

# The people that put the pop in culture



**GEOFF PEVERE**  
**THE FILM GEEK**

From April 11 to 21, the world's largest festival of Jewish and Jewish-related film unfolds in Toronto. While nearly 100 dramatic features, shorts, documentaries and TV productions have been programmed from around the world, among the more conspicuous elements of the 21st Toronto Jewish Film Festival are the non-fiction movies about Jewish artists and entertainers.

There's nothing new in this, but the fact is inescapable. Indeed, when Neal Gabler wrote his 1988 account of the role of Jews in the American movie business, he called it *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. Given the fact of Jewish contributions to international entertainment generally, the book might well have been one of a several-volume set called *From Allen to Zimmerman: How the Jews Put the Pop in Culture*. Because, as the documentary component of TJFF once again renders irrefutably clear, you can take showbiz out of the Jew, but ...

## **Beautifully Broken: The Life and Work of Rafael Goldchain**

While the fixation with history and identity that defines the work of the celebrated Toronto photographer Rafael Goldchain are hardly uncommon in the work of Jewish artists, the man's own approach to these issues is truly singular. By shooting himself dressed as his own ancestors in a series of haunting portraits, Goldchain raises questions of legacy, responsibility and multi-generational Judaism that filmmaker Vladimir Kabelik uses as a frame for interpreting the man behind the camera. (April 17, 6:30 p.m., ROM; April 21, 4:30 p.m., Sheppard 5)

## **Gainsbourg by Gainsbourg: An Intimate Self Portrait**

In Pierre-Henry Salfati's absorbing but elliptical first-person account of the life and career of the late Russian-born French pop singer, the man's own words describe a life of hardship, untreated alcoholism, shame and - with apologies to Edith Piaf - no regrets. Despite the fact he was a national hero, an international star, a critical darling and accompanied by some of the world's most breathtaking women - Anna Karina, Brigitte Bardot, Jane Birkin - he retained a sense of personal fraudulence because he wasn't a 'true' artist. One can only conclude he didn't spend much time listening to his own work. (April 20, 9:15 p.m., Innis College)

## **Hava Nagila (The Movie)**

In Roberta Grossman's wry account of the history and subsequent global ubiquity of the

world's most famous Jewish party song, there is much dissent over the origins of the composition, the best way to play it, what it really means, and whether or not it's a sublimely rousing expression of Jewish communal solidarity or the most annoying assembly of musical notes ever. However, as the movie probes these issues and implications, it confirms one thing: Wherever there were Jews gathered for celebration in the last century, *Hava Nagila* was played, heard and danced to, a reminder of a people's fundamental insistence on joy. (April 21, 8 p.m., Bloor)

## **Jerry and Me**

When the American-based, Tehran-born filmmaker and teacher Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa was growing up in the Shah's Iran, she was transfixed by the hyperkinetic human cartoon image of Jerry Lewis, who came to symbolize for the young woman not only a spirit of constant resistance against norms, authority and convention, but a kind of maverick outsider's sensibility that found an enduring affinity with Saeed-Vafa's own lifelong sense of exile. A kind of personal essay told with clips from Lewis's largely self-directed oeuvre, *Jerry and Me* is a movie about Jewishness as a unifying metaphor: Under properly alienating circumstances, Jerry is the Jewish Everyman. (April 13, 3 p.m., Innis)

## **Joe Papp in Five Acts**

Tracie Holder's and Karen Thorson's film profiles the late New York theatrical force, who began by challenging Broadway but ended up ruling it. *Joe Papp in Five Acts* is about a man of considerable complexity and dimension, who at once insisted on theatre for the people but presided autocratically over his own, who concealed his Jewishness for much of his life and then embraced it, and who considered theatre in the very same familial terms he denied his own family. But the contradictions were crucial to the career, which was based in a belief that art is surrounded by walls that are there for the storming, and the only thing standing between the common guy and Shakespeare was a mythical moat of shallow snobbery. (April 15, 6:45 p.m., Innis; April 16, 4 p.m., Sheppard 5)

## **Koch**

The recently deceased, multiple-termed mayor of New York never met a camera he didn't like. And it's almost impossible to watch Neil Barsky's fascinating, carefully wart-conscious portrait of Ed Koch without feeling like you're witnessing one of the Big Apple's longest-running showbiz spectacles. Koch was as motivated by his own gargantuan ego and need for public affirmation as he was by political ambitions and ideals, but the impressive thing about this documentary, completed not long before its subject died in February, is that it provides a comprehensive account not only of both sides

of Koch, but how inextricably hitched they were. (April 14, 5:45 p.m., Bloor)

## **My Father and the Man in Black**

When filmmaker Jonathan Holiff was growing up in London, Ont., his dad Saul wasn't around much, and when he was, he wasn't much of a dad. Meanwhile, Saul Holiff was engaged in the considerable feat of "managing" the unmanageable Johnny Cash, turning the Man in Black into a huge international pop crossover star despite the fact the amphetamine-gobbling singer was aptly named for much more than his sartorial habits. Although somewhat marred by an overuse of awkwardly intrusive re-enacted sequences, Holiff's movie about his father's struggle with Cash is ultimately touching and illuminating, an account of an unlikely but deeply bonded partnership. (April 18, 9 p.m., Innis)

## **Neil Diamond: Solitary Man**

On camera, the great pop songwriter and performer Neil Diamond is open and unaffected yet inscrutable and remote. He feels like he's presenting himself rather than being himself. Not as much as, say, Bob Dylan in *No Direction Home*, but let's just say you shouldn't turn to British filmmaker Samantha Peters's hour-long portrait of the so-called "Jewish Elvis" for much more than a breezy recap of a hook-heavy career. The music, of course, is mostly terrific, and the archival footage irresistible. But Diamond is a guy who built his brilliant career on being careful and in control, and that comes across almost as forcefully here as the chorus for *Cherry Cherry*. (April 13, 7 p.m., Innis)

## **Roman Polanski: A Film Memoir**

The world's most perpetually controversial film artist sits down, while still under house arrest in Switzerland two years ago, and talks about his life with one of his best friends, the producer Andrew Braunsberg. For anyone who's read about Polanski or heard him interviewed before, Laurent Bouzereau's simply-rendered, two-gentlemen-talking documentary won't offer much by way of revelation, but it is an opportunity to observe a truly world-class raconteur narrate his own story. And what a story: From the shattering experiences in the Lodz Jewish ghetto when the half-Jewish Polanski was a boy to his more recent struggles, including the 1977 case where he plead guilty to illegal sexual relations with a minor, the Polanski story is one of those very few that gives even his movies a run for their money as pure drama. (April 17, 4 p.m., Sheppard 5; April 21, 3:15 p.m., Innis)

For more information on the Toronto Jewish Film Festival see [tjff.com](http://tjff.com).

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