

PRESS RELEASE

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**SAN
FRANCISCO
JEWISH
FILM
FESTIVAL41** | july 22–
august 1
sfjff.org



**41st SAN FRANCISCO JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL,
Presented by the Jewish Film Institute,
Wraps after 11 Days of World Class Cinema
to a Virtual Audience from Over 40 Countries**

**Festival Hosted 35 Guests from Around the Globe,
26 Q&As and Online Conversations**

Award Winners Announced

SAN FRANCISCO, August 4, 2021 -- The Festival, the first and largest of its kind, presented over **50 films from over 20 countries**, with an unprecedented number of shorts, Q&As, and special guests from around the globe. SFJFF41 celebrated bold films and filmmakers that expand and evolve the Jewish story for audiences everywhere.

From historical dramas to genre-bending documentaries, this year's themes ranged from **poignant coming of age films to complex narratives surrounding Jewish identity**. Six films addressed LGBTQI+ issues, eight films on the joys and pains of teenage life, seven explored topics and themes relating to the Israeli-Palestinian region, 25 featured directors and producers that identify as female or non-binary, literature took center stage in five films, and the creation of music graced the screen in three films. This year, the **new JFI Social Change Teen Fellowship program** presented the Take Action program.

Festival-goers experienced SFJFF several ways this year: viewing films from home in the JFI Digital Screening Room, and in-person at two days of live screenings at the historic Castro Theatre in San Francisco. Special guests at the Castro Theatre included the Bay Area filmmaking team of **PROGNOSIS: NOTES ON LIVING**, and the director, producer, and creator/star of **A KADDISH FOR BERNIE MADOFF**.

"JFI is happy to support films and filmmakers with nuanced, layered, and complex narratives that reflect the full diversity of Jewish experiences. We are particularly excited to award \$100K in the second annual JFI Completion Grant award ceremony. We look forward to seeing these films at future SFJFFs." —**Lexi Leban, Executive Director**

"We are so pleased with our first ever hybrid festival. It was fulfilling to provide something for everyone with in-person screenings and a robust, high quality on-line program with audiences tuning in from all over the world."—**Jay Rosenblatt, Program Director**

SFJFF41 had 26 Q&As and post-film conversations, a record number for the festival. Some events hosted over 35 guests, including a variety of JFI staff and special guest interviewers from across the globe and the filmmaking world. This year's virtual audience stretched across over 40 countries and 40 out of 50 states in the US.

SFJFF41 AWARD WINNERS

The juried **SFJFF Best Short Documentary Award** was presented to **THE LOVE AND DEATH OF YOSEF AND ZILLI** by Dean Gold. Following a long and loving marriage, Yosef and Zilli tell their son, Doron, of their plan to commit suicide together. As their plan begins to materialize, Doron seeks to preserve his parents' memory with his video camera. His tapes reveal a heartbreaking and controversial tale about aging, mortality, and love of life. As an Academy Award® qualifying film festival in the Documentary Short Subject category, the film will be eligible to be nominated for an Oscar® for the 2022 Academy Awards®.

The **2021 SFJFF Film Movement Award** was presented to Anika Benkov for the short film **THE BINDING OF ITZIK**, about a middle-aged Hasidic bookbinder who stumbles across a Craigslist ad offering 'binding lessons for submissive women.' He responds to it, becoming entangled in an emotionally intense BDSM relationship with a stranger on the internet. Presented with distributor Film Movement, the Award honors achievements in short filmmaking that express the Jewish experience in a unique, original and meaningful way, or provides a fresh perspective on diversity within the Israeli or Jewish community.

The **San Francisco Film Critics Award** went to **NEIGHBOURS** by Mano Khalil. When a new teacher arrives in his village on the Syrian/Turkish border, six-year-old Sero's carefree life is changed as the cruelties of cross cultural conflict impinge on his beloved family.

