

## Director Ran Tal Delves into the Depths of the Israel Museum

After introducing us to the kibbutz's "children of the sun" and the mosaic of Sakhne National Park's visitors on his quest for the Israeli ethos, documentary filmmaker Ran Tal does a U-turn and ascends from the valley to Jerusalem and the Israel Museum. For us it's a direct continuation.

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In one of the cellars of the Israel Museum a group of curators and employees gather to discuss the collection of Palestinian and Druze items of clothing and embroidery kept there. The fabrics are laid out on the table, employees in white gloves handle them, breathe them in. One of them, Milkham by name, wonders aloud what Edward Said would say about the fact that the collection has never been displayed to the general public. "He'd be very angry," answers curator Noam Baram Ben-Yosef. "On the other hand, I can also hear him say: 'Who are you, Israel Museum, to represent the Palestinian culture? How dare you place yourselves above us, categorize us by region and say this and that about us? We think of ourselves differently and we want to be in charge of our own culture.' Look, when it comes to the Palestinian issue, no matter what you do you'll come out looking bad," she continues. "You took away our land, plundered, robbed, and now you want to represent us? We don't even want to come to the Israel Museum and see what it has to offer, we don't identify with the museum, we aren't part of it."

This scene, which appears in the new documentary film "The Museum," is part of film director Ran Tal's attempt to delineate the modern Israeli ethos and touch some of its raw nerves. In this film, which comes to theaters next Thursday (Nov. 30), he does this by drawing our attention to the human beehive that he finds in the Israel Museum. For two years he traveled to Jerusalem again and again, visited the museum countless times, listened to the stories of the people he met there, filmed them working at the museum, visiting it, each person bearing his own cultural and personal baggage. And he filmed the museum as a space that contains all these stories: the upper museum, with its inviting exhibit spaces and visitors trawling through its halls, and the lower museum, the storerooms, with the preparatory work for exhibitions that takes place there and its enormous collection of art and antiquities. Over the backdrop of its impressive architecture, vast array of works of art and breathtaking archeological relics he sketches out a sensitive, gloomy, thought-provoking, dreamy, sometimes optimistic and sometimes humorous depiction of today's Israel, of this complex and complicated place weighted down with history.

Twice in the past, Tal, one of Israel's most prominent documentary filmmakers today, set out to draw a portrait of Israeliana. In his prizewinning film "Children of the Sun" (2007) he did so through conversations with people who grew up in the communal children's houses of the kibbutz movement, and in his excellent film "The Garden of Eden" (2012), through a series of conversations with visitors to the Gan HaShlosha / Sakhne National Park. "The Museum" is the third part of this trilogy. This time, too, Tal sets up his camera in a single place of action and tries to extract a distilled essence of the Israeli ethos. This time, too, he forgoes a classic narrative story, preferring a rich cinematic mosaic that sweeps the viewer away on a subconscious, sometimes associative journey. And this time, too, instead of a single

linear storyline he presents a series of images and personal stories in such a way that the viewer must be an active partner in the task of connecting them.

"I love museums. I love to wander around them. And when I decided to study a museum I knew from the start it had to be either the Israel Museum or Yad VaShem because both play a heavy role in Israeli culture," Ran Tal explains. "In the speeches given at the Israel Museum's opening ceremony in 1965, for instance, you can clearly see that it's not just another museum; it plays a role in building the nation. They spoke of our connection to the land of Israel, of gathering together the spiritual treasures of world Jewry. And when a place is given the role of both molding and reflecting the local culture it becomes much more interesting to me."

"We are privileged to now have this proud and glorious museum, a home where our spiritual archives are kept and studied," stated Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in his speech at the museum's opening ceremony in 1965. In Tal's film there's no mention of this speech, just as there's none of the almost requisite information such as the size of the museum, the extent of its collection or its history. "I was interested in looking at the Israel of today through the galleries and storerooms. To look at all sorts of Israeli conflicts and myths. To look at the fears, the demons, the hopes of Israeli culture. The museum's history is a different film," he explains.

Still, the spirit of the national role it was intended to fill definitely hovers above the Israel Museum. In Israel's biggest cultural institution at whose opening ceremony the Prime Minister spoke of "the rebirth of the nation in its homeland" and the reestablishment of "our bond with the generations that lived in this land since the days of antiquity" the nationalist-Zionist spirit can't help but crop up. And in fact, in Tal's film it pops up again and again among the people and exhibits. Thus, for example, says Tal, "In the museum's archeology wing many civilizations are displayed, but a special place is devoted to the civilization of the First and Second Temple Eras. Ottoman civilization is also represented, but not Palestinian civilization. I think that indicates the tragedy of this place. Noam the curator expresses a certain hope in that scene that the day will come when those items will be exhibited, but it's the museum people who have to decide whether to make the effort to exhibit them and then see if they're attacked for it. I don't think the Palestinians feel comfortable there, either. There are a lot of schools from East Jerusalem that visit the museum but you'll hardly ever see Palestinian families that come to see art and archeology in their leisure time."

