Trabelsi Productions
presents

a film by
Rachel Leah Jones

Ashkenaz

"A Jew is an Arab Born in Poland"
—Philip Roth, Operation Shylock

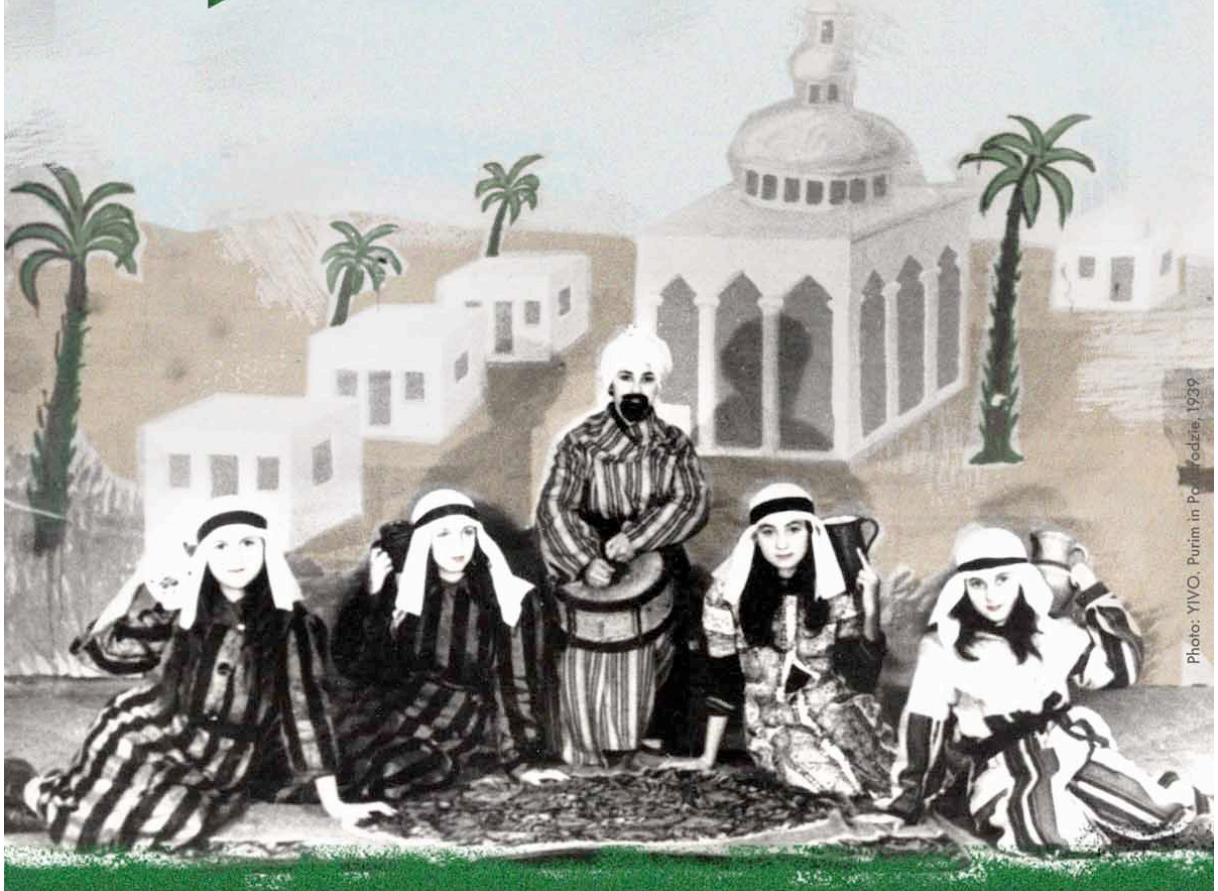

Photo: YIVO. Purim in Po[illegible]odzie, 1939

Written and Directed by **Rachel Leah Jones** Produced by **Osnat Trabelsi**
Camera **Philippe Bellaiche** Editing **Eyal Sivan** and **Morris Ben Mayor**
Sound **Tully Chen** Music **Habiluim** and **Oy Division**

Cinephil
RABINOVICH FOUNDATION CINEMA PROJECT
TRABELSI
Jewish Broadcaster
HOT (8)

SYNOPSES

(120 WORDS)

Ashkenazim—Jews of European origin—are Israel's "white folks." And like most white folks in a multicultural society, they see themselves as the social norm and don't think of themselves in racial or ethnic terms because by now, "aren't we all Israeli?" Yiddish has been replaced with Hebrew, exile with occupation, the shtetl with the kibbutz and old-fashioned irony with post-modern cynicism. But the paradox of whiteness in Israel is that Ashkenazim aren't exactly "white folks" historically. A story that begins in the Rhineland and ends in the holy land (or is it the other way around?), Ashkenaz looks at whiteness in Israel and wonders: How did the "Others" of Europe become the "Europe" of the others?

