



Peccadillo Pictures Presents



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE
UN CERTAIN REGARD



A FILM DIRECTED BY HAIM TABAKMAN



★★★★★
Daily Express

★★★★★
Attitude

★★★★★
The Times

★★★★★
Time Out

★★★★★
Daily Mirror

Aaron, a married butcher working in Jerusalem's Orthodox community, is respected by friends and family – a pillar in the community. However, when he hires handsome runaway student Ezri to assist with his business, sexual tensions bristle, and the pair cautiously embark on a love affair that must be kept hidden at all costs. Meanwhile, a neighbouring shopkeeper persists in seeing a man of her own choosing, even though she's been promised by her father to another. As forbidden truths come to the fore, these lovers are forced to either confront or relent in the face of a centuries old religious community, with startling results.

A beautifully affecting love story that has rightly earned comparisons to *Brokeback Mountain*, Haim Tabakman's potent yet impeccably restrained tale has won awards and accolades at film festivals the world over.

On DVD: 20th Sep / Dur: 90mins / Certificate TBC / RRP: £15.99

Extras: Interview with director Haim Tabakman, Picture Gallery, 5.1 Dolby Digital

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Images: <http://picasaweb.google.com/PeccadilloPictures>**

INTERVIEW WITH HAIM TABAKMAN

Eyes wide open is your first feature film. What is your background?

I had aspirations of becoming a musician when I was a teenager but I also wanted to become a veterinarian. Towards 21 to 22 years old, I was at a junction in my life and I had to decide. When I realized that music wasn't really my world, I started to think about cinema, which is about storytelling, music, and images... a lot of creative energy. I went to study cinema at Tel Aviv University, and then I had the incredible opportunity of presenting my short films to the Cinefondation in Cannes.

How did you get involved in this project?

The project started with a script that Merav Doster wrote seven years ago. Rafael Katz, the producer, got in touch with Merav. He convinced her to develop the script into a fifty minute drama for TV. Then, he received some financing from the Israel Film Fund. They were looking for a director and Rafael met me, on behalf of someone at the university. So, I got involved in the TV project. I was happy as I had just made two shorts. I immediately saw the script's potential and I was honoured.

Did you work on the script with Merav for the feature film?

It was very complicated. Merav, Rafael and even David Barrot, the French producer, were involved in the script and I really only started about a year ago. I wanted to add things that were a little bit different and we began to rewrite on another level. It was really a group effort to make everything that everyone had written coexist in the script.

Do you know if this story is based on a true story?

I don't think so. It's true that it is something that could happen at any time, but it's not based on a true story. Merav did a great deal of research and I also talked to many people... When you're locked away with so many boys, as you are in a yeshiva (religious school), these things happen very often. It's about experimenting or dealing with all kind of questions about sexuality. This is the main tragedy of that kind of life. Religious people do not consider homosexuality a sin; it just does not exist. So how can you deal with it if somewhere it is written that it does not exist? In the Talmud, it is written that the Sons of Israel are not even suspected of doing that. God did not make things that way. If you talk to a religious person now and say: "I'm gay, what can I do?" he will answer: "If you are tempted, you should know your duty in front of God and the community". To them, it's just an evil urge. Being gay is like a disease that you can easily get rid of it. It cannot be part of a human being's essence.

Regarding the movie you say: "closer to the sin, closer to God". What do you mean?

When you are a religious man, you have two incompatible options: fighting against natural urges, which give value to life or being authentic (accepting natural urges) and losing your religious points of reference. Living with religious codes gives a direction to life: a frame and a meaning. But just as everyone, a religious man is confronted all the time with sins and from that, he has to define himself. The closer you are about to commit a sin, the more you are aware of what you are, of the definition of being good or not good. The closer you are to the sin, the more aware you are of your religious essence... Aaron welcomes Ezri into his life, as he wants to feel a religious awakening again. He knows that he is transcending real sexual urges.

Doing a movie about a love story between two religious men is really taking on taboo, isn't it?

Yes, of course. Some people from the religious world helped us, but no one wanted to be credited or thanked as advisers. There is really strong negative energy associated with this subject. If you want to be part of the orthodox world, there is no way to settle this conflict. If you are inside this world, homosexuality is not accepted. Aaron wants to stay in the religious circle and be authentic. He has to pay the price: losing his religious frame of reference to be himself. Most of the time, religious people do not choose to fight. They live a double life, giving up their authenticity.

The title *Eyes wide open* is a reference to that. I suppose it's "the eyes" of the community...

It's "the eyes" of the community, of God, but not only that. For me, it's more about accepting faith, your own being. I think our heroes are diving into this romance but they know there is no real chance to live it. It's just like accepting faith. I see *Eyes wide open* as a car rushing towards you, but you keep on walking in the same direction. You do not step to the side of the road. You understand everything but you cannot stop.

Who are these two characters Aaron and Ezri?

They are both very strong. Aaron is a very closed person. In a way, he is almost a fanatic. He accepts the code of the religious world and as he refuses to live a double life, he has to be very tough. I think it is a very brave decision that he made when he was young, maybe unconsciously to deal with his father, his world. Ezri is an angry young man, just like James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Being gay is definitely not a reason to abandon God. Ezri is very clever and religious in most ways. I think he is practically a one-man revolution mechanism. Both are attracted to one another because they are opposites. Like a chemical explosion. Each can ruin the defences of the other. Ezri wants to shake Aaron, to wake him up. Ezri is younger than Aaron but he knows in a way that he is more aware and authentic than Aaron, so he has a lot of influence over him. But he also needs a place for his safety because it is not a safe world; he has no place to go back to. He does not know where to go but he has guts and he is not afraid of it. In our world, it is the same. The religious world is just a very extreme example of what we all experience.

