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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE in association with KINO LORBER

WORKING WOMAN

SYNOPSIS

Orna, (Liron Ben Shlush) is the mother of three young children with a husband struggling to start his own restaurant. To help support her family Orna returns to the workplace, landing a job with a former army superior, Benny (Menashe Noy) who is now a successful real estate developer. While Orna embraces her new position and tries to balance its demands with her home life, she begins to experience escalating sexual harassment from her boss. Her rapid rise through the ranks and her increasing financial success seem to parallel a pattern of predatory behavior which ultimately brings her career and marital relationship to the brink. This timely and devastating story is expertly told by long time feminist filmmaker Michal Aviad.

FILMMAKER STATEMENT

- Michal Aviad, Writer / Director

What is your background as a filmmaker?

I started to direct films in San Francisco in the 1980's, and at the same time I started identifying as a feminist. I have made ten films, and all of them – documentary and fiction - look at complex social and political issues from the point of view of female protagonists.

Making films from the point of view of women is a way to remind us that women's ways of understanding and acting in the world matter, and are worth showing – and this theme is recurrent in all my work: *Jenny & Jenny* (1997) is a film about two 17-year-old working class girls; *Dimona Twist* (2016) is about the shocking experience of North-African women in Israel of the 1950's, an unexamined female story from modern history; *Ever Shot Anyone?* (1995) explores the military through women's experiences; *The Women Next Door* (1992) is about the responses of women to military violence; *Invisible* (2011) examines rape from the point of view of its survivors.

Feminism for me is the political lens through which I see that the lives and happiness of all human beings, including women, matter. I believe that caring for each other is a basic value, and I hope for a society where group and individual violence and exploitation are penalized.

What was your inspiration for making WORKING WOMAN?

I started working on WORKING WOMAN in 2012. Like other women around me, I heard stories of sexual harassment on a daily basis, especially in the work place. I was fascinated by the process of change I was witnessing. From the generation before me in which society was blind to the phenomena, to my generation and the younger generations who seek a deep change in the ways women and men relate sexually to each other.

My first fiction film, *INVISIBLE* (2011), is directly about the trauma of rape. But in *WORKING WOMAN*, I wanted to make a film on the less clear, more grey area of sexual abuse. I searched and collected stories from my life, my friends, the internet and courtroom cases. I was surprised to find out how different each incident is in its details, context and personalities involved, yet how similar they all are in terms of using authority and power to coerce women into sexual relations.

WORKING WOMAN is about the ways in which the powerful at work can exploit and abuse their subordinates and endanger their livelihood. Most work relations steeped with sexuality are between a male employer and a woman employee. More often than not, it is the woman who pays the economic, reputational, social, psychological and familial price.

Many clichés which blame women permeate our culture. Often, both women and men believe in them. I tried in the film to understand the harsh consequences of sexual harassment on the victim and her entire context: her relationships with her husband and her children, and her ability to find work. At the same time I wanted to understand the blindness of the abuser and the social environment.

I searched for films on the subject, but to my surprise found out that most films romanticize or eroticize sexual harassment. Some go even further to turn the woman into the harasser. (*Fatal Attraction*, 1987, and many others.)

In *WORKING WOMAN*, I wanted to explore how the relationship between employer and subordinate, when infused with sexual elements, is complex and difficult to separate from successful and prolific work relations.

It took us years to secure funding for *WORKING WOMAN*. Funders told us again and again that the story is so small, so "grey", that it is not dramatic enough for a film. Last Fall, while we were finally in the middle of shooting the film, the #metoo movement came into being. I remember telling myself: my film will remind us that sexual harassment at work is not unique to famous people.

The performances in the film are phenomenal – what was your casting and rehearsal process?

In my documentaries I work with the protagonists for a long time before and during shooting. We form intimate relationships based on many hours of hanging out together and learning to know each other. My way of directing them is through the human contact we form.

The same was true for *WORKING WOMAN*. We started from auditions, but before finalizing my decision about three excellent actors: Liron (Orna), Menashe (Benny) and Ofer (Oshri), I met with them many times. I wanted to find out how we relate to each other, how open we are and whether I can gain their trust. I was not looking for talent only, but also for life experiences and for actors with a heart.

