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Film Review: Ida's Dance Club

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A film by Dalit Kimor (director and producer) produced in collaboration with Tel Aviv University and David Katz Faculty of the arts, Department of Film and TV and The Anna Havas Scholarship fund for students in the film & television department established in memory of Michael Havas (1903-1993). In Hebrew, with English subtitles. Distributed by Ruth Deskin Distribution.

Ida's Dance Club is a must-see film for all dance scholars, sociologists, individuals interested in the Israeli society, but also anyone interested in a good documentary that vividly shows everyday lives and personal stories of a group of people. The film features dance society for senior Israeli citizens run by Ida Ben Ami in Tel Aviv, Israel. The dance society organises dance competitions for senior citizens (Golden competitions), and the film shows a story of preparing for the second Golden competition. However, the film is much more than that because it also depicts the personal stories of the participants and the role dance has in their lives, personal destinies and problems people are faced with in their everyday lives, as well as complexity and diversity of the Israeli society.

The film opens with Julia Goldinsky showing her winning the first Golden competition, and then going to the market to buy vegetables. People in the market recognise her, commend her dancing style, and even dance with her because they saw her on the TV and liked her. After that, the film shows another woman (Clara Shezifi) telling her friends she saw an advert for the competition. While explaining why she wants to join the competition, Clara makes a bold statement by asking: "Why is Dancing with the Stars only for youngsters with nice legs?" With this, she reflected upon the problem all modern societies are faced with nowadays, i.e. the problem of the media and popular culture that impose values, expected lifestyle and personal appearance expectations that have a negative impact on people who do not fit within the stereotype or an expected role. This is particularly true of women, as many feminist researches have shown¹. This statement will bear new relevance later in the movie with events surrounding Julia Goldinsky who will undergo plastic surgery to remove extra skin from her legs only to end up in pain and miss the second competition even though dancing means everything to her, i.e. in one moment in the movie she states she is nothing without dancing, and if ever not able to dance she prefers to die. As we will learn as the movie progresses, Clara's and Julia's life paths are very similar and united in pain caused by their siblings, and even though these two women do not interact in the movie nor is their destiny exactly the same, similarity, pain and deep connection between both women can be strongly felt throughout. In some ways this story reminds the viewer of a movie called *Crash*², however, unlikely for *Crash* where director emotively sensed racial problems American society is going

through and has created a story based on one true event, this film offers a narration of true people who are going through similar life paths, and yet they do not always interact. The people in this movie are the 'real people' that all of us can identify with, and unlikely for most Hollywood movies the happy ending, as in real life, is not guaranteed nor achieved in all cases.

Throughout the movie we are looking at preparations for the second Golden competition while, at the same time, meeting competitors who give snapshots of their lives through cut scenes. For example, Julia is obsessed with her looks, being the best in dance, but she has no relationship or contact with her daughter. When she speaks of her daughter and the lack of communication between them, we see her sadness and loneliness. On the other hand, Clara has an ill daughter and she takes care of her for 17 years. She cries in the movie saying she loves her daughter and does not want to lose her, but that she has no life that has "turned into a 24/7 depression for her". In that, this dance competition means a distraction and relief for her, and when we listen to her story we feel sadness. While at first this confession sounds negative for we do not usually perceive children as a burden to private life even if they require constant care, as it appears, Clara's daughter refuses to eat properly and does not take any advice from her mother who is trying to explain that very small amount of plain vegetables will not make her feel any better. We do not see Clara's daughter properly, but even a look from the back is enough to notice that her daughter is extremely skinny, almost like a human skeleton, and probably suffers anorexia accompanied with psychological denial of the medical condition. Therefore, dance classes became a centre of Clara's life, and she takes them very seriously. Just like with Julia, dance classes became a relief and meaning in life. Clara's dance partner Alberto switches to dance with another women (Carmella Ashkenazi) based on Carmella's intrusive initiative, and Clara finds a new partner in Benny Raphael for whom we will later in the film learn that he is gay who has been hiding his orientation for major part of his life, and had to cope with that.

The film also shows other competitors such as Sarah who is still dancing even though she is 92 and cannot dance all dances she still vividly remembers from the past. We also meet one Ukrainian man who survived Auschwitz and the notorious Dr Mengele and his medical experiments. This Ukrainian dancer was a victim having his blood drained like many Jews did for German army blood transfusion purposes (while they are alive and lying on the table). This man cries in the movie and says Mengele hurt him so much, and that perhaps he would be better off dead. Even though he still works, he refuses to say anything else about him saying the only thing that matters are his traumas from the Holocaust that determine him. Yet, he attends the dance class and tries to find a meaning in this form of art. We also meet a woman who cannot stand rings and sparkly things that make "Christmassy noise" because she gets "shivers" remembering how the Nazi's would come to take Jewish property, and how the Jewish people would be throwing everything valuable on the floor, like jewellery etc, which made a jingling sound. They would do this knowing the punishment would be brutal if they had something to hide.

