

THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2015 ■ 11 YEAR, 5775

On fire
Woman ignites car at
Jerusalem gas station



DocAviv opens
TA's Int'l Documentary Festival
features 'Look at Us Now, Mother'

In today's Weekend*
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Making peace with her past

Among the offerings at the Tel Aviv's International Documentary Festival is 'Look at Us Now, Mother' – director Gayle Kirschenbaum's personal take on the rocky relationships between mothers and daughters

• By HANNAH BROWN

To paraphrase Mark Twain, every daughter complains about her relationship with her mother, but no one ever does anything about it.

No one except Gayle Kirschenbaum, that is.

Kirschenbaum made a documentary, *Look at Us Now, Mother!*, which will be screened at DocAviv, the Tel Aviv International Documentary Festival, which will take place on May 7-16 at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque. The movie will be shown on May 14 at 8:30 p.m. and May 15 at 6:45 p.m.

Look at Us Now, Mother! details Kirschenbaum's long, painful and funny journey to make peace with her mother, and with herself. That journey culminates in a moment when, while spending time with her mother at a film festival in France, she was able to "reframe the way I see my mother...I was able to close my eyes think of my mother as a little girl...and I imagined me as a little girl, we were both wounded little girls, both children who are hurt."

Getting to this point wasn't easy, as her film shows.

Kirschenbaum, who grew up on Long Island, always felt hurt and persecuted within her own family, as her extroverted and often outrageous mother, Mildred, encouraged her brothers to beat her up and tease her. Mildred was extraordinarily critical of Gayle, especially of her appearance.

"She wanted me to be the perfect Jewish princess daughter and I wasn't," recalls Kirschenbaum.

But in spite of the barrage of criticism with which she had grown up, Kirschenbaum, who studied art, became a suc-



STILLS OF Kirschenbaum and her mother Mildred in 'Look at Us Now, Mother!' The film tells the director's long, painful and funny journey to make peace with her mother, and with herself. (Courtesy)



cessful television documentary producer. She found the perfect subject for her directorial debut right in her own home: her Shih Tzu, Chelsea. Kirschenbaum's first film, the crowd-pleasing *A Dog's Life: A Documentary*, was produced by HBO and screened at film festivals around the world, to great acclaim.

Kirschenbaum found her next subject right under her nose. Actually, it was her nose.

"My mother has been after me to have this nose job and is convinced that if I had a nose job my life would be completely better," says Kirschenbaum.

In the short film *My Nose*, Kirschenbaum visits several plastic surgeons with her mother to see what they would do if they got their hands on her. She also gets feedback from others, including the late master documentary director, Albert Maysles, who became a mentor. Spoiler alert: Kirschenbaum decided to stick with the nose that her mother thinks of as a barrier to her daughter's happiness. The short film is witty and

original, with effects such as an image of Mount Rushmore with Kirschenbaum's face superimposed on it.

While doing a Limud weekend in the Catskills to present *My Nose*, Kirschenbaum got the idea to make a film about her relationship with her mother.

"People would come up to me and say, 'I love your nose, don't touch it,' but they also kept approaching me with their stories about their mothers. I started hearing people's life stories, and I thought, how you can get to a place where you can forgive the person who should love you?"

As a documentary filmmaker, she felt she had the tools to make this film. She knew how to research, and went through her father's 8mm home movies. She even dug her parents' love letters, from when her father was serving in the US military during World War II. She discovered a great deal she had never known about her family that changed her perspective significantly, including trauma that her mother had experienced in

childhood, which her mother had never spoken of.

Although she thought of this documentary as kind of sideline to her real work – she quotes the John Lennon line, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans" – the work on it gradually became the focus of her life.

"I had no idea what I was getting into. In every way, it was hard to make this movie. Financially, of course, because I stopped doing everything else. But the hardest part was the emotional stuff, and I wondered: How am I going to tell this story without sounding like a victim?"

Finding her childhood diaries was key to getting her in touch with the family dynamic she experienced growing up.

"I sat down started reading them, and I was back to being that wounded, hurt, angry child."

She also found drawing she had done as a child to express her feelings. This opened her up emotionally.

"I started crying full time,"

she jokes. "Crying and working on the film."

One aspect of making the movie that might have seemed tricky – securing her mother's cooperation on a film that portrays her affectionately but not always flatteringly – was actually quite easy.

"Here's the deal – my mother loves attention at all costs... *Psychology Today* called her a 'geriatric shock jock.' She's like a 90-something Howard Stern, she says things just to get attention. I knew that going in. She'll always say, 'I did it for Gayle, anything to make her happy.'"

Although her mother was in her late 80s when Kirschenbaum made most of the film, Mildred was up for anything – trips from her Boca Raton, Florida home to New York to visit with relatives, a visit to a French Film Festival and even to India. They also put a mother-daughter ad on Craigslist, looking for a father-son duo to date, and went into family therapy.

This funny and moving film was financed in part by a successful Kickstarter cam-

paign, and Kirschenbaum is in the midst of a new campaign, to raise funds to develop and share the method she developed for dealing with her mother, that she feels can help with all difficult relationships. Details about the new campaign and the movie are available on the website, lookatusnowmother.com.

"My mission is to share this with people. I've learned you can't change anybody else, you can just change yourself."

Kirschenbaum says she has gotten to a place where "criticism is powerless over me."

The turning point for her was that moment in France when she was able to visualize her mother as a little girl, dealing with family trauma.

When the going gets tough with Mildred, and it still does, Kirschenbaum says, "I just close my eyes and think of my mother as a little girl...I do this with anyone who's difficult. I realize they have problems, and it's a way of healing myself."

Sharing this method with others is "my accidental life mission."

Kirschenbaum is also working a new television show, which she isn't ready to talk about yet, but is plenty busy promoting the movie.

Kirschenbaum wants to show the film to as many audiences as possible: "I finally got the film I wanted. I wanted to get a message across and I wanted to take you on an emotional journey."

To order tickets to the DocAviv screenings, go to the website at <http://www.docaviv.co.il/2015-en/films/look-at-us-now-mother>. To find out about upcoming screenings in other parts of the world, go to the movie's website at lookatusnowmother.com.