



FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
OFFICIAL SELECTION  
COMPETITION

NATALIE PORTMAN

HANNA LASLO

HIAM ABBASS



# FREE ZONE

A FILM BY AMOS GITAI

AGAV FILMS AND AGAT FILMS & CIE PRESENT



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# HAD GADIA

*My father had bought it  
For just two pennies  
The lamb! The lamb!  
My father had bought it  
For just two pennies  
As the Haggadah relates*

*The crafty cat was on the lookout  
It pounced on the lamb  
And ate it up  
The dog choked the cat  
That had eaten up the lamb  
That my father had bought  
For just two pennies  
The lamb! The lamb!*

*Along came the stick  
To strike and beat the dog  
That had choked the cat  
That had eaten up the lamb  
That my father had bought  
That he had bought  
For just two pennies  
The lamb! The lamb!*

*[...]  
Without any delay  
The fire burnt the stick  
That had beaten the dog  
That had choked the cat  
That had eaten up the lamb  
That my father had bought  
For just two pennies*

*The lamb! The lamb!*

*Then the water put out the fire  
That had burnt the stick  
That had beaten the dog  
That had choked the cat  
That had eaten up the lamb  
That my father had bought  
For just two pennies  
The lamb! The lamb!  
Why do you sing, little lamb?  
Spring isn't yet here  
And Passover neither  
Have you changed?  
I have changed this year  
And every evening  
Like each evening*

*I have only asked four questions  
But, tonight  
I have thought of another question  
How long will this hellish circle last?  
I have thought of a question tonight  
How long will this hellish circle last?  
That of the oppressor and the oppressed,  
Of the executioner and the victim  
How long will this madness last?  
[...]*

*Lyrics, arrangements and performed by Hava Alberstein  
Traditional music  
NMC Records*

# SYNOPSIS

# FREE ZONE

*Rebecca (Natalie Portman), an American who has been living in Jerusalem for a few months now, has just broken off her engagement. She gets into a cab driven by Hanna (Hanna Laslo), an Israeli. But Hanna is on her way to Jordan, to the Free Zone, to pick up a large sum of money that "the American", her husband's partner, owes them. Rebecca persuades Hanna to take her along. When they reach the Free Zone, Leila (Hiam Abbass), a Palestinian, explains that the American isn't there and that the money has vanished...*

# INTERVIEW

# AMOS GITAI

## *Does the free zone in the film actually exist?*

Yes, in eastern Jordan, an area has been set up as an economic free zone. There are no customs and no taxes. People from neighboring countries like Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Israel come here to sell and buy cars. I'm interested in these pockets of freedom in the Middle East where people of different origins can mingle and find things they can do in common. I'm interested in observing how people of the region are connecting to other people through everyday activities, and not only through political gestures. At this point we have been deceived continuously by the big politicians. It's necessary to start with the little details and maybe through these details we can transform our situation. Buying a car, fixing it, crossing the borders, sharing a story, a meal together... I'm interested in free zones where things like this can happen.

## *And peace exists in this free zone?*

Yes. Complete peace. You can even see Israeli buses being sold to Saudis or Syrians. These countries normally don't even have diplomatic relations since they are officially in a state of war. But in the free zone, commerce gives people a kind of pragmatic attitude. I think such a less-charged nationalistic attitude could lead to moving beyond the actual situation. I'm interested in exploring every vector that can create a meeting point. Trade is creating a common ground. People are opening their borders to cooperate and have common projects with economic value.

## *Borders play an important role in the film...*

In the Middle East, borders are a real issue. It's always physical borders, political borders, which lead to mental borders. I've become very interested in borders - how they are crossed, who and what crosses them. My previous film, PROMISED LAND, was about the trafficking of women across the Egyptian border into Israel. In FREE ZONE, it's about the voluntary transfer of a car across the Israeli-Jordanian border.