These Holocaust stories reflect wider Israeli problem of collective trauma caused by the Holocaust that still lasts even though it has been more than 60 years since the WWII ended. However, as research conducted by some Israeli scholars shows, Israel has never completely recovered, as survivors still have to live with their traumas that largely define them, and these traumas are also often passed on to next generations.³ Dance, however, appears as a form of relief and a meaning making in

otherwise sad lives in which Jewish people cannot overcome trauma they encountered in the past.

To generalise, it could be said, it is very visible in this movie that all participants are looking for a meaning in their lives, and with this dance becomes embedded in the everyday lives of participants that really enjoy and identify with dance. In some aspects when dance becomes your whole life it brings with it its own disappointments. The portrayal of dance in this movie becomes a story of joy, meaning, and happiness, but also sadness, disappointment and defeat. For example, Julia undergoes plastic surgery to remove the extra skin from her legs, which projects the media expectations in terms of personal appearance, i.e. as Clara stated there is an expectation that dance is only for people with nice legs. However, as an outcome, Julia is in pain due to surgery and cannot dance and compete, as well as keep her apartment on the roof that gives a view of the whole Tel Aviv because she cannot walk up the stairs anymore. We see deep sadness during the dance competition when Julia can only watch other participants but not compete. Ida calls Julia's daughter and explains that Julia is in pain, but in the movie we do not see her daughter coming to see her, and in a way Julia loses everything. On the other hand, Clara takes this dance competition very seriously but fails to win any prize while her competitor Carmella who took her dance partner away (Alberto Kapiluto) and made an attempt to take her second dance partner (Benny Raphael), wins the second place. The movie shows Clara packing her stuff while the victory celebration is still on, apparently leaving quickly in disappointment. Unlike the usual Hollywood movie plots, there is no happy ending for the main characters, Julia and Clara alike. We also see disappointment on the face of Ukrainian men who suffered from Mengele's abuse. But, then surprisingly the first place is won by Inga and Michael Perry where we see Inga getting "shivers" albeit this time for winning the competition and not because of Nazi's coming to take her personal belongings. This victory symbolically represents a victory for all Holocaust survivors who managed to settle down in a Jewish state. The Holocaust story is narrated throughout the movie from a different perspective as well, i.e. we see that people speak Hebrew and other languages, and this shows the diversity of the Israeli society, where Jews from all countries immigrate, to find shelter from prosecutions that in some places did not end up until the present day.⁴

In some aspects it appears that dance becomes a language of emotions, i.e. it seems that participants can communicate their emotions better when communicating in their languages of origin other than in Hebrew (e.g. Russian for Julia or English for Benny and Sarah). Therefore, with this, we get the message that while the language of origin helps in expressing emotions properly, there are no language barriers when it comes to dance, which clearly has an important meaning in life for the Israeli society, where immigrants often face exclusion due to language barriers. Dance, thus, helps to bring a sense of belonging and interaction within society, as well as a meaning in what could be otherwise sad and lonely lives.

¹ The issue is not new. Early feminist articles recognised the problem, e.g. E. Friedl (1967). "The Position of Women; Appearance and Reality". *Anthropological Quarterly* 40, 3: 97-108 and M. Boskind-Lodahl (1976). "Cinderella's Stepsisters: A Feminist Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia". *Signs* 2, 2: 342-356. With the rise of mass media and fashion industry, the issue became even more severe and it no longer presents a problem of patriarchy but also a health issue as many women (particularly young girls) suffer bulimia and anorexia. For more details see, for the example, S. Grabe, & L. M. Ward (2008). "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies. *Psychological Bulletin* 134, 3: 460-476.

² Crash. Directed and written by Paul Haggis; produced by Yari Film Group, 2004.

³ D. Wardi. *Memorial candles: Children of the Holocaust* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁴ For an explanation of events surrounding surge in global Anti-Semitism see M. Topić. "A European Intifada? On the New form of an Old European Anti-Semitism in the New Millennium". In - Topić, M.; Sremac, S. (eds.) *Europe as a Multiple Modernity: Multiplicity of Religious Identities and Belonging* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).