

*Samuel Goldwyn*  
SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS

# PAST LIFE



A film by  
Avi Nesher

Israel/Poland • 109 min. • 2016

\*\*Toronto International Film Festival 2016 (official selection) \*\*

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## **SYNOPSIS**

### **SHORT SYNOPSIS:**

Follow two rebellious Israeli sisters, in 1977, as they delve into the dark mystery of their father's life in Poland during World War II.

### **LONG SYNOPSIS:**

Inspired by true events, PAST LIFE tracks the daring 1977 trans-European odyssey of two sisters – one an introverted ambitious classical music composer, and the other a combative liberal magazine editor. As they try to unravel a disturbing wartime mystery that has cast a foreboding shadow on their entire lives, they realize that freedom from the shackles of the past requires painful sacrifices, as does the struggle to discover one's unique voice.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My parents survived the Holocaust – that is a fact. But how they managed to come out of the inferno that has claimed the lives of 6 million Jews – I will never know for sure. There is the official version, but there are also rumors. Some rumors are more troubling than others – I have never dared ask my parents about this particular part of their history and my very reluctance to do so has always troubled me.

I am very much aware that growing up in an atmosphere of secrecy, anger and guilt affected my life. Now, disturbingly enough, I see it beginning to affect my children's life, too.

World War II ended in 1945 and it took the world seven decades but finally everyone seems to have moved on –everyone, that is, except for the sons and daughters of those Holocaust survivors, the very people who constitute the vast majority of the population of my homeland.

To be clear, the sheer horror, ferocity and unequalled scale of the Holocaust have created a trauma that has become part of our personal and national DNA. Slippery politicians know only too well how to press the Holocaust button and activate reactions that would do Pavlov proud. Though there are not many Holocaust survivors left, the trauma has been passed on to us and it is still very much a part of our present and even more so, a part of our collective subconscious. It is a deeply rooted trauma that is very difficult to overcome, but overcome it we must if our children are to have a future.

My diehard attempts at dealing with this trauma are through my art – ultimately that is what the heroine of PAST LIFE tries to do. John Cassavetes once said that a film offers a unique opportunity to challenge someone's point of view in a mere two hours. When I wrote PAST LIFE I was trying to reach out, let people know that la guerre n'est pas "finie", but I also found this to be a great opportunity to exorcise my own inner demons. Making PAST LIFE made it possible for me to ask questions I never dared ask my parents. I can only hope the film will rise to Cassavetes' dare and challenge the way our parents' past lives shape our present.

## FILMMAKER BIO

### **Avi Neshet (Writer / Director)**

Avi Neshet is considered one of Israel's all-time greatest filmmakers. His acclaimed films have garnered multiple Israeli Academy Awards and over two dozen nominations. Among many awards, he recently received the Cinematic Excellence Award at the Haifa Film Festival, the Outstanding Achievement Award at the Jerusalem Film Festival and the prestigious Landau Award for Excellence in the Arts.

Neshet's early features, "The Troupe" (1977), "Dizengoff 99" (1979) and "Rage and Glory" (1984) are considered Israeli classics. His latest features – "The Secrets" (2007), "The Matchmaker" (2010) and "The Wonders" (2013) – were all official selections at the Toronto International Film Festival, as well as in many other festivals, and were all accorded great critical acclaim.

Neshet's most recent film, PAST LIFE – the first installment in a trilogy that deals with the stranglehold of the past on the present - is, again, an official selection at TIFF 2016. Neshet is currently working on "Valley of Ghosts" – the second film in said trilogy.

## CAST BIOS

### **Nelly Tagar (Nana Milch-Kotler)**

A sought-after actress, star of Israeli blockbuster “Zero Motivation” winner at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival. A role that landed her in IndieWire’s 20 best performances of 2014.

### **Doron Tavory (Baruch Milch)**

A highly acclaimed theater actor. Since 1974 a member of the Haifa, Beersheva and Gesher Theaters. Among his awards, Tavory is the first actor to ever win The Landau Award in acting category.

### **Joy Rieger (Sephi Milch)**

A young actress who got her break at the television hit “The Greenhouse”. Currently she is playing one of the leads in a new staging of Ibsen’s “The Pillars of Society” in the Cameri Theater.

### **Evgenia Dodina (Lusia Milch)**

One of Israel’s most admired and successful film, and theater actresses, with 4 Ophir award winning films in her resume – “Saint Clara” (1996), “Circus Palestina” (1998), “Yana’s Friend” (1999) and “Nina’s Tragedies” (2003).