## *You chose an innovative way of setting up the story...*

The film starts in Jerusalem in front of the Wailing Wall, the remnant of the sacred shrine of the ancient temple destroyed by the Romans. A young woman, Rebecca (Natalie Portman), is in a car driven by Hanna (Hanna Laszlo). We don't know who they are or where they're going yet, but the journey starts there. To show their memories and also the context in which these women are together, I use a series of layers of images, sometimes 8 layers simultaneously.

I was interested in exploring how to integrate into the narrative fragments of desynchronized memories. We see Rebecca and Hanna continuing to drive to the Free Zone and at the same time we have this voyage being interrupted and charged with memories and references to how they came to be in this moving envelope called a car.

## *Three women: one American, one Israeli, one Palestinian. How would you describe these characters?*

Hanna, the Israeli, is strong, charismatic, matter-of-fact. A bit of a bully, but also charming. All those characteristics at the same time which is a bit like an Israeli, in general. That's how I see us. Overbearing, but sincere. Not always respectful, but refreshing in a way. That's everything I like and resent about Israelis. I guess it's also a portrait of myself. I'm not different from my people... I always allow myself to be more critical with my people than with others. Leila (Hiam Abbas), the Palestinian, is more reserved, more respectful of others' personal space. She is shocked by Hanna's immediate informal attitude.

Rebecca is a young woman trying to interpret the world for herself, to make up her identity. She's an American with an Israeli father and a non-Jewish mother. According to Jewish law, she is not Jewish. But Rebecca herself feels Jewish, even Israeli.



***Did you write the role of Rebecca for Natalie Portman?***

The screenplay went through a lot of transformations. The original version was written about men and at one point I decided to make it the story of three women. When Natalie Portman came to the project, we had a couple of early conversations and I decided to integrate some of her biographical elements into the story. I thought it would be interesting to have somebody from outside, kind of having her own point of view about what she sees and how she understands it, how she interprets it. Unlike Rebecca in the film, both of Natalie's parents are Jewish. But like the character she plays, I think she's researching who she is, what the world is about. I think she's using cinema in a good way as a means to exploring and understanding the world which is something I try to do myself.

***In a similar way, you also integrated into the film the real stories behind the locations...***

Sometimes I like very much when a film location has a kind of an echo into the narrative. The oasis in FREE ZONE is actually a place where a Palestinian man, Mussa Alami, founded a farm orphanage for Palestinian refugee children after 1948. It's a place I remember reading about when I was 16 or 17. During its history, two attempts were made to burn it down, once by Palestinians, once by Israelis. I used the true story behind this farm to enrich the narrative of the film.

***Leila, Rebecca and Hanna arrive at this oasis to discover the farm on fire. How is this a turning point for the three women?***

Leila is a modern woman. She doesn't want to oppose society, but she also wants to be free and independent. That's exactly what her husband's son refuses. From this point on, the relationship between the three female characters changes. What began as only a kind of pragmatic mutual need turns into an emotional solidarity. Hanna will accept to help Leila cross the border back into Israel.

***Why did you choose to make a film with only women as the leading characters?***

Men are the generals, the military guys. They're usually the heads of states in the Middle East, with the exception of Golda Meir. We see the great achievements of men as keeping this area in constant war. It might be interesting to allow women to take over. Maybe they would apply a more down to earth and humanistic vision to our conflict. At the same time, I don't want to idealize women too much. Women are also capable of being killers. I consider myself non-racist and non-sexist, so I think we all have the potential of being angelic but also monstrous. I think that today, because women are still subject to sexist attitudes, they are agents of change in a positive way. Not because of some sort of DNA composition, but because of the social circumstances. They haven't yet been allowed to achieve their maximum liberty. Maybe the condition of not always being in the most powerful positions has given them a good critical way of looking at things. Women can be good agents of change, but they will have to assume this. It won't be given. It can't be taken for granted.

***The car seems to be more than just a means of transportation...***

I think that the car can definitely be considered the fourth main character. It imposes a restricted territory. When the three women are in the car, or when two of them are in the car, they cannot be far from each other. Being in the car imposes a physical proximity, so they must relate to one another. They must talk to each other. Even by not talking or not relating, they are still communicating something. In this way, I think the car takes them all on both a concrete voyage and a metaphorical voyage.

