

Ecocinema - film goes green in Israel

By Karin Kloosterman May 20, 2007

When Leonardo DiCaprio was in Israel earlier this year with his supermodel girlfriend Bar Rafaeli to meet her family, he also met Israel's vice premier and elder environmental champion Shimon Peres.

Peres spoke with DiCaprio on the Israeli government's proposed Peace Valley Project to bring stability to the region and DiCaprio shared news that his own environmental documentary, *The 11th Hour* will soon be released.

It's not just movie stars like DiCaprio that have been turned on to making films about the environment these days. Israel has recently joined the worldwide environmental film force by developing its own festival - Ecocinema - where this week in Tel Aviv, it will showcase environmental documentary films from Israel and abroad.

With films regularly screened at Cannes, and an Israeli-inspired TV show on HBO, Israel's film and TV talent emerging from places such as The Sam Spiegel School in Jerusalem and the Film Department at Tel Aviv University (TAU) are bound to take center stage when it comes to the environment.

Although few Israeli environmental films have been made, explains festival founder and director Tsur Mishal, he expects the festival will encourage Israelis to put picture and sound to the unique perspective that the country's citizens have on the environment.

"Here in Israel, we look at the people first. This is our personal way to show that the environment is not something 'out there'. We like to portray how the environment affects people," he told ISRAEL21c

"Israelis can contribute a lot to the environment film movement more specifically because we have great documentary filmmakers such as Ran Levi and Ayelet Bargur and a good reputation in documentary film."

Bargur's films have been screened in Israel, the US and in international film festivals; her most popular works are *So New So Far* about globalization and *As If Nothing Happened*. She also lectures and screens her films in Israeli schools on environmental issues.

"Our future depends on the environment," says Bargur, who played a role in organizing Ecocinema this year. "This festival documents relationships between man and the environment and how we live together. For me I hope that through film, people will be more aware. It depends on us."

Apparently both Washington and Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs thinks that Israel's

filmmakers and Ecocinema - which was founded in 2004 - is a worthwhile cause to promote. Mishal 32, a graduate of TAU's Film School, was flown to DC in March where he attended the annual Environmental Film Festival, In Our Nations Capital.

"The Foreign Ministry thinks it is an important thing to develop environmental film here and to bring Israeli films to America," says Mishal, who exchanged Israeli films for American ones and brushed shoulders with the Hollywood stars of the environmental world. His visit was instrumental in getting Israeli films screened in the States.

Mishal mentioned a run-in with long-time environmental activist and educator David Suzuki. "I invited David to come to Israel, but he says he isn't flying much these days in order to reduce the carbon footprint on our planet," notes Mishal. "We might hold a video conference with him though, if we can raise the funds."

A truth however inconvenient, as former vice president Al Gore puts it, global warming and other detrimental man-made effects on the planet can no longer be ignored. Polar bears are drowning in the Arctic, chunks of land are sliding into the seas and scientists are forecasting droughts, desertification and a world that may be inhospitable towards our future survival.

"From the environmental point of view, I want to help the world," says Mishal, "I want to see that when I leave things are better - not worse."

To increase its outreach and impact, Ecocinema partnered with the student activist group Green Course to reach student volunteers at 26 Israeli university and college campuses.

Inaugurated about 10 years ago, Green Course and its 6,000 volunteers lobby and petition fiercely against perceived environmental injustices in Israel. Recently the organization won the fight against a proposed building project in Jerusalem - The Safdie Plan - which threatened to increase the urban chokehold in the city.

Green Course is now making a film about their efforts to disband Safdie. "We often make films for our own use in order to document events," notes the organization's spokesperson, Maya Iluz, a recent graduate of Hebrew University's Agriculture Faculty.

"Through working with film, people can see and be aware about the environment in a more relevant way," she adds.

Israel's Environment Ministry of Environmental Protection also advocates the power of film for environmental protection. On Earth Day, April 22, the ministry screened the video *Sparks*, which was produced by 30 Israeli and international eco-artists as a response to the environmental destruction that occurred during the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006.

The screening at Tel Aviv's Cinemateque was followed by a debate on the merits of reclamation of disturbed environments by artists, scientists and academics.

Since its founding, Ecocinema has screened between 15 and 20 films per year from Israel and around the globe. Highlights from abroad include *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Super Size Me*, *Fast Food Nation* and *Thirst* - a film about the privatization of the planet's water.

This year, as an impetus to ramp up student involvement, the festival has also partnered with TAU's Porter School of Environmental Studies. Dame Shirley Porter, the philanthropist behind the School, is offering a \$1,000 prize for the best student film.

All of the film schools in Israel are expected to participate and a panel of judges from TAU and Green Course will select the winner.

Israeli films set to enter the festival include *The Drumming Ghost* - documenting what Israelis learn from Africans when they study and travel abroad; and a film about freeing dolphins in captivity. Some directors, such as Bargur, have chosen to ask questions about globalisation and how it fragments the Israeli society growing at light-speed into the world of high tech. In her film, *Intel Inside, Where?* she explores the growing divide between the working class in Israel who once worked in the textile industry and the new class of workers employed by multi-national corporations such as Intel.

"When you speak about the environment, everything in life has to be connected," sums up Mishal. "That's what we are going to attempt to do through film. If one only looks at nature or at people, then it strengthens this disconnect. We need to look at ourselves as part of nature and how we will continue to be part of this planet."