### **Rafael Stachowiak (Thomas Zielinski)**

Studied acting at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin. Since 2009 he is an ensemble member of the “Thalia Theater Hamburg”. In 2014 he received the Rolf- Mares-Award for his outstanding performance in the play “Moby Dick.” Since 2007 he has appeared in various feature films and TV productions” such as Lollipop Monster” (2011), “Tabu – Es ist die Seele ein Fremdes auf Erden” (2011), “Tatort – Borowski und der Himmel über Kiel” (2014) and “Naked among Wolves” (2015).

### **Tom Avni (Jeremy Kotler)**

Theater and screen actor, and translator for theater. Had his first debut in 1996 at the age of 9. His career included various starring roles on stage and television. His current performance as Romeo in William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in the Israeli theater led to further critical acclaim.

### **Katarzyna Gniewkowska (Agnieszka Zielinska)**

Graduated from the Drama School in Krakow. In 1987 started working in one of the most acclaimed Polish “theaters, Narodowy Star y Teatr”, where she performed many unforgettable roles and received many awards. Gniewkowska appeared in films by Jerzy Janicki, Edward Skórzewski, Andrzej Wajda, Wojciech Smarzowski and lately for Marcin Wrona in the highly anticipated movie “Demon.”

### **Muli Shulman (Uri Lotan)**

Has worked in repertoire and fringe theaters throughout Israel since 1993. Most recently Shulman starred in several acclaimed Beersheva Theater productions. His debut TV appearance was the lead role in the hit television series “Irreversible”. He is now starring in the television satire “So It Goes”.

## **EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION WITH ELLA SHERIFF (BARUCH MILCH'S DAUGHTER)**

### **Growing Up in a House with a Secret**

The secret was always there. At times, it came close to revealing itself, but then it did not – and that was the hardest part. Our parents always told us, “The terrible things we went through, the things we saw...” But they never said what actually happened there. Those words were always spoken in moments of anger. It was terrifying to know that our parents had a secret, but never knowing what it might be.

In fact, the atmosphere was consistently grim. There was never a feeling of a happy childhood. We could not share our own distressing experiencing with our parents, either, and yet on the other hand we girls were always overprotected, especially by our father, and we could not understand where this anxiety was coming from, the constant fear of loss.

We first read our father's Ten Commandments in the diary he wrote, and as we did, we realized why we grew up the way we did. Our father raised us according to these terrible Ten Commandments he had written.

### **Baruch Milch's Ten Commandments**

(from his book “Can Heaven Be Void?”)

#### **And these are my Commandments:**

1. Thou shall have no other Gods before yourself.
2. Do only that which benefits you, and do not sacrifice for others.
3. Live life to its fullest and enjoy every moment.
4. Love yourself above all.
5. Do not have faith – the sky is empty.
6. Do not do unto others that which you would like done unto you.
7. Do not strain your mind for naught.
8. Toughen your heart and do not heed it.
9. Do not get too close to people, and do not bring them closer to you.
10. Do not be gullible, and trust no one.

I'm glad to say that my father was only partly successful in raising me this way, because I do believe in people, but I do not believe in God, and nothing can change that. The Ten Commandments were a much bigger influence on my sister; I was able to avoid their gloom and grew up to be more of an optimist, while my sister was more vulnerable, and protected herself with a tougher façade.

My talent as a composer was discovered at early age, and my teachers could not help but recognize it. And yet, they always had this desire to control and shape my talent in their own way. My character in the film is very similar to who I am in real life. There

was also a reference made to my appearance, to the dissonance between my physical appearance and my aspirations of becoming a composer and singer. Everyone could understand the singer part, but a classical composer, this they could not grasp, because composing music was a man's job. There was this feeling I got from my teachers, most of whom were men, that I was aspiring to a place that might be beyond my abilities, and that it might be

better if I were to aim lower. But I believed in myself, in what I had to say musically, and so, with great stubbornness, I carved a niche for myself as a classical composer.

One could say that our father was the catalyst; he brought us up like boys, not to depend on anyone, not even our partners. This meant we both had to have a profession and be very successful at it. My sister chose the theater, while I chose music. Our choices disappointed our father very much; he'd hoped we would choose something more practical, or follow in his footsteps and become doctors.