***For the first time, you shot a film in Jordan...***

Not only a first for me. It's the first Israeli film shot in Jordan in cooperation with the Jordanian Royal Film Commission. There are no cinema treaties between the two countries, but the Jordanians helped make the film shoot possible. They were really cooperative and open, even when I explained that I preferred to shoot a common gas station or the barren free zone instead of touristic sites like Petra. There was no intervention in the content and they just went along with what the film needed. Initially, of course, there was a kind of resistance between the Israeli and Jordanian crews, but this melted down after only a few hours and relations became very warm. I think that just the shooting of the film is a good example of how political borders can be crossed. It was really a great experience.

***So instead of showing off the archaeological beauty of Jarash, you preferred to use a simple gas station to stage the scene where Rebecca is friendly with the Jordanian owner...***

I'm interested in modernity. I want to show the modern aspect of the Israeli or Jordanian or Palestinian existence. I think connections are created in a modern context. In the archaic context, each side remains attached to its nationalistic attitudes or national shrines.

Modernity has both good and the bad aspects. Shrines have been destroyed, but a common tissue, a common way of communicating, can be created in its place. I didn't want to show the exotic Jordan of camels in Petra and beautiful sunsets. I wanted to show Jordan through its vitality, through the pulse of life, through the highways, the busy streets of Amman. This kind of modernity is for me the fabric of what connects places.

***FREE ZONE appears more peaceful than some of your previous films...***

More and more, I stress humanizing characters, to find ways to express their complexities and contradictions. The characters shown are accessible. Each one with its purposes, its rhythm, potential for anger, disagreement, love, affection. In a way, the film loves all its characters. This represents an understanding of relativity. By establishing relativity, the characters are softened. Not every film should be about rage.

***Are you optimistic about eventual peace in the Middle East?***

The Europeans, 50 years after they burned the entire continent and killed tens of millions of people, came to the simple conclusion that they are allowed to have conflicts, but they just don't need to kill for it. I think that relatively in the Middle East we did not kill so many people and we have not created such outrageous things as have happened in Europe.

But it's definitely time for us to understand that we are entitled not to agree and even to have conflicts, we just don't need to have wars each time we disagree. We have to find other ways to negotiate our differences. We are not obliged to create a uniform society, a uniform Middle East. We can still hold on to our different cultures, our languages.

We can continue to disagree. Even if there will be peace, there will remain conflicts. Maturity is about disagreeing without using force. This is true for personal relations and entire nations.

# BIOGRAPHY

# AMOS GITAI

Amos Gitai was studying architecture, following in his father's footsteps, when the Yom Kippur War interrupted his studies and it was the use of his Super8 camera, whilst flying helicopter missions that led to his career as a filmmaker.

Based in Israel, the United States and France, Gitai has produced an extraordinary, wide-ranging, and deeply personal body of work. In around 40 films – documentary and fiction, Gitai has explored the layers of history in the Middle East and beyond, including his own personal history, through such themes as homeland and exile, religion, social control and utopia. His trademark style includes long takes with scarce but significant camera movements and a devilishly clever sense of humour.

In the late 70s and early 80s, Gitai directed numerous documentaries, including HOUSE and FIELD DIARY. During the same era, Gitai received his Ph.D in architecture from the University of California – Berkeley.

Following the controversial reception to FIELD DIARY, Gitai moved to Paris in 1983, where he was based for the next ten years and during this period continued to travel widely directing such documentaries as PINEAPPLE – a humorous odyssey about the growth and marketing of pineapples. He also made BRAND NEW DAY – a film that followed Annie Lennox and the Eurythmics as they toured Japan.

During this period he began directing fiction and historical films about the experience of exile. These films include the Venice critic's prize-winning BERLIN JERUSALEM and the extraordinary trilogy on the Jewish legend of Golem.

