

First to Stand: Irwin Cotler's Fight for Human Rights



Shaparak Shajarizadeh and Irwin Cotler on the right. Photo by Maurie Alioff.

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by Maurie Alioff – Québec Correspondent

(February 7, 2023 – Montréal, QC) Filmmakers Irene Angelico and Abbey Neidik's new documentary, *First to Stand: The Cases and Causes of Irwin Cotler* launched at Montreal's Cinéma du Musée in two packed screenings, followed by emotional Q and As. In an unusual move, the theatre decided to follow the December premiere with an extended run. After confronting many obstacles, including the COVID pandemic, and meeting other challenges, the couple was delighted by standing ovation

responses to their film. It looks like it has a bright future.

First to Stand had its Toronto screening on February 5 at the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema. Angelico and Neidik introduced the doc, which played to a large, enthusiastic audience.

In her heartfelt address, Angelico underlined a point Cotler makes at the end of *First to Stand*. “The film is about human rights heroes who find the courage to stand up to repressive regimes, who often pay the price with imprisonment or exile. And the film is dedicated to my brother, Mike, another kind of hero, who stood up to mental illness with enormous courage every day over half a lifetime. He passed away last week. I will miss him. It is practical to compartmentalize things into human rights or mental illness or other struggles, but what it is all about at heart, is every kind of courage and every act of kindness, every day.”

The documentary is a captivating movie with themes that couldn’t be more relevant in a troubling 21st century world riddled by rising authoritarianism and the persecution of people who rise up against it. *First to Stand* depicts former Justice Minister and Attorney General Irwin Cotler’s battles in defence of those who have been victimized and risk their lives in Iran, Russia and other autocracies.

Angelico and Neidik, who co-produced and co-directed for their company DLI Productions, collaborating with TVO, structured the film in what Cotler calls “causes and cases.” Each Cotler intervention tracked by the

doc represents a cause, each individual case stands for millions of people.

During an interview with the husband and wife team, Neidik told me, “There’s always a few people who say ‘This is bullshit; I don’t believe in this.’ And they stand up. And if one person stands up, other people get the courage to do the same.” *First to Stand* doesn’t beat around the bush. It makes the point explicitly. In the film, Cotler says that everyone can feed into anti-authoritarian energy. As Neidik puts it, “even if it’s just taking one little action. Not everyone is a Mandela.”

The subjects in the doc include Shaparak Shajarizadeh, an Iranian woman tortured and sentenced for protests that helped to trigger the current movement for women’s rights, and Ensaf Haidar the wife and voice of Saudi blogger Raif Badawi who was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1000 lashes for advocating freedom of speech. With Cotler’s help, both women are now living in Canada. Raif Badawi has been released from prison, but as the movie’s epilogue points out, he can’t leave the country and join his family.



Photo of Ensaf Haidar in Montréal by Maurie Alioff

Both Shaparak and Ensaf have been moving audiences in Q&As which have featured Cotler himself. According to Angelico, Cotler has been fighting for “justice causes” since he was inspired by his parents and poet Irving Layton, his impassioned teacher at Montreal’s Herzliah High School. At this point, Cotler became close friends with Layton’s protégé, [Leonard Cohen](#).

Angelico says that for Cotler’s parents, you had to “feel the pain of injustice” to be an advocate. Early in his career, Cotler was poisoned in Russia and found himself being rushed out of the country by the Canadian embassy. Working on behalf of Nelson Mandela in Apartheid South Africa, he got locked up. Angelico recalls that Cotler’s first job out of McGill University was to work for Middle East peace in Cairo. “And his first case was representing a Palestinian detainee.”

Angelico and Neidik met Cotler when they were launching their first film, *Dark Lullabies* (1985), which daringly depicts the Jewish children of Holocaust survivors meeting with the children of Nazis. Angelico, whose parents miraculously survived death camps, co-directed and is the film’s protagonist, sometimes coming face-to-face with unrepentant Hitler defenders. Angelico’s father Henry wrote a memoir of his nightmare and ecstatic liberation. Published as *Aftermath*, its intimacy and frankness makes it one of the best accounts of the Holocaust ever written.

Angelico remembers that when she and Neidik met Cotler, We “became friendly. He loved *Dark Lullabies*, and we were very taken by his

commitment over the years to human rights. As a human being, “he is very kind, tireless, and committed – and fun to be with. Even now in his early 80s, he’s hard to keep up with. Irwin is a real deal person.”

By following Cotler doing his work, and offering fascinating insight into how he maneuvers, First to Stand profiles the man while probing some of the most fundamental issues of our time. Since Dark Lullabies, Neidik and Angelico’s DLI Productions has released a wide range of one-off films and series, including *Shekinah* (2013), *Shekinah Rising* (2018), *Unbreakable Minds* (2004), *Vendetta Song* (2005), and *The Cola Conquest* (1998). Vision TV has the broadcast rights for the abbreviated TV version of *Reaching for Zion*, featuring Bob Marley’s granddaughter Donisha Prendergast and includes it in a package of films with a black focus.

I asked Angelico and Neidik about their lengthy collaboration. Do they have a system? “No system whatsoever,” Angelico laughed. “Chaos. Sometimes we co-direct and co-write. We co-produce pretty much.” While Neidik is an excellent cinematographer, “I never do the camera.”

Neidik, adds. “Often on location, there isn’t chaos, there’s a flow. Irene is incredibly organized, and I’m a lot more overview To capture the story, you have to be open to emotion, someone’s inner story. To get to the mind, you have to go to the heart first.” The couple’s son Toben joins the flow with his ideas and sound skills. But once they get into the editing room, and start debating choices, Angelico jokes, “It’s war.”

TV Ontario airs *First to Stand* on February 28, and in March, it will screen at the National Arts Centre during the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The Jerusalem Cinematheque plays it on February 28.

Also see: Read more about [Irene Angelico](#).

Also see: Waiting for Raif about Saudi dissident Raif Badawi [screens at the Victoria Film Festival](#).



Maurie Alioff is a film journalist, critic, screenwriter and media columnist. He has written for radio and television and taught screenwriting at Montreal's Vanier College. A former editor for Cinema Canada and Take One, as well as other magazines, he is affiliated with the Quebec media industry publication, CTVM.Info. His articles have appeared in various publications, including Canadian Cinematographer, POV Magazine, and The New York Times. He is the Québec Correspondent for northernstars.ca.