(100 WORDS)

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(50 WORDS)

Ashkenazim—Jews of European origin—are Israel's "white folks." But the paradox of whiteness in Israel is that Ashkenazim aren't exactly "white folks" historically... Ashkenaz looks at whiteness in Israel and wonders: How did the "Others" of Europe become the "Europe" of the others?

(25 WORDS)

Ashkenaz looks at Ashkenaziness —the Israeli version of whiteness — and wonders:
How did the "Others" of Europe become the "Europe" of the others?

DIRECTOR'S BIO/FILMOGRAPHY

Rachel Leah Jones is a director/producer born in Berkeley, California and raised in Tel Aviv. She has a BA in Race, Class, & Gender Studies and an MFA in Media Arts Production. Her credits include: 500 DUNAM ON THE MOON (France/USA, 2002) and GYPSY DAVY (Israel/Spain/USA, in production). ASHKENAZ (Israel/Netherlands, 2007) is her 2nd film. Over the years, Jones has worked on numerous socially and politically engaged documentaries in Israel/Palestine such as WALL, CITIZEN BISHARA and THE BOMBING (dir Simone Bitton) and RAGING DOVE, CAFÉ NOAH and WARP AND WEFT (dir Duki Dror) and been affiliated with various progressive media outlets such as the joint Israeli/Palestinian ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION CENTER in Jerusalem and the critically-acclaimed public TV/radio program DEMOCRACY NOW! in New York.