## **ABOUT CREATING THE PAST LIFE SOUNDTRACK - YISHAI STECKLER**

My first encounter with Avi Neshet in the fall of 2014 was the beginning of one of the most fascinating creative processes I have ever taken part in. My work with Avi focused on two aspects of the film: for the screenplay, Avi sought to gain a deep understanding of the role of the conductor, the structure of the choir, the rehearsal process, the social relationships within the choir between the singers themselves and between the singers and the conductor. For the soundtrack, we met regularly over many months in order to select the music for the film. When I first read the screenplay, I knew I was going to play a significant part in this work that moves me in so many different ways: the Holocaust, music, dealing with trauma, growing up, and Israel in the seventies. The classical choir repertoire is extensive, and at the initial stages we listened to countless pieces to get an idea of where we wanted to go with it. This was a great delight for me as a musician, to work with a director who does not simply “lay” the music down onto the film but works in an almost reversed process: you could say the film in many ways grows out of the musical choices made for it. Choosing the opening piece for the film was critical for understanding the complex circumstances of an Israeli choir touring Germany in the 1970s. After a long deliberation between the classical European repertoire, the classical Israeli or the light repertoire, we decided to go for something rare, a Jewish liturgical piece in Hebrew dating back to the 17th century, written for the big Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam – “Hishki Hizki” by Abraham Caceres. The beautiful music and the poetry of the lyrics, which match the feminist spirit of the screenplay, made this piece ideal for the opening of the film. Other classical pieces that found their way into the film are: “A German Requiem” by Brahms, the “Cantique de Jean Racine” by Gabriel Fauré, an excerpt from the opera “The Pirates of Penzance” by Gilbert and Sullivan, chamber music by Ravel, piano music by Debussy, Chopin, Schumann, and of course two original pieces commissioned especially for this film and composed by Ella Milch-Sheriff and Avner Dorman. Tying all these together with the beautiful score, which serves the film wonderfully, is the French composer Cyrille Aufort.

A unique aspect of my work was collaborating on the piece of music for the film’s climactic scene with the composer Ella Milch-Sheriff (who is the basis for the character of Sephi). Starting out, we chose a text out of Ella’s father’s original writing. The text we chose, “Time Will Come,” expresses a wish and a hope for better days. The music had to be moving and thrilling, yet naïve and still “green,” as befits a young 21-year-old composer. Working with Ella was almost telepathic in the way we understood each other, and the results followed shortly thereafter. The piece is preceded by rough draft versions featured at different stages of the film, allowing the viewer to participate in the composer’s process on her way to the finale’s concert in Berlin, a kind of catharsis for all the film’s main characters, each to his or her best ability.



## ABOUT FILM MUSIC - AVI NESHER

**From an interview with director Avi Neshet that appeared in Cinema 2016, the magazine of the Israeli Film Critics Association:**

“For me, music is raw emotion and you need to understand the nature of the film’s emotion before you can start writing a script. For example, whenever I write a script that tries to deconstruct the driving forces that dictate Israeli history, I need to understand not only the tone of the music that will accompany the visual, but the arrangement and orchestration of that music as well.

Israelis like to think of their nation’s existence within the Middle East as a disharmonious one, but internally Israelis perceive the Jewish-Israeli experience as a very harmonious one. I find that perception to be only partially true, and my films often come to terms with traumas that haunt the Israeli collective subconscious.

We are a society that constantly generates conflicting narrative lines. The Israeli synthesis comes from a powerful thesis, the Zionist experiment, interfacing aggressively with an equally powerful antithesis, the forces of history, past and present, which oppose the idea of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East, and with Jews’ own ambivalence about Israel. This is a complex notion to convey in a film, and in my very first film, *The Troupe*, about an army performing-arts troupe, I thought it would be interesting to elaborate on that through musical counterpoint – namely music that included contradictory musical lines that kept colliding until they achieved (momentary) harmony.

Music has been a key element in all my movies, and there has always been interplay between music and story. In *Turn Left at the End of the World*, two teenage girls, both from immigrant families, come of age in an isolated Israeli desert town. One girl is from India, the other is Moroccan, and I used music to convey the culture clash. *The Secrets*, about religiously observant young women in Northern Israel, moves to a klezmer beat, as well as the liturgical melodies of Jewish prayer. A teenage boy is awakened to the power of sensuality and the call of the world beyond Israel through rock music, such as Steppenwolf’s “Magic Carpet Ride,” in my film, *The Matchmaker*. This subversive rock music supplants the placid, patriotic Israeli music he has grown up with, and these changes are reflected in the movie’s soundtrack and score as well as in the plot. In *The Wonders*, the brilliant Israeli hip hop band, Hadag Nahash, provides a beat that defies genre and mirrors the deepening complexity of the protagonist’s experience of Jerusalem. The scores for all these movies blend the musical and narrative elements to define the emotional core of the film, just as I have done with *Past Life*.

The idea to write *Past Life* came to me when I met the wildly talented composer, Ella Milch-Sheriff, the inspiration for the character of Sephi in the film. She studied at the Jerusalem Music Academy during the mid-1970s and had to constantly battle the patriarchal establishment of the academy that tried to discourage her from studying composition. “After all, has there ever been a truly significant or well-known female classical composer?” they kept asking her.

