



Shira Haas (Zoom screenshot)

CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT

Shira Haas & Israeli Filmmakers Appear at Virtual Film Festival

By **Gerri Miller** January 17, 2021[Print This Article](#)

“Shtisel” and “Unorthodox” star Shira Haas discussed her latest film, the Ophir-winning (and potentially Oscar-nominated) drama “Asia” at the InFocus: Israeli Cinema film festival, appearing virtually via Zoom at a panel that also featured writer-producer Ron Leshem (“Valley of Tears,” “No Man’s Land,” “Euphoria”) and producer Alon Aranya (“Tehran,” “Your Honor”).

Presented by New Filmmakers Los Angeles and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in partnership with the Consulate Generals of Israel in Los Angeles and New York, the virtual festival also featured a program of five award-winning Israeli short films and a panel discussion with their directors.

Haas, who won of the nine Ophirs awarded to “Asia,” a heart-wrenching drama about a Russian immigrant mother and her ailing daughter, talked about her skyrocketing career and most memorable roles.

“I was a very shy child. I never thought I’d be an actress. I thought I’d be a writer or graphic designer, not the center of attention,” she said. “‘Princess’ was my first project. I was 16½. I fell in love with acting in this movie. It got into the Sundance Film Festival and I got representation, and then ‘The Zookeeper’s Wife’ happened. That was my first interaction with a global audience, it opened the door for me to continue telling stories and playing complex and interesting characters.”

Haas recalled reading “Shtisel” for the first time. “I come from a secular background and thought, ‘How can I relate to that?’ But reading it opened my mind to telling this story and to this world. It made me see the bigger picture and have more empathy.” She also shared her challenging experiences making “Unorthodox,” which earned her an Emmy nomination last year.

“The head-shaving scene was very challenging but also very empowering. It was on the first shooting day. I had such long hair then. One heck of a welcome,” she recalled but Esty’s audition scene was even more daunting. “It’s such an important scene and a very symbolic one,” she said. “It’s a story about a woman who’s finding her voice, and in that scene, she’s literally finding it. It was [filmed] live and there were a lot of people and cameras. I was really nervous about singing in front of everyone and messing up. I felt a lot of responsibility to do it right.”

When it comes to choosing projects, “It was always important for me to do roles that were different from one another, like ‘Asia’ and ‘Unorthodox’ are—different languages, different everything,” Haas noted. “For me, acting is not only the result, but the process, the research. That’s what I’m looking for in a project, and different stories and collaborating with directors and creators that inspire me.”

On the subject of the success of film and TV shows from Israel on the global market, Haas, remarked, “I think people in America are tired of only seeing people like themselves and want to see something different but still be able to relate to it. I think people are way more open to it and looking to see that kind of material from amazing creators, writers and directors.”

Leshem opined that in Israel, “We take risks, maybe because of the urgency of life. We’re good at collaborating, working together. We think outside the box.” Aranya, whose spy series Tehran” is a big hit for Apple TV+ and English-language remake of his drama “Your Honor” is now airing on Showtime, pointed out, “Success on global television can come from anywhere today if it’s done right.”

The shorts program featured screenings and conversation with the filmmakers behind “Birth Right,” about a Russian girl pondering her future on a Birthright trip to Israel; “White Eye,” in which a bicycle theft prompts a crisis of conscience; “Image of Victory,” a documentary about a wounded IDF soldier’s recovery from an injury sustained in the 2014 offensive in Gaza;

“Anna,” about a lonely older Ukrainian woman with dwindling romantic prospects; and “Touch,” a very different kind of teenage romance: it’s totally silent. The dialog is entirely in the form of text messages.

“I’ve always wanted to do a rom-com but I knew it had to be weird and kind of grotesque for me to enjoy making it,” said Nir Berger, “Touch’s” director, and recent Ophir winner for “Here We Are.” “I have this fascination with digital communication, which I find so sad and so hilarious at the same time. It was terrifying to shoot a film with no dialogue. We had to make up a lot of ways to deal with that. I love the idea that the way in which the medium in which you communicate confines and creates this lovely irony.”

His teenage protagonist alternates between trolling, catfishing and obsessing over a boy. “I wanted it to be cringeworthy in the way you see this teen writing the most horrible things to people. You want her to stop and be better than that,” he said. “That was the experience we were trying to create with the film.”

In “Birth Right,” Inbar Horesh wanted to evoke the feeling of alienation that being between two cultures can produce. “I was interested in breaking this image of what it means to be an Israeli,” she said. “In telling these characters’ stories I wanted to show that not everyone fits in completely. The group looks very united from the outside but when you focus on each one of them you see that they don’t quite belong completely. Maybe this united community that we’re trying to create in Israel is only in our minds and doesn’t really exist.”

For “Image of Victory” director Adi Mishnayot, the film was “a very personal experience”—it documents the long recovery of her brother, Uri, after he was injured in battle in July 2014. “All Israelis have this fear of someone close to them being injured or worse. You constantly see on the news representation of what that is. When it happened, it was overwhelming and my first instinct was to start filming everything, but I didn’t touch the material until a year after, when I realized this was my story to tell,” she said.

A steady stream of dignitaries and celebrities visit Uri in the hospital including model Bar Rafaeli, part of the IDF’s publicity machine. “They are recruited to keep the positive view of the army going, [which is necessary] in order for the system to work. It’s idealized into this very positive thing when in reality it’s constant war,” Mishnayot said. “This film is not about Uri’s recovery process but what it means to be an Israeli hero,” she continued, noting that Uri is now a student and doing well. “People that fought in earlier wars tell me they identify so much with Uri’s experience.”

“White Eye” filmmaker Tomer Shushan revealed that the story, about a man whose efforts to retrieve his stolen bicycle causes him to lose sight of his humanity, was based on an incident in his life. “My instincts were to get my property, and I couldn’t see this person in front of me. It happened so fast that I didn’t have the time to think or breathe or understand if what I’m doing was right or wrong. In the end, it doesn’t matter what happens with the bike. The harm has already been done.”

Dekel Berenson’s film “Anna” was inspired by a trip to Ukraine, where one of his grandparents was born. “I got to know the country and that’s how I learned about these parties” where American men seek brides,” he said, but he didn’t speak the language and had a translator in order to work with the local cast and crew. His next project is “Aliya,” about a young Ukrainian woman who discovers she’s Jewish, moves to Israel and joins the IDF, but a violent off-base assault causes her to reevaluate her choices, values and beliefs.

The short films are currently playing the festival circuit and

“Asia” will be released theatrically this year.

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