

TWO GIRLS FROM DIFFERENT DISTANCES

Writer-Director Ela Thier

Starring Noa Rotstein and Dalena Thuy-Anh Le

Production dates: August 17-September 7, 2009

STORY SYNOPSIS

When the 12-year-old Ellie arrives in the US from Israel, she copes with homesickness and humiliations in school. Determined to learn English and assimilate, she empties her piggy-bank where she had been saving money for phone calls to Israel. Instead, she buys a used, mechanical typewriter and writes her letters back home in English.

Life becomes easier when she meets Thuy, a Vietnamese refugee her age. The two girls, having both arrived from war-torn countries, find solace and adventure with each other and become inseparable. Ellie, however, takes it personally when Thuy prioritizes her studies over spending time together. When the two hurt each other and end their friendship, a letter arrives from Ellie's friend in Israel, and helps her grieve and remember her identity. Ellie sells her typewriter and buys Thuy the study book that she always wanted but couldn't afford.

As the girls watch the sun rise after another sleep-over, Ellie writes her friend in Israel about her new-found wisdom: that not even one's parents, or oceans, or wars, can change the fact that once you are friends with someone: it's forever.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Ela Thier directed the award-winning short, *A Summer Rain*, a story about her immigration experience. The film has screened on three continents, and will screen at 150 venues across the US and Canada in the fall of 2009. In 2007 Thier directed excerpts from her feature, *A Story for Old Lovers*, starring Jay O. Sanders and Tony-award-winner Maryann Plunkett. Thier studied Film & TV at New York University where she wrote, directed and performed in several short projects.

Ela Thier's screenplay, *The Wedding Cow*, was produced by SWR, a major German TV network, garnering twenty awards at international film festivals including nine *Best Feature* and five *Audience Choice* awards. Thier's feature scripts were selected by the Independent Film Week (formerly IFP Market) for three consecutive years, with two scripts selected in 2007. She has since written projects on commission and was offered several options. In 2008 she received an Artists' Fellowship Award in Screenwriting from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Thier teaches screenwriting in NYC, and is now in the process of opening *The Independent Film School*. She has assumed a variety of roles in a number of films created by her students.

TWO GIRLS FROM DIFFERENCE DISTANCES: script excerpt

FADE IN:

TITLES

Slow, acoustic ISRAELI 70's MUSIC accompanies a slow pan highlighting the details of a young girl's drawings: an ocean, a boat, a plane, an island.

The music gradually drowns out as -
the deafening sound of a JUMBO PLANE crescendos.

CRASH CUT:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

AMERICAN 80'S ROCK-&-ROLL MUSIC now dominates.

An Israeli family watches TV in an unfurnished room:

ELLIE'S MOTHER and FATHER, 30's, chain-smokers.

TALI, 3, bored, climbs in and around her parents laps as they watch TV.

ELLIE, 11, is occupied writing a letter.

They all wear typical 70's Israeli outfits: jeans, hand-me-down T-shirts, barefoot or Israeli sandals.

Note: *italicized dialogue is spoken in Hebrew with English subtitles.*

ELLIE (V.O.)

To my best friend in the whole universe times infinity. You're about to be very jealous. My dad got his first paycheck and we bought a color TV! There are no subtitles, but my dad tells us what the show is about and then we understand. He said that if I watch a lot of TV I'll learn English very fast.

TV (V.O.)

GE - We bring good things to life!

EXT. ELLIE'S HOUSE - DAY

TITLE: Connecticut 1982.

This is a small house in an ordinary lower middle-class suburban town.

ELLIE (V.O.)

My parents rented a huge house, more like a villa. People in America don't live in apartments. If my parents like it in America then they'll buy a house for good. Until we come back to Israel.

Tali, Ellie's 3-year-old sister, draws on the driveway with a piece of chalk.

Ellie, on the stoop, surveys the neighborhood: quiet, not a soul in sight.

ELLIE (V.O.)

So far, my mom doesn't like it because there are no people on the street. My dad likes it because in America they respect your privacy. He said that up till recently people would have a gun on top of their fireplace and if someone walked on your lawn you were allowed to shoot him. By the way, we have a fireplace. Oh and by the way: we have a lawn.

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - DAY

Ellie's room consists of cardboard boxes that she had turned into furniture: a desk, a chair, a night stand.

Ellie is at her "desk", drawing the layout of her room.

ELLIE (V.O.)

I have my own room. With a full-length mirror. And I have a fan.

(As she draws it)

The squiggly lines is where the heater is, but it's not like the kind we have in Israel. It automatically heats the room if it's cold, so it can snow outside and you can still walk around naked. By the way, it's going to snow in the winter. I'll send you a picture if my dad lets me use his camera.

