

## Tightly stitched stories

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Ben Jacobson , THE JERUSALEM POST

The past two years have been a whirlwind for Eliezer "Laizy" Shapira. As the air date for the finale of the first season of *Srugim* approaches, the Yes hit's cocreator, cowriter and director is busying himself with publicity matters (interactive screenings at the Jerusalem Cinematheque, news media interviews like this one) and business matters (negotiating the terms of an international export version of Season 1, talking with Channel 2 executives about syndicating reruns in the coming months).

The entire country seems to be enraptured by the phenomenon that is the show: an honest and witty glimpse into the lives of a clique of five compelling national religious 30-something singles living in Jerusalem's German Colony-Katamon area.

Meanwhile, Shapira and *Srugim* collaborator Chava Divon are in the midst of creative brainstorming sessions for Season 2, a process which expires soon, since the full scriptwriting team must work its magic in time for production to be complete prior to the December 2009 target air date.

"It's been crazy," he says with an enthusiastic smile.

But two years ago, Shapira, who grew up shuttling between the settlement of Karnei Shomron and Philadelphia, where his father served as a Jewish Agency emissary, was working in Jerusalem as a tour guide and cleaning apartments here and there for extra cash. He was already a few years out of the Orthodox-friendly Ma'ale film school, and the momentum that he had ridden following three successful projects - *Eicha*, a poignant but endearing comedy about settlers; *Saving Private Finklestein*, a documentary about an under-celebrated Jewish British WWI soldier; and *The Last Scene*, a meditation on the relationship between the Holocaust and contemporary memory - had wound down. Festival award statuettes stopped arriving, as did invitations to speak at film seminars and Jewish communities the world over.

Together with Divon and established producer Yonatan Aroch, Shapira had put together a 50-minute comedy for the Gesher institute, but the project fell through. Eventually, it evolved into ideas for a short film that was basically a preliminary version of *Srugim*, which was also nixed. But Aroch felt that the material was strong enough for a full TV series, and he managed to set up a deal for this summer's Season 1 with Yes.

WHAT GAVE the Yes executives the foresight to gamble on such esoteric and loaded material is a mystery, but Shapira always felt that the combination of wholesomeness and loneliness in the *Srugim* concept had strong potential to appeal to a mainstream secular audience. "We wouldn't be able to sell it without that," he says. "The Yes executives connected to it, and I felt that that was a strong sign that

it was different, but would speak to their own lives, too. There's something refreshing and exciting about innocence."

After getting the green light from Yes, Shapira and Divon put together a team of writers who were mostly Ma'ale alumni as well, and mostly living in social circles similar to those of *Srugim*'s characters. The team labored over scripts and hundreds of casting auditions for about a year, a process which ultimately shortened production into a marathon scramble. But Shapira is proud of the results of these efforts.

"It was like basic training, in a way," he jokes. "There was a great atmosphere and something special going on there."

One of the program's working titles was *Sex and the Holy City*, but eventually the team settled on *Srugim* (literally "knitted," a reference to the skullcaps worn by modern Orthodox Israelis). The title implies that the show is somehow emblematic of the subculture it portrays, a subculture which is virgin territory for the majority of *Srugim*'s viewers.

Although he takes comfort in the knowledge that sophisticated audiences know the difference between characters and the cultures they come from, Shapira takes the responsibility that comes with this phenomenon seriously. And while most of the religiously observant set has embraced the show, many have condemned it.

Leading national religious figure Rabbi Shlomo Aviner recently issued a halachic ruling that it was forbidden to watch *Srugim*.

"I knew it was going to come," Shapira says of the small religious backlash against him. "It's uncomfortable for me to see talkbacks saying, 'This director should take off his kippa, because he's not religious.' But I feel good about what we've done - no regrets. We do some scandalous things with provocative issues, but we do it well. It's not giving in to ratings. It's serious issues, in the cleanest and most modest way."

Shapira says that originally, the characters were less flawed and more pious, but as the creative process evolved, the writing team abandoned that concept in favor of one more nuanced and compelling. "We had to make room for them to repent," he recalls.

Moreover, in Shapira's opinion, the morality and identity struggles of *Srugim*'s characters serve to maximize the show's realism. "No one wants to make a PR movie about religious people," he says. "The result is more identification. Secular people can watch it and say, 'It's the same as our life, but different.' It's the same loneliness, the same searching for dates. The same but with a twist - somewhat different rules."

SHAPIRA RECALLS shooting a sexually charged scene and trying to set the right tone. "I was frantic about it," he says. "It was very big. But on the set, there was an atmosphere of holiness. It was gentle, intimate, caring. It's one of the things I'm most proud of. It's out of loneliness with these characters - it's not dirty."

Sitting and talking with Shapira, his ubiquitous smiles and laid-back gusto make it hard to remember that this is a man with burdens. He feels alienated by a sectarian culture that is built around family structures and has little room for 32-year-old, self-sufficient bachelors like himself. The popularity of his TV show has meant that he serves as Israeli pop culture's de facto ambassador of Jewish spirituality.

This is not a man who is content to rest on his laurels. Sure, the success of Season 1 has meant that he no longer feels the need to focus on establishing an ensemble and a tone, but, as he puts it, "on the other hand, we need to do even better [for Season 2]. It's like starting over. I think it will be good."

While he's been through the process once already, and experience helps, he still feels like he has what to prove. "We set a high standard... Now it's more fun, and we have the recognition, but there's a lot of hard work to be done."

*Srugim* airs on *Yes Israeli Stars* on Mondays at 10 p.m.

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