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Hagana massacre libel resurfaces at film festival

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A discredited master's thesis which "exposed" the massacre of Arab prisoners of war by Hagana troops during the War of Independence has found new life as one of the seven films competing for this year's Wolgin Award at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

The emcee at Monday night's premiere screening read a disclaimer, but the film is clearly based on the notorious thesis by Teddy Katz. Katz's 1998 paper, suggesting a massacre perpetrated by members of the Alexandroni Brigade at the seaside village of Tantura near Haifa, initially received a grade of 97 at the University of Haifa.

Alexandroni veterans first heard of the allegations when they were splashed across the pages of Ma'ariv in January 2000 and they subsequently sued Katz for libel. Katz apologized in court, saying, "I now believe that there had ever been a massacre," but he retracted 12 hours later after receiving financial help for the trial from the PLO. In light of the court case, the university reexamined the paper and ordered Katz to correct the significant

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discrepancies between the oral history cassettes he recorded and his transcriptions. Finding his modified work unsatisfactory, the university took the paper off its library shelves and asked other Israeli universities to do likewise.

In the film, *Islands on the Shore*, three generations of an Israeli family get together one day at their moshav homestead by the sea. The handsome, blind historian son and his beautiful Arab assistant present the latter's graduate thesis exposing a massacre of Arab prisoners during the 1948 war that took place at the Arab village on whose ruins the moshav stands.

Although director Yeud Levanon officially denies that his film was inspired by the Katz affair, he supplied his publicist with quotes from Katz's thesis and out-of-context quotes from Ha'aretz concerning the Katz case. The publicist now faces a law suit.

The seaside setting is compelling proof of the Katz connection, and the film's closing credits thank Kibbutz Nahsholim, the seaside kibbutz located at the Tantura site, for allowing it to film there.

Teddy Katz says that he wasn't consulted during the film's production, and first heard about it recently from his lawyer, Avigdor Feldman, in connection with its publicist's legal problems. "I'm looking forward to seeing the film this Sunday. I understand the director built a plot based on my thesis, which is freely available on the Internet."

The real characters of the Katz affair make an interesting contrast to the fictionalized account presented in the film.

In contrast to the modest, pure-minded Arab female PhD candidate calling for the right of return who authors the thesis in the film, Katz is a 58-year-old caretaker of a class of teenagers at his kibbutz. He is a flamboyant Meretz activist often

found at the front lines of political rallies.

And unlike the 60-something reserve general politician and war criminal of the film, Katz's real-life target octogenarian is Benzion Friedman, born in Norfolk, Virginia, who joined the Hagana at the age of 16, served under the legendary Orde Wingate, and ended up commander of one of the Alexandroni Brigade's 300-man battalions.

Famed comedian Hana Laslau appears in the film as the chubby dean of the university, greedily scooping up humorous while agreeing to squash the thesis in return for an endowment by the battalion veterans. In reality, the pensioners had a hard time scraping together the money for a modest ad responding to the massive Ma'ariv article.

Festival spokesman Shauli Baskin explains that any Israeli film can compete for the Wolgin Award for best feature film as long as it meets the contest's technical requirements.

Islands on the Shore has been chosen to represent Israel at the 2003 Montreal International Film Festival and will be screened at all four Israeli cinematheques on July 25.

In his column in Friday's Ma'ariv, Dan Margalit wrote that the film made him long for Jenin, Jenin, director Muhammad Bakri's "documentary," which portrayed the Operation Defensive Shield battle, in which 50 Palestinians and 23 IDF soldiers were killed, as a massacre.

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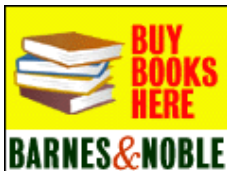
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