



Arts & Leisure, Film, TV & Theatre

Film presents chassidic women's attitudes to intimacy

October 20, 2013

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MONTREAL – A documentary intended to dispel misconceptions about Chassidim, in particular women and their relationship to men, opens this month.

Shekinah: The Intimate Life of Hasidic Women, directed by Montrealer Abbey Jack Neidik, who co-produced with Irene Lilienheim Angelico, was made with the full co-operation of a Chabad Lubavitch community.

The filmmakers were given access to interview students at the Seminary BMC, a women's teachers college in Ste. Agathe, founded by its principal Chana Carlebach, a central subject in the film.

The young women speak frankly about their lives, including their surprising attitudes to love and intimacy. Viewers get a rare glimpse of what courtship and marriage are like in this community.

Far from repressed and stuck in the 18th century, the interviewees seem joyful and unafraid to speak their minds. They see themselves as more liberated than most women, in the sense that their modest appearance spares them from being viewed as objects.

For them, sex is all the more blissful – not less – because divine commandments attend it

“Their relationships with men are based on the Kabbalah, the mystical aspect of Judaism,” Angelico said. “They see God as both masculine and feminine, and marriage as pre-ordained in heaven.”

In Judaism, Shchinah usually refers to a manifestation of the divine presence, often one with feminine attributes, and has special significance in Kabbalah.

“The laws of Torah affect almost everything they do, and still their lives are filled with great passion,” she said.

This 70-minute bilingual film also looks at the relationship between these students, many of whom come from other countries, with secular Jews and non-Jews, mostly francophones, living in the area.

“We see how tolerance develops and misconceptions dissolve as both sides learn about each other,” Angelico said.

Neidik added: “In filming Shekinah, I was granted rare access to a community that is unknown, closed and misunderstood. What I found was the opposite of what I expected.

“Behind the rigid, drab exterior that the chassidic people present to the world, there exists a vibrant, passionate sensuality that seems more liberating and fulfilling than that of the secular world that I come from...

“They say that, most of the time, we are unaware of our transcendental identity and that in marriage and lovemaking, it is possible to become aware of the spiritual... In our materialistic, consumer-driven world, I believe we all need a little more of this kind of soul.”

Neidik gained the trust of the Lubavitchers through Mushka (Monika) Lightstone, a former Montrealer who had been his sound assistant – and would ultimately become the executive producer of Shekinah. She moved to Los Angeles to pursue her film career and became religious.

Her daughter attended the Seminary BMC, and she asked Neidik a few years ago to film a performance the students were putting on. His conversations with the young women were a revelation – they were not the throwbacks he expected. His interest was piqued.

Around the same time, the seminary was reaching out to the broader community to demystify their image. The culmination was the public outdoor wedding of Hana Sellem, who figures prominently in the film.

Neidik would spend more than two years filming. The filmmakers allowed rabbis of the community to vet the material, without surrendering their artistic integrity.

“We did not want to step over the line, or be offensive,” Angelico said. “There is some touchy stuff here.”

Advance screenings take place Oct. 24 and 27 at Théâtre Outremont, before general release at Cinéma du Parc from Oct. 28 to Nov. 7.

Neidik and Angelico are veteran documentarians – and married. Genie Award-winning, twice Academy Award-nominated, Neidik has more than 70 films to his credit.

Their 1980 film *Dark Lullabies*, about the effects of the Holocaust on the next generation of Jews and Germans, has enjoyed international acclaim and is still being shown, including at this year's Stratford Festival.

Neidik and Angelico want *Shekinah* to have an educational role. The Oct. 24 screening is reserved for high school students, and will be followed by a discussion with the filmmakers and film participants.

A DVD version of *Shekinah* is available for schools and colleges, accompanied by a study guide to aid classroom discussion (the film is suggested for students in Grade 9 and up).

The aim is to foster more understanding of not only Chassidim, but any group whose beliefs or behaviour is not that of the majority culture – something Neidik and Angelico believe is especially pertinent in Quebec at the moment.

The film's website includes a Frequently Asked Questions section, which answers some common inquiries about Chassidim, such as why do chassidic women wear scarves or wigs? Why do the men wear hats and different clothing? What are the laws of modesty?

There are also sections on the Kabbalah and “kosher sex,” and a glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew terms.

If still more information is needed, visitors can “Ask a [chassidic] Rabbi” online.