Milch-Sheriff started out as a classically trained singer in a choir, and because I love choral music, I found that a great cinematic asset. Choral music brings to mind liturgical music, because so many houses of worship feature choirs as part of their service and because so much choral music is sacred music. Since the main driving force in *Past Life* is the desperate need to find a path to forgiveness, I thought the use of human voices as the main texture of the

film's music would evoke theology, without my having to add images of churches or synagogues.

The film tracks Sephi's path to creativity, which is something all artists struggle with. The common notion is that you have to go into seclusion in some mountain cabin to reach enlightenment. I thought that to get past conventional notions of harmony, you have to burn down the cabin and deal with real life as it is - warts and all. The more difficult Sephi's life becomes, the more original her (and the film's) music gets. At last, she realizes that music is one of the very few mechanisms that offer us any solace when confronting life's unavoidable hardships."

## MUSIC CREDITS

### **Cyrille Aufort - Score**

Cyrille Aufort has composed music for feature films such as 9A directed by Reza Rezaï, Hell directed by Bruno Chiche, Splice directed by Vincenzo Natali, The Empire of Mid-South directed by Jacques Perrin and Eric Deroo and Omblin directed by Stephane Cazès. Omblin has met with critical success, receiving the Ecran Junior Award at the 2012. Cannes Festival. Cyrille was nominated for the prestigious “France Musique - SACEM” Award in 2011, recognizing the best film music composers in France each year.

In 2012, Cyrille Aufort continued with A Royal Affair (awarded the Silver Bear for best main actor and best scenario at the Berlinade 2012 and nine Robert Awards at the film festival in Denmark 2013), directed by Nicolaj Arcel, an original soundtrack co-composed with Gabriel Yared. Recently he composed the music, for “*An Ideal Man*” directed by Yann Goslan as well as Ice and the Sky, the new project by the director of March of the Penguins, Luc Jacquet.

### **Ella Milch-Sheriff - Composer of “The Time Will Come”**

One of Israel’s most performed composers in recent years, Ella Milch-Sheriff was born in Haifa, Israel. She began her career as a composer at the very early age of 12. She graduated in composition from the Rubin Academy of Music at Tel Aviv University.

Ella has composed operas, chamber, orchestral and vocal music as well as popular music and solo works. Her music is performed widely through Israel, (by the Israel Philharmonic/Zubin Mehta and all of Israel’s major orchestras and musical ensembles), Europe (Berlin, Vienna, London, Warsaw, Dusseldorf, Cologne, etc.) and the US (Chautauqua Festival, Washington DC, North Carolina, etc.).

### **Avner Dorman - Composer of “The Concert”**

The world’s finest orchestras, conductors, and soloists regularly perform Dorman’s music, and many of his compositions have become staples of the contemporary repertoire. Dorman’s music is championed by conductors including Zubin Mehta, Ricardo Chailly, and Andris Nelsons, and by soloists Gil Shaham, Martin Grubinger, and Hilary Hahn. The 2015-2016 season includes performances with the Cleveland Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony, as well as chamber music premieres at Carnegie Hall and the Phillips Collection.

### **Yishai Steckler - Soundtrack Producer**

Studied singing and conducting at the Rubin Academy of Music in Tel Aviv and the Royal College of Music in London. Served as House Conductor and Choir Conductor for the Israeli Opera for 11 seasons. Conducted the finest symphonic orchestras in Israel, including the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rishon LeZion Symphony Orchestra, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, the Haifa Symphony Orchestra and the Israel Chamber Orchestra.

Steckler has also conducted symphonic orchestras and in opera houses in Italy, Germany, Brazil, Romania, South Korea and France.

# CREDITS

Written and directed by Avi Neshet

## Cast:

Nelly Tagar - Nana Milch-Kotler  
Joy Rieger - Sephi Milch  
Evgenia Dodina - Lusie Milch  
Doron Tavory - Baruch Milch  
Tom Avni - Jeremy Kotler  
Rafael Stachowiak - Thomas Zielinski  
Muli Shulman - Uri Lotan  
Katarzyna Gniewkowska - Agnieszka Zielinska

## Produced by:

David M. Milch • David Silber  
Moshe Edery • Leon Edery  
Ruth Cats • Avi Neshet

Director of Photography: Michel Abramowicz AFC  
Editor: Isaac Sehayek  
Score: Cyrille Auffer  
Original Music: Ella Milch - Sheriff, Avner Dorman  
Production Designer: Eytan Levi, Daria Dwornik  
Costume Designer: Inbal Shuki, Aleksandra Staszko  
Sound Design: Gil Toren  
Sound Mix: Graham Daniel