(Indicating in the drawing)

This is where I'm putting a picture of you. Please send me another one. I put the one I had under my pillow in the motel where we stayed, and I forgot it there.

Hearing a noise, Ellie perks up and looks out the window. Seeing the mailman approach she dashes out of her room.

EXT. ELLIE'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Ellie is on the stoop reading a letter.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

To my best friend in the entire universe times infinity. Thank you so much for the dollar you sent me. And thank you SO SO SO much for the second dollar you sent me. My brother got jealous which is what he deserves because he has E.T. stationeries and he didn't let me use one.

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Ellie sits on her cot, ready for bed. She reads.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

This morning my grandmother fell so I went to be with her and also to feed the chickens so she gave me this piece of wood. Isn't it amazing? I turned it into a key-chain so you can use it for your new house.

Ellie proudly fastens her key to a homemade key-chain made of plywood. On it, her name in Hebrew letters is written with magic markers.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Tali and Ellie follow their mother at the produce section of a supermarket, stopping by a roll of plastic bags.

ELLIE (V.O.)

Shlomit. In America there are things for free, everywhere you go. At the supermarket, they give you free bags. And nobody looks to see how many you take!

Ellie's mother rolls out several bags, tears them off at the perforation, and stuffs them in her purse.

As she turns to leave, temptation wins, and she turns back around to take more bags.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ellie's mother victoriously places dozens of little ketchup and mustard packets in a bowl.

Beside the bowl: plastic utensils, straws, and napkins that were clearly taken from a fast-food restaurants.

She then opens her purse and retrieves dozens of little matchbox packets.

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - DAY

Ellie stuffs an envelope with as many little sugar packets as she can fit in.

She places her letter inside, licks the envelope shut, and pounds on the envelope to flatten it as best she can.

ELLIE (V.O.)

On Tuesdays people put things on the street that you're allowed to take. For FREE!

EXT. CAR - DAY

Ellie helps her mother drag a table off the street and into the trunk of the car.

The 3-year-old Tali holds a lamp shade.

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - DAY

Ellie's room is now populated with street furniture. She sits at her "desk", not a ratty card table.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

Ellie, my mom is getting me a calculator for my bat-mitzva! I'm sending you a picture of it.

Ellie pulls out of the envelope a newspaper clipping of an ad exhibiting a calculator.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

By the way, even though Tislam is the best band in the world, I'm sending you a picture of Chava Alberstein because she's your favorite. Do they ever play her music on the radio?

Ellie tapes a Chava Alberstein poster to her wall.

INT. ELLIE'S HOUSE - DAY

Ellie's mother fixes up the apartment: Israeli paintings, fabrics, and hand-made knick-knacks from the Tel-Aviv "shuk" populate her environment:

She removes a wreath that hangs on the wall, left there by the previous tenants, and places a *Hamsa*.

She places a pair of Shabbat candlesticks and several menorahs on a shelf for display.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

Ellie, tomorrow I'm going to my dad's memorial service.

ELLIE (V.O.)

Shlomit, please tell me what's happening in Lebanon because the news in America don't tell you anything. By the way, I'm sending you another dollar and also some stickers. Aren't they cute?

On the mantle, Ellie's mother places a series of framed photographs, all of them of ARYEH: as a child, at his bar-mitzvah, as a soldier.

A commemorative book is placed by his photographs.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The family has supper. Ellie hates the food on her plate.

ELLIE'S MOTHER

The woman at the supermarket told me that she has a cousin in Israel.

(Amused)

In America, that's code for "I'm Jewish". You're not supposed to say here that you're Jewish.

ELLIE'S FATHER

They respect your privacy here.

ELLIE'S MOTHER

I think you can say you're Jewish, you just can't say that you're a "Jew". "Jew" is a bad word, but "Jewish" is OK.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Ellie explores a thicket of abandoned woods.

ELLIE (V.O.)

I found a whole forest near the house that is bigger than the biggest forest in Israel. And there are real live squirrels in America! They don't look like the cartoons. My parents let me and Tali feed them, but a guy at my dad's work told him that they can have rabies.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

Today I got a letter that said that you got my letter. That made me very happy because I kept worrying that they wouldn't get there.

INT. ELLIE'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ellie and Tali are plugging in and propping up a fan.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

It's 10:15 in the evening which means that it's 3:15 in the afternoon for you. I wonder what you're doing right now.

ELLIE (V.O.)

