

North American Premiere - New Restoration

“BAR MITZVAH”

1935 | USA

Yiddish w/ New English Subtitles



The National
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Jewish Film

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BAR MITZVAH

Review by Richard Brody (Jan 18, 2010)

This schmaltzy, stage-bound, and threadbare Yiddish melodrama, made in New York in 1935 but set in Poland, pays tribute to religious and theatrical traditions while surprisingly bursting their bonds in moments of modernist cinematic inspiration. It's centered on Yudele (Benjamin Schachtman), a boy from a pious and wealthy family who is about to make the Jewish rite of passage, when his long-widowed father, Israel (Boris Thomashevsky), brings home his young new wife (Anita Chayes), a shameless gold-digger. As the plot lurches and twists through a maze of dramatic clichés, it incites vehemently histrionic performances which sometimes creak and sometimes dazzle. An extraordinary dance number by Sam Colton, as an American suitor looking to wow Yudele's nubile sister (Gertrude Bulman), offers Astaire-like flashes of joyful brilliance. And, though Henry Lynn's direction is, for the most part, merely (and barely) functional, it rises, on a few occasions, to astounding and, perhaps, unconscious invention—notably a song performed by Yudele's ghostly double, as well as a stunningly original shot that abandons a moment of high drama in favor of the reaction it arouses. These lightning bolts of cinematic revelation suggest the pliable, accessible modernism of the cinema in even the most constraining of circumstances. (Film Society of Lincoln Center; Jan. 14 & 24.)



Building a Better New York Jewish Film Festival

By Michael Atkinson (Jan 12, 2010)

Jewish film festivals, which take place in virtually every major city in the country (San Francisco was first, 31 years ago), always run the risk of irrelevantly roping in nearly any film with an "oy" in it, even while they've relied, soporifically, on World War II docs and Israeli *Crash* ripoffs. Not this year. In the wake of *Defiance*, *Valkyrie*, et al., the blooming of features based on Holocaust history nudges out the familiar "kak," albeit with erratic results, while a smattering of archivals define what such a festival is really for.

The new discovery and restoration of *Bar-Mitzvah* (1935) should be cause for aficionado celebration—despite it being a deplorable film, no more adept than Oscar Micheaux's early talkies, it is just as fascinating as cultural time travel. A canned melodrama hinging on the old chestnut about a shipwreck victim returning to find her husband remarried—here to a goldbricking vamp—Henry Lynn's movie, the only surviving film of Yiddish theater legend Boris Thomashevsky, is paradigmatic New York ethnic cinema, shot flat as a pancake, recycling old vaudeville routines (dances, Mae West jokes), and acted as if the camera were in the next county. (So? It played for years in Yiddish theaters around the world.) If "Jewish film," and Jewish culture at large, are about legacy, then this is required viewing, an immersion in remembrance of the forefathers.



The 19th New York Jewish Film Festival: Betampte!

By Richard Z. Chesnoff (Jan 13, 2010)

And strictly for fun, there is a restoration by Brandeis University's National Center for Jewish Film of *Bar Mitzvah*, an all but forgotten 1935 Yiddish feature film starring the legendary Boris Thomashevsky. It's a corny, badly made early talkie, but it's a chance to see the one time heartthrob of Second Avenue at work in a photo-play that gives today's audience a *betampte* taste of what a Sunday afternoon was like in the great Yiddish theater of yesteryear. It even features some fabulous Thirties song and dance hoofing!