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Ben Zaken

בן זקן

Efrat Corem

Producer Itai Tamir. **Production company** Laila Films (Tel Aviv, Israel). **Director** Efrat Corem. **Screenplay** Efrat Corem. **Director of photography** Shafir Sarussi. **Production design** Ben Shalom Davidi. **Costume** Yam Brusilovsky. **Make-up** Ana Paris. **Sound** Michael Goorevitch. **Sound design** Michael Goorevitch. **Editor** Nisim Massas, Lev Goltser.

Cast Eliraz Sade (Shlomi), Rom Shoshan (Ruhi), Mekikes (Ronen), Amar (Leon), Chani Elemlch (Dina), Batel Mashian (Riki), Robby Elmaliah (Yair), David Ben Hamo (Rabbi).

DCP, colour. 90 min. Hebrew.

Premiere 8 June 2014, Cinema South Film Festival Sderot, Israel. **World sales** Patra Spanou Film Marketing & Consulting

The Ben Zaken family lives in the small Israeli city of Ashkelon on a run-down housing estate. The family is made up of single father Shlomi with his eleven-year-old daughter Ruhi, his brother Leon and the mother of the two brothers. Their living situation is somewhat precarious. The austere apartment is cramped and everyone's nerves are pretty frayed. Social services has its eye on the motherless Ruhi, who is bullied in school and is not an easy child.

Efrat Corem's remarkable debut film is a sensitive portrait of an environment marked by stagnation and a lack of economic and emotional resources. The film tells its story in calm scenes that are empathetic while still retaining a degree of distance. They often consist of single shots, which are less about putting bleakness on display than posing the question of what family is. Is a shared name and a shared roof over your head enough to define a family, or is it more about having feelings of altruistic responsibility for each other? Over the course of the film, Ruhi's father is forced to find a very concrete answer to this general question and to find what his role as a father is supposed to be.

Anna Hoffmann

On the outskirts of Israeli society

The Ben Zaken family interests and moves me because they have a unique survival mode and specific life codes that belong to an invisible world on the outskirts of Israeli society and culture. The people who live on these fringes are supposedly weak, or as people tend to say, weakened, but when it comes to the Ben Zaken family, these definitions are invalid. This family does not measure itself against anything or anyone else.

The camera in *Ben Zaken* functions as a witness; my intent was to keep the characters from conducting themselves in front of it. I wanted to give them the freedom to move, though in terms of narrative, they are never really free.

Life according to the Ben Zaken family is a cruel and harsh journey in which there are neither shortcuts nor solace. The only comfort comes from the knowledge of the shared fate they all have. In that sense, Shlomi rebels against his natural instincts to preserve the order of things as they always were by trying to break the cycle for his daughter's sake. For that reason he is my hero.

Corem Efrat

The misery of a single father

"This is the kind of film that expects its viewers to have the patience to listen and watch, even if they don't agree with what they see on the screen," says Efrat Corem, writer-director of *Ben Zaken*, one of the first two films to come out of Sapir College, in the south of the country and very close to the Gaza Strip.

For the last five years, Corem was artistic director of Festival Darom (Cinema South Film Festival), an event organized by her alma mater and Sderot Cinematheque for the benefit of a population deprived of the film luxuries that abound in cities such as Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa.

Cannes screened Corem's first film, *Your Younger Daughter Rachel*, in 2007, but embarking on a feature film was a completely different matter.

"Moving from a graduation short to a full-length feature was a major step, mentally. It took me no less than six years to write the script, and once I met my producer, Itai Tamir, I needed yet another year to organize the pre-production, cast the picture and shoot it, though that was the shortest process of them all – only 16 days." The funds to complete the film, \$335,000, came from several sources. "Israel Film Fund was one of them, the Gesher Fund whose purpose is to encourage productions in the peripheries, added their contribution and even Festival Darom and my school, Sapir College, pitched in with a grant, which was very encouraging," Corem says. Last year, she won another grant at Jerusalem Film Festival's Pitch Point, which allowed her to move into the actual production. The entire story takes place in one of the more deprived corners of her hometown, Ashkelon, next door to Sderot. It is her very personal universe. "The elementary school you see is the one I went to; everything around there is painfully familiar to me," she says. The plot follows the relationship between a middle-aged single father and his eleven-year-old daughter, and their respective attempts to break out of their circle of misery, just like all their neighbours.

"There is nothing heroic about the main character, barely making a living as a night guardian and still living with his own mother, at a loss to assume his responsibility as a parent," she says. "Only

when he is separated from his daughter does he really become a father in the true sense of the word."

The entire cast consists of non-actors and her main goal was to make it all look almost, but not quite, a documentary, certainly different from any other film of this kind. Her minimalist approach means each scene consists of only one shot.

As for the future, Corem has no intention of moving out of Ashkelon. "This is my world and I want to go on exploring it."

Edna Fainaru, Screen Daily, 17 July 2014



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Efrat Corem was born in 1979 in Ashkelon, southern Israel, where she also grew up. She studied cinema and television at Sapir College in Sha'ar HaNegev. In 2006, she made her thesis project film, *Berachel bitha haktana / Your Younger Daughter Rachel* (34 min.). Since 2009, Efrat Corem has been the artistic director of the Cinema South Film Festival in Sderot, for which she also heads the Israeli cinema section. *Ben Zaken* is her first full-length feature film.