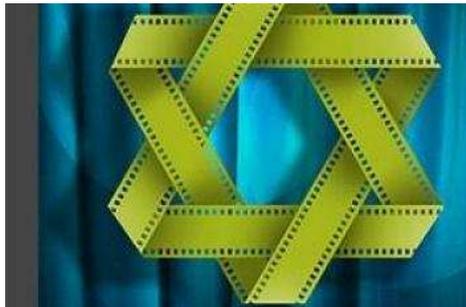


## Illumination through story-telling - CJFF Returns

by [Michael J. Solender](#)



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**[Charlotte Jewish Film Festival expands reach with universal themes, messages](#)**

**[Charlotte Jewish Film Festival Saturday March 2nd through Sunday March 17<sup>th</sup>](#)**

When Charlotte playwright Mark Woods launched Plaza Midwood's short lived experimental Story Slam! a few years back, he succeeded in bringing the most fundamental universality to every production that graced the tiny stage – the story. Since man drew on cave walls, Woods used to say, it's always been about the story.

Charlotte's Jewish Film Festival, celebrating its ninth year, has embraced this notion. While their growth is due to a number of factors, in largest measure its success comes down to the notion of story, an art-form Jews have mastered over the centuries.

From the Biblical and Talmudic tales of Cain, Abel, David, Goliath, Ruth, and Esther to Shalom Aleichim's *Fiddler on the Roof*, Jerry Seinfeld's quirky neurosis, and *The Simpsons*' producer and last year's CJFF speaker, Mike Reiss - Jews are for the most part pretty darned good story tellers.

The appeal of Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, and Mandy Patinkin is their ability to cut across religious lines and lay bare universal truths and themes that resonate within each of us – this is the essence of story.

"Our mission remains illuminating the Jewish experience through film," says festival chair Jeff Turk. "Though we have really come to realize that the Jewish experience truly extends beyond those that are Jewish and shows how this heritage, culture, and religion touches upon each of us."

### Growing audience through outreach

CJFF saw a 60 percent increase with more than 3,000 viewers last year, screening 11 films over the two weeks of the festival. *Charlotte* magazine paid homage to their programming success as their readers cited CJFF as Charlotte's best film festival of 2012.

Niche festivals take savvy marketing and effective community outreach and that is precisely what Turk and his dedicated volunteer staff has done over the past few years. They've affiliated with another spring culture happening, the Ulysses Festival, in a special film showing at Sensoria at CPCC ([Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy](#)), reached beyond their South Charlotte base of Shalom Park and Ballantyne to host expanded screenings at Lake Norman area venues, solicited and heeded audience feedback to strike a better balance between dramas, documentaries, and comedies – and even have children's and young adult programming targeted for this year's audience. One of the festival's free screenings will be the early childhood program, [The Seder on Planet Matzah Ball](#).

Recognizing the increasing relevance and reliance for entertainment programming for smart phones, festival marketing wonks have created an app (available on their website) that lists show times, screens trailers, and provides up to the minute updates on venues, programming, and ticketing.

Audience members for this year's festival will experience a markedly more balanced roster of films than in past years, which have skewed heavily toward documentaries and Holocaust related programming. Festival goers will find four dramas, four documentaries, and three comedies – each film an intricate story with appeal beyond being a "Jewish oriented film" and some, such as opener *Hava Nagila – The Movie*, are crossover gems that deserve to be seen by as wide an audience possible.

### 12 films in 16 days

[Hava Nagila - The Movie](#) is a unique treat for QC audiences as the film has only been released to a handful of film festivals and will open in very limited release in 2013 before going to DVD. "The film was originally titled, *Hava Nagila – What is it?*" said Roberta Grossman, the film's director whose quest led her down a "rabbit hole" of exploration uncovering more layers and nuances to the Hava story than she ever imagined.



The question of what "Hava Nagila" was so vexed her that after conversations with scholar Josh Kun, she decided she had to find the answers behind this important cultural marker in her life. Grossman enlisted the help of *Friends* co-creator/producer Marta Kaufmann along with a team of talented writers and support personnel and the "Hava Nagila" quest was on.

The one hour and 15 minute film has quick pacing and features interviews with musical scholars, historians, Jewish cantors, and, most entertainingly, performers. Viewers discover "Hava Nagila" has more covers than the couches in the lobby at New York City's Waldorf Astoria. Glen Campbell, Regina Spektor, Connie Francis, and Hava's greatest ambassador, Harry Belafonte, all share what the song has meant to them and how it came into their repertoire.



The film depicts the fascinating journey back to the shtetls of Odessa all the way to New York City's Delancey Street in telling the back story of "Hava Nagila." There is even a good old fashioned controversy leaving the viewer to decide who should own the royalties and rights to the song. But the real story here is the enduring power of music as story, lesson and spirit.

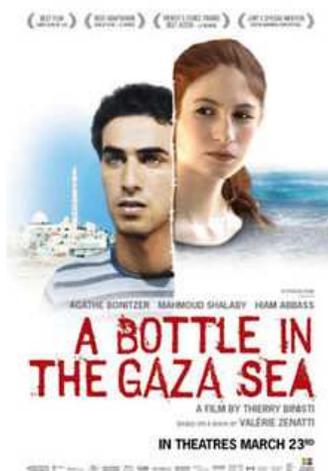
Director Grossman will be on hand to speak at the film's opening and is an example of the quality supplemental programming the festival brings each year.

### The Other Son

Using a plot twist and farfetched theatrical gambit does not usually make for a compelling film. Yet that is precisely what viewers will find with *The Other Son (Les Filles de l'autre)* directed by Lorraine Levy. This French film explores the very real world of two teens that were switched at birth and only discover, along with their families, this life shattering detail as they are both to embark upon young adulthood. Separated by only a few kilometers, life could not be any more different for Yacine, a Palestinian, and Joseph, an Israeli – two eighteen year-olds with very different upbringings, values, and world views.

Through some remarkable character portrayals by both boys and their mothers, the film quickly moves beyond the credulity issue and confronts viewers with the constraints and stark differences that exist on either side of the Tel Aviv/Palestine border. Where the film could be ham-fisted and judgmental, it is remarkable in its restraint and allows the viewer to make their own judgments on character motivation, right and wrong, fair and unfair. There is plenty to weigh in on as the film pulls no punches in documenting the realities facing those living in this precarious state today. Kudos to Levy for avoiding the easy and moralistic way out and leaving more loose ends than tied ones.

Two other films of special note are *Bottle in the Gaza Sea*, and the gripping documentary *Follow me: The Yoni Netanyahu Story*. *Bottle* follows a similar us/them parallel as *The Other Son* though has a Romeo and Juliet twist to it – in this case, the two protagonists exchange all their passion and ideals through online messages and email after the curious discovery of an actual message in a bottle is found. Again Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints are exchanged. The southeast's Deputy Consul General to Israel will be on hand to discuss the film afterwards.



*Follow me* retells the well-documented story behind of the 1970s raid on Entebbe where there was only one casualty beyond those of the hijackers, Yoni Netanyahu – the brother of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The film explores Yoni's poetry, tortured yet achingly loving relationships with his family members, and the internal struggle he had with himself over which direction to take his career. Winner of Best Documentary at Palm Beach International Film Festival, this is another compelling story that transcends religion and casts a very wide net of appeal.

For the full schedule and latest information on the Charlotte Jewish Film Festival, [look here](#).

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