

Southern Jewish Life

New Orleans Chefs Alon Shaya, top, and Jacques Leonardi (seated) visited an Israeli army base in the Golan



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ROSH HA'AYIN

Muslim/Jewish film featured at Sidewalk

By Lee J. Green

A movie about faith in the Orthodox Jewish and Muslim communities in New York City, friendship, family and the challenges of being different in America highlights one of the selections at Sidewalk Film Festival in Birmingham, Aug. 26 to 28.



Voted as one of the top 10 independent film festivals in the United States, Sidewalk will screen "David" along with many other jury-selected short and feature films at several venues across downtown Birmingham. The festival moved up its dates this year so to not conflict with the High Holy Days or another religion in Alabama — college football.

"David" tells the story of Daud, an 11-year-old Muslim boy growing up in Brooklyn as the son of the local mosque's Imam, in a conservatively religious family. Through an innocent act of good faith, Daud inadvertently befriends a group of Orthodox Jewish boys who mistake him for being Jewish and accept him as one of their own (they call him "David").

While working together on a summer project, Daud and one of the Jewish boys, Yoav, develop a genuine friendship. But when true identities are revealed, dynamics change.

The film shows the challenges of retaining conservative religious practices and values while also adapting with the greater community.

"David" started as a short film called "Daud," which was selected for the 2010 Sidewalk Film Festival. Co-writer/Director Joel Fendelman grew up as a Reform Jew in Miami. He graduated from film school in Savannah, Ga., and then moved to Brooklyn in 2004.

He has made one another feature documentary about the Kung Fu tradition and several other short films.

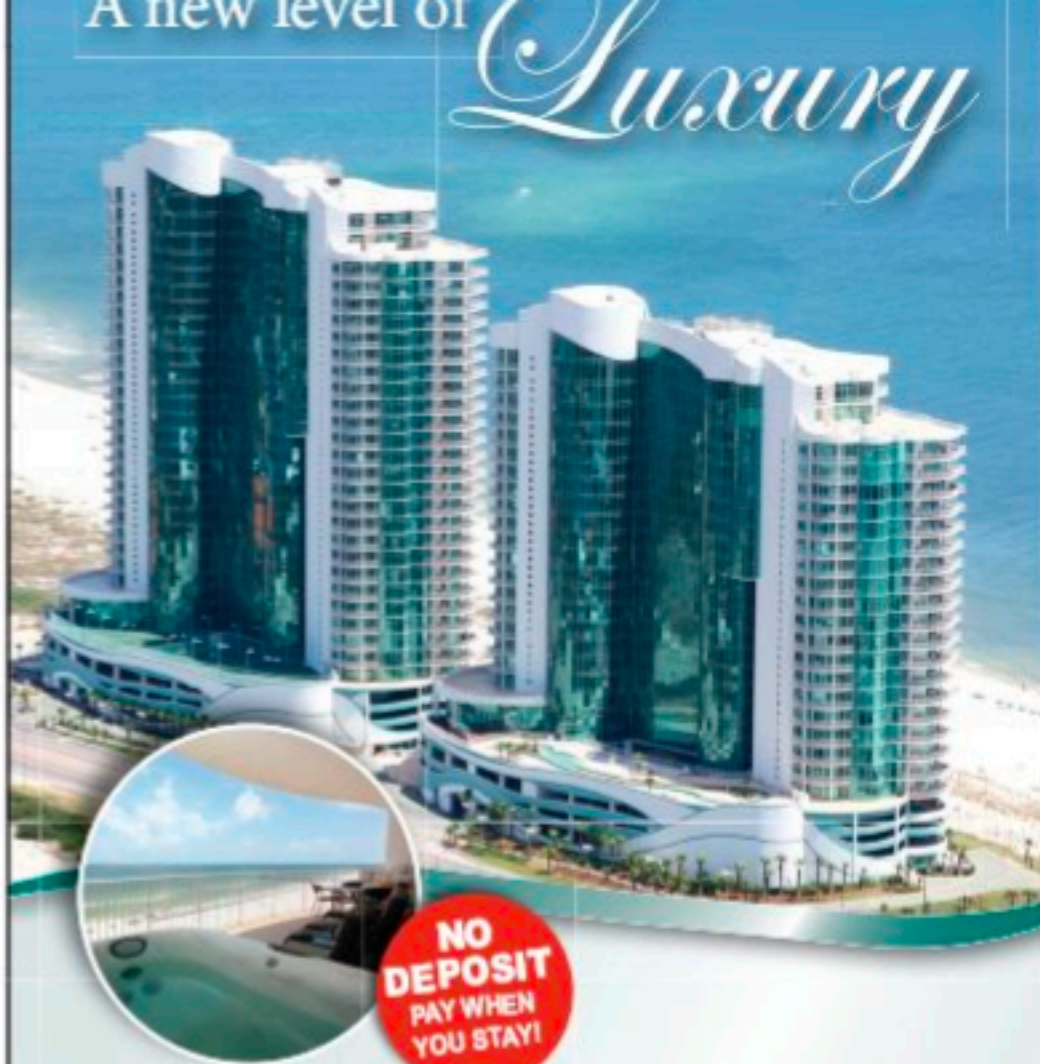
"I think the story for David/Daud first came to me from a deep-rooted feeling of being different. I grew up in Miami, where most of the population is Hispanic and I was one of the very few Jewish kids in my high school. It's not that I experienced extreme prejudice or anything of the sort, but sometimes I felt that I just didn't fit in," said Fendelman, 30.