DIRECTOR'S PHOTO

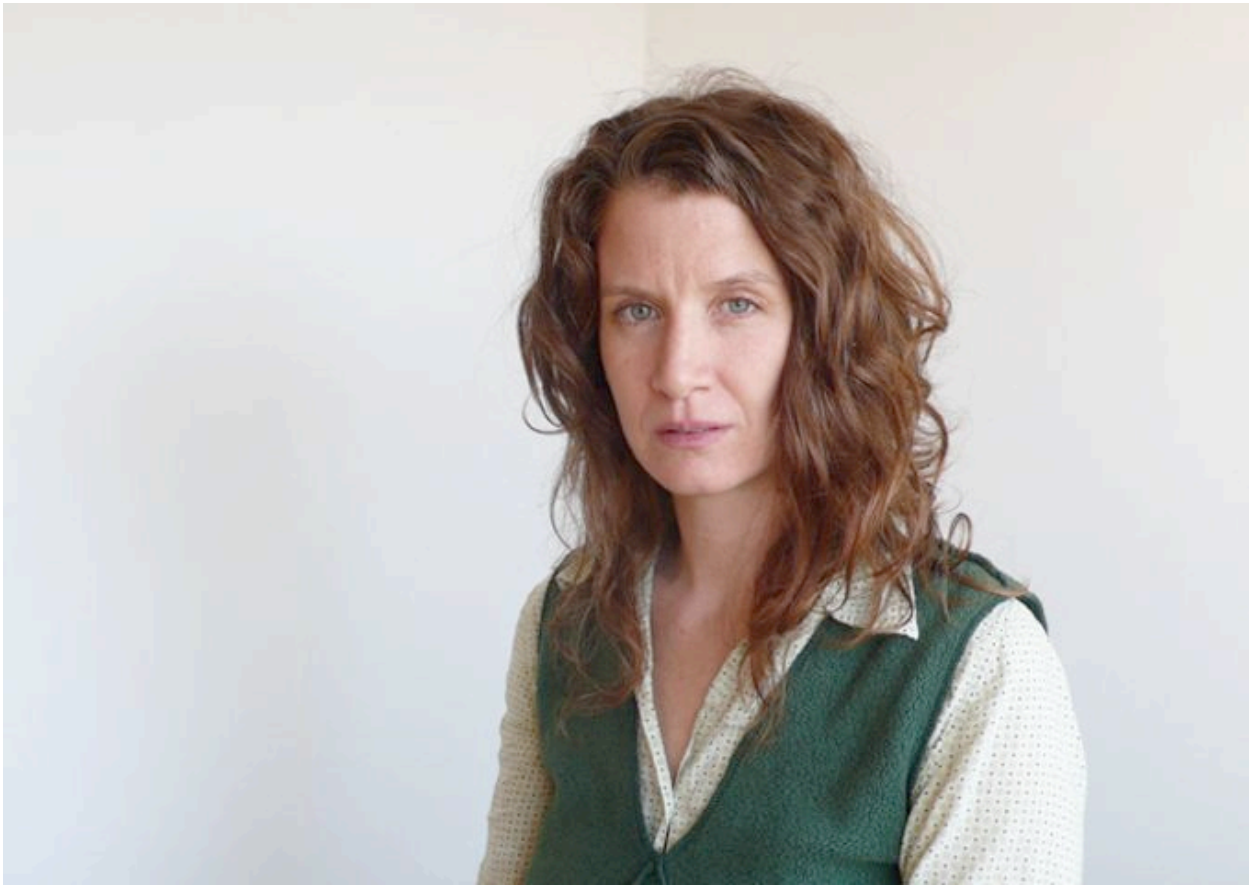

Photo: David Adika

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Original Title: **ASHKENAZ**
English Title: **ASHKENAZ**
Total Running Time: **72 minutes**
Countries of Production: **Israel/Netherlands**
Year of Production: **2007**
Original Languages: **Hebrew, English, Yiddish**
Subtitles: **English**
Shooting Format: **DVCam PAL**
Screening Format: **Digital Beta PAL or Beta SP PAL**
Frame Size: **16:9 Letterbox**

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Sound: Tully Chen
Editing: Eyal Sivan, Morris Ben Mayor
Music: Habiluim, Oy Division

PRESS (SELECTED QUOTES)

"Thrilling."
—Yediot Ahronot

"Enchanting… A fabulous film about Ashkenaziness in Israeli society today."
—Ha'ir Weekly

"Innovative… and subversive"
—Maariv

"Brilliant… The cinematic equivalent of a Talmudic text."
—Haaretz

"Rachel Jones' Ashkenaz serves up a probing analysis of the contradictions of Ashkenaziness as it has functioned within Israel. Rather than a celebratory exercise in Yiddishkeit nostalgia, Ashkenaz paints a refreshingly complex portrait of Ashkenazi identity as seen not only through the eyes of Ashkenazim themselves but also through the eyes of Mizrahim and Palestinians, in an audaciously lucid gaze at the ironic twists of history."

—Ella Shohat, New York University
Author of Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation

THEY SHALL NEGATE THOSE WHO NEGATED THEM
A COMMENT ON THE FILM ASHKENAZ

Amos Noy, Haaretz
December 21, 2007

THERE IS A GENRE of films one might call "Ashkenazi": a jovial bunch of middle-aged men celebrate their Ashkenaziness in a Tel Aviv pub called "Abraham's" or "Belz"; close-up shots of beer, herring and schmaltz laden tables; singing mouths bellowing out song fragments in broken Yiddish; confused interviewees, drunk with nostalgia, lamenting their deprivation with a full mouth: "We too are a discriminated ethnic group." It all looks like a caricature of a caricature, reinforcing the three foundations of ethnic consciousness in Israel: food, music and accent.

ASHKENAZ is not like that. Rachel Leah Jones' cinematic "touch" is as far from this genre as east is from west, and succeeds, both in content and in form, to navigate troubled waters and redefine the concept "Ashkenaz" as it is commonly understood in Israel today. By no means is it a film about "Ashkenaziness" in the European, American or historical sense; an Ashkenaziness so diverse in terms of time, place and people (think of the differences between Russian, Polish, and German Jews, for example) that it calls into question the very possibility of conceiving of it as a single category. It is a film about Ashkenaz in Israel, here and now.

The only way one might define and discuss this Ashkenaz, is by looking at the way it defines and discusses itself, which is by way of negation. It isn't an ethnicity, it isn't Eastern, it battles Arabness, it defines itself in opposition to Sephardiness, it negates tradition, religion, culture and "diaspora," it is nothing and therefore everything in the same way that Eurocentrism disguises itself as universalism. As Orna Sasson Levi explains in the film, the popular (and deeply meaningful) question: "What are you?" (i.e. What's your ethnicity?) came as a complete surprise to her when she heard it for the first time in the army. Because in its own mind, Ashkenaz is Israel (and everything else, isn't).

