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The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(04/27/1997)

The Tribe At Tribeca

Newcomer David Volach's 'My Father, My Lord' tops a large and promising roster of Jewish-themed films at this year's festival.

George Robinson - Special To The Jewish Week

Every once in a while a film takes you completely by surprise. It grabs you by the lapels, gets in your face and says, "This is very important." Films like those make this job worth doing, and every film critic wishes there were more of them.

David Volach's first feature film, "My Father, My Lord" is just such a film. As far as I'm concerned, if the Tribeca Film Festival, which opens this week, were to show nothing else in its sixth year, its continuing existence would already be justified.

Heady claims indeed and, if you read this part of the newspaper regularly, you know I seldom make such statements about new filmmakers.



"My Father, My Lord" justifies such praise with its quiet intelligence and its extraordinary attention to the expressive use of the mundane detail. Volach claims as his primary influence the brilliant Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, best known here for his "Three Colors" trilogy ("Blue," "White" and "Red") and "The Double Life of Veronique." Volach has said that "My Father, My Lord" is an appreciative response to the first of the 10 telefilms in Kieslowski's "Dekalog," a contemporary reworking of the Binding of Isaac in response to the injunction, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Volach's approach to the story is as oblique as Kieslowski's. Like the Torah's, his tale focuses on an older chasidic couple, a highly respected rebbe (Assi Dayan) and his wife (Sharon Hacohen Bar), whose only child is a sweet, daydreaming boy (Elan Griff). One of 19 children from a fervently Orthodox family, Volach left that community because he wanted to pursue a life of the imagination and aesthetics, something he couldn't do in the haredi world in Jerusalem. As a result, he brings a gravity and sincerity to his approach to depicting that world. Although father and son clearly dote on one another, the rigorous strictness of the father's piety creates a small but discernible gap between them, while the unquestioning warmth of his mother's love creates a total devotion. Finally, on a summer vacation trip to the Dead Sea, tragedy strikes the family, leaving them irretrievably shattered.

Volach tells this story simply and quickly. "My Father" is only 73 minutes long. But like Kieslowski, he tells it with a slow-building intensity that is based on the accretion of seemingly irrelevant detail and a slow narrative rhythm that is seductive and satisfying. He has the Polish master's sense of the mysteriousness of existence, the precariousness of human life and the arbitrariness of death. And like Kieslowski, he is perfectly willing to let his camera just run when a moment of sheer mystery occurs.

For the past few months, I have been slowly formulating an idea of

what the film aesthetic of a spiritual Judaism would look like. Although it is hardly the only answer, "My Father, My Lord" is definitely one answer, and a profoundly moving one.

The best news about Tribeca this year is that "My Father, My Lord" is only one of a dozen Jewish-themed films on display in the festival, and the other two available at press time are also quite successful, if not as surprising or intense.

"Miss Universe 1929 – Lisl Goldarbeiter. A Queen in Wien" is the latest work of the Hungarian documentary filmmaker Peter Forgacs. Forgacs, whose 2005 film "El Perro Negro: Stories from the Spanish Civil War" won the 2005 festival's award for best documentary feature, has carved out a niche all his own, transforming people's home movies into compelling, dramatic features that focus on the tragic workings of European history in the bloody 20th century.

"Miss Universe 1929" is another example of the creative ways in which Forgacs takes other people's footage, never intended for public consumption and, by putting it in a larger sociopolitical context, makes it speak across decades, reminding us of the ways that individual men and women are tormented by moments larger than themselves.

Lisl Goldarbeiter was, as the title says, Miss Austria of 1929 who went on to be crowned Miss Universe in the unlikely venue of Galveston, Texas, an event from which, the film dryly notes, "the public [was] excluded." A beautiful and poised young Jewish woman, she was captured on film, almost obsessively, by her cousin Marci Tenczer, who was quite clearly madly in love with her. Tenczer, who was still alive at the time of Forgacs' filming, offers his own observations on their lives, supplemented by readings from Lisl's diaries and letters. And Forgacs supplements Tenczer's images with newsreel footage of the period, showing us how the political upheavals of the 1930s gradually closed down the fairy princess world in which Lisl lived.

Surprisingly, as is the case of several of Forgacs' other films, Lisl and Marci both survived the Shoah. In fact, after the war, the cousins were reunited and married. But the scars of history are unmistakable in their lives, whether put there by the Nazis in the '40s or by the Hungarian uprising in 1956. As has been the case in every other film by Forgacs that I have seen, the interweaving of personal narrative and the movement of history is beautifully seamless, the images captivating or terrifying. "Miss Universe 1929" presents yet another way of entering into the story of the Jews in the previous century, one that Forgacs has made his own.

Intriguingly, Vivienne Roumani-Denn has also chosen to retell a historical story through the eyes of a single family. Her film "The Last Jews of Libya" would be just another talking-head documentary, albeit an unusually interesting one, if her own family were not the 50-minute film's central focus. The Jewish community of Libya, over two millennia in continuous existence, no longer exists, but her family was at its center for much of the last 100 years of Jewish life in Benghazi, and a few of them were, as the title says, the last Jews to leave in the 1960s. As was the case for many Sephardic Jews in the Arab countries of North Africa, existence was generally comfortable, if precarious. The filmmaker's grandfather Yosef was respected by the local Arab merchants, but when Mussolini caved in to Hitler, Fascist racial laws were instituted in Italian-held Libya. And when the Six Day War broke out, Jews were the victims of anti-Semitic rioting.

Roumani-Denn tells this story as experienced by her mother (with Isabella Rossellini giving effective voice to her diaries and letters). Because the focus of "Last Jews" is entirely on the Roumanis and the Tamams (her mother's family), the film is something more than another superficial historical documentary. Instead, viewers are given concrete examples of the workings of history on individuals, and history has an appealing and entirely human face. n

The Tribeca Film Festival opened on April 25 and will run through May 6. For information, call 212-941-2400 or go to <http://www.tribecafilmfestival.org/>.

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