## 70 Years Tops

Another scene from the film: A group of cadets from an officers' training course visiting the Israel Museum looks over a model of Second Temple Era Jerusalem. A particularly energetic officer steps in front of them. 2,000 years ago there was no secular society here, she explains. Society was religious, and the Temple wasn't only a place of religious ritual, it was much more than that. It was a governmental, political and commercial hub. "You guys, the Temple is a vibrant place. You guys, we're here on Givat Ram, we have a parliament, a government and a courthouse here," she explains passionately.

She states that when the Jewish people had sovereignty in the past - in the time of King Solomon in the First Temple Era and the United Kingdom of the Second Temple Era - each survived for only 70 years. When she reminds the cadets that the State of

Israel will soon be celebrating seven decades since its establishment they realize that the Third Commonwealth is liable to suffer the same fate. "That's it, we're done for," comments one of the cadets. They all laugh. Then, out of nowhere, reality pokes its big nose in. Their cell phones all ring. There's been a terrorist attack.

In another scene the "Eternal Jew," the victim of persecution, is seen trying to flee from something horrible in a painting by Shmuel Hirschenberg from 1899; and in another a woman is seen over a backdrop of the exhibit "Night Falls on Berlin" from 2015, which featured works that the Nazis called "decadent art." She tells a heartbreaking story about her parents, Holocaust survivors, and mainly about the hardship, pain and trauma experienced by those who are raised by such parents. Meaning her parents. "I felt like I was born in a cemetery, I dreamt about corpses holding me by the ankle, I felt I couldn't begin my life because I was dragged down by everything that happened before I was born," she says, among other things.

The Israel Museum's galleries and storerooms are dedicated to the collective Jewish and Israeli memory, so when we walk through the museum we walk into the extended Jewish past which is all about persecution, destruction, sacrifice and victimhood, says Tal. "We look at the present but we're really living in this endless past. Our whole consciousness is there. This is supposedly the 21st century, but it's all about Hadrian and Titus and Hitler who are still hanging around in our consciousness. And this dictates the way we experience the world. It's a collective mindset that influences the way we behave as an Israeli, Jewish society. And as a result the ghosts of the past are still hovering around us and affecting us. We'll keep fighting forever over the one square kilometer which is the Temple Mount, and that will continue to determine who dies and who lives here."

Tal conducted a plethora of conversations with museum people: ushers, curators and visitors, male and female alike. The kashrut supervisor who works there, for instance, explains in the film that the museum means nothing to him. For him the synagogue is the important place, the source of values, and only those who don't have that turn the museum into their temple. An usher tells how, since he became religious, he gets excited every time he's assigned to work at the Shrine of the Book near the Dead Sea Scrolls, while former museum director James Snyder talks about how he grew up in Pennsylvania as a Jewish boy who felt like he was from another planet, and how his mother died the day before the festive reopening of the museum and he had to start his mourning for her a day late. But on that day he found himself taking pride in the fact that here was little Jimmy from Pennsylvania walking around with Israel's president, prime minister and all its dignitaries.

In this film Tal carries on the technique he used in his two previous films, of separating sound from image. In scenes where people tell their personal stories, sometimes giving us an intimate peek into their emotional worlds, Tal chooses not to film them; instead he presents the interview as a voiceover over footage of the museum. This separation allows him to shatter the cinematic illusion, preventing the viewer from being drawn completely into the film and leaving him somewhat distant, critical. "This duality interests me because it gives you, the viewer, the space to decide. I don't try to force things on you - now cry, now be moved. You understand that different connections are being made; the manipulation is apparent. And this creates a complex viewing experience because you see one thing, you hear

something else, and this creates a third thing which is your own, not just mine," he explains.

The cinematography is static, the camera barely moves. It invites the viewer to observe, to ponder. Nili Peleg's impressive editing work also supports this approach. The pace is slow; nobody's rushing anywhere. The cinematic collage of "The Museum" makes the viewer think. To look for the connection between the stories himself. And to look for himself among all these strangers. It's like a embroidery work where another stitch is added each time, says Tal. "Like a mosaic where you have to keep finding a stone that fits, it's a laborious, probing job. These are collages; they have no narrative. I realized that this way I can talk about the "underground" Israel, its subconscious, through a place like the Israel Museum."