It's 10:20 in the morning which means it's 5:20 in the afternoon and you're watching Shminiot Ba'Avir.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

I'm writing in tiny letters so I don't waste this stationary. Except I have nothing to write but I want to keep writing to you. Oh I know, let me tell you what I'm wearing.

Ellie and Tali turn the fan on, bring their faces up close and go: "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah", amused by the fan's distortion of their voices.

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - DAY

Ellie creates a piggy-bank out of a shoebox.

ELLIE (V.O.)

A Russian guy at my dad's work wants a baby-sitter so now I'm going to make three dollars an hour, and work 3 hours a week. That's nine dollars a week, which is 2700 Liras. Given my current financial situation, I'll be able to buy stamps, save money to call you on Rosh Hashana, and also buy your bat-mitzva present.

Ellie places her first few bills and coins in the shoebox.

ELLIE (V.O.)

I think I'm going to get you a bathing suit. What size are you?

INT. ELLIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Ellie reads a letter in bed.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

Ellie, today I walked by the building where you used to live.

ELLIE (V.O.)

Shlomit, I had a dream that you were sick with a fever and were throwing up. At least I got to see you in my dream.

Ellie hears the pitter-patter of tiny footsteps approach.

Tali stands at the doorway.

ELLIE

You want to sleep here?

Tali nods and rushes over to join Ellie in bed. Ellie places Shlomit's letter on top of a fat stack of letters.

The two girls fall asleep together.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Ellie explores the woods as usual.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

Ellie, don't EVER write that I don't have to read your letter if it's boring. I always read EVERY word, and it's never boring.

ELLIE (V.O.)

Shlomit, I'm crying on top of the paper on purpose so the ink will smudge and you can see how much I miss you.

SHLOMIT (V.O.)

Every morning I wake up thinking that you'll surprise me and be downstairs. But then I wake up and see that you're still gone.

Ellie finds a boulder and sits down.

ELLIE (V.O.)

I found a rock to sit on. And there is a rock next to it. So when I go there, I sit, and I imagine that you're sitting next to me.

We pull back to see Ellie sitting by herself -
the boulder beside her
is empty.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

An indiscernible rumbling of "R's" and "L's"...
many people talking... none of it understandable...

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

We are in a busy 6th grade class.

It's mayhem.

CHILDREN at various work stations, work busily.

A warm MRS. CAROL floats among the stations.

Ellie stands at the doorway, frozen with fear.
Overwhelmed. The sounds surrounding her make no sense.

Mrs. Carol notices her and approaches.

MRS. CAROL
You must be Ellie!

Ellie looks up, recognizing her name.

MRS. CAROL
(Gesturing with her hands)
Would you like to hang your bag in the
coat room?

Ellie doesn't understand. Mrs. Carol stands towering over her with a smile.

ELLIE (V.O.)
*Shlomit, today I said my first sentence
in English.*

Mrs. Carol tugs at her bag and points at the coat room.

MRS. CAROL
(Pointing)
Would you like to hang it over there?

ELLIE
The blue door?

MRS. CAROL
(Excited)
Yes! The blue door.

ELLIE (V.O.)
*I said "blue" first. And then I said
"door". In English, everything is
backwards.*

Ellie enters the coat room through a blue door.

INT. COAT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ellie stands alone in front of a row of backpacks. She dismounts her empty backpack and hangs it up.

Before entering the classroom, she stands for a moment, hiding out in the quiet solitude of the coat room.

Peering in, she watches the children bustling around in the classroom, their speech making no sense.

Scared, she remains in place.

Two GIRLS enter the coat room talking to each other as they rummage through their bags.

The two girls look like porcelain dolls: french braids, brand new back-to-school outfits, pretty skirts, matching tops, white stockings and lacquered shoes.

An awkward exchange of stares follows between Ellie and the girls until Mrs. Carol enters.

MRS. CAROL
You ready Ellie?

She's not.

But she follows Mrs. Carol out of the coat room --
and enters her new world.

INT. SCHOOL LIBRARY - DAY

The LIBRARIAN instructs the children as they sit quietly and listen.

ELLIE (V.O.)
My mom got a job teaching Hebrew at a Jewish school and there is an Israeli woman there, so now she has a friend.

As the librarian lectures, Ellie stares into space, not understanding a word. Her eyes catch sight of a map of the world that hangs behind the librarian.

ELLIE (V.O.)
By the way, maps in America cut Asia in half so their country is in the center of the world. Oh, and schools in America have libraries
(She sees a box of them-)
And free pencils.

Ellie is startled when the children suddenly get up in unison and roam around, browsing the stacks.

Ellie is disoriented.

Across the room, her eyes stop at:

THUY --

an Asian girl with a regal posture, reading quietly at another table.