

Foreign Letters

A Story of Friendship
and the Ties
that Bind Us



A *Asian Jewish Life* sat down to speak with Ela Thier, writer, director and producer of the film *Foreign Letters*. The film is highly autobiographical and Thier even makes an on screen appearance at the end.

She also has two other feature films to her credit, *Puncture* (story-by, co-producer) and *The Wedding Cow* (writer), which won eighteen international awards, including four Best Feature and four Audience Choice awards. She has also written and directed over a dozen short films. Among them: *A Summer Rain* (writer-director-producer), on which *Foreign Letters* is based, won numerous Best Short awards and screened at over 200 film festivals and venues.

For those that grew up in America in the 1980s, *Foreign Letters* is filled with nostalgia. For *Asian Jewish Life*, the connection story of friendship between an Israeli girl and a Vietnamese girl is just too perfect. But overall, it is a story that anyone who has ever felt different or struggled with acceptance can relate to. It is a moving and beautiful, and sometimes even funny, story about differences and similarities and the true meaning of friendship.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Was *Foreign Letters* a story you always wanted to tell? Why?

Ela Thier (ET): I haven't always thought I would tell this story. In fact, I've always written pure fiction, so writing something this autobiographical is a departure for me. It came out of a conversation I was having with a producer while we were discussing another project. She asked me about my life and when I mentioned immigrating to the U.S. at the age of 11 she made some off-the-cuff comment about it being a good topic for a film. She's a producer I have tremendous



Ela Thier

respect for, so her comment never quite left me alone.

In 2008, the moment I was notified that I received a fellowship grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts, I knew immediately that I would use it to make a short, and that this would be the topic of the short. In fact, I wrote the short in one sitting that same evening, knowing that a feature would follow.

I think that all of us carry memories of relationships and life events that we want to tell stories about. So in that sense, I'm sure it's a story that on some level I always wanted to tell. But without this conversation with this particular producer, it wouldn't have occurred to me that this story is a film.

AJL: What is the connection between your short, *Summer Rain* and *Foreign Letters*? Why did you choose to remake the film? Did the theme change?

ET: I don't think of *Foreign Letters* as a remake. They are two different films. *A Summer Rain* was focused on my relationship with Shlomit, my friend that I left back home. It's a film about saying goodbye and missing home. *Foreign Letters* is focused on my relationship with Van (named Thuy in the film) who is

the girl I met in the US. It's a film about saying hello.

I've heard from people who've watched both that it's best to watch *A Summer Rain* (the short) first, and then watch the feature. I would agree. One is a continuation of the other.

AJL: Portraying real people authentically can be quite challenging. What did Thuy think of how she was portrayed?

ET: Van (Thuy) was involved in making the feature from the start. She watched the short and was enthusiastic about helping me grow it into a feature. While working on the script I would call her to help remember our past.

It was through talking to her that I identified a central theme in the story, poverty, and the shame that comes with it, particularly in the US where people are faulted for being poor – like it's your own fault if you don't have money. She talked to me about how she felt as a child about being poor while going to a school in suburban Connecticut where she felt that she had to hide who she was. This conversation clarified for me what the story would be centered around.

Van was also a great resource to Dalena Le who played Thuy. Dalena is a first generation immigrant and speaking with Van about her experiences helped inform her performance.

Van is pleased with the film and feels that it portrays us well. She says that the portrayal of us made her face her past, and feel things again about our friendship and childhoods. I'm thrilled that the film brought us closer together as adults.

AJL: How autobiographical is it? How much of what we see is real? There are some differences in the film from your bio.



ET: I'm a crafty fiction writer, so I knew how to shape a true-life story into an entertaining piece that would hold together dramatically.

So yes, there are key changes: for example, I'm actually one of five children. To simplify the story, I eliminated all of my siblings and just kept one younger one. I did grow up with a single mom who remarried when I was four, so I did have a dad when I was a tween. But again, this is a whole story in it of itself; getting into that would have been a distraction.

Van and I were best friends from the time we met until the end of high school. The biggest change that I made was in taking events that spanned over 7 years and compressed them into a single year. The trials and tribulations in our friendship (the insecurities, "break-ups", etc.) were things that mostly went on in high school. For the sake of the drama, I compressed it all down.

