

ISRAEL'S GOLDEN AGE OF TV

**Shows find worldwide
audiences thanks
to streaming, and
powerful storytelling**

By Dina Kraft

MENU



At the premiere of one of the most expensive productions in Israeli television history, a lavish period piece spanning three generations called “The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem,” the cast poses in a flash of designer suits, gowns, sequins and stilettos in Tel Aviv for the local paparazzi.

Among them are faces from some of Israel’s best-known shows abroad. There’s Hila Saada, from “The Beauty and the Baker,” a comedy picked up by Amazon about a supermodel who falls in love with a baker (an American remake appeared on ABC); Itzik Cohen of “Fauda,” who plays an army officer in the hit counterterrorism thriller; and the main star power, Michael Aloni, best known for his role in Israel’s most recent internationally acclaimed hit: “Shtisel.” Both “Fauda” and “Shtisel” were acquired by Netflix and were breakout successes, helping prompt this new age of Israeli television internationally. “The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem” itself was written by Shlomo Mashiach and Ester (Esty) Namdar Tamam, whose series “Your Honor,” about a judge and the son of a mob boss, premiered last year on Showtime.

The melodrama tells the story of a Sephardic family in Jerusalem, starting in 1919 when the country was under British rule, and was adapted from the novel of the same name by Sarit Yishai-Levi. And as it goes with every new Israeli TV show these days, the chatter instantly turns to which American network or international streaming service might buy it. That’s something Oded Davidoff, the director, prefers to play down, choosing instead to speak of the pull of the series itself.

“I think people will get a sense of the history of this place, of watching how this country became a country. The conflict is there, but so is the sense of living together,” says Davidoff, referring to the mix of Jews of various backgrounds and Palestinians living in the city. He is smiling and looking relaxed after the premiere of the first two episodes.

Davidoff speaks near a pair of vintage MG convertibles that flank the entrance and next to appetizers set on tables fashioned to look like they come from a Jerusalem shuk, a nod to the setting of the show. The touch of Hollywood style glamour suggests how Israeli TV is beginning to try on bigger-budget productions like this—a costume-and-setting-rich period piece—a departure from other Israeli shows, known for producing powerful content on a shoestring and still finding success. (Its creators joke that



Photo credit: NATI LEW/yes Studios

David (Israel Ogalbo) and Luna (Swell Ariel) in “The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem.” Produced by yes Studios and starring some of the country’s most popular actors, this love story set against the epic backdrop of Israeli history has it all: a family curse, military battles, fabulous period settings and costumes and even a belly dance or two.

even though it’s expensive by Israeli standards, the cost of one episode does not amount to the cost of feeding the cast and crew of a big-budget series like “The Crown”.)

According to those who consume it, the secret sauce of Israeli TV begins and ends with old-fashioned storytelling. Marry that with the “conflict as author” of so many complicated and charged stories, a compelling and often addictive mix suited for today’s binge viewing can sometimes follow.

“I think the most important thing that happens here is that there’s lots of great material. We have lived in a conflict zone for so many years and people here really know how to tell a story from it. That’s key to it all—the story,” says Davidoff.

Danny Syrkin, director of “Tehran,” which is the first non-English language series on Apple TV+ —a thriller about an undercover female Mossad agent working to sabotage Iran’s nuclear program, echoes that sentiment. Glenn Close, reportedly a fan of the show, will be joining the cast in Season 2, portraying a British woman living in Tehran in a role specially created for her, according to Deadline, an entertainment news website.

As Old as the Bible

“Jews come from a storytelling tradition as old as the Bible,” says the Moscow-born writer and director who immigrated to Israel with his family as a young child. “We have been able to get to a high level of TV-making even though our resources are not

as big as in other places, including Europe. But it makes us try to think in terms of smart and agile storytelling.”

Israeli series are shot without pilots, and episodes are filmed over just two or three days. The creator, writer and director are often the same person.

“You create and solve your problems in the writing, rather than in special effects,” says Adrian Hennigan, TV critic at Haaretz, the Israeli newspaper. “You have plausible characters in plausible situations. They know their limitations and accept them and, within those confines, make great drama.”