In the mid-90s Gitai moved to Haifa and began the most fertile, productive period of his career to date. Over 10 years, Gitai made some 15 films, both documentary and fiction. The 1995 feature DEAVARIM marked the return to his country and his reunion with the light and landscape of Tel Aviv. The first film in Gitai's trilogy of Israeli cities, DEVARIM was followed by YOM YOM (shot in Haifa) and KADOSH (shot in Mea Shearim, the Jerusalem district of Orthodox Jews). Other fiction features followed: 2000's KIPPUR, 2001's EDEN, 2002's KEDMA, 2003's ALILA and 2004's PROMISED LAND.

Gitai's work has been the subject of major retrospectives, notably at Centre Pompidou (Paris), NFT and ICA (both in London), and cinematheques in Madrid, Jerusalem, Paris, Sao Paolo, Tokyo and Toronto. Future retrospectives are scheduled later this year at New York's Lincoln Center and Berlin's Kunstwerk.

1980	HOUSE documentary
1981	WADI documentary IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY documentary AMERICAN MYTHOLOGIES documentary
1982	FIELD DIARY documentary
1983	ANANAS (Pineapples) documentary
1984	BANGKOK-BAHRAIN (Labour for Sale) documentary
1985	ESTHER feature
1987	BRAND NEW DAY musical documentary
1989	BERLIN-JERUSALEM feature BIRTH OF A GOLEM docu-drama
1991	GOLEM, THE SPIRIT OF EXILE feature WADI, TEN YEARS LATER documentary
1992	METAMORPHOSIS OF A MELODY documentary/theatre
1993	QUEEN MARY documentary THE PETRIFIED GARDEN feature THE WAR OF TH ESONE OF LIGHT AGAINST THE SONS OF DARKNESS documentary/theatre
	IN THE VALLEY OF THE WUPPER documentary
1994	KIPPUR WAR MEMORIES - documentary IN THE NAME OF THE DUCE documentary
	GIVE PEACE A CHANCE documentary
1995	DEVARIM (Things) feature
1996	THE ARENA OF MURDER documentary MILIM (Words) theatre/documentary
1997	WAR AND PEACE IN VESOUL improvised docudrama
1998	A HOUSE IN JERUSALEM documentary ZION, AUTO-EMANCIPATION documentary YOM YOM (Day After Day) feature
1999	KADOSH feature
2000	KIPPUR feature
2001	EDEN feature WADI GRAND CANYON documentary
2002	KEDMA feature
2003	ALILA feature
2004	PROMISED LAND feature
2005	FREE ZONE feature



# FILMOGRAPHIES

## NATALIE PORTMAN

Born in Jerusalem.

1994	THE PROFESSIONAL (LEON) (dir. Luc Besson)
1995	HEAT (dir. Michael Mann)
1996	BEAUTIFUL GIRLS (dir. Ted Demme)
	EVERYONE SAYS I LOVE YOU (dir. Woody Allen)
	MARS ATTACKS! (dir. Tim Burton)
1999	STAR WARS, Episode I: The Phantom Menace (dir. George Lucas)
	ANYWHERE BUT HERE (dir. Wayne Wang)
2000	WHERE THE HEART IS (dir. Matt Williams)
2002	STAR WARS, Episode II: Attack of the Clones (dir. George Lucas)
2003	COLD MOUNTAIN (dir. Anthony Minghella)
2004	GARDEN STATE (dir. Zach Braff)
	CLOSER (dir. Mike Nichols)
	Winner - Golden Globe - Best Supporting Actress
	Nomination - Academy Award - Best Supporting Actress
2005	STAR WARS, Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (dir. George Lucas)
	FREE ZONE (dir. Amos Gitai)

*Shooting* V FOR VENDETTA (dir. James McTeigue, written and produced by Andy and Larry Wachowsky)

## HANNA LASLO

Born in Jaffa.