Fast-forward 15 years and he is living in New York City, post-Sept. 11. "I remember riding the subway and seeing a traditionally dressed Muslim man enter the train. The first thought that came to my mind was 'I wonder if he's a terrorist.' Days later I sat with that thought, bothered by my ignorance. I decided to learn more about the Muslim Arab culture."

He spent the next year volunteering at the Arab American Association in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. Fendelman taught English to immigrant Muslim women and led a youth group during the summer. "It was one of the most profound experiences of my life. I learned that some of my preconceived notions were of course untrue. I was completely embraced as a Jew and an American. I discovered many commonalities between our religions, cultures and experiences," he said.

Fendelman contacted Patrick Daly, an anthropologist and writer who worked with him on the Kung Fu movie. The two started to draft out the short film "Daud" and then started working on the feature film "David."

"I wanted to tell this story through the eyes of the kids. That goes beneath the walls. Kids are pure and innocent. This isn't a story of



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cultural and political conflict; it's about identities, friendships and how we're more alike than we think deep down inside," he said.

He chose to set the film in his home city of Brooklyn since it "is a fascinating melting pot of immigrant cultures that have kept many of the traditions and customs from back home. There were two particular neighborhoods that were most intriguing to me for the purposes of this film — Bay Ridge (a predominantly Muslim Palestinian neighborhood) and Borough Park (primarily an Orthodox Jewish area).

"Both neighborhoods are adjacent to each other and have much overflow. Muslim men in robes pass Orthodox Jews in black suits and hats. In a sense this area is proof that a peaceful way of life is possible in contrary to the situation in Israel today," said Fendelman.

In addition to learning much about the Muslim community through his volunteerism and research for the film, Fendelman also learned more about those in the Orthodox Jewish community.

He said the young actors playing Daud and Yoav were not professional actors and did not audition for the roles. "We were lucky to discover the both of them. They were playing parts that seem to in many cases closely mirror their own lives," added Fendelman.

The feature film "David" debuted at the Brooklyn Film Festival this past June and won the Audience Choice Award. On Sept. 9, there will be a one-week run of the film at the Quad Cinema in Manhattan. Along with the screenings there will be interfaith dialogues and programs, also tied into the 10-year remembrance events of Sept. 11 in New York City. The Sidewalk screening is Aug. 27 at 4:15 p.m., at the McWane Center Ruston Theatre.

The filmmaker said he plans to come back to Birmingham to support the feature film, as he did last year with the short film. He is no stranger to the Magic City; he is cousins with Barry Dreayer of Birmingham.

"I am so glad that I get to share this film with Birmingham and so many others. I think it is an important story. It certainly has had a profound positive impact on my understanding and my life," he said.

Also on the schedule

"Green" marks the first feature film from Jewish filmmaker Sophia Takal, and premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas earlier this year. It will be shown on Aug. 28 at 6:25 p.m. at the Alabama Theatre loft.

"Green" tells the story of Genevieve, a New York intellectual who moves to the rural South with her journalist boyfriend while he works on his latest project about sustainable farming. Bored and feeling neglected, Genevieve turns to a working class local woman named Robin.

But when Genevieve's husband, Sebastian, forms a bond of his own with Robin, Genevieve finds herself overpowered by jealousy and insecurity in her paranoid fantasy.

Takal grew up in Montclair, N.J. and now lives in New York City. She graduated a few years ago from Columbia University with a degree in Film Studies.

She visited Birmingham last year to support the feature film "Gabi on the Roof." Takal played the lead character, and her fiancée Lawrence Levine directed. At the Brooklyn Film Festival, Takal earned the Best Actress Award.

For "Green," the tables have turned. Takal wrote and directed the feature and Levine plays the lead male character, Sebastian.

"Genevieve is like me in that she has some issues with jealousy. I chose the rural South for most of the setting, since I wanted to create a ideological, environmental and geographic distance from New York City" where the characters started, she said.

"There were some challenges in my first time directing, but I have learned a lot from Lawrence. The most important thing for a director