I wanted to veer away from "good" and "bad" characters. Before shooting, I worked extensively for months with each actor. We conducted research together. With Menashe (Benny) we met relators, and with Liron (Orna) we learned methods of selling real estate. Over time, we opened up our lives and experiences, and through intimacy, slowly built each character and each scene. We found charm and generosity in Benny, lovely parenting and loyalty in Ofer, as well as flaws in Orna. We mainly talked, spent time together, and learned a lot from each other. We all made sure we rehearse the scenes technically but I trusted them to bring the emotions during shooting. Over time Liron (Orna) became my close partner to decisions concerning the content of the film.

When we came to the set, the actors and I were already very close to each other. I keep my sets calm and focused. I don't allow shouting and I strive to create a collaborative atmosphere, in which as the director, my job is to know what I'm looking for and to make the final decisions. We are all there to serve each other and allow each of us to be as creative and precise as possible. On the set, often the actors knew better than me how Orna or Benny or Ofer react and behave. They were already totally mixed up with the characters. I consulted with them. During shooting, I encouraged a lot of improvisation, which I believe gave the film a realistic edge.

I know how to work only through relationships of tenderness, shared passion, trust and appreciation. And maybe this is another feminist wisdom I use.

What are your cinematic and creative influences, and how did they influence the making of *WORKING WOMAN*?

I started out in documentaries and make films in the realistic-humanistic tradition. I'm influenced by filmmakers such as the Dardenne Brothers (*Les Films*, *Two Days, One Night...*), Andrea Arnold (*Red Road*, *Fish Tank*), Romanian filmmakers such as Cristian Mungiu (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, *Graduation*), Radu Muntean (*Tuesday After Christmas*) and Iranian Cinema. I'm also greatly influenced by feminist filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman and Jane Campion.

I knew that this film is about visual nuances. The proximity of the bodies to each other, the moments of silence, the gestures, the ambiguities - are the materials the film is made of. I wanted to explore when and how do their hands, legs, heads, bodies come closer and when do they move away from one another. What in the protagonist's clothes, movements or presence become dangerous to her? And what are the meanings of gazing or refraining from gazing at one another?

We shot the film with a handheld camera in long takes, mostly one shot per scene. There are about 100 shots in the film. The long takes allow imitation of realistic time flow and emphasize the complex shades of feelings and decisions of each character. For me listening and reacting is not less important than talking. Daniel Miller, the DOP, and me decided that camera's movements, clinging to the neck of Orna, and focus changes will tell the story of the scene and allow the long takes to keep the sense of real time.

We shot the film essentially from two perspectives: I wanted to get as close as possible to the POV of the heroine, to understand what she is going through. At the same time I wanted to give a more knowledgeable POV, let's say – the filmmaker's POV, that exposes the societal norms that blind each of the other protagonists in the story.

Daniel and I planned every shot/scene ahead of time, to reflect these intentions. Each shot was choreographed and during the shooting there were a few "dancers" on the floor: the actors, the DOP and the Boom Man.

I wanted to immerse the story in the protagonists' human, social and urban surroundings. The Art Director, Costume Designer and myself learned the real environments including class and culture of the characters. The film's scenery details the vast gap between classes, and the inherent contradictions in the Israeli dream of economic and social success. While the landscapes depict the Israeli harsh light and colorful urban environment, the protagonists are filmed with tenderness and compassion.

During editing Nili Feller ("Waltz with Bashir"), my editor and myself worked to minimize the cuts and still give the film a flow that keep the viewers alert.

The film shares some structural similarities with Romantic Comedies: You know almost from the beginning what will happen, but you don't know when and how it will happen. I wanted us to watch on a daily, step-by-step basis how sexual harassment happens: why Orna feels guilt and shame, why she has no exact words to tell her story, how such a story destroys Orna and her husband, the economic and psychological price Orna has to pay and why it is close to impossible to prove criminality of the abuser in such cases.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Michal Aviad, Co-writer / Director

An acclaimed and award winning documentary and narrative filmmaker, Michal Aviad was born in Jerusalem, Israel. She studied literature and philosophy at Tel Aviv University, and began making films in San Francisco in the 1980's. Since returning to Israel in 1991, she has continued to write, direct and produce films. Aviad is a senior faculty member at Tel Aviv University's Tisch School of Cinema. Her critically acclaimed films include *Acting Our Age* (87), *Jenny and Jenny* (97), *Invisible* (11), and *Dimona Twist* (16).