The roots of good storytelling on a budget finding an international audience can be found in “In Treatment,” the first Israeli show whose concept was sold and remade into an American version, in this case by HBO in 2008. It was cheap to make largely because it’s entirely set in a psychotherapist’s office, each episode delving into the story of a different patient being treated. After running for three seasons, HBO is now bringing the series back, this time with Uzo Aduba (of “Orange Is the New Black” fame) in the lead role.

What’s changed since 2008 and the era of Israeli adaptations it kicked off—Showtime’s thriller “Homeland” included, which was the most successful of them all—is the rise of streaming services. These services from the big names like HBO, Netflix, Apple TV+ and Amazon have all picked up Israeli shows in their original form, now accessible to viewers worldwide to choose with the original Hebrew subtitled or dubbed into the local language of one’s choice. Smaller streaming services like TK are also offering Israeli TV shows and drawing audiences.

Danna Stern, managing director of yes Studios, a production and distribution company that produced “Beauty Queen” and sold “Fauda” and then “Shtisel” to Netflix after plans for both of their American remakes fell through, delights in this new access of original Israeli content. She also believes the industry is evolving beyond Middle East conflict stories it is most known for.

But she also knows the competition to be recognized in that space is extreme. “There’s an abundance of content, so breaking through the clutter to get yourself seen and noticed means your work has to be special, it has to resonate, and the question is: How do you do that?”



Photo credit: VERED ADIR/yes Studios

Created by Dana Idisis and Yuval Shafferman, “On the Spectrum,” an award-winning dramedy about three friends with autism who face and overcome the challenges of daily life together, stars (l-r): Neomi Levov as Zohar, Niv Major as Ron and Ben Yosipovich as Amit. For HBO Max’s English-language version, the Hebrew dialogue was dubbed by graduates of the Los Angeles-based not-for-profit Exceptional Minds, a vocational academy and digital studio that trains autistic artists.

An answer lies in the example of “Shtisel.” It’s a series that almost was not made in the first place; few production houses were interested in the story of the travails of an ultra-Orthodox family in Jerusalem. But yes Studios took a chance on it, and it mesmerized its mostly secular Jewish audience in Israel, known more for its hostility toward the ultra-Orthodox than its curiosity about them. It also became a singular example of a crossover hit for ultra-Orthodox viewers, who don’t own televisions. Still, word of the show spread quickly among them, leading to illegal downloads watched surreptitiously from cell phones.

The show has an intimate feel, with the camera’s gaze fixed firmly on the family and their cloistered, ultra-Orthodox world in a neighborhood of Jerusalem. And that’s at the core of its appeal, that window into a world foreign to most viewers. The storylines don’t deal with greater political or societal issues, but with the characters’ lives.

“The stories are very human stories. We try to be as specific as possible in language and food but not to address the usual conflicts we hear about, and that is why it speaks to so many people, including people who are not Jewish,” says Dikla Barkai, the show’s producer and a secular Jew.

“I was surprised I connected to it. It was a world I did not know anything about,” she says. “But when I read the script, I fell in love.”

Two seasons of the show aired in Israel before it went off the air in 2015. In 2018 Netflix picked it up without any marketing fanfare. But a fan base emerged, many of them Jewish women in the United States and the United Kingdom, according to Stern, and they started spreading the word about the show among themselves and on Facebook. That momentum led to Netflix adding another season. So, the cast and crew reassembled.

“It was a dream coming back for a third season. I have to thank our viewers for making this happen,” says Aloni, who plays Akiva Shtisel, or Kive, a gifted painter and dreamer who tries to fit his art within the confines of his community. But the more significant theme for Akiva and his father seems to be about two men grappling (usually quite clumsily) with love and loss.

Aloni observes: “You see at the end we are all flawed, and that’s why this show was able to break barriers and reach wide audiences around the world.”

The Conflict and the conflict

Israel’s conflict with its neighbors likely seems abstract and confusing to the average television viewer in the United States and around the world. But two recent shows provide an up-close look at its impact on the people who live there. In “Valley of Tears” screened by HBO Max, viewers get a harrowing up-close view of the 1973 Yom Kippur War that almost led to Israel’s destruction.

The true story of the violence that led to the outbreak of the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza inspired “Our Boys.” The HBO miniseries was created by two Jewish Israelis, Hagai Levi (an executive producer of “In Treatment”) and Joseph Cedar, and a Palestinian Israeli, Tawfik Abu-Wael.