Do you think Rivka understands what is happening between Aaron and Ezri?

People that live with one another can usually sense everything. She knows and she is part of this story. She knows that her husband does not love her the way he should. She accepts it because this is part of the code. I think she has a very big heart because she is not really angry; she gives him a chance to decide.

And what about the reaction of the community? It is very violent...

The escalation to violence occurs because Aaron does not want to quit. It starts with suspicion. They talk with him, they try to keep him quiet, they care for him. You are never alone in this society, as people are always interested in your life. They take care of you if you are sick or poor, you are never alone or without food. But on the other hand, they always know what you are doing and they always have an opinion about what you are doing. If you are stubborn and say: "I have to do it my own way", troubles begin. I think this is what happens in the movie. Aaron, his eyes wide open, decides to go on. Even if the truth is starting to spread, he keeps on doing what he has to do. The film is a little bit loose in this way. It does not tell you everything. You have to think and imagine a lot of things.

Do you think the movie can create a polemic in the religious world and Jewish community?

I hope so. I really want to help break the silence, to break the taboo in ultraorthodox society. The film can be part of the evolution of the orthodox world. The way religious people live now is not the way Jerusalem has always been. It is a reaction to the fear of losing part of their traditions. In the end, we are dealing with human beings, not with sins. There is a way to convince people, through movies, without using force to say: "Look, this exists". And the first time somebody says: "I know, it exists", we win! Just to recognize it exists is better than not existing at all.

You've chosen great actors like Ran Danker who is a very famous actor and singer in Israel... and Zohar Strauss.

Working with both of them was great. Their acceptance of such a risk was more than generous. They broke a religious taboo. They put themselves into the characters. They are part of the power of the film. Zohar is modest and gentle with something dark about him. The camera loves Ran. He has true intuition as an actor. He, like Ezri, is free of inhibitions.



HAIM TABAKMAN

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1975, Haim Tabakman studied Cinema and Television at the University of Tel Aviv. His first short film, *Free Loaders*, was selected in 2003 by the Cannes Film Festival (Cinefondation), as well as by the Karlovi Vary and Montpellier film festivals. In 2004, another of his short films, *The Poet's Home*, was amongst the Cinefondation's film selection at the Cannes Film Festival. Tabakman has also edited several films, including *My Father, My Lord* by David Volach. *Eyes Wide Open* is his first full-length feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

As a director

2006 *Year Zero Diaries* - 30' documentary

2004 *The Poet's Home* - 10' fiction

2003 *Free Loaders* - 15' fiction

As an editor

2007 *My father, my lord* - 90' feature

2006 *Year Zero Diaries* - 30' documentary

Weekly Bible - TV drama series

2005 *Yad Va Shem* - 5 short films for the Holocaust Museum

As a cinematographer

2004 *Collaborators* - 50' documentary

CAST

Aaron - Zohar Strauss

Ezri - Ran Danker

Rivka - Tinkerbelle Ravit Rozen

Rabbi Vaisben - Tzahi Grad

Mordechai - Isaac Sharry

Israël - Avi Grayinik

Sara - Eva Zrihen-Attali

ZOHAR STRAUSS can also currently be seen in *Lebanon*, he was awarded best supporting actor for this role by the Israeli Film Academy in 2009, at the same awards he was crowned best actor for *Eyes Wide Open*. His other film credits include *Walls*, *Jellyfish*, and *Things Behind the Sun*. TV credits include 'Hayley Keley' and 'Ima'lle'.

RAN DANKER was born in 1984 in Norfolk, Virginia, in the United States. In 1986, he moved to Israel with his mother, who raised him in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv. After starring in commercials Ran studied acting and shortly after graduating starred in YES Television's hit musical drama series, *Our Song*, for its four-season run. Ran won the *Golden Screen* award for best actor for his work on the show. He also appeared as the title character in the two TV series' of Danny Hollywood. Danker turned towards music for the first time whilst working on the stage in productions including *Festigal* and *The Sound of Music*. He was the Hebrew voice of the lead character in Disney's *Chicken Little* and *Arthur and the Minimoys*. Other film roles include *Restless & Kalevet*. In 2007 Danker released his debut album with the musician Elai Botner, the album was a big success, many of the singles got in the top 10 and they were voted best group of the year. Danker is currently working on his second album.

TINKERBELL RAVIT ROZEN is a well known face in Israeli cinema, her credits include *Comrade*, *The Gospel According to God*, *Giraffes*, *Time of Favour* (for which she won best actress at the Israeli Film Academy awards) and *Total Love*. Her TV credits include 'Tropic of Venus'.

CREDITS

Directed by Haim Tabakman
Produced by Rafael Katz
Michael Eckelt, Isabelle Attal, David C. Barrot
Original Story and Screenplay by Merav Doster
Director of Photography Axel Schnepat
Editor Dov Steuer
Music Composer Nathaniel Mechaly
Art Director Avi Fahima
Costume Designer Yam Brusilovsky
Sound Design Gil Toren
Line Producers Itai Tamir, Christian Vennefrohne
Casting by Yael Aviv



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