

"Jewish cinema does not bore" - on the history and present of the Jewish Film Festival Berlin and Brandenburg.

A text by Bernd Buder.

The Jewish Film Festival Berlin and Brandenburg was founded in 1995 by Nicola Galliner, at that time as part of the cultural work of the Jewish Community Berlin. Since then, it has continued to develop, soon becoming independent and expanding its festival area to include all of Berlin and Potsdam. Today it is the largest Jewish film festival in Germany.

There are many reasons to make a Jewish film festival. First of all, there is the long history of Jewish filmmaking, which is almost as old as the history of film itself. A history that took one of its beginnings in the Yiddish theater and literary tradition, such as the comedy "East and West" (1923), staged with actors from the Vienna Yiddish Theater, or the Scholem Alejchem adaptation "Russian Happiness," made two years later in the Soviet Union. The rest of the story is marked by the careers of Jewish producers, who shaped not only the success story of Hollywood, but well-made entertainment cinema per se. Of politically responsible repression, of occupational bans, the Holocaust and the compulsion to go into exile. Of new career opportunities, but also of failure in exile. Of films that, often linked to the reconstruction pathos of socialist film provenance, negotiate nation-building in Palestine and Israel. Of the social frictions associated with it, even today. About the Shoah and the associated traumas. About the history, present and future of Jewish life. About the coming to terms with these traumas and the history that produced them, in a Jewish-non-Jewish context.

Many epoch-making documentaries and feature films have been made here. Jewish cinema has thus been part of the center of society from the very beginning: it negotiates central questions of the condition humaine and of social coexistence. It asks about the responsibility for history - and, especially in times of increasingly acute conspiracy theories, about the background and fatal dangers of anti-Semitism. The conspiracy theory itself, which serves as a blueprint for other conspiracy theories. Which is proven not only, but strikingly often, by the fact that conspiracy theorists, if they don't already start with anti-Semitism, often enough end with it.

But Jewish cinema is above all: entertaining. In addition to the Hollywood pioneers mentioned above, it is also associated with names like Woody Allen, Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg. But what makes a film Jewish? Only the subject? The origin of the director, the actresses or the screenwriter? This topic has also moved the Jewish Film Festival Berlin and Brandenburg since its founding. In 2019, history and cultural studies scholar Frank Stern asked in the festival's 25th anniversary commemorative publication, "Was and is every film with Natalie Portman, Gal Gadot, Sharon Brauner or Michael Degen a Jewish film? Of course not. (But mostly it is.) When it comes to the question of what is Jewish in film, what counts is the content, the Jewish history, the Jewish atmosphere, the aura of Jewishness around love, family, tradition, memory and trauma, physicality and spirituality. Menorahs and caps are not enough to provide a sedate background for the film. ... A Jewish theme or the figure of a Jew out of political correctness, anti-Semitic malice or as philo-Semitic kitsch does not make a Jewish film."

The publicist Henryk M. Broder answered the question "what makes a film Jewish?" in the commemorative publication for the tenth anniversary of the Jewish Film Festival Berlin in his usual pointed way: "Everything that is not boring is Jewish. Because contrary to all prejudices, there is only one area in which Jews do indeed dominate. It is not banking, not the stock market, not the game of billiards. It is entertainment, show business. ... So what makes a Jewish film? The same thing that

makes a Jewish book or Jewish music. It doesn't bore. No sooner has it begun than it's over. There are 60, 120 or 180 minutes between the beginning and the end, but it's only the perceived time that matters. If it's more than ten minutes, then it's not a Jewish film."

Fortunately, the question of what Jewish cinema actually is can hardly be answered, or only approximately. In any case, it is immensely diverse, immensely international and immensely controversial in the best sense of the word. Like its makers and protagonists, it is interwoven with history and contemporary history. It is shaped by the Jewish tradition of learning, by discourse, and by looking at things from a wide variety of perspectives at the same time. It is certainly also characterized by Jewish humor, which, similar to the menorah and kippah mentioned by Frank Stern, but with all its fascinating uniqueness, has almost become a cliché again. Like everything else, it too has its roots in social experience and is therefore so wonderfully ambiguous. As the political scientist and Judaist Sylke Tempel put it in the commemorative publication for the tenth anniversary of the Jewish Film Festival Berlin: "Jewish humor is youngest-sibling humor. One deals exclusively with stronger powers. And with a superior authority (the mother, in Israel/Palestine also: UN, EU, USA etc.), which tries to establish justice by means of the ultimate injustice: 'If you don't stop fighting right away, you'll all get slapped. No matter who started it.' As the youngest of the siblings, one must make up for weakness with self-mockery and mockery of the stronger in order to maintain one's dignity and create an inner protection against superior power. This corresponds roughly to the Jewish experience. Jewish humor is accordingly subversive."