For TV critic Hennigan, “Our Boys” is a favorite because it tells a story from multiple perspectives. In this case that meant not just telling the tale of three Jewish teens kidnapped and killed by Hamas in the West Bank, but focusing primarily on the murder of a Palestinian teenager burned to death by Jewish extremists in revenge. “It tries to reflect the dynamic here and reflect that on screen...but that was a big shock for people,” he



Photo credit: courtesy of yes Studios

Michael Aloni portrays teacher and talented painter Akiva (Kive) in “Shtisel,” a serial about the trials and tribulations of a multigenerational Haredi family living in Geula, Jerusalem produced by yes Studios. Premiered on Israeli television in 2013, it went on to become a 2018 runaway hit on Netflix, where fans can now stream all nine episodes of the show’s third, and final season.

said of Israeli Jewish viewers accustomed to having the focus on their own trauma, not that of Palestinians.

Another possible sign of Israel’s TV industry evolving: Some recent productions seen in original form on streaming services have absolutely nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict or religion. “Losing Alice” stars a powerful female lead and was written and directed by a woman, both anomalies in the industry in Israel. The crew was 50% women.

The show was launched on Apple TV+ and stars Ayelet Zurer. International viewers may know her from her acting in American movies and her role in “Shtisel” as a love interest to Akiva Shtisel.

“It’s about a woman getting closer to 50 and wondering about the price between art and life. And that’s coming from my own point of view, and it’s pretty universal,” says Sigal Avni, the show’s writer and director, who immigrated with her family to Israel from the United States as a girl and now lives and works in both New York and Tel Aviv.

“The Israeli television industry has come a long way in the short number of years we’ve had TV,” says Avni. Israelis had one channel, the state channel, until the 1980s. Israel’s TV regulatory system has helped spur that growth because it forces Israeli satellite TV stations to invest 8% of their revenue back into production and its commercial channels to put back 15%.

That translates into more opportunities to make shows and a bigger appetite for risk.

An example of this is “On the Spectrum,” a show about three young adults with autism who are roommates in Tel Aviv. Its audience increased exponentially when HBO Max bought it.

Dana Idis, writer and co-creator based the story on her autistic brother. “I wanted to write a story in which he was the hero, where he deals with society and not where society needs to deal with him.”

Esty Namdar Tamam, writer and producer of “The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem” hopes more international co-productions will become the norm in Israel so creators can marry their stories with more funding to bring Israeli TV to an even higher level. Otherwise, she charges, the practice of networks and streaming services merely shopping around for story concepts and ideas to remake smacks of cultural capitalism, noting Israeli creators get paid very little for selling their ideas.

“More budgets can let the creatives soar even higher, especially now,” she says, as “the world is becoming a place where you can watch everything.” 🌐



Photo credit: VERED ADIR/yes Studios

A tangle of Shtisels. L-R: Kive’s father, Shulem (Dovale Glickman), the family patriarch, with Nuchem (Sasson Gabay), his brother from Antwerp, Belgium. During season 2, Kive falls in love with his first cousin Libbi, Nuchem’s daughter, but the relationship fizzles when he fails to keep his promise to her that he will give up painting. New Yorker critic Alexandra Schwartz praised the show “with no nudity, no violence and no dragons” as “funny, moving and humane.”



Noted Israeli character actor Sasson Gabay (l), aka Uncle Nuchem, enjoys a bonding moment with CEO Daniel S. Mariaschin in B’nai B’rith’s Washington library/recording studio in 2019.

Acclaimed Israeli actor Sasson Gabay, known to “Shtisel” fans as Nuchem Shtisel, was on tour starring in the Tony Award-winning musical “The Band’s Visit” at the Kennedy Center when he visited B’nai B’rith’s Washington, D.C., headquarters on Aug. 5, 2019. During a podcast with CEO Daniel S. Mariaschin, the Iraqi-born performer spoke about his extraordinary life and career, and the need for the bridging of cultures through art, music and theater. A case in point: “The Band’s Visit,” is the story of musicians in a touring Egyptian orchestra who develop new friendships when they accidentally wind up in a desolate Israeli town. 🌐



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