After many award-winning documentary films, Michal Aviad's first fiction *INVISIBLE* (90-min) won the Ecumenical Prize at the 2011 Berlin International Film Festival (Panorama section), Best Israeli Film and Best Actress at the 2011 Haifa Film Festival and the Grand Prize at the 2012 Creteil Women Film Festival in France. *INVISIBLE* was released theatrically in Israel and France, and was the MOMA choice for a limited release in NYC. *WORKING WOMAN* her second fiction film.

SELECT FILMOGRAPHY:

2018 **WORKING WOMAN** (93-min, produced by Lama Films) is her second fiction feature film. The film is about an ambitious young mother, who aspires to succeed at her new job without paying the price that her boss demands.

2016 **DIMONA TWIST**, (71-min, produced by Lama Films) This documentary tells the stories of Seven women arrive in Israel by ship in the 1950s and 1960s and are sent straight to Dimona, a town recently established in the desert. **Best Documentary at The Jerusalem Film Festival.**

2013 **THE WOMEN PIONEERS** (51-min, produced by Eden Productions) this documentary made of archives, uncovers the passion, struggle and pain of women pioneers who came to Palestine a hundred years ago to create a new world and a new woman. **Research Prize, DocAviv Film Festival, 2013, Best Documentary, Women Film Festival, Israel, 2013, and Best Experimental Film, Polish Jewish Film Festival, Warsaw, 2014.**

2011 **INVISIBLE** (90-min, Israel–Germany, produced by Plan-b films) is her first feature length fiction film. *Invisible* was part of more than 30 festivals across the globe, was theatrically exhibited in New York, Israel and France and has received the **Ecumenical Prize at the 2011 Berlin International Festival (Panorama section), Best Israeli Film and Best Actress at the 2011 Haifa Film festival and the Grand Prize at the 2012 Women International Film Festival in France.**

2002 **FOR MY CHILDREN** (66-min Beta), a personal film about the history and events in the life of one family of immigrants and refugees as seen through the prism of the first days of the new Intifada. With ZDF-ARTE. The film took part in the Leipzig film Festival, MoMa Documentary Series, San Francisco International Film Festival, Munich Documentary, Nyon, INPUT 03 and more.

2001 **RAMLEH** (60-min Beta,) is a social-political film about the lives of women in the town of Ramleh, a Jewish-Arab town torn by religious, national and cultural differences. With Sundance Institute. Was part of the Jerusalem International Film Festival, FIPA 2002, Munich, Prague, Istanbul, Milano, Mumbai, Kalamata, Human Rights Watch Film Festival in New York and others.

1997 **JENNY & JENNY** (60 min Beta), a film on two teenage working-class Israeli girls. *JENNY & JENNY* was awarded **Best Israeli Documentary for 1997** from the Israel Film Institute. It was part of the Jerusalem International Film Festival, Denver Film Festival, Boston Film Festival, Feminale and INPUT '98.

1995 **EVER SHOT ANYONE?** (produced by Amit Goren, 60-min Beta) This documentary explores Israeli male culture from a woman's point of view. The film was part of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, Feminale, the Leipzig Film Festival, INPUT '96, Flaherty film Seminar and many others.

1992 **THE WOMEN NEXT DOOR** (80-min, 16mm). Co-Produced with The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, USA. Filmed during the First Intifada, the film examines the roles of Palestinian and Israeli women in the conflict. The film was part of the Forum in the **Berlin International Film Festival where it received the Peace Prize**. Chicago International Film Festival **Certificate of Merit** It took part in many festivals including Jerusalem, Pesaro, Munich, San Paolo, Portugal, India, and INPUT '93. The film was aired in many countries including a national broadcast on PBS's P.O.V. series.

1987 **ACTING OUR AGE** (60 min, 16mm). The film explores women and aging and was part of many international film festivals including the U.S. Sundance Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival. **Nat'l Educ Film Festival, Silver Apple** The film was aired in many countries and was selected in 1988 to be the first program on PBS's P.O.V documentary series.

