



THE GREATEST JEWISH FILMS

By Nathan Abrams

Governess is antidote to current crop of Jewish TV shows

NATHAN ABRAMS explores classic Jewish films and characters

WITH all the current shows on British TV about Jews (*Two Jews on a Cruise*, *Strictly Kosher*, *Friday Night Dinner*, *Grandma's House*, *Jewish Mum of the Year*, *Jews at 10*) generating a fuss about whether they're good for us or not, it is timely to consider that oddity – a great British Jewish film.

Arguably the very idea of a good British Jewish film is an oxymoron as there have been so many poor ones (*Suzie Gold* and *The Infidel*, to name just two). But there is one that stands out from the rest – Sandra Goldbacher's 1998 film *The Governess*.

Minnie Driver stars as Rosina da Silva, a strong Sephardi Jewess in Victorian London. She lives a comfortable and wealthy Jewish life in the East End.

Rosina is religiously defined: the opening sound of the film is the recitation of the *Shema*, accompanied by the image of a tallit.

Rosina presents an alternative model of representation of the Jewess. She is unorthodox, rebellious, experimental, active, liberated, fun, radical, modern, anachronistic, high-spirited, theatrical,

Rosina models herself on exotic Jewesses

independent and cosmopolitan.

Contrary to convention (on two counts), she aspires to be, like her Aunt Sofka, an actress who never married.

Rosina is at the centre of the narrative and she drives the action. As a sign of this, she is a blur of activity in contrast to the stereotypically static female roles in costume drama.

But when her father is murdered, her mother tries to convince her to marry, thus securing the family's financial future.

Rosina refuses and rejects the traditional path, abandoning her dream to become an actress. She takes a job as a governess on Skye in the home of the Cavendish family where she assists the head of the household (Tom Wilkinson) with his photographic experimentation.

Reinventing herself as 'Mary Blackchurch', she removes her distinguishing Jewish hat, clothing and hairstyle and replaces them with monochrome clothes and glasses in order to mimic a gentile identity.

However, Rosina's Jewishness is not entirely suppressed.

Invoking her converso ancestors – those Jews who were outwardly Christian but remained privately Jewish – Rosina



HIDDEN IDENTITY: Minnie Driver swaps her privileged Jewish life to become a governess

secretly practises her hidden Judaism, holding a seder within the privacy of her bedroom.

In doing so, she wears her father's tallit, the garment of a married Jew, its black and white stripes symbolising her Jewish status in a gentile household.

Rosina presents an alternative model of Jewish sexuality to the mainstream American fare mentioned in previous columns.

Although it does replicate the older stereotype of *la belle juive* (the beautiful Jewess), she is constructed from the inside, by a British Jewess (Sandra Goldbacher), rather than from the non-Jewish outside.

Rosina's Jewishness is defined in sexual terms. When in synagogue, she gazes at the men below foregrounding her sexual curiosity.

As she leaves, dressed in exotic, Sephardic clothing (including a black fez), she passes in front of a poster for the 'first appearance of Rachel La Grande Tragedienne – Jewess and Jewel of Paris', while simultaneously she is shouted at ('Jew girl') by some prostitutes, one of whom offers her 'lessons' by baring her breasts.

Rosina is certainly a sexual non-conformist. She is willing to kiss her betrothed before marriage and defends her action with a flourish: "Actresses care not for such convention."

When she takes up her position as a governess on Skye, it is her that makes the first moves to seduce her employer Cavendish.

Sex between them is initiated when Rosina says, in the context of a photo session, "I dreamt of a beautiful picture we could make of Salomé."

She proceeds to remove her outer garments but does not undress further; indeed, she covers herself with a white veil, adding, "I have heard it said that the ancient Hebrews used to express love for each other entirely covered."

In this way, Rosina models herself on such exotic Jewesses as Queen Esther and Salomé.

Charles's son Henry (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) also falls for Rosina. But where his father loves her in spite of her Jewishness, Henry does so because of it, for she represents something unobtainable.

Capping it all off, the film is beautifully shot, displaying a rich palette of red and gold in contrast to the washed-out diluted Scottish landscapes.

There are also many allusions to famous paintings. Overall, *The Governess* is such an unusual film on so many counts that it is definitely a must-see and one of the few British-Jewish films deserving the adjective of excellent.