In a brilliant move, the film does what in retrospect appears to be the only thing it could do with something that defines itself by way of negation: it turns to the negated and asks them to define it as they see it. Upon examining some of the reactions to the film—especially the enraged ones—it is clear that it is precisely this move that triggers anger. In ASHKENAZ you will not hear charges of "discrimination" (the word never appears in the film) nor will you hear any "self-pity" (a notion that the oppressors invented to silence the oppressed). It is the simple role-reversal that people find so threatening, more than any rehashing of trite but true social injustice statistics.

Defining this elusive thing called Ashkenaz from the standpoint of those it has negated, the film interweaves an array of extraordinary speakers, some "intellectuals," some "vox populi." Quite simply, they are asked to name Ashkenaz. And the responses form a colorful and telling assortment of locations: an army base, a kibbutz, a grave, a

photo archive, the theatre in which the Eichmann trial was held, a public-hospital turned gated-community, an Orthodox neighborhood. The speakers and their interpretations, insights and analyses do not always go hand in hand. At times they are complementary, at times contradictory.

In the eyes of some critics, this is a weakness. "The film doesn't have a clear thesis," they say. True, the film does not articulate a linear understanding with a simplistic beginning, middle and end. And given its subject matter, it shouldn't. Instead of employing a "modern" encyclopedic temporality, it turns time on its head. Its subject is its thesis, and vice versa: it spins multifaceted treads to weave together a place that is not really physical. Remarkably, this is the Jewish scholastic methodology that characterized Ashkenaz, then and there. It has been said that the childhood landscape of the (diasporic) Jew is textual and that his homeland is a page of Talmud. Jones creates the cinematic equivalent of a Talmudic text, at the center of which stands an empty stain. She reconstructs Ashkenaz by means of that which the State of Israel repressed. She restores a diasporic space that is discursive and metaphysical (like Mount Sinai and Lublin in the hair-raising words of poet Jacob Glatstein: "On Mount Sinai we received the Torah, in Lublin we gave it back"). Or, as the subtitle of Yigal Nizri's important anthology *Eastern Appearance / Mother Tongue* reads: "A Present that Stirs in the Thickets of its Arab Past," Jones' film stirs in the thickets of a would-be western present that negates its eastern past.

One of the film's peaks, judging from the critics, is a conversation with two young women of "Moroccan origin." One critic heard a register of normalcy in it "that put the subject back into proportion" and distinguished between "stereotype and reality." How did the spirited sound of street Hebrew keep the critic from hearing the charm and distress, the heart-breaking pain and its playful denial, the humble confusion and astute observations? Only (the) God (of deafness) knows. It is indeed one of the film's highlights: in a manner of homiletic interpretation, a casual conversation elucidates the entire subject, and follows prophet Ezekiel's words: "They shall negate those who negated them," both in form and in content.

DON'T CALL ME ASHKENAZI

Israeli society has always identified its "ethnic problem" with Mizrahi Jews. Along comes the film ASHKENAZ and redirects the gaze. If somebody is in need of help around here, it's Ashkenazi Jews…

Poria Gal, Maariv
December 10, 2007

IF COUNTRIES had psychologists, and if Israel at 60 happened to start going to one—and we must admit it's hard to imagine a place more in need of one than Israel—s/he would probably begin with an exercise in guided imagery: "everybody close your eyes and say what comes to mind when you hear the word 'ethnic'." It is precisely the array of associations that come to mind (usually accompanied by the imagined scent of Middle Eastern cuisine) that the film ASHKENAZ tackles.

In other words, how did "ethnic" and "Mizrahi" come to be synonymous, or, more precisely, how was Ashkenaziness in Israel constructed as a neutral identity beyond the realm of ethnic characteristics; as a collective identity that characterizes the majority, constitutes the model, the canvas and the matrix; the "norm" that designates its corresponding "others." A color without color, a white that has become transparent.

