

BATIM

Houses

Director Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum

Israel, Germany | 2025
98 min. | Hebrew, Russian with English subtitles

Screenplay Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum. **Cinematography** Yaniv Linton. **Editing** Avishai Sivan. **Music** Rike Huy. **Sound Design** Rotem Dror. **Production Design** Sharon Isabella De Levi. **Costumes** Aya Zaiger. **Make-Up** Inbal Zorer. **Producers** Elad Gavish, Adi Navon, Anatol Schuster, Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum. **Co-Producer** Ronen Ben Tal. **Production companies** Marker Films (Tel Aviv, Israel), Bona Productions (Tel Aviv, Israel). **With** Yael Eisenberg, Tali Sharon, Evgenia Dodina.

Synopsis

Sasha is young, non-binary, creative and has seemingly left their experience of migration and childhood trauma behind them. Yet in order to really become liberated from the ghosts of the past, they must face up to them on a transformative journey that leads through the ghostly house of an overcast, desolate Safed. Believed dead, the family dog Rem suddenly appears out of nowhere, becoming a loyal companion and a silent witness of their longing for belonging and healing. Forgotten history meets repressed memories, old video and diary recordings reveal scars that could come become open wounds at any moment. In their former parental home, queer artist Anna offers the traveller temporary shelter, warmth and support. Enchanted by Anna's approach to life, it briefly seems possible for Sasha to find a home by creating a new narrative for their identity. With a radiant, sensitive Yael Eisenberg in the leading role, a way of staging corporeality with filigree precision and a poetic visual language that sticks to black and white, Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum's enigmatic, contemplative feature debut tells the story of someone looking for themselves in a life marked by upheaval and hurt. (Irina Bondas)

Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum is a filmmaker, photographer and actress. Born in Ukraine in 1984, she immigrated to Israel in 1990. A graduate of the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in New York and the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem, her short film CONFESSIO won the Short Independent Film prize at the Cinema South Festival in 2019. She acted in films like KEDMA by Amos Gitai and ANDANTE by Assaf Tager. Her photography, exploring identity and memory, has been showcased in exhibitions, including Waiting at the Nolobz Art Gallery in Tel Aviv in 2019. HOUSES is Tetelbaum's debut feature film.

Films: 2012: Mi At / Who Are You (short film). 2014: Dag Ba-Maim / Water Fish (short film). 2015: Kol Yom / Every Day (short film). 2017: Vidui / Confession (short film). 2025: Batim / Houses.

Director's Statement

A Journey of Self-Discovery

"The urge to share my memories has evolved"

The film **HOUSES** deals with our search for a true home inside us. It follows Sasha, a young woman who looks and feels more comfortable as a man, as he sets out on a journey of self-discovery, while grappling with his traumatic childhood memories of growing up in Safed.

After emigrating to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the early '90s, my family set-tled in Safed, the city that now lies at the center of the film. We moved houses three times while living there.

Over the years, the urge to share my memories from this time has evolved. The experience of a rootless 6-year-old girl, the child of immigrants, not speaking the local language, in a family that is busy building a life in a new country. These circumstances have formed me to become a person who, for most of my life, has looked back in an attempt to shed light on my formative memories.

Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum

Interview

The Experience of Constant Change

Veronika Nicole Tetelbaum speaks to Barbara Wurm and Irina Bondas about memory, gender fluidity and the experience of Soviet immigrants in Israel

Barbara Wurm: Welcome to Forum, Veronica. There are many layers of time in your debut feature film BATIM. How long was the process of creating this film?

Veronica Nicole Tetelbaum: Yes, in this film there are a lot of layers of time, like in life itself. I tried to create the mindset of Sasha, a character who moves between the past and the present, reality and imagination, blurring what we're used to calling linear time. Making this film was a very complex experience. It took me nine years to make it, if you start counting from the first draft until the beginning of filming, and that's because of the difficulty in getting funding. But in the end, it was made in 17 days, including the reshoots, on the one hand – and on the other hand, it took shape all throughout my life until the moment I declared it ready, a few months ago.

BW: Is it an autobiographical film?

VNT: I would say that this is a film that lies somewhere between fiction and autobiography, yes.

BW: So, you first decided to move from documentary to fiction and then to broaden the perspective from your biography to others?