It certainly serves as a tonic to much of the fare currently on TV.

■ Nathan Abrams is a senior lecturer in film studies at Bangor University and is the author of *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (IB Tauris, 2012).

Michelle uses appliance of science for tale of Palestinian brothers

BY SIMON YAFFE

MICHELLE Cohen Corasanti grew up in a Zionist family in upstate New York with no knowledge of the conflict in the Middle East.

She had never even heard of the Palestinians. But her first book, *The Almond Tree*, is a tale of two Palestinian brothers.

In the story, 12-year-old Palestinian Ichmad sees his family's home and possessions confiscated, and his siblings succumb to anger and hatred in the face of war.

But his brilliance in science wins him a scholarship to an Israeli university, where he encounters prejudice and opportunity.

His brother disowns him as he mixes with Israelis and he even marries a Jewish girl.

However, Ichmad is judged on his abilities and ideas and receives a Nobel Prize.

"All I knew was that after the Holocaust, the Jews found a land without a people for a people without a land," Michelle said.

But when she was 16, Michelle left her hometown of Utica and moved to Israel to study Hebrew and Zionism.

And it was while a pupil at the Ben Shemen Boarding School that she found out about Palestinians.

Michelle recalled: "My Israeli boyfriend was a Kahanist, which I also had no idea about."

"He said that there were 21 Arab countries and the Palestinians should be transferred to one of them."

"I even thought the word 'Palestinian' meant Israeli Jews before Israel was created."

It was not until she spent a summer in Paris studying French that she first encountered Arabs.

"I met educated Lebanese and when I returned to Israel, to enrol in the Middle East studies programme at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, half of the class were Palestinians."

"The other half were Israeli Jews



PEACE HOPE: Michelle Cohen Corasanti

and I became friendly with both sides.

"I was invited into the homes of the Palestinians and saw they were completely different to what is taught about them by American Jews."

"I began to see the Palestinians as human beings."

She became closer to Arabs when she returned to America to take a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies at Harvard.

While there, Michelle won a fellowship to read Arabic at Middlebury College's summer programme.

She said: "One day, I was speaking modern standard Arabic with a classmate and three Arabs spoke to us."

"One of them, Sabri, spoke to me in colloquial Palestinian Arabic."

"We got talking and I discovered he was taking a post-doctorate in chemical physics."

"He told me his father had been imprisoned for 14 years for helping to buy arms."

"Sabri was one of nine children

and his mother was illiterate, but because he was so brilliant at maths and science, he won a scholarship to university – and the Israelis paid for his education."

It is her experiences of seeing Israelis and Palestinians work together that inspired *The Almond Tree*.

After Harvard, Michelle took an internship at her father's law firm and became an attorney.

She also met and married Italian-American Joseph Corasanti, with whom she has two children.

"One day, I was reading Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and thought that politics, history and religion provide impossible obstacles," Michelle, 46, remembered.

"But I had seen with my own eyes how powerful common interests can be."

She wrote her first draft seven years ago – she had stopped being an attorney when her children were born five years previously.

Michelle, who lives in upstate New York and Florida, ended up taking 21 writing courses before she felt her story was good enough.

"My editor was a Christian fundamentalist and after he read it, he ripped it apart, which is what I wanted," she explained.

"I wanted to make it the best novel I could."

"He said my story had changed his whole way of thinking after he had read it."

Having spent time living in Israel, Michelle is ever hopeful of a solution to the conflict.

She added: "It is not about who is right or wrong or showing historical facts."

"The conflict has to be seen to have a human side, through stories."

"That is what is needed if it is to be resolved."

"If I can just make a small ripple and advance peace in any way, that would be enough for me."

SCINDLER SAVED HUNDREDS.
WALLENBERG SAVED THOUSANDS.

...the most important individual saviour of Jewish lives during World War II"
- Jewish Telegraph

WINNER OF 4 EMMY AWARDS
GOLDEN GLOBE

THE AWARD-WINNING MINI-SERIES OUT ON DVD FROM NOVEMBER 5, 2012

INCLUDES ENGLISH SUBTITLES

order your DVD now **hmv**
hmv.com

© 2012 CBS STUDIOS INC. CBS AND RELATED MARKS ARE REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF CBS BROADCASTING INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.