The film was directed by Rachel Leah Jones, an American-born Jew who moved to Israel as a child, and produced by Osnat Trabelsi. Maybe it sounds stereotypical, but I'm not sure that a pale male kibbutznik—a born and bred member of the establishment, former combat soldier who votes for the liberal party and mumbles in social gatherings how "they've stolen the country from us"—would have thought to make such a film. I'm not sure he would have felt the need, as Jones and Trabelsi did, to undermine the "obvious" dichotomous categories of "Ashkenazi" and "Mizrahi," "Self" and "Other," and, if we extend these terms to include Ben Gurion-speak: "Salt of the Earth" and "Human Dust."

Since the state was established, Ashkenazim have been perceived as lacking any ethnic attributes, something that goes well with feeling like landlords. While the Mizrahim have been assigned the role, both on the street and in the academy, of the ultimate "Other" under the supposedly objective category of "ethnic." This trend permeated Israeli sociology, which for years researched the Israeli "Other" while never looking at the ethnic characteristics of Ashkenaziness, let alone the complexes being Ashkenazi entails.

And the complexes, oy, the complexes... These are abundant: being the "Other" of Europe, an otherness perceived as "inferior" to the point of annihilation; developing an inferiority complex characterized by "self-hatred"; surviving the Holocaust and declaring "regeneration" by establishing a new state that entailed the oppression of another people. True, all this is history, but it also sounds like material for long-term therapy. Who is to say that a psychologist will suffice?

One of the more interesting choices the filmmaker made was the decision to combine articulate speakers with man-on-the-street interviewees Jones encountered along the

way. This mixture not only maintains a dialog between the subjects and objects of discussion, it reminds us that Asheknaziness is a living breathing organism, albeit repressed; a thing that, despite the "irrelevance" many people attribute to it, still arouses emotion and commotion.

Thus, for example, one interviewees starts singing spontaneously in Yiddish, while another eulogizes the banished language in tears, and yet another insists: "Forget about it, its over!" but nonetheless releases a barrage of imagery from the Ashkenazi collective unconscious. Ethnicity come across as something suppressed, an illegitimate topic of discussion which, if raised, must be reduced to cheap folklore and bad jokes.

And along comes ASHKENAZ and undermines this reduction. Like the slogan: "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," one can see this film as a therapeutic act that not only breaks a taboo, but places those who until now were considered "perfectly healthy" squarely on the psychiatrists' couch. And this is precisely what makes the film so subversive: if Mizrahim were considered "unhealthy," an "ethic problem," immigrants in need of "absorption," and among especially backward scholars in need of "re-socialization," Ashkenazim were considered "healthy," "absorbing," "socialized," not to mention "civilized."

But when the film ends and the lights come up in the theatre, you find that the Ashkenazi is on the couch. The approach is empathetic—the filmmakers' are careful not to field-martial Ashkenazim as such—and there are even moments of laughter and tears, as one might expect from a good therapy session. But the process is nonetheless painful: the moment the interrogator is interrogated and the landlord becomes just another tenant.

The camera moves through various sites chosen by/for the respective participants. Sami Shalom Chetrit speaks by the graveside of Kalman Kaznelson, author of the racist treatise *The Ashkenazi Revolution* self-published in the early 1960s. Jamal Zahalka is filmed outside the gate of a kibbutz, where he spots Askenaziness along its fences and grassy lawns. "Those who dispossessed us are not the Mizrahim who yell 'Death to the Arabs!' in football games, but rather the Ashkenazim who established the state," he asserts, knowing that his words are explosive because they blast away the façade of Israeli homogeneity, because they turn Israeli liberalism on its head.

Other speakers join, each from his/her unique angle, in this innovative project one might call: "Asheknaziness: Toward a Critical Deconstruction." Some contrast it with Mizrahiness (like journalist Shaul Bibi), some analyze the Israeli street (like Orna Sasson Levi who talks about Ashkenazi kibbutzniks who lack ethnic self-awareness before they serve in the army). At times, it feels as if more attention could have been paid to the Ashkenazi rejected-from-within, i.e. the inferiority complex Eastern European Jews felt vis-à-vis their German Jewish brethren who treated them as "poor relations," and how this attitude was replicated between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in Israel. Daniel Boyarin touches on it (and there is only so much one film can touch on).

On the other hand, as an Ashkenazi-Mizrahi half-breed who grew up in a family where the Ashkenazi side was always more "provincial" and "ignorant" in comparison to the "modern" Mizrahi side, I know how liquid and unstable these categories are. And how much "Ashkenaz," like the "Orient," is but a construct. So where is the Ashkenazi Edward Said? Maybe s/he isn't quite ready to come out of the closet.