

Fire Dance



a review by Phyllis Chesler

[Rama Burshtein-Shai](#) has written and directed her best film yet. [Fire Dance](#) is a mesmerizing, mystical, erotic, and rather magnificent work; one filled with love for a community of Israeli hasidim in Tiberias, but a work which neither spares them, nor the viewer. It is a complex film about tribalism versus individual happiness; about passion and restraint.

Fire Dance is very bold, perhaps shockingly so. The first episode opens with a young hasidic girl's rather gruesome suicide attempt, and ends with something totally unexpected, even surreal: from out of nowhere, a wild dog ferociously attacks another young hasidic girl—an assault which leaves her with

a disfiguring, life-long scar on her face. Our would-be suicide believes that her jealousy of the more popular girl may have caused this disaster.

Days later, these characters, as well as the wildness of the desert, the sky over Yam Kinneret, (the sea of Gallilee), still live within me, such is the power of this eight episode film. Cinematically, Burshtein-Shai proceeds slowly, with life-like pauses in a conversation, with time for each character to think.

We live at a time in which hasidic and haredi life has been denounced and famously filmed as cruel, intolerant, unjust, homophobic, misogynistic, medieval, ([Unorthodox](#), [Trembling Before God](#), [Leaving the Fold](#), [One of Us](#), [My Unorthodox Life](#)). Burshtein, does not avoid these themes; what she does is similar to what [Shtisel](#), [A Price Above Rubies](#), and [The Women's Balcony](#) do, namely, she balances them out by presenting hasidic/haredi communities that are, at the same time, also filled with a longing for God, a belief that even mighty sinners (drug addicts, adulterers, violent hooligans,) can repent and be redeemed, that fallen souls can be rescued. Most moving, individuals within these communities are filled with incredible, humbling, deeds of loving kindness.

For example, in one scene, a Grand Rebbe is in the midst of an important meeting with other rabbis when a woman who has been waiting to speak to him starts screaming and refuses to stop. He interrupts his meeting to hear her out. She is utterly alone in the world and does not know what kind of new stove to buy. Surprisingly, the Rebbe immediately takes her into his own kitchen and shows her his oven and explains to her how it works.

Another example: The would-be suicide, Faigie Rosenberg, (Mia Ivryn, in her first ever role), is the kindest, the boldest, and the smartest of all the girls. She seeks out an older, distant female relative, Mrs. Epstein, a hoarder and, without being asked, totally cleans up her apartment. This woman is also agoraphobic and has not been outside for "seven years and some months." Faigie gently talks her through it and accompanies her outside.

Perhaps Rabbi Natan, (played by the very soulful Yehuda Levy), is the embodiment of chesed, loving kindness. He is a rabbi with a "troubled past," who is known (and mistrusted) for helping women. He and his wife have organized a small sewing workshop for women who are mentally or cognitively disabled, non-employable, in order to ensure that they do not fall by the wayside. He also counsels women about their anguish, tries to help women obtain religious divorces—or he tries to get them and their husbands to reconcile lovingly when possible.

The unhappy, deprived women fall in love with him. They include our trouble hero Faigie. Some women demand religious divorces. One, Giti, goes on a hunger strike until she receives one. R. Natan experiences what Freud called transference (and maybe counter-transference). The besotted include Faigie who is at least half his age. Clearly, he is their Love Doctor, his combination of philosophical and mystical advice hypnotizes his female flock. The situation becomes untenable, harassment and violence erupt. Stones are thrown through windows, women are called "harlots." Faigie is thrown to the ground and beaten. R. Natan flees to the desert.

In all her films, [Fill the Void](#) (2012) and [The Wedding Plan](#) (2016), Burshtein-Shai romanticizes

weddings and brides. It is as if each wedding re-enacts the first Creation story in Bereshit. Without one's mate one can never be whole. While this is true for men as well, the filmmaker focuses mainly on the women, on their desire to be cherished, sung to, to not feel humiliated, to not be alone, to have children, to honor their parents. Their wedding dresses and their seats before the bedeken, when the women come to bless the bride, are Burshtein-Shai's version of every film Disney ever made about a prince and princess and a happy ending. Fairy tales to which women are addicted. All her brides are shy virgins—not Amazon warriors, corporate killers, or IDF soldiers.

Okay, it's not my only cup of tea but it *is* very moving and visually powerful. Burshtein-Shai also depicts the kind of intense female bonding that rarely exists in the secular world.

However, she gilds no lilies. Feige's mother Raizi, a widow, (Noa Koler), hits her, keeps verbally abusing her, never even took her for glasses until Feigie was seven years old. Her mother says, rather insanelly to the astonished optometrist, "Yes, I told you, she's blind as a bat."

And yet, the women embrace each other, dance together, try to help each other; their loving relationships are very intense—they have only each other in their small, precious world.

I do not love the fact that Burshtein-Shai's women, in all of her films, are a bit unbalanced, emotionally extreme, not at all restrained—even as they wrestle with their obligation to maintain the stability and survival of their communities, over and against their desire for happiness and romantic

love. Their values are religious, not secular.

When R. Natan's father, the community's Rebbe dies, he has his will read aloud by his survivors, beginning with his wife, his two sons, and his daughter. The love he openly professes for his wife is unparalleled, (except for the Song of Songs); it is almost embarrassing. His advice: "The hardest thing is to judge everyone favorably, even the wicked."