

Capturing Yiddish Theater

by Tom Tugend
Contributing Editor

When Dan Katzir saw the classic Yiddish play "Grine Felder" (Green Fields) in New York about three years ago, he was so moved that he cried at the end.

That was an unusual emotional reaction for a self-possessed young sabra and a former lieutenant in the paratroops, the more so since he hardly knew a word of Yiddish.

Katzir, who combines the pragmatic outlook of his Israeli contemporaries with a not-so-typical attachment to the traditions and heritage of the Jewish people, decided to transform his sensibilities into a working project.

A director, producer, cinematographer and writer, Katzir set out to capture what would prove to be the dying gasps of the Yiddish Public Theater on New York's Lower East Side and of some of its venerable performers.

Sitting in a French coffeehouse near the UCLA campus with his enthusiastic producer, Ravit Markus, Katzir carries with him a 16-minute tape with highlights of the provisionally titled "The Yiddish Theater of New York."

Dan Katzir

The tape is a fundraising persuader, and if it does its job, Katzir plans on a 90-minute film, to be followed by video cassettes, a DVD, a Web site and a CD of favorite Yiddish songs.

Katzir, 34, whose work is partially supported by the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity, is among thousands of hopeful filmmakers in Los Angeles, among them a smattering of Israelis.

However, he has a leg up on much of the competition through a brief but solid record of awards for his previous works.

During the last couple of months, his documentary "Today You Are a Fountain

Pen" (2002) has won best short film honors at the well-known Palm Beach (Florida) International Film Festival, the Joyce Award at the San Diego Jewish Film Festival, and the Diversity Award of the Multicultural Motion Picture Association.

Katzir's first film, 1997's "Out for Love... Be Back Shortly," is still a favorite of Israel's younger generation. However, he is no fan of the current crop of Israeli films, which he considers hypercritical of the country and too imitative of French and certain Hollywood movies.

"There is a tremendous warmth and humanity in Israel, which are not being shown," he said. "There are any number of Israeli versions of 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' which could well compete in the international market."

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