

BY JANET SILVER GHENT | OCTOBER 4, 2023



Caryn Huberman has fond memories of attending San Francisco Jewish Film Festival screenings at Palo Alto's CinéArts before Covid-19 arrived. She recalled how moviegoers would camp in their seats, eating sandwiches brought from home as they took in three or four films in a single day during the festival's local run.

The SFJFF had a robust presence in the region for more than 25 years. But CinéArts closed permanently in 2021 after pandemic lockdowns, and the festival has yet to find a new venue on the Peninsula. The Jewish Film Institute, which runs the SFJFF, said in a statement that it's exploring new venues and locations for next summer's festival.

Huberman, who lives in Palo Alto, has opted not to drive into San Francisco for the in-person screenings at the Castro Theatre. Instead, the longtime chair of film events at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills and other Peninsula residents have been looking for options closer to home.

This month, two festivals — the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival and the United Nations Association Film Festival — will present Jewish-interest films in Palo Alto, Mountain View and online.

The SVJFF, which runs Oct. 15 to 29, will offer four in-person screenings for the first time since 2019. Another 25 films will be available to stream at home. View the full lineup here.

“We’re finally starting to get back to showing in theaters in a small capacity,” said Tzvia Shelef, director of the SVJFF. “The biggest challenge has been staying alive during Covid. Our donors have been very generous, and we hope we can continue doing this, with more and more in-person screenings.”

The opening and closing films — “**Remembering Gene Wilder**” and “**Bella!**” — will screen at Mountain View’s ShowPlace Icon Theatre & Kitchen, which offers reclining seats and a menu. The two documentaries trace the lives of the comedian and of feminist icon and politician Bella Abzug.

The same films opened and closed this summer’s SFJFF. “It’s not surprising because they’re both so good,” Shelef said.

Beginning Oct. 26, the SVJFF will stream “Trust,” the debut feature film from director Almog Avidan Antonir, who was born in Israel and grew up in Sunnyvale. In the drama, three siblings reunite for their mother’s chaotic funeral and reading of her will.

“The cast is first-rate in this gutsy indie with a strong message about how it sometimes is best to uproot from a dysfunctional family tree in order to maintain your own sanity,” The Mercury News wrote in a review.

The festival will stream a number of films set in Israel, including “The Narrow Bridge,” a documentary about Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones to the long-running conflict and are working toward reconciliation between the two peoples; “Savoy,” a docu-drama about an Israeli housewife who becomes a mediator after she’s taken hostage in a 1975 Palestinian terrorist attack; “Shamir: His Way,” a documentary about the late Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir; and “America,” a drama about a love triangle involving two Israeli men and the Ethiopian Israeli fiancée of one of them.

Several Holocaust-related films will be offered online as well: “Farewell Mr. Haffman,” a drama about a Jewish jeweler in Paris during the Nazi occupation; “Schächten,” another drama in which a Viennese Jewish businessman pursues an SS commandant who oversaw the murder of his family; and pianist Hershey Felder’s documentary “The Assembly,” which follows eight young American musicians who travel to Auschwitz.

(Felder, who lives in Italy, will be in the Bay Area to lead a singalong show on Oct. 11 in Mountain View and donate the proceeds to TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, which has featured Jewish-themed shows in recent years. The nonprofit theater company is trying to raise \$3 million by November to help it recover post-pandemic.)

For SVJFF donors with festival passes, two films will be screened in-person at the Oshman Family Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto. The biopic “Simone: Woman of the Century” traces the life of Simone Veil, an Auschwitz survivor who became a French feminist icon. “Who Are the Marcuses?” is a documentary about a relatively unknown Long Island couple who donated half a billion dollars in 2016 to Ben-Gurion University

of the Negev to advance water technology. A limited number of tickets will be available to non donors at the door.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Association Film Festival will screen three documentaries with Jewish content at the Mitchell Park Community Center in Palo Alto. The short “13 Drivers’ Licenses” (Oct. 22) tells the story of German high school students who research the fates of Jews who once lived in their town. “I Wanted To Be a Man With a Gun: Three American Soldiers in World War II” (Oct. 27) recounts how U.S. veterans — two Jewish, one Christian — took revenge against the enemy. “Israelism” (Oct. 27) is a portrait of two American Jews who became anti-occupation activists after visiting Israel.

The U.N. festival will also show two films by local Jewish filmmakers: “When We Were Bullies” (Oct. 25 at the Roxie Theater in S.F.), which is JFI Program Director Jay Rosenblatt’s Oscar-nominated short documentary about a school bullying incident that he participated in as a child, and “Town Destroyer” (Oct. 26 at Stanford University), a documentary from Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman about the controversy surrounding murals at San Francisco’s George Washington High School.

Huberman said she plans to show up at the Icon for opening night of the SVJFF — masked. She will also take advantage of the festival’s virtual showings.

“I’m tired of online,” she said, “but with Covid coming back, it’s the wisest thing to do.”

Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival

Oct. 15-29. Opening and closing films at the Mountain View ShowPlace Icon Theatre & Kitchen, 2575 California St., cost \$40 each. Virtual screenings are \$18.