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Gillian Britt: Helping bring Jewish films to forefront

By Amanda Estes
Staff Writer

The Maine Jewish Film Festival (MJFF) begins March 29 with the dramatic comedy “My Mexican Shiva” – a celebration of a life, after death.

But you don’t have to know the first thing about a shiva – a seven day period of mourning – or the Jewish faith to enjoy the 22 diverse films that constitute this year’s festival, says MJFF Board Vice President Gillian Britt.

“Maybe you haven’t participated in a Passover Seder, but you’ve sat down to plenty of Thanksgiving dinners,” the 39-year-old Britt says. “It’s just a great festival and I would encourage anybody who’s curious to come out. It’s very friendly and because you’ve all shared this community experience, people will turn around and talk to each other even if they don’t know each other.”

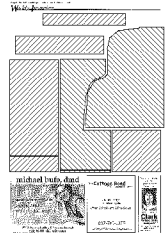
The Cape Elizabeth resident joined MJFF roughly four years ago and uses her public relations skills – she runs the Portland-based public relations agency, gBritt PR, with her husband James Britt – to help promote the films that chronicle the Jewish experience. For a foreign film lover like Britt, it’s an enjoyable process.

“I love watching things and experiencing different cultures through different forms of art – and film fulfills that,” Britt says. “You’re drawn into the story and find something that relates to you and your own life.”

Once you discover that connection, you’re no longer concerned with race or religion and instead you become more interested in the characters, Britt says.

This year’s film festival, which runs through April 6, will feature a variety of stories and characters, with a focus on labor. According to the festival schedule, nine films will explore the struggle for labor equality; the effects of political blacklisting and the degradation of Nazi “labor” camps. Clara Lemlich, a 19-year-old garment worker, who organized the walk out of more than 15,000 shirtwaist makers in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1909 is the subject of one film and another features Gertrude Berg, who created, wrote and starred in the 1930s radio show, “The Goldbergs,” that later became a weekly television program and a foundation for the family-based sitcom.

A free screening of “Clara Lemlich: A Strike Leader’s Diary” is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. on April 2 at the Teamsters Local Union 340 at 144 Thadeus Street in South Portland. A discussion with Southern Maine Labor



Council President Peter Kellman will follow the film. *

"Having the screening take place in a union hall is a great idea [and] it's all Kari's idea," Britt says, referring to MJFF Executive and Artistic Director Kari Wagner-Peck. "That search for equality fits in very well with unionization."

Apart from the labor theme, the festival will also feature a Women Filmmakers Forum and the film, "Arranged

(friendship has no religion)" about two teachers at a Brooklyn public school who become friends and learn they are both facing arranged marriages. A free screening for youth 18 years old and younger of the documentary, "Mechina: A Preparation" will expose audiences to 18-year-old Amitai as he faces his fate in the Israeli Defense Force. The festival's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) film project features "Keep Not Silent – Ortho-Dykes," a documentary about three lesbians living in Orthodox Jewish communities in Jerusalem.

"Keep Not Silent" Director Ilil Alexander, is among the group of directors and producers who are expected to attend the screenings and offer insight into their work.

Britt, who is Jewish, says "there are definitely experiences that take place in the films that I have not had."

"I was raised in a very casual household," she says. "My father was not Jewish."

Britt credits her father with fostering her love of the arts, particularly theater and opera.

"My father's an artist," she says. "When he started sculpting – just being surrounded by that with classical music playing. I used to go to the opera with my father when I was a little kid. Visually, it's over the top and it's just beautiful to listen to."

The Portland Opera Repertory Theatre (PORTopera) was Britt's first client when she moved to Maine 13 years ago.

After attending college in Ohio, Britt interned and began her public relations career at a Chicago public relations firm. Meeting actors, artists, chefs and dancers and attending special events is an aspect of the profession that has always appealed to Britt.

"I just find it fascinating," she says. "I'm never going to sit down and compose a symphony, but I can write a press release."

Britt, however, tried her hand at acting in high school and college and appeared in some training videos.

"I've definitely enjoyed performing on the stage," she says. "I didn't really think I would continue to act. When you're in a play, the people you're performing with become family for a short time."

If you're moving around a lot, it's more difficult to establish that connection, Britt says.

With its cobble streets and ocean breezes, coming to Portland was a bit like being back in Denmark, Britt says. She visited the country as a high school exchange student and later lived there for a couple of years.

Britt says Portland has a thriving arts community.

"Everything's here," she says. "I admit when we first moved to Maine, I thought, 'Oh, we're only two hours from Boston, I can go whenever I want,'" she says. "I never go to Boston."

The Maine Jewish Film Festival begins on March 29 and runs through April 6. Tickets for the individual films are \$7 for adults and \$5 for students and seniors and can be purchased at www.mjff.com or by mail at the MJFF box office. An all-festival pass is available for \$85. For a full festival schedule and ticket information, visit www.mjff.org.

• Editor's note: In keeping with the Sentry's full disclosure policy, we note that MJFF Executive Director Kari Wagner-Peck is married to Sentry Editor Ward Peck.

