapbooks. It’s a rags-to-riches story

of the life of the bold, brash and beloved “Last of the Red Hot Mamas.”The Eckers will participate in a Q&A following the showing.

The Tucson International Jewish Film Festival, through the magic and power of cinema, promotes the preservation of Jewish culture and encourages cultural diversity. Contributions to ensure the sustainability of the festival are gratefully accepted. Tickets are available at tucsonjcc.org or 520-618-5026.