

A MICROCOSM OF ISRAELI SOCIETY

JUDI HERMAN reviews four short films brought to the UK in June by the Tel Aviv University Trust



Elisar Girshovich and Noa Barkai in *Eva is Leaving*

The best short films are little gems, telling tight, clear stories with economy and discipline. The four films showcased by TAU (Tel Aviv University) Trust UK display all these virtues.

These shorts have clearly been carefully chosen for the very different predicaments in which their protagonists find themselves, which together offer a microcosm of Israeli society.

Each explores its own small 'situations' and each does it with style. The young filmmakers prove adept at using visual and aural metaphor and at directing the fine actors they've cast. Their films are tightly scripted with clear storylines and high production values. Composers have written and orchestrated original musical scores that play a vital part in the storytelling.

In writer/director Maya Tiberman's *Ramlod*, a young photographer runs out of petrol as she drives through the outskirts of a Jewish-Arab city. She has no choice but to enlist the aid of Arab children playing at the sandy roadside. In Lila Rubinstein's pitch-perfect performance, her face and body language beautifully display her anxiety, as we follow her attempts to engage with the gang and negotiate with its solemn, unsmiling little leader (self-composed Mario Manssa). Yair Dalal's original score helps to create a slightly exotic and alien atmosphere and to ratchet up the tension.

Tiberman calibrates her plot finely as the young gang leader demands a succession of new photo opportunities in exchange for the promise of directions to the petrol station and the girl's instincts for a great picture story outweigh her fear. The photography is fine too, seeing the unlovely urban landscape through the girl's eyes – or lens. I won't spoil the clever end.

The Decision Maker of the title in writer/director Danny Yagil's film is Israel's Prime Minister Gideon Harel (extraordinary

Oded Teomi), preparing to take part in an eve-of-election TV debate with his main opponent. But the polls are not healthy and it's all too clear he isn't in good health either, as Yagil's merciless close-ups emphasise.

Behind the scenes at the TV station, his 'people' buzz round him, spin doctors, speech writers and stylists – including his own smart, sleek daughter. The beleaguered premier manages to slip away from his entourage and security guards, seeking a few moments of solitude before the hurly-burly of live debate. Like Alice in Wonderland he tries different doors along endless corridors. Discovering more about himself than is comfortable as he overhears what the cleaner thinks of him and watches his own TV obituary, makes him take stock of his past and decide to take a different path for the future ...

Danny Yagil's storytelling is powerful and nuanced, his characters vivid and their relationships convincing and intriguing. He displays a healthy cynicism about the life political, where image and soundbite are everything. Even the young voters seen cheering for Harel as he arrives at the TV station turn out to have been paid 150 shekels each for their pains.

Yagil has created a world as convincing as the Copenhagen corridors of power in the blockbuster Danish political TV drama series *Borgen*. And talking of corridors of power, there's a lovely contrast between the opening tracking shot of the bright sandy path between lines of trees in the orchards of Harel's kibbutz birthplace and the low-lit grey corridors of the TV studios, with their monochrome-clad denizens. Beautifully judged, classy filmmaking.

Writer/director Aya Somech's *Eva is Leaving* bravely and bleakly tackles the polarisation of Israel's ultra-Orthodox and 'ultra-secular' by setting husband and wife against each other. She does this in the

microcosm of the café they ran together until Eldad started to become ever more religiously observant, so that now to Noa Barkai's bitter Eva, he is no longer the man she married. Somech shows Elisar Girshovich's forbidding Eldad reciting a blessing to go with his every action, starting with washing his hands. The café has become claustrophobic, the atmosphere and working relationships tense and bad-tempered.

Again both storytelling and performances are assured. The former intimacy of the couple is sadly palpable, and their stand-off contrasts starkly with the comfortable ease together of an elderly couple sitting at one of their tables. Again music is important, a pop song with the refrain "She's all yours" making a sadly ironic counterpoint to the marriage falling apart behind the counter.

Finally there is a wicked tragi-comedy with an ironic title, *A Wonderful Day*, written by Joseph Fackenheim and Ariel Weibrod, directed by Weibrod and Yossi Meiri.

Shachar's plans for the day involve proposing to his girlfriend and leaving Israel for a better life in Germany. But he is thwarted at every turn – by the German immigration authorities, by the unexpected outcome of his proposal and by the efforts of his grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, to persuade him to stay. Could all his problems be linked? Audiences are in for a treat with unexpected plot turns and machinations and a fine display of comic acting from Lia Koenig as the Machiavellian Grandmamma, from Elinor Kluger as the gorgeous Sharon (could her red dress be a clue?) and above all from Ori Yaniv as the put-upon innocent Shachar.

TAU alumni include Hagai Levy (*BeTipul/In Treatment*), Ari Folman (*Waltz with Bashir*) and Gideon Raff (*Hatufim/Homeland*). On this showing, the next generation are names to watch too.