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Jewish Film Festival comes of age

By **Joe Williams**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

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The St. Louis Jewish Film Festival, which previews Thursday and runs from June 22-26 at Plaza Frontenac, turns 13 this year. And as every Jewish kid knows, 13 is the big one, the birthday where a child is declared a grown-up.

For its bar mitzvah year, the J-Fest is in a celebratory mood. The festivities begin Thursday with a suitably youth-oriented preview. Screening at 7 p.m. at Plaza Frontenac will be "The Hope," a documentary about the Jewish rock movement. After the screening there will be a live performance by Rick Recht, a St. Louis-based singer and guitarist who is featured in the movie. Recht, who has released four albums and toured across the country, has been called "The Jewish Dave Matthews."

The teen theme continues on Sunday with the kickoff film, a star-powered British comedy titled "Sixty Six." Helena Bonham Carter ("Sweeney Todd") plays a mother whose son's bar mitzvah is complicated by England's success in the World Cup soccer tournament.

There's also a bar mitzvah-themed documentary, "Praying with Lior," about a birthday boy with Down Syndrome.

Documentaries have always been a strong focus of the festival. This year's subjects range from the Gaza evacuations ("Unsettled") and a Mossad agent who posed as an ex-Nazi in Egypt ("Champagne Spy") to cosmetic surgery ("The Nose") and Jewish hoopsters ("The First Basket," which tells us that the first field goal in NBA history was scored by a Jew named Ossie Schechtman).

The festival often includes sneak previews of films that will be returning to St. Louis later in the season. One such hot ticket is "Refusenik," an acclaimed documentary about the Soviet dissident movement embodied by heroic Jews like Natan Sharansky.

But one of the pleasures of a film festival is taking a chance on the unknown. Perhaps this year's surprise hit will be a drama like "Four Weeks in June," a Swedish film about an unlikely friendship between a young beauty and an elderly Jewish woman who loves American jazz. Or maybe it will be a romance like "Love and Dance," which is touted as "an Israeli 'Billy Elliot'." A film called "Steal a Pencil for Me" is intriguingly described as a documentary about an illicit love affair in a concentration camp. And from the South by Southwest Festival there's a buzz building for "Arranged," which finds comedy in the plight of two Brooklyn school teachers, one Jewish and one Muslim, who are hoping to be matched with suitable husbands.

Many of the screenings will be followed by discussions with relevant experts and Jewish community leaders. But you don't have to be a Talmudic scholar to appreciate that this year's festival includes exactly 13 films.

about this blog

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