

## News from the AJS Film Committee

Written by Dalit Katz, Chair of the AJS Film Committee with the collaboration of Olga Gershenson and Cathy Poruges, film committee members.

To celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Association for Jewish Studies, the Film Committee has programmed a film festival to take place during the first two evenings of the conference. With a focus on documentaries that explore the arts from an international perspective, the festival invites attendees to enjoy a glimpse into early Indian cinema in *Shalom Bollywood*, marvel at the exotic characters who frequent *The Museum*, share the adventures of the Nobel laureate profiled in *Saul Bellow*, and be moved by *Svetlana Boym: Exile and Imagination*.

The documentary feature *Shalom Bollywood*, (2018, directed by Danny Ben Moshe Australia/India, in English & Hindi with English subtitles, 76 minutes) revisits a fascinating chapter in the early history of Indian cinema, the world's largest film industry. When the screen presence of Hindu and Muslim women was considered taboo in the new medium, Bene Israelis and Baghdadi Jews stepped in to fill their roles, emerging as Bollywood's first megastars. Interviews with the actors' family members and friends, rare archival footage from silent films such as the 1927 *Wild Cat of Bombay*, retro-style music and animation combine to revive the songs and dances typical of a Bollywood production, paying tribute to Indian cinema's golden age icons.

Professor Joan Roland (Professor of History, Pace University) will contextualize the Jewish communities in India in her introduction to the film. The film will be screened on Sunday, December 16 at 7:30 PM at the Amphitheatre in the Seaports World Trade Center.

The acclaimed novelist--winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, three National Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize--is the subject of *The Adventures of Saul Bellow* (directed by Asaf Galay, 2018, Israel/USA in English, 80 min), the first documentary film on the writer considered by many as one of the greatest prose stylists of the 20th century. Marking the centennial of his birth, the film features interviews with his family, friends and writers including Martin Amis, Philip Roth and A.B. Yehoshua. Highlighting Bellow's impact on American literature and his identities as a writer, polemicist, 'serial husband', father, Chicagoan and Jew, director Asaf Galay is known for innovative films about modern Jewish culture; his recent documentary, *The Hebrew Super Hero*, concerns the development of comic books in Israel. Foregrounding the humor that remains an underestimated element of Bellow's life and work, the film explores ways in which laughter figured as an integral element of the writer's personality and style.

The film will be presented by Professor Hannah Pollin-Galay, Senior Lecturer in Yiddish and Holocaust Studies, Department of Literature, Tel Aviv. It will be screened on Sunday, December 16 at 9 PM at the Amphitheatre in the Seaports World Trade Center.

*The Museum* (directed by Ran Tal, Israel, 2017, in English & Hebrew with English subtitles, 72 minutes, nominee for the Israeli Ophir Award for Best Documentary) offers a strikingly creative documentary exploration of the Israel Museum--its galleries, storerooms, employees and visitors--that boldly unlocks the mysteries of this major cultural institution through an ironic yet comprehensive gaze. Singing security guards, blind patrons, and a Haredi inspector share the

screen with curators, Palestinian guides, and an American museum director. Accomplished Israeli film maker Ran Tal has assembled footage of the museum's daily routine into a cinematic collage--observant, sensitive, and diverse.

Professor Yaniv Feller, Assistant Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University, former curator of the Jewish Museum in Berlin will introduce the screening. The screening will take place on Monday, December 17 at 7:30 PM at the Amphitheatre in the Seaports World Trade Center.

The festival concludes with *Svetlana Boym: Exile and Imagination* (directed by Judith Wechsler, USA, 60 minutes, in English). In 1980, age 21, literary and cultural critic Svetlana Boym (1959-2015) left the USSR for the US. After graduate studies at Boston University and Harvard, she became the Carl Hugo Reisinger Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. A brilliant writer and scholar of ambitious scope and great imagination, she explored motifs of exile, nostalgia, the diasporic imagination and forms of freedom in her books, essays, and art making. Interweaving videos, interviews, and photographs with the subject's original texts and film excerpts, this moving documentary pays tribute to her rich legacy. The film will be introduced by Catherine Portuges, Professor Emerita, Film Studies/Comparative Literature, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Director Judith Wechsler will conduct a Q/A session with the audience after the screenings. Judith Wechsler was awarded the Chevalier de L'ordre des Arts et des lettres for her filmmaking and publications on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century art. The film will be screened on Monday, December 17 at 9:00 PM at the Amphitheatre in the Seaports World Trade Center.

In addition to programming the festival and inviting scholars and filmmakers to present the screenings, the Film Committee works with the AJS Director of Events to secure screening space and provide for A/V technological support. A substantial portion of the committee's activity involves negotiating with film distributors for access to their selections at the AJS Film Festival at no cost to the conference. If you are interested in purchasing a particular film for your library or for use in your classes and public programming, please contact the distributor directly.

Another important initiative of the Film Committee is the organization, in collaboration with the AJS Pedagogy Division, of a session on teaching with film. This year's roundtable explores the pedagogical possibilities of teaching Jewish humor through film and television. Members of the roundtable will share experiences from their own classes. Olga Gershenson, Professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies and Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, will discuss the use of the Soviet Yiddish film *Jewish Luck* (1925) to show how the humor and literary work of Sholem Aleichem was reinterpreted in the Soviet Union. This discussion will help students appreciate cross-cultural aspects of Jewish humor. Catherine Portuges, Professor Emerita, Comparative Literature/Film Studies, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, will give a comparative analysis of *They are Everywhere/ Ils sont partout* (2016), a controversial French sketch comedy that deconstructs anti-Semitic clichés through provocative, politically incorrect dialogue. Jennifer Caplan, Assistant Professor at Towson University, will present *Roses Are Red, Humor Is Blue: Teaching "Obscene" Jewish Humor Through Film and TV*. This presentation is about how to theoretically frame material that may be offensive to some students, and why it is important to work with films and performances that push social boundaries.

The roundtable will be moderated by Dalit Katz, Adjunct Associate Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University, and the founding director of the annual *Ring Family Wesleyan University Israeli Film Festival*.

The Film Committee welcomes you to join us for both the screenings and the pedagogical session. Our contribution to 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration included participation in international film festivals (two of our members curate an annual festival on their home campuses), locating new work, and engaging in the challenging process of selecting four films from a diverse roster of excellent submissions. See you at the movies!