

## A Decade of Jewish Film in Charlotte

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**Charlotte Jewish Film Festival – A Preview**  
**Feb. 22 through March 9.**  
[www.CharlotteJewishFilm.com](http://www.CharlotteJewishFilm.com)

Achieving a 10-year anniversary is a big deal for any cultural institution in Charlotte; let alone the small all-volunteer Charlotte Jewish Film Festival (CJFF). Yet a decade after the first CJFF opened its doors for a single showing and a handful of patrons, the festival delivers 16 days, 13 films, and some fascinating additional programming, including interfaith dialogue and community outreach, all wrapped into compelling community event that clearly has broader appeal than its moniker might suggest.

Last year's attendance topped the 3,000 mark and survey data indicated 15 percent non-Jewish attendees. Clearly the broader appeal of the CJFF is the cultural ideals and experience that are at their core - Jewish yet universal enough to cut across a vast swath of an increasingly diverse and curious Charlotte community.

Year in and year out, the lineup of initial run films has been impressive. This year is no exception, with a number of films in limited, festival-only release and others just coming out in 2013-14 season.

"We are part of a group called the Jewish Film Presenters Network," explains festival director Rick Willenzik. "There are now Jewish Film Festivals in [many cities across the U.S.]. The network is very good about sharing information. So when a good 'Jewish' film (with themes of Jewish culture, religion, history, etc.) hits the 'circuit,' the information is shared with the group. Now that we've been around, we have distributors approaching us all the time offering new films to consider."

### This year's line-up

Many of this year's offerings are worth special note. The lightest film of the festival taps into an existential question that has perplexed Jews throughout the ages – Why are we so darn funny? *When Jews Were Funny* is a documentary that postulates there has been some "shrinkage" in the heft and weight of Jews on today's comedy circuit. Just don't tell this to Jerry Seinfeld, Ben Stiller, Howie Mandel, or Sarah Silverman. The film taps into the congenital angst of many of the past generations best borsch belt stand-ups such as Gilbert Gottfried, Jackie Mason, Shelly Berman, Alan King, Norm Crosby, and others and delivers a joke-a-minute comparison to Jews of yesteryear vs. those of today. Who is funnier – Oy! You decide.

*The Jewish Cardinal* is the dramatized true story of Jean-Marie Lustinger, a French Jew, who as a child during the Holocaust converted to Catholicism. Not only did he go on to become a priest, but also the Archbishop of Paris and a close confidante of the Pope as well. Remarkable in every detail, this true-to-character film was the Audience Award winner at last year's Boston Jewish Film Festival and is certain to generate a great deal of buzz in Charlotte. A tour-de-force performance is delivered by Laurent Lucas who struggles with his father, his aides and himself in coming to grips with his Jewish/Catholic persona.

*Hunting Elephants* is the festival opener and offers viewers an unlikely crime caper comedy that crosses generations in its casting and appeal. The Israeli film features a 12-year-old boy who develops a detailed plot of revenge on the bank that literally worked his father to death.

### Interfaith Outreach

Perhaps the most intriguing film on the festival agenda is one that is being used as a springboard for community outreach and an interfaith discussion involving several area high schools. *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. & Mrs. Kraus* is a compelling documentary that tells the story of a Jewish-American couple who managed to liberate 50 Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Vienna at the beginning of WWII. San Francisco journalist and first-time filmmaker Steve Pressman, 58, directed the film and will be on hand when it screens in Charlotte.

"I'm thrilled it will be the backdrop for a discussion about social justice and standing up to do the right thing in the face of impossible odds," said Pressman.

The film involved painstaking research and came to light after Pressman's wife Liz, discovered a trove of material, documents, ephemera, and a manuscript documenting the experience from her grandmother, the very Eleanor Kraus depicted in the film.

"I'm afraid the story would have been lost to history," said Pressman who ended up working with various organizations in Washington, D.C. and Israel to track and identify the participants in this incredible journey. Ultimately, half of the children that made the transport were identified and interviewed for the film by Pressman.

"The gaps they filled in and the emotion most held for the Kraus's was tremendously moving," said Pressman. "I simply can't imagine being a parent faced with having to give their children to strangers or the incredible dangers the Kraus's experienced, themselves parents. The courage demonstrated by all is truly inspirational."