OPENING & CLOSING NIGHTS

SFJFF41 kicked off virtually with **MISHA AND THE WOLVES**, the dramatic tale of a woman whose Holocaust memoir took the world by storm, but a fallout with her publisher – who turned detective--revealed an audacious deception created to hide a darker truth. The in-person Opening Night film at the Castro Theatre was Vadim Perelman's **PERSIAN LESSONS**, in which a young Belgian man is arrested and sent to a concentration camp in Germany. He narrowly avoids execution by swearing to the guards that he is not Jewish, a lie that temporarily saves him until he is charged with teaching Persian to the officer in charge of the camp's kitchen.

The Festival's virtual Closing Night film was Doron and Yoav Paz' **PLAN A**. Based on a true story, the film follows a group of Jewish Holocaust survivors who plan to poison the water system in Germany, killing millions of Germans in an ultimate act of revenge. The film provides a new perspective on the Holocaust and addresses our most primal feelings: revenge, justice, and morality.

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

The Festival presented two remarkable Centerpiece films. The **Centerpiece Narrative** film was the Bay Area Premiere of **200 METERS** by Ameen Nayfehi, who spent his formative years moving between Jordan and Palestine. The film follows a desperate Palestinian father, who is denied entry at an Israeli checkpoint to see his injured son. It's just 200 meters across the border wall, but to Mustafa it might as well be a world away. Taking matters into his own hands he makes the dangerous decision to smuggle himself across. The **Centerpiece Documentary** was the West Coast Premiere of **THE CONDUCTOR** by Bernadette Wegenstein. With unprecedented access, the filmmakers accompany internationally-renowned conductor Marin Alsop filming across three continents as she

smashes the glass ceiling to become the first woman to serve as music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, and the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Legendary Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland was the recipient of **SFJFF's 2021 Freedom of Expression Award** in conjunction with a screening of her newest film, **CHARLATAN**, a richly drawn biopic of Czech healer Jan Mikolášek who rose to fame through his uncanny ability to diagnose disease with a mere glance at the patient's urine. Following the online screening, Holland discussed her work and the film with Laura Thielen, former Artistic Director of the Aspen Film Festival and San Francisco International Film Festival.

Nicholas Bruckman's documentary **NOT GOING QUIETLY** was featured as part of **Take Action Day**, a day dedicated to social justice films that reflect the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam, healing the world with our actions. In the film, 32-year old Ady Barkan's life is upended when he is diagnosed with ALS. After a chance encounter with a powerful senator on an airplane catapults him to national fame, Ady and a motley crew of activists ignite a once-in-a-generation movement for universal healthcare. The screening was presented by **JFI's Social Change Teen Fellows**, who led a virtual Q&A with subject Ady Barkin and filmmakers Nicholas Bruckman and Amanda Roddy.

"Song and Dance" night was a particular highlight, with an in-person screening of **A KADDISH FOR BERNIE MADOFF** at the Castro Theatre. An artistic excommunication set on Wall Street in 2008, director Alicia J. Rose's film is a mystical meta-musical about the greatest financial fraud in history, as seen through the eyes of musician/poet Alicia Jo Rabins. The screening was followed by a live Q&A with Rose, Rabins, and producer Lara Cuddy.

WET DOG was the **Next Wave Spotlight** presentation, geared toward audiences 35 and under but enjoyed by all. Based on a provocative autobiography, this story – set in a largely Muslim neighborhood in Berlin – follows a teenage gang member who is caught between hiding his Jewish identity and saving his life.

The festival presented a special West Coast Premiere screening of **THE LIGHT AHEAD** at the Castro Theatre. A forgotten classic by B-movie maverick Edgar G. Ulmer (**THE BLACK CAT**, **DETOUR**), this 1939 film is one of the finest examples of pre-WWII American Yiddish cinema. At once a touching comedic drama and poignant social critique, Ulmer's film is markedly distinct from the standard Hollywood offerings of the era, and is a prescient allegory for the looming peril facing European Jews on the eve of the Second World War. The film was presented in a **new 4K digital restoration** from original 35mm materials by the National Center for Jewish Film.