Just as art can't help but be political, he says, so too the museum's activity isn't devoid of political considerations. "You have to realize that the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is political and so is the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art. I think with the Israel Museum, because of its purpose and the content it deals with, its politics are more pronounced. But everything is very political. Look at which museums addressed fifty years of occupation, which exhibits each one put on, if at all; the only one that addressed it seriously was the Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod. So everything's political. All art is steeped in politics.

"I think there's a sort of dance regarding the curators' worldview," he goes on to say. "At the Israel Museum there are a lot of curators as well as a variety of content. It's an encyclopedic museum - it has art, archeology and Judaica as well. You don't see that everywhere. Usually it's an archaeological museum, an art museum, a museum of history. And this is a museum which has several wings, each of which has its own terminology, its own history of research, people who come from totally different disciplines. That's also what makes the Israel Museum so interesting."

He uses the space where Danziger's sculpture "Nimrod" stands as an example. "On one side of it, behind it, is Israeli art. On another side you see the whole archeological section which documents about 100,000 years of the region's history. And on the side of his shoulder you see Judaica, what remains of Jewish existence in different places. So in an encyclopedic museum the experience is much more complex. All the questions and stories and narratives echo one another."

Regarding his own work, says Tal, "What I do is similar to what the archeology curator does who says in the film that his storeroom is the pantry from which he concocts his stories. The editor and I collect the pieces of the reality that I've recorded and from them we assemble our story. That is, the meaning of the footage is determined in the editing suite. It doesn't exist in reality. There is no such Israel Museum, only the interpretation of it in the film. If you used my footage you'd turn it into a different movie."

## Shattered Utopias

Tal, 54, was born and raised on Kibbutz Beit HaShita and graduated from the Tel Aviv University Film School in 1994. Two years later he directed the drama "Queen of Hearts" with Etgar Keret and then chose to focus on documentary filmmaking. He directed "67 Ben Tzvi Road" (1998) which dealt with the forensics institute at Abu Kabir, "My Dream House" (2005) which portrays four families trying to build their

dream house, and 2007 saw the release of "Children of the Sun" which won many awards including Best Documentary at the Jerusalem Film Festival, the Ophir Award, and seven prizes in the documentary film competition. His film "The Garden of Eden" established him as one of Israel's most important and fascinating documentary film directors.

He teaches at the Sapir Academic College and at Tel Aviv University, where he is currently working on creating an MA degree course in documentary cinema, and as he sees it, "The Museum" (which was made with the support of Yes Docu, the New Israel Film Fund and Mifal HaPais) is a direct continuation of "Children of the Sun" and "The Garden of Eden." All three, he explains, attempt to deal with the Israeli ethos through spaces and places which have cultural, political and historical significance: the kibbutz, Sakhne National Park and the Israel Museum. "True, there everyone jumps into the water naked and here everyone is dressed and walks along quietly, but all these places allow one to observe them in a similar way. Sakhne, the museum and the kibbutz are all connected to the Israeli enterprise and they're all a product of the same period, conceptually speaking."

All three places have a utopian dimension, he states. "The kibbutz was an attempt to build an exemplary society that would deal with and solve the problems of the human race. Sakhne was an attempt to create a magic garden, an imaginary slice of nature, where people could go and enjoy themselves. And the museum's purpose, among other things, is to be a sort of closed capsule of thoughts and discussions about humanity and the Jewish people. But when something that comes from this type of utopian thoughts meets reality, the result is tragedy. That's why I find this interaction interesting, challenging, thought-provoking and heartbreaking all at once."

The drama of Israel can be understood not only through places from which conflict bursts out with a cry but through places where it's hidden from the eye, Tal asserts. "As someone who lives in a reality where the cry is the essence, I prefer the silence. I feel comfortable in such places which is why I make my films there. Granted, the Israeli ethos is more amusing in Sakhne, but it can also be seen in the museum's spotless galleries. In the museum there's a little more over-polite ritual, but we don't really change when we stand before the Dead Sea Scrolls or a painting by Magritte."

The Israel Museum, he agrees, is a place of consensus. "A place with so many visitors is limited in terms of its ability to follow unknown paths. After all, it's an institution that has to be financially viable and it's very complicated to survive while asking radical questions - which is the purpose of a museum. So is the Israel Museum true to its purpose? I wouldn't want to answer that. That's one of the questions that comes up in the film. It looks into the role of the museum within the Zionist narrative, within the Israeli narrative, within the Jewish narrative and within the Middle-Eastern narrative. The film asks the questions but doesn't provide answers. I don't think it's my job to present answers or encapsulations of the places I document. My job, if I have one, is more to ask questions, to ponder, to tell a story, even if it's truncated and not necessarily complete, like reality."