

## arts



Falashas (Ethiopian Jews) are the subject of *Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews*, currently at the Cineplex.

## They won't win friends

### Documentary sheds light on Ethiopian Jews

By JASON SHERMAN

"Personally I got involved in it by being a journalist, a Jew, an Israeli, and a Zionist. I believe in the right of the Jewish people to lead a free and sovereign life in the state of Israel. To my mind not helping these people was a slander undermining everything Israel was standing for."

These are the words of Simcha Jacobovici, the moving force behind the documentary *Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews*. Jacobovici co-produced, codeveloped, wrote, and directed the film, now playing to unexpectedly large audiences at the Carlton Cinemas.

It is an exposé with a twofold purpose: to make the public aware of the Ethiopian Jews (Falashas) and to depict the bureaucratic political, political, and social entanglements that keep them from reaching their goal—to live in Israel.

Ethiopian Jews are amongst the oldest surviving members of the Diaspora (the Jewish community outside Israel). They live in isolated villages, practicing in strict observance the laws of the Torah. Paradoxically it is this strict observance which has led Israel to demand "symbolic conversion" of Ethiopian Jews who make it to the Promised Land.

Jacobovici explained just how symbolic the circumcision is: "They take a drop of blood from the guy's penis. Now, when you're 64 years old, you've lived all your life as a Jewish person and you pull your pants down and they take a drop of blood symbolically—when half your family was killed because they're Jews—it's pretty demeaning."

Even this outrage might be overlooked if it were all that were necessary to get the Falashas to Israel. But it is only the last step. In fact, of an estimated 20,000 Ethiopian Jews, only some 2,000 have made it to Israel. The Israeli secret police, Mossad, are apparently working on secret deals to save the Falasha.

Jacobovici was warned not to make the film lest he upset such plans. The Sudan government, he was told, did not even realize they had some 2,000 Jews in their refugee

camp. When Jacobovici interviewed two officials in Khartoum he was nonchalantly told that "yes, we know they're there and they're free to go."

Such blatant contradictions might make the film seem a condemnation of Israelis' pacific attitude. Not so, says Jacobovici. He doesn't see it "as an anti-Israel film. I see it as critical of the government but very pro-Israel, because, in fact, it demands of it to live up to its own standards."

"Because most of my extended family was killed during the Holocaust, I also think that if after the Holocaust we allow these kinds of things to happen again, then we are not only committing an injustice against the people who are dying but against the people who already died during the Holocaust. It would prove that we learned nothing."

Falasha means "stranger" or "one who does not own land" in the language of the Christian Amhara Kings who subdued their bid for independence in the 17th century. This defeat made the 500,000-strong community second-class citizens with neither land nor religious rights.

**"They're black, they're Jewish, they're Zionists, and they're Third World"**

To this day little has changed. Although the present Marxist government of Ethiopia, under the control of President Mengistu, has instituted land reforms, the peasants' associations simply refuse to give land to the "evileyed" Falashas.

Furthermore, the Jews are concentrated in Gondar Province, governed by "an Idi Amin-type character" named Melaku Teffera. He has padlocked synagogues, sold thousands into slavery, practiced cultural assimilation and tortured those who try to emigrate. The film does not dwell long on the Melaku problem. It chooses not to win sympathy with repeated accounts of torture.

Ethiopian power-tripping and Israeli politicking are but two obstacles facing the Falashas. Other reasons came to Jacobovici one by

one like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. He wanted the film to dramatize not only the plight of the Falashas, but the difficulties involved in getting some answers.

The viewer, then, is taken from Canada and the United States to Ethiopia (where some powerful footage was shot and where the film was almost confiscated), to the Sudanese refugee camps and to Israel (where again the film was almost taken—neither of the governments directly involved wanted this documentary to be made).

What the viewer sees is a virtual parade of talking heads explaining why their organization, their people, their government *can't* help the Falashas. And this, really, is the major problem. As the president of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews says in the film: "They're black, they're Jews, they're Zionists, and they're Third World. All those things mixed into one person doesn't win you any friends."

Jacobovici, however, wants to avoid any labeling. "It's not just a Jewish story. It's a universal story. Any time you study prejudice it has universal implications, but especially these people who pay the price of not fitting any stereotype."

The Falashas endure for one reason, one aim: to live in Zion. Acknowledging the difficulties and the politics, Simcha Jacobovici has hope. He offers solutions so simple and so realistic that it seems impossible they haven't been used. The Sudanese refugees need only to be sponsored by a nation that has diplomatic relations with Sudan. They would then be free to go to Israel.

