

Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival Kicks off Two Weeks of Streaming

By Jeffrey Edalatpour | Oct 19, 2022



ELDER FLOWER Grandpa sells medical marijuana to retirees in Greener Pastures, part of this year's SVJFF. Photo Credit: SVJFF

When the pandemic arrived in March of 2020, Tzvia Shelef didn't want to cancel the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival. With only a month of lead time, she reconfigured the fest into an online event.

As we all remember, in 2020, people were stuck at home with nowhere to go. Many were grateful that the SVJFF moved online.

"It was a big success. We had the most attendees that we've ever had—at home," Shelef says.

This year's Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival (SVJFF) returns this weekend for two weeks of virtual screenings. Shelef, the festival's executive director, says people still aren't ready to spend time in a packed movie theater. Even with the pandemic seemingly on an ebb tide, audiences remain divided.

"The younger crowd are willing to come once a week but devoted patrons who

attend daily are not going to risk it,” she says.

Shelef, herself, misses the shared experience of a packed movie house.

“When was the last time we saw a movie together and then [went] out to the lobby to talk about it? Everybody wants to share what they thought. I really miss that.”

To encourage that sense of connection, several of this year’s screenings will include pre-recorded interviews with the filmmakers.

Daniel Raim, who directed the festival’s opening night documentary *Fiddler’s Journey to the Big Screen*, will talk about his film along with the three actresses who played Tevye’s daughters in *The Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). The documentary *Women of Valor* delves into the historic ban that forbids Ultra-Orthodox women from running for parliament in Israel. Anna Somershaf, who directed the film, will discuss her work with Esty Shushan who is leading the movement to change the ban.

One in-person event will take place in Los Gatos at the Jewish Community Center this Sunday. Saul Dreier will perform with the local band Hot Kugel to benefit the Jewish Silicon Valley Holocaust Remembrance Association. The 97-year-old Dreier is a Holocaust survivor and was featured in the 2020 documentary *Saul and Ruby’s Holocaust Survivor Band*.

Overall, Shelef says that this year’s festival is defined by variety.

“Opening night is fabulous,” she says.

“*Fiddler on the Roof* is such a classic movie. This documentary about how they made it is an extraordinary story.”

The original film, she says, is still very relevant today. “If we look at what’s going on now, in Ukraine or in other parts of the world, people are being taken out of their home and moved to other countries.”

Closing night film *Neighbours* dramatizes a true story about Kurds in Syria. An interview with director Mano Khalil follows the screening. Two documentaries feature well-known authors. The life of the late Amos Oz is scrutinized in *The Fourth Window*, while *Grossman* attempts to connect David Grossman’s life with his novels. Shelef has noticed a significant increase in the number of documentaries submitted recently.

“We used to get more feature films. Something happened to films in the last two years during COVID,” she says. “Filmmakers didn’t have the budget to finish. Or they weren’t sure if they could even show their movies in the theater.”

Some of the movies in this year’s festival have been lying in wait to be seen because there wasn’t a way to distribute them.

Shelef is now going into her eleventh year as executive director of the SVJFF. She describes the role as her ideal job.

“I get to be involved with the Jewish community here and also bring in the arts,” she says. “It’s an opportunity to bring my history to the people. If we don’t give it to them, they won’t get it.”

When Shelef and I spoke, she had just returned from a trip to Israel. While there, she visited a friend who's directing the Netflix series *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* (“an absolutely wonderful series”).

“If you go to Israel, you have many [TV] shows every day, many cultural events,” she explains. “The festival is one event where you can actually bring the art for two weeks, to see what's out there. You get educated. You get to see a lot of different stories about Jewish life.”

Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival

Opens Sun

Online