What's true to real life, besides the spirit of our friendship and the feel of being a foreigner, are all the details that I think give the film its voice: finding out about floss for the first time; Van (Thuy) waiting outside my house for two hours because

she didn't want to be impolite and ring the bell; being targeted by girls in the school for "looking Jewish"; ice-skating, walking in the woods, writing our "best-friend" contract; my stealing our badge to see if she would miss it (umm... yeah, I did that!); and of course – my beloved typewriter; all that and more are all true to life.

I suppose I should also add that the letters I exchange with Shlomit (the friend in Israel) are excerpts from actual letters, and the letters we see on the screen were the actual letters that she sent me. I had kept all of her letters, and she had kept all of mine.

AJL: Who do you see as the audience?

ET: I predict that many marketers would peg this film as being for tweens, for Jewish audiences, for Asian-Americans, for immigrants.

I'm convinced, however, that thinking this way is a mistake. Human beings, all over the world, are more or less the same. We love, we laugh, we cry, we're uplifted by caring and human connection.

Logically, I think that anyone who has ever had a friend – and that would be all

of us – would find this movie meaningful and see it as being about them.

One of my highlights in screening this film was at the Toronto Jewish film festival. A man in his 80's came up to me after the screening. He kept trying to tell me that it's a beautiful film, but he was crying too hard to be able to speak. He was not a 12-year-old girl. He's just human.

I've also gotten comments about how and why this film is more suitable for girls, and that boys wouldn't be interested in it. Well, a 14-year-old boy confessed to me (in secrecy!) that this is the only film he's ever seen that has made him cry. So much for films about girls being suitable only for girls!

All of my films are about caring and human connection. So in that sense, I think that the audience to all of my films is the human race.

AJL: What was the message you wanted to send?

ET: *Foreign Letters* is about the significance of friendship. I think that saying that friendship is significant is another way of saying that human beings are significant. The most interesting, vital,

Film in Focus

by Erica Lyons



rich and meaningful aspects of our lives, are our relationships with other people.

We live in a culture that manipulates us to focus on money and material comforts, but I think that all of us, on some level, know in our heart of hearts, that our relationships with people matter more and offer more, than anything we can buy.

Specifically, I would add that many immigrants, like myself, carry the feeling of being uprooted. Everything in life can feel temporary to us. Because there's a point in our life in which we feel like we lost everything and everyone that we knew, we're vulnerable to feeling that people and relationships come and go. This film, in some sense, is my love letter to all immigrants – it's a reminder to us that every relationship we've ever had will always be with us. Even if circumstances make it impossible to see someone regularly, once you establish a connection with someone, nothing and no one can make that connection go away.

We all hear a lot of talk about investing our money and making it grow. But I think that real security, real riches, real satisfaction in life, comes from what

we invest in people and from making relationships grow. We'd be wise to follow the lead of young people, and especially young women, because they can still remember that this is true. If we don't make the mistake of "cutesifying" young women and dismissing them, we can turn to them for leadership and let them remind us of what's really important in life. Money comes and goes, but relationships are for good. That's the message behind this film.

AJL: Have any of your other films been so heavily autobiographical? Do you plan to make any others? Is it harder or easier to tell your own story as opposed to someone else's through film?

ET: *Foreign Letters* is the most directly autobiographical film; I'm very much a fiction writer. But I think that no matter what I write about, the emotional content is always autobiographical. I could be writing about pigs in space, but how the pigs feel, what they care about, and their relationships with each other will always be autobiographical. I imagine that's true of every writer. So in some sense, it doesn't really matter to me how autobiographical my writing is in any given project; the themes and ideas in the stories are always personal.

I'm a very prolific writer so yes, I am always working on a film. I'm currently working with Inna Braude, who produced *Foreign Letters* with me on the production of my next film which we'll be filming in the spring of 2013. We're both very excited about it; *Foreign Letters* is just a first of many films that I'll be making for years to come.

AJL: How long did you continue to write/correspond with Shlomit?

ET: Shlomit and I corresponded by mail for three years before our communications tapered off. My last letter from her dates to 1985, and I moved to the US in 1982.

After I made *A Summer Rain* in 2008, I searched for her and found her living in Cleveland. I went out there and we reunited after a 30-year absence. We are now regularly in touch. ✧

If you are interested in hosting a public screening of *Foreign Letters* in your community or organization, please email ThierProductions@gmail.com or visit the film's website at www.ForeignLettersTheMovie.com.