

FESTIVALS

November 10, 2013: World Premiere at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, at the Boston Jewish Film Festival, co-presented by The Doc Yard

November 17, 2013: New York City premiere at the IFC Center, as part of DOC NYC

ONE-LINE SYNOPSIS

At 16, Anna broke away from Orthodox Judaism. Years later, she confronts difficult truths about faith and reckons with her past.

PARAGRAPH SYNOPSIS

At sixteen, Anna Wexler had broken away from her Orthodox Jewish community in New Jersey, rejecting its religious doctrine and social restrictions, and severing ties to her family. This led to her running away from home, sleeping on the streets, and experimenting with sex and drugs with friends who had also left the Orthodox world. However, after studying in Israel, her friends had a change of heart and returned to the fold. Feeling betrayed, Anna launches a quest to understand their transformation by following three rebellious Jewish teenagers in their yearlong rite-of-passage journey from high school to Israel. Along the way, Anna is forced back to the roots of her own struggle to understand the meaning of faith and the essence of religion and identity.

LONG SYNOPSIS

At sixteen, Anna Wexler broke away from the Orthodox Jewish community in which she was raised. She found herself running away from home, sleeping on the streets of New York City, and embarking on an escapade of drugs, sex and adventure with her friends, who had also left the Orthodox world.

Then, something happened that drastically changed the course of her friends' lives: after high school graduation, they went to spend a year studying in *yeshiva* (religious seminary) in Israel. After this mysterious year, Anna's friends returned to the religion with great fervor. Her male friends now donned black hats, and many chose to stop speaking to women altogether. Anna's female friends now prayed three times a day, strictly observed the Sabbath, and wore long sleeves and skirts, even in the summer.

Unorthodox is Anna's quest to understand this "year in Israel," which is a rite of passage for American Orthodox teenagers. Were her friends coming to spiritual realizations on their own, or were the Rabbis brainwashing them? To answer this question, Anna sets out to follow a new generation of teenagers through the year in Israel.

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Tzipi, 18, is a mirror-image of Anna: a rebellious Orthodox Jew with intellectual objections to the faith. Chaim, 19, a half-Dominican bad-boy, goes to Israel because all his friends are going. Jake, 18, is a talented musician who defers admission to Berklee School of Music to go to Israel.

When the characters first arrive in Jerusalem they go wild, and in shocking scenes, *Unorthodox* captures heavy drinking and recreational drug use—inside the religious seminaries. But as the year progresses, the changes begin. As Anna follows the characters, she confronts difficult truths about belief and happiness, and is forced to reckon with her past. Four years after the “year in Israel,” the filmmakers pick up the cameras again: and what they capture is surprising.

Unorthodox follows in the tradition of *Devil’s Playground* (2002), about Amish teenagers exploring the world outside their secluded community. However, instead of using text-on-screen to describe religious traditions, *Unorthodox* uses Anna’s personal story to explain Orthodox Judaism; instead of scenes filmed from a distance, *Unorthodox* uses intimate footage shot by the characters themselves. *Unorthodox* is the story of the titanic contemporary clash between modernity and faith. It is an investigation of teenage naiveté caught in the powerful tide of religious dogma, and a depiction of the inevitable struggle with identity that is part of growing up. Outsiders to the community as well as those familiar with the Orthodox Jewish community will be shocked by the raw emotional honesty of the subjects and filmmakers in *Unorthodox*.

THE FILMMAKERS

NADJA OERTELT is a scientist and filmmaker interested in the intersection of science and the arts. She is currently a HarvardX Fellow, producing and creating a multimedia, interactive, educational open-source documentary on topics within neuroscience. She graduated from MIT in 2007 with a BS in Neuroscience. She has studied visual arts, film, archaeology and anthropology, directed and produced short documentaries for *Vice/VBS* and published research as a neuroscientist at MIT and Harvard. She has conducted archaeological fieldwork in South Africa and investigated the evolution of primates while at UCL in London.

ANNA WEXLER is a science and travel writer and documentary filmmaker who is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at MIT in the STS (Science, Technology, and Society) Program, where she is studying the social, ethical and legal implications of neuroscience advances. She graduated from MIT in 2007 with two Bachelors’ of Science degrees, one in Brain and Cognitive Science and the other in Humanities and Science with a focus in Writing. Afterwards, she was selected as a 2007-2008 filmmaker-in-residence at WGBH for *Unorthodox*. Her writing has appeared in numerous outlets, including Maxim, Budget Travel, Unpious, and has been anthologized in outlets such as Best Travel Writing 2012 (Vo. 9) and Best Women’s Travel Writing 2011. For more: www.annawexler.com

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT BY ANNA WEXLER

In Thanksgiving 2004, instead of going home for the holiday, I accepted an invitation to join my undergraduate advisor and her family for dinner. At the time, I was a sophomore at MIT, majoring in neuroscience. Even though my family lived just four hours from Boston, I wasn't too eager to see them. As a teenager, I'd rebelled against the Modern Orthodox Jewish faith in which I'd been brought up, and the wounds were still fresh.

Over dinner, the story of my background came out. I talked about how most of my friends who had rebelled with me had returned to the religion after spending a year in Israel. It wasn't just my friends: almost everyone from the Modern Orthodox community seems to return to the faith. I mentioned that I wanted to do a writing project that investigated this phenomenon.

My advisor's partner, a science documentary producer, listened to my story, increasingly intrigued. "The essence of documentary is to capture change on camera," he said. "Why don't you make a film?" I told him that I didn't know anything about documentary film. He said that it was easy, and that he would help me through the process.