Hanna's romance with the stage began during her army service while serving as a performer in the "Pikud Darom" group. Although she never studied theatre, Hanna learned by doing in numerous stage plays. Hanna also created five one woman shows: "Hanna Laslo with a Direct Smile", "Sex, Lies and Hanna Laslo", "Life According to Laslo", "Laslo Neto" and "More Hanna than Laslo" - winner of the 2004 Israeli Theatre Prize for the Best Show of the Year. Hanna can be seen regularly on television in variety shows and sitcoms. She was also the host of the Israeli version of "The Weakest Link."

Hanna has appeared in over a dozen Israeli feature films, including Amos Gitai's ALILA, which earned her a Best Actress nomination at the Israeli Film Awards. FREE ZONE is her second film with Amos Gitai.

## HIAM ABBASS

Born in Nazareth, Hiam Abbass studied photography and theater before starting a career as an actress. No longer standing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she left her country in 1988. After a stay in London, she settled in Paris where her acting career began. Hiam has also made two short films, LE PAIN (2000) and LA DANSE ETERNELLE (2003).

1995	HAÏFA (DIR. RACHID MASHARAWI)
1996	LE GONE DU CHAABA (DIR. CHRISTOPHE RUGGIA)
1998	VIVRE AU PARADIS (DIR. BOURLEM GUERDJOU)
1999	ALI RABIAA ET LES AUTRES (DIR. AHMED BOULANE)
	LIGNE 208 (DIR. BERNARD DUMONT)
2000	FAIS-MOI DES VACANCES (DIR. DIDIER BIVEL)
	QUAND ON SERA GRAND (DIR. RENAUD COHEN)
2001	AIME TON PERE (DIR. JACOB BERGER)
	SATIN ROUGE (DIR. RAJA AMARI)
	L'ANGE DU GOUDRON (DIR. DENIS CHOUINARD)
2002	LA PORTE DU SOLEIL (DIR. YOUSRI NASRALLAH)
2004	LE DEMON DE MIDI (DIR. MARIE PASCALE OSTERRIETH)
	PARADISE NOW (DIR. HANI ABU ASAAD)
	LA FIANCEE SYRIENNE (DIR. ERAN RIKLIS)
2005	FREE ZONE (DIR. AMOS GITAI)

# FREE ZONE

## ACTORS

NATALIE PORTMAN  
HANNA LASLO  
HIAM ABBASS  
CARMEN MAURA  
MAKRAM KHOURY  
AKI AVNI  
URI KLAUZNER  
LIRON LEVO  
TOMER RUSSO  
ADNAN TARABSHI  
SHREDY GABARIN

## DIRECTED BY SCREENPLAY

AMOS GITAI  
AMOS GITAI  
MARIE JOSÉ SANSELME

## PRODUCERS

NICOLAS BLANC, MICHAEL TAPUACH, LAURENT TRUCHOT

## LINE PRODUCER

GADI LEVY

## CASTING

ILAN MOSKOVITCH

## 1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

HAIM RINSKY

## PHOTOGRAPHY

LAURENT BRUNET, RENATO BERTA

## STEADYCAM

HAIM ASIAS

## SOUND ENGINEER

MICHEL KHARAT

## SOUND DESIGNER

ALEX CLAUDE

## RE RECORDING MIXER

STÉPHANE THIEBAUT

## EDITING

ISABELLE INGOLD, YANN DEDET

## ART

MIGUEL MARKIN

## COSTUMES

ALINE STERN

## MAKE UP & HAIR

ZIV KATANOV

## IN COPRODUCTION WITH

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GOLEM - ARTEMIS PRODUCTION  
AGAV HAFAKOT - HAMMON HAFAKOT  
ARTE FRANCE CINEMA - CINEART -  
SCOPE INVEST - YISRAEL ESER  
CHANNEL - YES SATELLITE - RTBF -  
BAC FILMS - UNITED KING

## IN ASSOCIATION WITH

CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA CINEMATO-  
GRAPHIE - THE JORDAN ROYAL FILM  
COMMISSION - THE TAX-SHELTER OF  
THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF BEL-  
GIUM - CARAT BELGIUM ENVICON-  
TROL - ISRAELI FILM FUND - CANAL  
PLUS - TPS STAR

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