VNT: Whenever I create, I always create from my own personal perspective, from my life experience, and from some emotion I want to express or explore. But then something happens to it—suddenly, as I'm writing, images start to form, and when they meet with other images, they change, and then it develops into places you didn't expect. In a way, it was like that with BATIM, too. The film is very personal, but there are a lot of encounters and elements that formed on their own to serve the protagonist's journey.

Irina Bondas: Safed, where your film is located, has a very special aura. And the way you are showing it is very special. From what you were saying, your starting point was autobiographical. In terms of the location and the story: how much was already there and how much did it evolve because the place and the houses demanded it? How did you develop the material?

VNT: Safed, or Tzfat as it's also called, was the first city we arrived at when I immigrated from the Soviet Union to Israel, and it plays a very special role in shaping the character and the visual language of the film. It's a city considered a holy city in Israel, along with Jerusalem and Tiberias—very old, with layers of history. On the one hand, seems to have stood still, and on the other hand, it's constantly changing and very eclectic. In the '90s, a lot of new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia were settled there, alongside a population that was becoming more religious. I tried to create these layers in the film by using the landscapes where I placed the camera, and through the feeling of alienation that exists from the contrast between Sasha and her environment.

IB: Did the plot change significantly since you wrote it in 2016?

VNT: Not really. I mean, there were a lot of elements that were cut, like Bambi, for example. At one point, there was supposed to be a Bambi in the film—that's actually how the film started. Sasha arrives in Tzfat on a steep, winding road and finds an injured deer by the side of the road. But of course, we couldn't film anything like that in the end, due to the low budget. As for Sasha's journey—her journey to her past, the moving between houses, and confronting her fears to try to free herself from them—that was always there, pretty much the same, from the first draft.

BW: I would like to address the gender identity or the definition of Sasha, because it's a major topic of the film. Sasha speaks about childhood referring to themselves as a boy, but in the video they are addressed as a girl. You refer to a non-binary identity and also speak of Sasha as she - there is this oscillation between the non-binary, the male identification and also the denial of the assigned female identity of the past. When we watched the film, it was not an issue that there is this oscillation. But as soon as we speak about it, it somehow pops up. So on another level, how important is it to have a fixed identity? Or who is actually in the position to define it? Would you say it's Sasha, your protagonist, or is it you? Where do you locate the gender identity aspect in your film?

VNT: Yes, Sasha is a non-binary character, meaning they don't want to define themselves in just one way, because they don't fully identify with one gender or another. They feel more comfortable being in between, their identity is fluid. And I think this is necessarily connected to them being an immigrant and their trauma. Sasha, in my eyes, is more of a being than a man or a woman. And yes, they try in some way to be the opposite in front of others, especially in front of those connected to their trauma.

IB: There are different interpretations of their identity as a non-binary person. Is it also a story about a transition, a journey where there is an identity that Sasha arrives at? I think it is also key question for the entire film. Would you say there is a goal, an arrival or does everything stay in-between?

VNT: Sasha is a character who experiences constant change, and he's probably been experiencing it for as long as he can remember, long before he even thought about what sexual identity means. I think for him, it's more of a mental state, a mindset, not an ideology. He's an immigrant who's lived in countless houses, cities, schools, he's between languages, between cultures... Therefore, I think the „goal“ of the film or this journey isn't necessarily finding his identity, but more about finding a home. Sasha goes on this journey to find his inner home. Does he succeed? Maybe...

BW: The film shows so much of what you described, being alone but not lonely or being lonely even, but not necessarily in a bad way. I'm surprised when, given the plot twist, you are also linking it to a traumatic past. It is also defining Sasha's relation to their physicality and sexuality. The film is very intimate and it is led by a great actress, Yael Eisenberg, who gives an astonishing performance. Her face, the way she looks and moves – it fits perfectly for what you tell us about this character. Was it a natural liaison?

VNT: Yes, Sasha moves around alone, he's kind of on his own in that sense, there's a strong core despite everything. He doesn't suffer from loneliness, in fact, I think it's much easier for him to be alone than to be with others. And that's definitely related to the trauma. And Yael Eisenberg, the actress who played Sasha, she absorbed the character so deeply over the years that you couldn't tell them apart anymore. Yael and I have known each other for many years, we first worked together on my film WATER FISH [2014, ed.], and since then, I've filmed her in everything I've done. The connection with her is subconscious; her face is an image in itself; somehow, she knows how to express all my intentions and even enhance them. When working with her, all I need to do is create the atmosphere and guide her in it. Most of the direction is about actions and rhythm here and there, but more than anything, when working with her, it's about guiding myself to give her the space to surprise me.