ADDITIONAL FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Producers – **Ayelet Kait** and **Amir Harel** (Lama Films)

Lama Films is one of the leading production companies in Israel, concentrating on social-, political- and cultural-oriented projects. Lama films produced internationally acclaimed films, including the US box-office success “Walk on Water” (Eytan Fox 2004), the 2006 Oscar nominee for best foreign film “Paradise Now” (Hany Abu-Assad, 2005), the Cannes Film Festival 2007 Camera d’Or Winner “Jellyfish” (Shira Geffen & Etgar Keret, 2007), and the Annie Awards 2009 nominee for Best Animated Feature & Best Directing “\$9.99” (Talia Rosenthal, 2009)

Writer **Sharon Eyal**

Sharon has graduated from Sam Spiegel Cinema School in scriptwriting after 10 years of working as an Attorney at Law. She has written the script for "Hanging", directed by Limor Shmila (in post production.)

Writer **Michal Vinik**

"Blush" (2015) which she wrote and directed opened in San Sebastian Film Festival and won over 10 prizes around the world. Michal writes for TV series' and is writing her next film. She is also a faculty member at Tel Aviv University School of cinema.

Cinematographer **Daniel Miller**

Since graduating from Sam Spiegel Film School in 2012, he has been shooting shorts, feature films, documentaries and TV series in Israel, Europe and Africa. His first feature film Run, a French- Ivorian co-production, was part of the 2014 Cannes film festival's official selection, and gained him a nominated for the AMAA for best cinematography.

Editor **Nili Feller**

Among the films she edited are The Burglar (2016, Director: Hagar Ben-Asher.) In Between (2016, Director: Maysaloon Hamood), Tikkun (2015. Director: Avishai Sivan), The Congress (2013. Director: Ari Folman), Waltz with Bashir (2008. Director: Ari Folman).

KEY CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Liron Ben Shlush as Orna

Leading actress & Screenwriter NEXT TO HER (Dir: Assaf Korman) 1914, CANNES 2014 – Directors' Fortnight. The Israeli Film Critics Association Award for Best film, Best Screenplay and Best Actress. At The Haifa International Film won Best Film. Silver Hugo - Chicago International Film Festival. Best Actress at The Mumbai International Film Festival 2014, Silver Alexander Jury Award at Thessaloniki IFF.

Menashe Noy as Benny

Is one of the main male actors in Israeli Cinema and Theatre for decades. His recent main role was in GETT (Dir: Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz) 2014. CANNES 2014 – Directors' Fortnight. At The Israel Film Academy Awarded Best Film, Best actor. At The Jerusalem Film Festival won Best Film, Best Actor National Board of Review, USA: Top Five Foreign Language Films Best Film at Oslo, Chicago, Hamburg, Hamptons, San Sebastian, Palm Springs. Nominated for Golden Globe.

Oshri Cohen as Ofer

Has played in many Israeli films and Television series, including LEVANON (Dir: Shmuel Maoz) 2009, which won The Golden Lion in Venice International Film Festival and Best Film at The European Film Awards. BEAUFORT (Dir: Joseph Sedar) 2007, which won Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, was nominated for the USA Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, won Best Film and Best Actor by the Israeli Academy.

WORKING WOMAN

A film by Michal Aviad

PRINCIPAL CAST

Orna **Liron Ben Shlush**,

Benny **Menashe Noy**

Ofer **Oshri Cohen**

Leah, Orna's mother **Irit Sheleg**

Sari, Benny's wife **Dorit Lev-Ari**

Mr. Benayoun **Gilles Ben-David**

Mrs. Benayoun **Corinne Hayat**

Director **Michal Aviad**

Writers **Sharon Azulay Eyal, Michal Vinik, Michal Aviad**

Production Company **Lama Films**

Producers **Amir Harel, Ayelet Kait**

Cinematographer **Daniel Miller**

Editor **Nili Feller**

Art Director **Eyal Elhadad**

Sound Designer **Aviv Aldema**

World Premiere 2018 Jerusalem Film Festival

International Premiere 2018 Toronto International Film Festival

Israel - 2018 - 93 mins - Color - Aspect ratio: 1:2.39

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