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FEATURED

Dark Jewish Comedy Explores Underground Card Game World

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A scene from the film Yaniv

An advance screening of “Yaniv” will take place at the Maple Theater.

New York City-based producers and filmmakers Amnon Carmi and Benjamin Ducoff have played the Israeli card game Yaniv for years, but one day imagined a twist on the popular pastime. “What if there was an underground card game

where Chasidic Jews were playing Yaniv?” Ducoff, whose mother is a Huntington Woods native, mulled over during a run.



Amnon Carmi and Benjamin Ducoff

The idea stuck, and the story for *Yaniv* — Carmi and Ducoff’s first feature-length film — unfolded in just five weeks. The lifelong friends, who grew up in a Cleveland neighborhood, dove straight into writing and soon brought to life the concept that had so quickly resonated and developed. Now, *Yaniv* will screen at the Maple Theater for the very first time on Aug.10 at 8 p.m.

Yaniv follows the dark and comedic tale of two Bronx high school teachers unsuccessfully trying to fund a spring musical, who like many educators, struggle to get funding for their programs. Instead, they aim to raise the money in a different way: by infiltrating an underground card game run by a

group of Chasidic Jews and ultimately winning the prize money.

The teachers themselves are secular but dress the part and talk the talk to blend in with the Chasidic card-playing community. “Due to budget cuts, the funding is cut off and he’s desperate to make this film,” Ducoff, 30, who is a teacher himself, explains of the main character Barry Bernstein, who he plays in the film. “He resorts to cheating at an underground card game.”

Bernstein, who learned about underground Yaniv clubs from his grandfather, wasn’t a total stranger to the scene, but had just enough knowledge to avoid raising suspicion. Then, Carmi, 30, says, “Everything falls apart” — and “all hell breaks loose.” The end result is a wild, comedic ride that he explains has serious, heartwarming elements, and an unexpected finale to the film.

Detroit Roots

Much of *Yaniv* was filmed in Detroit at the Display Group studio, which is owned by one of the film’s executive producers, Rick Portwood. Production began in July 2022 and included a robust cast of local Detroit actors secured by local casting director Janet Pound.



Filmmakers set a scene during production, much of which took place in Detroit.

Carmi and Ducoff say that filming in Detroit was to their benefit in terms of budget and connections, but also gave them a chance to meet and network with Metro Detroit's own Chasidic community. Plus, various areas of Detroit where *Yaniv* was filmed closely resembled Queens, New York, where the movie is set.

Throughout *Yaniv*, which has a runtime of about 80 minutes, viewers will catch glimpses of numerous Detroit landmarks, including the area of Woodward Avenue by Comerica Park and the historic B'nai David Cemetery on the east side of the city. Ducoff says the latter, in particular, was one of his favorite locations to film.

As a South Bronx teacher, Ducoff also understood the importance of including students and aspiring filmmakers in the making of *Yaniv*. For the portions filmed in New York, Ducoff's own students played roles in both the film and production process and were paid for their work.

A Homecoming

Now, bringing *Yaniv* to Metro Detroit for its first advance screening serves as a sort of homecoming for Carmi and Ducoff, who credit the area for making the film what it is.

“We just want to bring it back to Detroit where it all started,” Carmi says. “Since the beginning, we knew that we wanted to show it in Detroit before we did anything else with it.”

Following the advance screening at the Maple Theater, where tickets cost \$12, Carmi and Ducoff plan to bring *Yaniv* to the indie film festival circuit. While the filmmaking pair say a Jewish audience is naturally a perfect fit for *Yaniv*, it's for anyone interested in a “quirky comedy” or who “wants a thrill” exploring the unique aspects of the Jewish community.



Filming behind the scenes in the film's "Club Room"

Still, Carmi and Ducoff say *Yaniv* would have never been possible without their immense support in Detroit. "We are so grateful to the talented and hardworking people of this city for making this film possible," Carmi says, "and showing what great film industry opportunities are available here."

Yaniv will screen at the Maple Theater on Aug. 10 at 8 p.m. You can buy tickets at yanivfilm.com.

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