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14 films make cut in Minneapolis Jewish Film Festival

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They whittled, they narrowed, they pared, and finally this year's review board of the Minneapolis Jewish Film Festival selected 14 films out of more than 170 they had previewed for screening during the event scheduled for March 15-April 1.

The choices include films from nine different countries and eight Minnesota premieres. Nearly all are award-winners.



"Mabul" shows on April 1.

Determining which films to feature this year was tougher than usual, said Kaira Hogle, festival manager.

"It was one of the strongest years in film we've had to sift through, so it was really agonizing," she said.

With the exception of the opening-night reception and screening, films will be shown at the Sabes Jewish Community Center in St. Louis Park.

The challenge of making those final selections is a result of a marked increase in the number of films made by Jewish filmmakers worldwide in recent years, said Walter Elias, festival co-chairman.

"There's just a tremendous number of Jewish films being made today," said Elias, who has been involved with the festival for 14 years. "We could have screened 300 films or more."

Elias said that in the festival's 19-year history, the number of Jewish film festivals also has grown, from a handful to somewhere between 50 and 60 festivals nationally today -- and that doesn't include those that have cropped up globally, from Hong Kong to Scandinavia.

Community connections

Though its mission and format have remained the same since it began 19 years ago, the festival has grown steadily and significantly over the years. Five years ago, the festival became large enough to necessitate hiring a paid manager, Elias said. In 2011, 3,000 people attended.

While many of those who attend aren't Jewish, the event plays an important role for members of the local Jewish community, Elias said.

"Many Jewish people have a need to observe their Judaism in a place that's not necessarily a temple or synagogue," he said. "We find that for a lot of Jewish people coming [to the festival], this is the biggest Jewish experience of their year."

The festival's community aspect extends to other groups as well, with Hogle seeking out and inviting organizations or populations that might have a special interest in a film's subject matter.

"I look at the content and think, 'How could this be a richer experience for the audience?' It helps to create a community dialogue around a topic," she said.

For example, to accompany the March 22 showing of "Crime after Crime," a documentary about a woman imprisoned for her link to the murder of her abusive boyfriend, Hogle and the festival's co-chairs organized a panel of experts on domestic violence, including a researcher and a judge. She also invited members of social service-related nonprofits and law firms to attend the film and discussion.

This year's festival

While many of this year's films have a Jewish screenwriter or cast, the must-have element of every film is a Jewish theme, Elias said. Beyond that, the films range from a family drama about a mother in 1960s Poland who decides to move her anti-Semitic sons to Israel to keep them out of trouble ("My Australia") to a documentary highlighting how art was used during the Holocaust to document genocide and preserve the artists' humanity ("As Seen Through These Eyes").

The March 15 opening night showing of "Dorfman" is a Minnesota premiere and will include a Q-and-A with the film's Los Angeles-based screenwriter, Wendy Kout. The romantic comedy centers on a dowdy single Jewish woman whose life changes when she takes a job cat-sitting for her dream guy. It will be widely released this summer and received awards at both the Hollywood Film Festival and the Miami Jewish Film Festival.

Harold Rosenthal, who's attended the festival for six years and has been a sponsor for four, always purchases an "all-festival pass" so he can sample a variety of films. He said he's excited about all of this year's offerings.

"I like comedies, I like serious films, I like them all. A good film is a thought-provoking film," he said.

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