



Fanny Valette and Sonia Tahar in *La Petite Jérusalem*.

TORAH AND TABU

La Petite Jérusalem

review by George Sax

Somewhere around the middle of Karim Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem*, one of the film's two sisters asks the other, "Why does Hashem [God] send us desires he disapproves of?" and her sibling answers, "To test us."

I had guessed her response before she uttered it, but not because I'm uncommonly acute or because this job prepares one to make good guesses. *Jérusalem* is the kind of tendentiously simple but vague film that clues you to such anticipation.

Set among a community of devout Sephardic Orthodox Jews in a working-class suburb of Paris, the movie obviously wants to be about the variously conflicting claims of faith and individual will, as these create individual and family stresses and confusion. But in its labored, low-key way, *Jérusalem* also seems confused, or at least too unfocused and incoherent.

The younger sister, Laura (Fanny Valette), is a subdued but increasingly discontented university student pursuing a philosophy degree. Her widowed, Tunisian emigré mother, who believes in the subsidiary traditional role of women and wives, expresses concerned disapproval: "Philosophy won't fulfill you; philosophy won't give you children!" Her elder sister reprovingly tells her, "You've been raised in the truth of the Torah."

Laura persists in her own course, albeit with increasing anxiety and questions. She eschews the long-ordained North African Jewish head covering and costume worn by her sister and asks her family for money to rent her own apartment. She works after school in the cleaning crew at an elementary school,

where she seems to have caught the attention of an Arab man, although she gives both him and us only the most obscure signal that she's aware of this interest. Her sister, meanwhile, is having problems with her husband, and with reconciling her understanding of her religious instruction with free physical participation in her marriage.

Jérusalem also touches upon at least three other potential themes, including the problematic relations between the Jewish and Arab residents of France's oppressively vast and dreary exurban industrial districts, but it never develops any of them to a satisfactory extent.

Albou has assembled her movie from clipped, abruptly ended, often repetitious scenes. She hasn't dramatized material or shaped scenes and sequences so that the movie achieves a real thematic movement. Information is too often ill-communicated, even visually. When a synagogue is firebombed, it's difficult to grasp this fact for a few moments because the sequence is so inadequately managed.

There are genuinely serious problems and interesting potential themes flitting around the edges of *Jérusalem*, but its drama is so unmoving that they don't become clear or involving. When it does raise itself above its grey, subdued level of operation, it's for briefly histrionic episodes.

A pall of seriousness hovers over the movie's proceedings, but *Jérusalem* never illuminates or clarifies its somber attitude.

La Petite Jérusalem, part of the *Emerging Cinema* program at the Market Arcade, will run from April 28 to May 2.

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A scene from *Charming Augustine*.

THE NERVES IN PATTERNS ON A SCREEN

Zoe Beloff's *Charming Augustine*

review by Girish Shambu

From my childhood in India, I have vivid memories of my parents taking me regularly to both magic shows and the movies. The two are, in my mind, inseparably tied together. Movies, you could say, are a sort of magic—a conjuring trick of images performed with light and shadow in a darkened room. They traffic in illusion and performance.

These ideas are at the heart of work by Scottish-born filmmaker Zoe Beloff, who will be presenting her 40-minute, 3D film *Charming Augustine* on Saturday, April 29, at 8pm at Hallwalls. The film is inspired by photographs and texts published by an asylum in Paris in the 1880s. Augustine was a young patient who was prone to fits of hysteria. She heard voices and had hallucinatory visions. Her doctors kept transcripts of her attacks and also took accompanying photographs.

The film starts out as a sort of clinical medical document but then slowly changes into a fiction-like drama. There is a theatrical aspect to Augustine's fits that the film is interested in exploring. Her hysteria led to the acting out of her unconscious fears and desires, and it is this performative aspect that lends itself to the cinematic. It's a way of using cinema to make altered states visible, to capture a spell of delirium as it unfolds, as if one were recording a performance.

The film is set at an interesting point in time. In the late 19th century, pioneers like Muybridge and Marey were using cameras to conduct studies of human and animal bodies in motion, investigations that led to the birth of cinema. Augustine's doctors used the same cameras to record not the body but instead the human mind.

Though movies had not yet been born, audiences of the day did not lack for cinema-like spectacle. Stereoscopic photography—what we call "3D"—was

invented in the mid-1800s, and the magic lantern, which was the forerunner of the movie projector, had been around for much longer. Victorian ghost shows and phantasmagorias used a combination of these devices to conjure up likenesses of people. 3D slides were especially effective because live performers would interact dramatically with handpainted slides projected on a screen.

By choosing to use 3D, Beloff has filmed the story of Augustine the way it might have been filmed at the time, if cinema had existed. She has said: "My project for some time has been an attempt to awaken the past buried behind the present, behind the illusion of progress, by studying its scraps and remains, outdated buildings and fashions, the landscape of the everyday that has been discarded, overlooked."

Also on the program are two short films that influenced Beloff. In D.W. Griffith's *The Painted Lady* (1912), Blanche Sweet plays a woman afflicted with delirium who speaks to people who aren't there. Griffith was known to strive for authenticity and it is said that Sweet's performance is close to descriptions of hysteria patients of the time. The other short film was made by a psychoanalyst in Pittsburgh in the 1920s and documents a patient performing her various multiple personalities.

On display before the screening is *Silo Dreams*, a 3D slide/audio installation by Zoe Beloff and Eric Muzzy. It consists of photographs of Buffalo grain elevators taken a few years ago. In Beloff's words, the elevators are "industrial ruins that were once cathedrals of modernism." Though their great era has now passed, they continue to stand as a memorial for industrial optimism. The symbolism of these tall, decaying but beautiful structures is especially poignant for us Buffalonians.

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