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Sephardic Film Festival: From Spanish Expulsion to Vidal Sassoon

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(March 12, 2011) New York's annual Sephardic Film Festival is always a tasty treat. First and foremost, it provides us with a cinematic kaleidoscope of the destinies of the descendants of those hundreds of thousands of Spanish Jews expelled from Iberia by the 15th century Inquisition. Refusing to be forcibly converted to Catholicism, these faithful sons and daughters of Israel left their homes in Spain to seek shelter from persecution (and certain death) in lands that stretched from Morocco to Afghanistan. Then over 600 years they managed to build a culture of their own, with Judeo languages and traditions of their own - always remaining Jews.

But the Sephardic Film Festival, now celebrating its 15th year, also takes us on a journey to other exotic lands where Jews - who while not always technically Sephardic (from the Hebrew word for Spain: Sepharad) - also survived with a fortitude that enabled them to hold firmly to their roots and faith.

This year is no different. In addition to stories of Sephardic Jewish life in Algeria, France, Israel, Iraq, Morocco, etc. there are documentaries and feature films about Jewish life in Ethiopia, in India, and even about a tiny community in Cuba which while partially Sephardic (the families of Turkish-born tobacco growers) is largely Ashkenazi (of European origin). Now a mere shadow of the 25,000 Jews who fled Cuba with the arrival of Fidel Castro, 1,500 Jews have managed to survive more than 50 years of socialist rule in a community that now shows rebirth. Their documentary story, by 24-year-old American filmmaker Milos Silber, is entitled, appropriately enough *Jubanos*.

The festival is sponsored by the ***American Sephardi Federation***, with almost all screenings presented in the lovely auditorium at the Center for Jewish History, 15 West 16th Street, New York. Additional screenings will also take place at the Jewish Community Center at 344 Amsterdam Avenue at 76th Street on Manhattan's Upper West-side. Details of the films and information on tickets are available at sephardicfilmfest.org.

Opening this years festival was the NY Premiere of French film-maker Alexandre Arcady's action-packed *Five Brothers*, the Law & Order-like story of a Franco-Algerian family, whose loyalties and honor are challenged by its dark secrets.

The growing Israeli film industry is represented by another family-themed feature film, this time a collaboration between acclaimed actor Moshe Igyv and his daughter Dana, who unite in a film by stage and film director Ron Ninio that examines a troubled father-daughter relationship.

World renowned Franco-Israeli actress Ronit Elkabetz, who won this year's Sephardic Film Festival "Pomegranate Award," is the subject of *A Stranger in Paris*, the documentary story of her life in theater, film and her childhood in a Sephardic family. This year's festival also includes *To Take A Wife*, the passionate tale of a Moroccan woman in Israel who feels trapped in her marriage to her traditional husband Eliahu. This too is a family affair: Elkabetz plays the lead and co-directed this feature with her actor-writer-producer brother, Shlomo Elkabetz.

The fate and future of the Bene Israel, the 4,000-member Jewish community in and around Bombay, is examined in *Next Year in Bombay*, a touching documentary by Jonas Pariente and Mathias Mangin.

And for sheer fun, there is the Festival's festive closing night feature, *Vidal Sassoon, The Movie*, a fast-paced documentary about the life of this British born son of Sephardic parents who went from an impoverished childhood in a London orphanage to the Israeli army and then on to world wide success as the father of modern hairdressing.