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Menashe

Joshua Z Weinstein

Producer Alex Lipschultz, Traci Carlson, Joshua Z Weinstein, Danny Finkelman, Yoni Brook. **Production companies** Shtick Film (New York, USA), Maiden Voyage (San Francisco, USA), Where's Eve (New York, USA), Sparks Productions (New York, USA), Autumn Productions (Toronto, Canada), Green Productions (Tel Aviv, Israel). **Director** Joshua Z Weinstein. **Screenplay** Joshua Z Weinstein, Alex Lipschultz, Musa Syeed. **Director of photography** Yoni Brook, Joshua Z Weinstein. **Editor** Scott Cummings. **Music** Dag Rosenkvist, Aaron Martin. **With** Menashe Lustig (Menashe), Ruben Niborski (Rieven).

Colour. 81 min. Yiddish, English.

Premiere January 23, 2017, Sundance Film Festival

World sales Mongrel International

Religion and tradition continue to determine everyday life in the Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood of Borough Park, Brooklyn. The eponymous hero's appearance alone makes him stand out. His ten-year-old son Rieven asks why he doesn't wear the same tall black hat and black coat as the other men. And Menashe even tucks his side locks behind his ears so they're hardly visible. The young widower keeps straying from the designated path. The community wants him to remarry as fast as possible. But he can't imagine a future with another woman and snubs all the prospective brides sent his way. Since he doesn't earn enough money and is unable to run his household on his own, an uncle decides to take over the job of raising Menashe's son. Our awkward hero comes off like an orthodox version of a typical Woody Allen character or an unorthodox rendering of the biblical Job. Menashe develops his own worldly wisdoms, yet keeps attracting misfortune. Both the film's drama and its humour emerge from precisely observed details of the strict rules governing Hasidic life. Failing to properly prepare the traditional kugel can thus end in true catastrophe.

Anke Leweke

“Many of the actors had never seen a film before”

What was the initial inspiration in making this film?

Joshua Z Weinstein: I was drawn to this story as way of better understanding my ancestors and myself. I grew up as a liberal Jew in the suburbs of New York. My great-grandparents came from the shtetls of Poland, landed in Brooklyn and from there, the family pretty much stayed put. That said, I have always been fascinated by Hasidic Jews. I feel as though we share a kinship, yet it is one that is rooted in a certain lack of understanding due to things that can easily be lost in translation. Hasidic life in Borough Park has many similarities to how my great-grandparents lived outside Warsaw. The film allowed me to share in the humanity and warmth of the community and develop a better thread of understanding that ultimately goes in both directions.

Did you write the film with Menashe Lustig in mind?

Menashe is a great friend and an even better actor. I remember the first time driving up to meet him in New Square, a town twenty-seven miles north of the George Washington Bridge, which is made up exclusively of Skver Hassids. It is also one of the poorest municipalities in the United States and is connected by a single road leading in and out. Entering a town completely populated by Hasidic Jews makes you feel transported back to the ghettos of Poland. On my first casting trip to this town, I remember having Menashe improv for us, and couldn't believe the ferociousness, humanity, vulnerability, and comedic timing he possessed. Many elements of his character in the film are also based on Menashe's own life. Menashe is actually a widower grocer whose son lives a few blocks away in a foster home. Bringing his life experience to the forefront made his performance incredibly raw, allowing life to imitate art and vice versa. Menashe sometimes told me how confusing the entire experience was for him, yet ultimately he was incredibly happy to be able to express himself in an artistic way.

Given the somewhat closed-off nature of the Hasidic community, did you have trouble populating the supporting cast?

Authenticity was our central priority in making the film. One of the ways we were able to get access to the community was through our producer, Danny Finkelman, who is himself a Hasidic Jew. He was not only a key gatekeeper but also served as part of a team of advisors who made sure that the all aspects of the film were honest and genuine representations of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism.

Casting was a lot of fun, but it was certainly an atypical experience overall. This was not the kind of situation where we could simply call a casting agent or post information on the Internet and expect the type of actors we needed to show up.

Ninety-nine per cent of the Hasidic men refused to be in the movie, and the point-zero-one per cent who could act were not easy to find. As such, it was very much like a game of telephone tag where my phone number was distributed within the Ultra-Orthodox world, resulting in some of the strangest phone calls I have ever received. Eventually we were able to pull together an incredible group of performers and subtly tweaked the roles around their strengths and personalities.

The ultra-conservative Hasidic community has rarely been depicted in film. Why do you think this is an important addition to their depiction in the larger entertainment landscape?

The community is usually depicted according to the views of outsiders and frequently appears cold and generally without joy. Yet the Hasidic culture that I have experienced is one that is funny, beautiful, and deeply spiritual. While I was researching the film I would walk the streets of Borough Park and have frank conversations with the people I encountered, many of whom were wonderful and exceedingly curious about the outside world. My goal with the film was to humanise these people to an audience of outsiders and share moments of their everyday lives that are rarely seen.

Were some of the actors hesitant to put so much of their own personal lives on screen?

Many of the actors took a huge risk in being involved with in this film, as most religious leaders in the community are firmly against outside media. Smartphones, Internet, and radio are banned in most Hasidic homes as well as modern music and books. So yes, there was a certain amount of hesitance involved.

What other influences did you draw on in writing and directing the film?

Even though this is a film set in the Ultra-Orthodox world, the bond between a parent and child is a theme that is universal. Some of my favourite films that examine that relationship and helped inspire the film include: *The Bicycle Thief*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, and *The Kid With a Bike*. I also love the depictions of New York in cinema, particularly those of William Friedkin, Morris Engel, Andrew Dosunmu, and John Cassavetes.

What was the energy and environment like on set?

Many of the actors in the film had never seen a film before at all, which presented an interesting set of challenges on set. As a result of that, I tried to help them forget that the camera was there in order to keep them focussed on their performances. We often shot from a block away with 400mm lenses in order to keep the actors firmly planted within the real world. We also had a translator on set who would let us know if they were straying too far from the script. All in all, everything about this film was crafted around the performances themselves. My goal was not to have the actors worried about hitting their marks or remembering lines verbatim, yet rather to allow them to remain in the moment and deliver honest performances overall.

How long was the shoot and where did you film?

Authenticity was the guiding principle for the film. I wanted to shoot in Borough Park, on the streets, in the synagogues, restaurants, and apartments where the real Hasidim live. Although capturing all these locations was extremely difficult, the film shines because you can almost smell and taste the legitimacy of the location.

We filmed a few times over a one-year period. There were two shoots that spanned two weeks each along with several one-off days. In fact, one of the biggest difficulties involved with shooting was making sure that everyone's beards remained the same length for continuity.

Interview: Shtick Film

About Menashe Lustig

In 2006, Menashe became the first Hasidic Jew to put a video on YouTube and now has appeared in more than three dozen videos. He is from New Square, New York and a very devout follower of Rabbi Twersky, The Grand Rabbi of the Skver Hasidic Movement. Menashe lived in London for seven years. After his wife passed away, he returned to New Square to work as a grocer. The film is, in large part, based on his true-life story.



Joshua Z Weinstein was born in 1983 in New York City. He studied film at Boston University from 2001 until 2005. In addition to directing his own films, he also works as a director of photography. Following three documentaries, *Menashe* is his first full-length feature film.

Films

2008: *Flying On One Engine* (51 min.). 2012: *Drivers Wanted* (54 min.), *I Beat Mike Tyson* (13 min.). 2017: *Menashe*.