Other highlights include a TV Spotlight on the six-episode series **LABYRINTH OF PEACE**, a compelling portrait of an industrial family dynasty, inspired by true yet little-known events in post-WWII “neutral” Switzerland; Asaf Galay’s **THE ADVENTURES OF SAUL BELLOW**, the first-ever documentary film about this legendary author, who was one of the most acclaimed chroniclers of post-war American Jewish life; and **MY NAME IS PAULI MURRAY**, a candid recounting of the journey of the pioneering attorney, activist, priest and dedicated memoirist who shaped landmark litigation—and consciousness—around race and gender equity.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

The Castro screening of **PROGNOSIS: NOTES ON LIVING** was one of the biggest events of the Festival. This film centered on Oscar-winning Bay Area documentary filmmaker Debra Chasnoff’s experience as she is diagnosed with stage-4 breast cancer. A raw, surprisingly funny portrait emerges of how her calling—to repair the world—shifts as she navigates between terminal illness and the shifting identities of her chosen LGBTQI+ family. The all Bay-Area filmmaking team was live for an in-person Q&A after the screening, including Kate Stilley Steiner (Co-director), Nancy Otto (Debra Chasnoff’s wife), Lidia Szajiko (Producer), Traci Dobronravova (Jewish Family and Children’s Services), and Oscar Klausner and Noah Chasnoff (Debra Chasnoff’s sons).

LOOKING AHEAD

The 41st San Francisco Jewish Film Festival featured an array of engaging and engrossing bold films that expanded and evolved the Jewish story for audiences everywhere. This year’s program had “something for everyone.” The Jewish Film Institute will continue its creative year-round programming and keep on with shared crucial and engaging conversations on, around, and about Jewish cinema as they move into their 42nd year.

Stay tuned for the Jewish Film Institute’s year-round programming, including its Ninth Annual WinterFest in 2022 and the 42nd San Francisco Jewish Film Festival.

[Festival Photos are available to download here. Please credit the Jewish Film Institute and photographer Barak Shrama unless otherwise noted.](#)

About the Jewish Film Institute

The Jewish Film Institute (JFI) is the premier curatorial voice for Jewish film and media and a leading arts and culture organization based in the Bay Area. JFI catalyzes and inspires communities in San Francisco and around the world to expand their understanding of Jewish life and culture through film, media, and dialogue. JFI each year produces their signature summer Festival, the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, in four Bay Area counties, the largest Jewish cultural event in Northern California and the first and largest festival of its kind worldwide. The annual festival provides a suite of awards, some with cash prizes, including: the Freedom of Expression Award (recent recipients include Norman Lear, Lee Grant, Kirk Douglas and documentary filmmakers Joe Berlinger and Liz Garbus); Audience Award for Best Narrative and Best Documentary; the Film Movement Award for Best Narrative Short; a juried award for Best Documentary Short (the winner is eligible for the Oscars); and the SF Film Critics Award for best international fiction feature. Throughout the year JFI screens films in the community including at WinterFest, a mini-festival in February, in senior communities, JCC's and at San Quentin Prison.

Additionally, JFI provides a number of Filmmaker Services to provide support for emerging and established filmmakers working with Jewish themes and create a continuum of support for filmmakers at various stages in their careers. This support is provided through JFI's Filmmaker Residency Program which since 2012 has provided office space and support for independent producers, the JFI Completion Grant program, which in its inaugural year provided a total of 75 K to six projects, and the JFI Social Justice Teen Fellowship with participants crafting and promoting a series of screenings and conversations around JFI's social justice films for other teens in the Bay Area.

Finally, JFI provides a number of online programs including: the JFI Film Archive, the largest database of Jewish cinema online today, with almost 40 years of curatorial history and more than 1,800 films to investigate, this archive is the largest online resource for Jewish film and media in the World; through JFI On Demand, more than 350 films of its greatest hits can be accessed anytime, anywhere; and the Monthly Online Shorts, in which every month JFI releases films for free to a global audience of 2.3 million since 2009.

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