The Ethiopian Jews are an embarrassment to Mengistu. He is trying to portray a new image. He needs Western money. For those who doubt Ethiopia's newfound sensitivity to world opinion, let them know that the film has already caused Gondar's synagogues to be unchained and 800 lives saved. Thousands of non-Jews reach Israel on pilgrimages every year. Mengistu would likely be open to such a program for the Falashas.

It is not, then, unrealistic to suppose that the Falashas can be saved. Said Jacobovici, "The film and public pressure and the knowledge will create a momentum for them. And if there is a momentum in the Jewish community generally and Israel specifically, then they will be saved."

## Sisters in love in the house

By STEPHANIE-LYN GROSS

*My Sister in the House*, a melodrama about two sisters in love, was produced first time in Canada at the Poor Alex Theatre last Saturday night.

Written by Wendy Kesselman in 1981, *My Sister in the House* was inspired by an actual murder committed by the Paplin sisters in Provincial France.

The two sisters, Christine, played by M.J. Buell and Lea, played by Roberta Weiss, were taken from convents at an early age and put to work as domestics by their mother, the girls' only living relative. Though we never meet the mother, it is understood that she forced the girls to work so that she could take the money they earned.

For years the sisters worked apart, communicating only by letters until Christine arranged a job where they could both work as servants in the Danzard residence. Madame Danzard, living only with her daughter Isabelle, was ecstatic to have "two girls for the price of one." The Madame is socially conscious and competes not just with her friends, but with her daughter as well.

The relationships in the play, that is, mother-daughter and sister with sister, make for excellent parallels that provide insight into the author's message. The pervading moods in the play are those of guilt and repression. Christine and Lea develop a close relationship that becomes sexual. Madame Danzard and her daughter do not suspect the nature of the sisters' relationship until they slip up with the housework.

The sisters are sympathetic because they are alone and do not possess enough money to live independently. They are repressed by their class status as well as their sexual love for each other. They are constantly on guard to protect their livelihood.

Isabelle is repressed in a similar way by her mother who never lets her out alone and forces her to dress the way she wants. Isabelle is obviously frustrated sexually, blaming her mother's overprotectiveness for her lack of popularity.

Madame Danzard is the source of guilt in the play. She represents the Puritan ideals that characterize the early 1900's (still present today). To Madame Danzard, everything must be socially correct as she is obsessed with "keeping up with the Joneses." She tells all her friends that Isabelle is engaged, even though she isn't, and she is picky, picky, picky, about housecleaning. A ritual of hers is to call Christine and Lea in the living room while she performs the white glove test. And she never misses a crack or a corner.

Subtle presentations of guilt are the most clever devices in *My Sister in the House*. In one instance, Madame Danzard and Isabelle are engaged in a cut-throat game of double solitaire. Isabelle throws a card under the table and soon after, is violently accused of "cheating" by her mother. Another example is that whenever Isabelle is in the living room alone, she guiltily sneaks a candy, making sure that her mother does not witness her indulgences. The fact that the accuser is always Madame Danzard is no coincidence.

There were only minor problems with the presentation of *My Sister in the House*. The youngest sister Lea, was often too sweet and timid which made her performance alienating rather than engaging. The pace was a little slow but the emotional peaks made up for this. The set was furnished warmly but may have been better with a colder and more sterile atmosphere to emphasize tension and repression, two integral mood-plays in the script.

*My Sister in the House* is definitely worth a go. Its contemporary meaningfulness cannot be undermined. The guilt placed on the sisters for their "sinful and ugly" relationship is still an attitude taken towards homosexuals (related or not). And Madame Danzard, with her social bourgeoisie trimmings is alive and well today. The script itself is carefully intertwined with parallels that elude to the plays underlying and not so underlying messages.

Mercury Theater will be presenting *My Sister in the House* Tuesday to Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$5 or \$3.50 for students. The Poor Alex is at 296 Brunswick Avenue.

## Chilling

Below is a list of songs. Next to this list is a list of artists. Match the first to the second and if you're free today, come on down to X-cal (111 Central Square, around the corner from the CYSF and the typing service), and you'll have yourself a free double pass for *The Big Chill* (starring William Hurt and Mary Kay Place. Simple.

"Ain't Too Proud to Beg"	The Young Rascals
"I Second That Emotion"	Procul Harum
"Natural Woman"	Marvin Gaye
"A Whiter Shade of Pale"	Aretha Franklin
"Good Lovin'"	Smokey Robinson & The Miracles
"I Heard It Through the Grapevine"	The Temptations

(offer limited while supplies last)