It is actually surprising that against the backdrop of this long history of Jewish cinema, its diverse depth of discourse and its close interweaving with fateful experience, anti-Semitism and political debates, it was not until 1981 that the first Jewish film festival ever was founded in San Francisco. An initial spark - today it is impossible to imagine the international festival scene without the many Jewish film festivals around the world. Nicola Galliner founded the Jewish Film Festival Berlin in 1995 with - so the legend goes - a film program sent to her by mail from the Jewish Film Festival San Francisco, in Berlin's Arsenal cinema with eight films. This first edition established a success story that the film lover continued to write for over a quarter of a century with her characteristic energy, warmth and joie de vivre. Under Nicola Galliner's wise and far-sighted direction, the festival accompanied filmmakers on their journey, stimulated discussion and ensured cultural understanding with the help of the programs presented. It became one of the largest Jewish film festivals in Europe, with a guest list that includes names such as future Oscar winner Susanne Bier, successful Berlin producer Artur Brauner, Belarusian documentary filmmaker Yuri Khachevatsky, Hollywood star Carol Kane and U.S. independent cinema pioneer John Turturro, to name just four of many.

Already the enumeration of this handful of names shows how a Jewish film festival can strike the creative balance between entertainment and reflection. Organizing a Jewish film festival in Berlin, the city from which the Holocaust was prepared, planned and organized, comes with a special responsibility. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of her festival, Nicola Galliner wrote: "One of our great concerns was and is not to depict Jewish life, Jewish biographies in a traditional, often exclusive 'victim role'. Throughout the years, it has always been important to us to break open this one-sided view and thus expand it to include the given complexity. To show that Judaism is above all one thing, highly alive."

This credo is still valid today. To live up to the excellent reputation of the Jewish Film Festival Berlin and Brandenburg in the world, to continue the successful festival history shaped by Nicola Galliner's actions with his guidelines and at the same time to further develop the festival are the goals of the new managing director duo Doreen Goethe and Andreas Stein, who are already well known in the festival world as the heads of the FilmFestival Cottbus. 2021 marks the first edition of the renowned film festival, which will be organized by the specially created JFBB UG after founder Nicola Galliner has retired.

With its program, for which a program collective will be responsible in the future, the festival wants to continue to depict the entire diversity of Jewish life and everyday life and to use the entire range of good entertainment to do so. The wide spectrum of stories and characters portrayed enables the audience to perceive Judaism in a completely different way than usual - detached from current daily news, thoughtful, often with a wink, between profound reflection and discursive depth. In this way, it offers the audience a variety of points of contact, Jewish identities come to the big screen in all their vividness, topicality and constant change. At the same time, it remains the festival's task to keep the memory of the Shoa alive and to resolutely counter anti-Semitic attitudes in all their overt and subtle patterns of thought.

The Jewish Film Festival Berlin and Brandenburg pays special attention to the discovery and promotion of young filmmakers in Germany and Israel. The Israeli films in the program bring stories of people and their everyday lives beyond news images and media clichés. As part of its work, the Jewish Film Festival Berlin and Brandenburg networks with other festivals, with institutions, museums and foundations, partners from the arts, culture and politics, and, of course, film funding bodies, distributors and the filmmakers who are at the center of interest. Their views, their attentive looking, their talent to move us, are the hummus (sorry for the cliché-heavy pun, but it had to be done) of every good debate about what we all need so urgently right now - especially under the auspices of hardened Corona discussions. In our case, differentiated views on the history, present and future of (not only, but especially) Jewish life for a Jewish and non-Jewish audience.