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New Zealand Film Festival, Israel

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The average Israeli’s knowledge of New Zealand’s history and culture is limited. The New Zealand Film Festival that took place in Israel’s three major cities in March 2009 – with films screened in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa – was therefore greatly welcomed and the screenings a genuine surprise. The idea of bringing Israeli and New Zealand culture and society closer was raised after the large July 2008 New Zealand film retrospective in Wroclaw, curated by Ian Conrich of the Centre for New Zealand Studies, Birkbeck, University of London. An Israeli version of Poland was suggested by Jon Booock, Chairman of the Israel-New Zealand Friendship Association. The two joined forces and, with sustained effort and support from the New Zealand Embassy, had films brought to Israel, courtesy of the New Zealand Film Commission, where they were subtitled in Hebrew for the festival.

The opening night in Tel Aviv on 12 March included a reception in the presence of HE Hamish Cooper, Ambassador for New Zealand to Turkey, Israel and Jordan, who made sure to arrive at each of the receptions that followed. The second opening night, held in Jerusalem on 14 March, included Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat, whilst the third opening night held in Haifa on 15 March included Haifa Mayor Yona Yahav. Other guests at these events included senior officials from Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and senior Israeli academics such as Haifa University’s Vice Chancellor Professor Yossi Ben-Artzi, and leading figures from Israel’s business sector. All were intensely interested in the festival and came to express their appreciation. The Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa audiences were outstandingly varied in age and professions, with film students, writers, journalists and the general cinema-goer sitting side by side. The Festival received a great deal of praise. The Israeli public was intrigued by New Zealand’s culture and filled the screenings, quite a number of which sold out in 300–400 seat cinemas. Major personalities from New Zealand’s film industry were present, with the esteemed director Vincent Ward, and John Barnett, the most successful producer in New Zealand, introducing their films and supporting discussions.
The films that were shown were carefully selected so that the various aspects of New Zealand's culture and society could be appreciated. Many of the screenings were regional premieres and almost all showing in Israel for the first time. The Festival films were, Desperate Remedies (1993), What Becomes of the Broken Hearted? (1999), The Price of Milk (2000), Rain (2001), Perfect Strangers (2003), Out of the Blue (2006), Rain of the Children (2008) and Dean Spanley (2008). Conrich wrote part of a special booklet to accompany the films, with an introduction to New Zealand cinema. He also made sure that as well as the filmmakers the Israeli public would have the opportunity to meet other noted artists from New Zealand, and invited photographer Craig Potton to join the delegation. Potton exhibited photographs of New Zealand landscape and fauna in the foyers of the cinemathques in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. This very successful initiative was acclaimed and added to the cultural context.

The second day of the Festival in Tel Aviv featured a symposium open to festival guests, chaired by Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, who was the first New Zealand Society Fellow in New Zealand Studies at the Centre for New Zealand Studies, Birkbeck, University of London. Conrich opened with an overview of New Zealand film from its early beginnings to recent developments, followed by a valuable discussion involving Ward, Barnett and Potton that delved into special issues and cultural themes. The Israeli media covered the Festival widely and, for about two weeks, it received major news coverage including news highlights on the main Israeli television channel, as well as on the radio and in culture and leisure programmes, the daily press and weekend supplements.

This festival and the Wroclaw retrospective are an instructive example of how New Zealand is strengthening its ties not only in Western Europe but in Eastern Europe and the Middle East through greater cultural awareness and collaboration. On a slightly more personal note, this year 2009, Tel Aviv is celebrating its centennial. Among the other festivities, the city is celebrating its liberation in November 1917 from Turkish Ottoman rule, which was achieved with the bravery of the soldiers of the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade and the ANZAC Mounted Division under General Allenby. The Festival was a wonderful opportunity to thank the people and government of New Zealand for its contribution to liberating the city.

[Editor's note: In the weeks following this festival the New Zealand government announced it was planning to re-open its embassy in Israel.]