I went back to my dorm and asked my friend, Nadja Oertelt, if she wanted to join me on the project. If we could capture this phenomenon on camera, maybe we could better understand it. Nadja and I had met during the first week of our freshman year and had immediately become close friends. She was the perfect filmmaking partner: where I had a writer's perspective and knowledge of the Orthodox world, Nadja had a background in arts and an excellent visual eye. That week, our journey began: two twenty-year-old neuroscience majors, with not a clue of what we were getting ourselves into.

That spring, Nadja spent nights poring over audio and lighting books, teaching herself the technical aspects of filmmaking. With the help of some funding from the MIT arts program, we drove to New York on the weekends, where we began the difficult task of interviewing and recruiting subjects. We filmed our first interviews on a camera that was borrowed from the "Intro to Video" class that I'd enrolled in. Finding subjects was no small feat, as many from the Orthodox community were suspicious about my motives: they wondered why someone who had left the community was coming back—with a camera.

By the summer of 2005, we'd found three subjects to take part in the project, and they agreed to film themselves during the year on small, handheld diary cameras. We filmed Chaim, Jake and Tzipi as they left the US, and spent a month filming their arrival and adjustment period in Israel. Meanwhile, Nadja and I were spending our junior year studying abroad in Cambridge, England, and the flexible academic calendar (and cheaper flights) allowed us to make several visits to Israel. During production, and again as we tried to put the film together in our senior year of college, Nadja kept insisting that my story was part of the film. I thought she was wrong: the film wasn't about me, it was about three kids spending their year in Israel.

It was only the year after college, when I was a filmmaker-in-residence at the Boston television station WGBH and trying to edit in earnest, that I understood the necessity of my role in the film. Experiencing the characters' journeys through my eyes would lend a personal feel to the story, and another layer of richness. I acquiesced to what Nadja and others had been insisting all along and became the fourth character in *Unorthodox*.

In 2008, we were struggling to put the film together. We weren't editors, and as first-time filmmakers with no prior connections in the documentary world, we got rejected from dozens of grants. By the end of 2008, we had a 20-minute "teaser" of the film, but the funding had run out.

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And we couldn't put our lives on hold for the movie: I moved to Israel, where I began a career as a freelance science writer, and Nadja moved to London, to get her Master's in Archeology and Anthropology.

Two whole years went by. We'd practically given up on Unorthodox. Then, the sudden death of my close friend Avi, who was one of the main inspirations for the film, prompted me to think about the film, and I knew it was time to finish it. Nadja and I picked up the cameras again in late 2010, five years after we first started filming. When we saw how drastically Chaim, Tzipi and Jake had changed, we knew we had an ending to the film.

I saved up all year so that I could devote several months to editing Unorthodox. In the summer of 2011, I holed up in my dad's guest room and worked late into the night, every single day. By the end of August, I'd shaped 150 hours of footage into a two-hour rough cut. When Nadja watched the footage from London, she called me, crying: it was the first time she'd seen our footage put together. But the film was still a long way from being finished: after talking to friends and advisors we realized that we'd need a professional editor to "bring it home."

We decided to turn to crowdfunding, which had sprung up in the years since we began the project. In December 2011, we launched a Kickstarter campaign. Much to our surprise, the Unorthodox trailer went viral in the Orthodox Jewish world. We raised nearly \$30,000 from over 300 people, and received hundreds of emails. The outpouring of support was invigorating: there was an army of people who believed in us and in the film.

I flew back to New York to begin working with Mark Juergens, an editor who was recommended to us by friends. Director-editor relationships are notoriously fraught with tension, but we truly lucked out with Mark. He was easygoing, pleasant, and had decades of experience editing features; his sense of pacing and emotion was the perfect antidote to my literal/intellectual editing style. We both fought for clips that we liked, and it was only when we were both happy with a scene that we considered it finalized.

Of course, the edit room is removed from the audience, so Nadja flew in from London in the summer of 2012, and together we spent weeks doing test screenings, gathering audience feedback, and re-editing. My friend and Associate Producer, Shira Katz, helped write the voice over and coached me on my delivery. Mark Suozzo did our original music. Daniela Sherer did our animation. Each one of these people, and many others, devoted an incredible amount of time to Unorthodox.

Nine years after that fateful Thanksgiving, Unorthodox will be having its premiere. When I think back on our journey, I sometimes wonder if the story of making Unorthodox is another film in itself, full of drama, plot twists, and an amazing cast of friends, advisors, and consultants. Nadja and I have changed, grown, and learned a tremendous amount through the project, which has defined the majority of our adult lives.

And our journey isn't over yet. It's now time to close the chapter on the "making of" Unorthodox and begin a new chapter, one where we release it into the world and let it take flight.

-Anna Wexler
Co-director, Unorthodox
Cambridge, MA
October 2013

MAIN CREDITS

DIRECTED BY: ANNA WEXLER & NADJA OERTELT

CAMERA: NADJA OERTELT

PRODUCED BY: NADJA OERTELT & ANNA WEXLER

EDITED BY: MARK JUERGENS & ANNA WEXLER

WRITTEN BY: ANNA WEXLER & SHIRA KATZ

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

AKIVA GREENFIELD

JEFFREY LEFKOVITS

MICHAEL LEFKOVITS

MARCIA BLAIR MEYERS

MUSIC BY: MARK SUOZZO

ANIMATION: DANIELA SHERER

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER: SHIRA KATZ

SOUND MIX: ALLEGRA DE SOUZA & RAMPRASAD SUNDAR

COLORISTS: ANANDA MOORE & NADJA OERTELT

MUSIC EDITORS: MARK JUERGENS AND ANNA WEXLER

ASSISTANT MUSIC EDITOR: ALLEGRA DE SOUZA