IB: You were saying the actresses had some space to explore. Did they improvise? Did you discuss the characters, did they also provide ideas?

VNT: It's not exactly improvisation—no, everything was written—but within that, there are nuances of emotional discoveries that affect the atmosphere within the space and what is ultimately felt in the scene. Of course, we talked about the characters and their story, both separately and together, but what's important is being able to get on a certain frequency. It's something unspoken. It's something related to the balance between the characters, the space, and the relationship to the camera.

BW: It is good we talked about this self-chosen, or inflicted identity. I think the film treats gender fluidity in a very open, authentic way, it leaves space for options. Sasha opposes certain people, whereas others become close friends or beloved ones, and there is an openness, where definitions don't matter because it's just about two beings that are connected. But my question now concerns the remarkable atmosphere you create by the beautiful black and white shots, special lighting and frame composition.

VNT: Thank you very much. I chose to shoot in black and white because I wanted to recreate the memory images from Sasha's childhood and how they saw it and experienced it. That's the reason for the foggy lighting and the static camera. I wanted to create something that seems like landscape postcards from their past that they enter. And the combination with the footage from the VHS camera highlights the gap between how they experienced reality and how it actually was.

IB: And when did you decide to add the VHS footage, the home videos? Is it original footage or did you reshoot it?

VNT: The script was written with that footage in mind, which I wrote and recreated in the shots with the actors on location.

IB: Was there a gap between your memories and the old home videos? You were saying that you tried to recreate Safed in black and white, the way you remember it as a child. It must look different now.

VNT: Actually, not much. Safed looks the same, just more neglected now than it used to be.

BW: Are there more examples that show the immigrant core of this everyday life, from your experience or in Israeli cinema, in communities that are similar to yours or close to yours?

VNT: Only now, 30-35 years after the big immigration from the Soviet Union to Israel, has my generation started talking about it. Recently, there have been a few series and some documentaries made on the topic in Israel.

BW: Why do you think that conversation starts only now? Is it because the previous generation tried to just assimilate or denied it even, or was shy about it, or ashamed?

The previous generation was mostly focused on survival.

VNT: Yes, I think the previous generation was mostly focused on survival, and not many of them were artists who succeeded or even tried to step onto the Israeli stage.

IB: Maybe also because they had to quit art in Israel to work for money?

VNT: Of course.

IB: Especially towards the end, Sasha's origin becomes an issue, because throughout the film you don't see many traces of it. Only in the videos. It's another aspect of their trauma or of their identity. How much space does it take up, because you couldn't tell from his behavior? Also, Yael doesn't share this identity, nor do the other actors. Is there something they cannot understand, that you need to explain? Or is it universal for you, despite the fact that it's a very particular community?

VNT: I think Yael really understands Sasha's fluid identity, as well as the other actresses on set. Even the actress who played the grandmother, Nadiегда Tichonova, didn't have any questions about it, unless maybe she was embarrassed... In the Israeli artistic community and bohemia, of course, there's no need for an explanation – but definitely, the people living in Safed or in the periphery in general, they probably won't view Sasha in a positive light. Unfortunately.

BW: You have described the relationship between Sasha and the mother as symbiosis, but I noticed also something close to abuse.

VNT: The relationship between Sasha and his mother is very complicated, and in a way, it's also quite symbiotic. The mother struggles to separate herself from Sasha, still seeing him as inseparable from her. To her, he's still that 5-year-old child she's taking care of. I think that's also where her inability to let him live his life comes from, and where the suppression of everything that happened to him and everything he is, stems from. She truly believes it when she tells him, "No one hit you, what are you talking about?" But yes, of course, this also borders on violent behavior, you could call it that, completely ignoring Sasha's need for her recognition.

IB: One final question. Coming back to Sasha: after going back, meeting with their mother and meeting Anna, is there a healing or is there potential hope for healing? What would you say?

VNT: Potential hope, I guess. Anna represents hope and the possibility of love, of belonging, of home.

BW: It's a very hopeful ending, Throughout the film, I had the feeling that Sasha, even given the traumas and the cutoffs or the disintegration, is a lovable person. I never lost hope. It's a very warm film, even if it's winter and black and white and empty houses. So you've achieved something by this presence of life and warmth and authenticity and honesty. It's a great debut, and it's a wonderful voice that you bring into the world of cinema.