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## Jack Garfein: Strange, wild, triumphant

MICHAEL C. KOTZIN May 21, 2013, 8:51 am



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On the evenings of Sunday, May 26, and Monday, May 27, the Tel Aviv Cinematheque – to be followed by the Cinematheques in Haifa and Jerusalem on each of the following nights respectively – will be hosting a retrospective tribute for a cinema director whose entire corpus consists of two films, one of them from 1957 and the other from 1961. The director is Jack Garfein, now 82 years old, and limited though his directorial output may have been, not only are the films worthy of attention, but given the totality of Garfein’s career and his history, the events promise to be extremely meaningful in a number of ways.

Garfein was born in a Czechoslovakian town in the Carpathian Mountains in 1930. His close-knit family was soon to be decimated by the Holocaust, and after suffering the horrors of a series of death camps which he alone of his immediate family survived, Garfein came to New York, where an uncle of his had found refuge right before the war. And then, as he tells his story, he began a new life, with an opportunity to develop his theatrical gifts thanks in great part to the assistance of the United Jewish Appeal, for which he became a spokesman.

Trained at the Dramatic Workshop of the New School and then the famed Actors Studio, along with such luminaries of America’s stage and cinema as James Dean, Marlon Brando,

and Rod Steiger, Garfein had an early chance to make his name on Broadway, where he directed the 1953 play version of Calder Willingham's novel *End as a Man*. Recommended by Elia Kazan, he then also directed the film adaptation, renamed "The Strange One." Produced by Sam Spiegel, its cast included Ben Gazzara, George Peppard, and Pat Hingle, all of them Actors Studio products making their screen debuts.

Four years later, Garfein directed Carroll Baker, to whom he was then married, in a film called "Something Wild," with music by Aaron Copland. Failing to fit into the culture of the Hollywood movie studios, he saw his directorial career in film come to an abrupt end. But he continued to direct for the theater, including the works of such notable twentieth century playwrights as O'Neill, Ionesco, Beckett, O'Casey, and Fugard. Meanwhile, maintaining a distinguished career as acting coach and teacher, he first headed to Los Angeles to join with others in establishing the Actors Studio West, then moved on to found his own acting studio in Paris, where he continues to be an active force.

With his engaging personality, profound sensitivity, and lightning-quick mind, Garfein makes a striking impression. The novelist Henry Miller included a chapter about him in his 1978 book *My Bike and Other Friends*, in which he said: "What amazed me about him on our first meeting was the range of his knowledge and his mastery of English, a foreign language to him. When we meet the sparks fly. He is not only most affable, charming, exciting, but a great raconteur who holds you spell-bound."



Jack Garfein in the 1987 Canadian Broadcasting System documentary 'A Journey Back'

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Through all the years of effort and accomplishment, through all the occasions of working with stars and celebrities, writers and intellectuals, Garfein's early experience as a young Jewish boy from Central Europe whose life was ripped apart by the Holocaust has remained with him. A powerful documentary called *A Journey Back*, made for the Canadian Broadcasting System in 1987, which the Tel Aviv Cinematheque will also be screening, shows him revisiting his childhood home town and Auschwitz. In an interview I had the opportunity to do with him a year-and-a-half ago, he reflected on the world today and spoke of what he called "constant anti-Semitism." "Sometimes it's hidden," he said, "but it's there. An unjust relationship to a people that has been going on for thousands of years. We have to have our eyes open."

I met Garfein after reading about him in the *New York Times* a little over two years ago, when that city's Film Forum offered a tribute similar to what he will be receiving in Israel, that one on the occasion of his 80th birthday. I was first drawn to the article by its references to "The Strange One," which I had seen decades ago, not long after it had been released, which I still remembered for its bold intensity. I had not seen "Something Wild" earlier, but when I recently did I had the strong feeling, as have others, that it – co-written by Garfein himself – was significantly influenced by his Holocaust trauma, which seems also to be reflected in "The Strange One" in some ways.

In the earlier film, set in a Southern military college, Gazzara plays a sadistic, cruelly manipulative cadet. In the later one, set in New York (which is shown in a series of hauntingly photographed scenes), Baker plays a young woman who struggles to deal with the effects of a violent rape. Though in different ways, both films grippingly explore the controlling imposition of power over others and the helplessness of victimization – each of them with endings that capture the sense of ultimate hope that Garfein has held to despite what life has brought him.

Garfein has received retrospective tributes like the one he will receive here especially thanks to the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, which took the overall lead in organizing it, in London, Paris, Los Angeles, and at the Telluride Film Festival. But he says that having this now happen in Israel – which he calls "the soul of the Jewish people" – will mean the most to him.

Rediscovered by viewers and critics, his two films have continuing impact. Garfein himself will be present at all of the upcoming programs and available for question-and-answer sessions following the screenings of the films, when he will be joined by Foster Hirsch of Brooklyn College and the City University of New York, the author of over a dozen books on cinema.

There is good reason to anticipate that all of these evenings will provide experiences to be long remembered. And at a time when artists and intellectuals from around the world are being implored to boycott the Jewish state and some, like Stephen Hawking, are complying, there is surely nothing that would keep away this creative, principled man – who is still proud of his father's role as a Zionist leader back in the Carpathian Mountains.