

Dark Lullabies: Timeless film, timeless message

Irene Angelico sees renewed interest in her documentary about children of Holocaust survivors

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE JANUARY 22, 2014



“There was very little talk about children of survivors when we began filming,” Montrealer Irene Angelico says of her 1985 documentary *Dark Lullabies*, which received a new wave of attention after being screened at the Stratford Festival last year. “Survivors didn’t want to know that they had passed this horror on to their children.”

Photograph by: Phil Carpenter, The Gazette

MONTREAL — Montreal filmmaker Irene Angelico grew up pretty much in the dark about her roots. It was only in her mid-20s that she became aware of the lengths to which her parents had gone to survive the Holocaust, and that most of her extended family had perished in the concentration camps during the Second World War.

After the initial shock of discovery, Angelico was moved to make a documentary about the impact of the Holocaust on children of survivors and on her German contemporaries. She set out around this continent, and to Germany, Poland and Israel.

The result was the staggering *Dark Lullabies*, one of the most intensely personal looks at the Holocaust as seen by those like Angelico who had grown up in its shadow. The film went on to win all manner of awards. Canadian author Margaret Laurence called it “one of the most moving and powerful documentaries I have ever seen,” echoing most of the critical reaction to the doc.

Clearly, the message bears repeating. Almost 30 years after the release of *Dark Lullabies*, the Stratford Festival in Ontario requested the film to screen at its Forum last summer. The reaction was overwhelming, so much so that the Canadian Forces College in Toronto screened it last week to our future military leaders studying the sources of genocide.

As a further result of the demand, *Dark Lullabies* is being screened at Cinéma du Parc from Jan. 27 — which is International Holocaust Remembrance Day — to Jan. 30.

Angelico was as surprised as anyone at the renewed interest in the film. “The Stratford Forum was interested in the role of the outsider, which was its theme (last year),” says Angelico, who directed the doc with her husband, Abbey Neidik (*Shekinah: The Intimate Life of Hasidic Women*).

“They wanted us to compare *Dark Lullabies* to *Romeo and Juliet*. We didn’t quite get that at first. What I realized is that it’s the whole idea of crossing the chasm, which is what we did at the time in *Dark Lullabies*. There was very little talk about children of survivors when we began filming. Survivors didn’t want to know that they had passed this horror on to their children. So there was barely a recognition that this legacy had been passed on.”

The situation changed when Helen Epstein wrote the bestselling *Children of the Holocaust* in 1979. That was the first time anyone had really recognized this phenomenon.

“The idea of going to Germany and talking to the next generation of Germans, which we did, was absolutely outside the acceptable box,” says Angelico, who was born in Germany and moved with her family to the U.S. before settling in Montreal. “But it was that idea — of speaking not only to children of the survivors, but also the children of the perpetrators — that Stratford was interested in. They saw that as similar to crossing over the way *Romeo* did. It turned out to be a fascinating experience.”

The film and its makers have since received invitations from other festivals for screenings and question-and-answer sessions. “What’s interesting is that none of this is the result of our doing. We were worried when we went to Stratford, because we didn’t know how it would play after all these years.

“Even when we made it, the pacing of the film was slower, because it’s a weighty subject and not something that can be rushed. The pacing of documentaries today is much faster. But still, the film holds up.”

Angelico comes to the conclusion that she was “very naive” about the Holocaust when she undertook the project. She had only the most basic information on the subject and had picked up very little from her Polish-born parents.

“My mother wanted to bring me up free from this horror. I had avoided the subject like the plague in every form — films, books or discussions. I just didn’t have the emotional stamina to deal with it. Then it turned around, and this film was my way to come to terms with it. It was really intense.”

Though she began to research the subject in the late 1970s, it took close to six years to finish *Dark Lullabies*. Getting the film financed proved difficult, particularly because potential investors took a dim view of Angelico going to Germany to conduct interviews.

But as much of the film's power comes from those interviews as from the ones dealing with survivors and their children. While some of Angelico's German contemporaries were compassionate, others were either ignorant of the Holocaust or, more alarmingly, dismissed it all as a "Hollywood fairy tale."

"It's quite different now, but when we went to Germany back then, the overwhelming majority of young Germans we had spoken to didn't know about this history," Angelico recalls. "It was more of a silence, because the Holocaust wasn't being taught in the schools then. It was amazing denial. There were no memorials at that time. Very few people were talking about it. And what some who were talking had to say was most disturbing."

With the passage of time, Angelico laments, younger generations everywhere are losing sight of that period of history.

"The point is, we all have to become aware of what it is that incites hatred, racism and intolerance — all those elements that have never gone away. And, sadly, as the saying goes: Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

[Dark Lullabies](#) is screened from Monday, Jan. 27 to Thursday, Jan. 30 at 7 p.m. at Cinéma du Parc, 3575 Parc Ave.

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