Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Queen Mimi

Evie Sullivan · Monday, December 14th, 2015

Five years ago, Yaniv Rokah, an inspiring Israeli actor, was working as a barista at a coffee shop on Montana Avenue in Santa Monica, California. One day, a woman from the laundromat across the street came into the shop. One look at her and Yaniv was mesmerized. She was unlike anybody he'd ever met. Her wrinkled face was glowing, her blue eyes sparkled and her smile was innocent and open. This was not your regular poor old, homeless lady who lived in a laundromat. This was a magical, spirited being.

"In the beginning, I didn't really know that I was making a movie," said the man who began following her around – first with his cell phone, later with a professional camera. "I wanted to capture Mimi's magic, because I realized she was so unique. I felt, here's someone in her 80's – let's not wait. Let me catch that magic before it moves on from this world, God forbid." What started out with casual conversations led to a friendship that aroused Yaniv's curiosity more and more.

"First, I wanted to have her on my phone, so I came up to her and I asked her some questions. That's how it started. There was just this small series of interviews through which I got to know her. She's so funny and positive and was making sexy jokes. The more I got to know her, the more I discovered about her. The idea to make a documentary grew and built. This is why it became a process of 5 years. Mimi is now 90! She turned 90 in August. And she's still the same – every day at the laundromat. Loves having fun and a lot of people come to see her every day. She gives them advice and in return, people give her gifts. She's quite a fixture in the neighborhood. She sits on her bench, and it's almost like going to see your therapist or pastor or something like that."

Mimi at the laundromat

Marie Haist, her real name, has been living for twenty years in the corner of the laundromat where she slept in a chair so she would not take up too much space. During the day, she worked folding laundry for the customers she befriended. With her cheerful personality and strength of character, people flocked to her.

"Do I know Mimi?" asks a young man in the movie. "Of course! Everyone knows Mimi. She's like the Queen of Santa Monica!" And another says of her: "She's a character. She is an artist. She's an artist of life." Mimi has movie star status on the posh shopping street of Montana Avenue. But even someone like Mimi can fall through the cracks of society. Marginalized women have been on the very bottom of the 50-year "War on Poverty" that made many homeless, sick and outcast.

Mimi's story unfolds as the typical experience of falling out of luck and surviving on scraps. After losing her house, she lived in her van that was taken away from her one day when she couldn't keep up the payments for it. Life on the street was the only way to survive. And that life usually hardens people. How did she manage to keep her spirits high, smile that disarming smile and stay healthy? That is what she tells us in Yaniv Rokah's award-winning film *Queen Mimi.*

L.A. premiere at the ArcLight on Dec. 13 as part of the Slamdance Cinema Club and limited theatrical release of Queen Mimi in February across L.A., Chicago and New York before its VOD and digital platform release in the early spring

On a stormy night some 20 years ago, Stan Fox, the very generous owner of the laundromat, saved Mimi from a life on the street – he let her stay inside his shop. It was there she took up residence during the day and helped customers to sort and fold their laundry. He never asked her to leave thereafter. She rested between rows of washers in a plastic chair, sometimes turning on one of the dryers at night when it became too cold. She never got as far as having her own bed there and because of that, she developed a muscle dystrophy in her neck. Mimi has been hunched over for decades now. But there is more to her than being an old lady cheering on well-to-do customers.

There is a twist in her story, a mystery she was hiding for a very long time and that enticed the thirty-something filmmaker. "I think because she was always so perfect and positive, I felt it was just too good to be true. Maybe because I'm an actor and I understand characters, I sensed the subtext. I wanted to explore it so I asked her, "What is the real story here? What is this all about – you living in the laundromat? Why is there no family to help you out?" I was determined. I wanted to find out.

Mimi and Yaniv

Yaniv Rokah was not the only one interested in the whimsical fixture of Montana Avenue. The actor and comedian, Zach Galifianakis, best known from the *Hangover* movies, was Mimi's "client" at the laundromat before he became famous. He struck up a friendship with Mimi and the two became very close. Mimi talks with affection at the beginning of the movie about the star. "This gentleman, his name is Zach and I can't pronounce his last name, it starts with a 'G,' he's on the program *Bored to Death*, do you know him? He used to live down the street and I have fluffed and folded for him!" Little did anybody know that this man would be instrumental for a positive change in Mimi's life. "I met Mimi in the late nineties when I was living in Santa Monica," says Galifianakis in the movie. "She worked and stayed in a laudromat where I'd do my laundry. We became chatty and then friends and we became flirtatious with each other since we were born in the same year (laughs) and we met at the laundromat where you meet all your friends!"

Mimi the Queen of the Red Carpet

Mimi became Zach's date at a few red carpet events and she liked the Hollywood glitz and glitter. Of course, the paparazzi had a heyday with her when she climbed out of the limousine and walked with Zach to a premiere. But that was not all. "After Zach left the neighborhood and became really famous, he felt that he should have done something for his old friend. First, he got her a cell phone, and then later an apartment so she didn't have to live in the laundromat, even though she kept

working there," says Rokah.

The documentary moved in the right direction, but not at the right pace that Rokah had hoped for. Mimi was all up for the game, but the young Israeli needed some help. "If we want a movie, you have to speak with Zach," he told Mimi. And she did. Rokah got a call from Zach one day and he said, "Why don't you come over and we'll do a short interview." The interview is an important part of the documentary, but it doesn't take away from Mimi's story. The film is about her. "Zach is an incredible person," says Rokah. "After the interview, he was like, 'Can you not mention that I got her an apartment?' I'm like, 'Zach, really? You're an amazing person that should be celebrated all over the world. That's an amazing thing that you've done for her. Why not?' And then he goes, 'Well you know what? You're right. It's your movie – you do whatever you want to do with it.' He's such a humble man. I think Mimi's a reflection of that. Mimi represents all of us in so many ways. Like a gigantic mirror that we look at and we want to just be better. We want to be that beautiful spirit that she represents."

Yaniv Rokah contributes his curiosity in finding out the truth about this homeless, elfish being to the fact that he's a foreigner. But it needs a special kind of foreigner who can document a life story in such a good spirit and sensibility. He reminded me that talking to somebody less fortunate than oneself, reaching out and being authentic with him or her is a fast and easy way to elevate our own spirit. Queen Mimi and the feel-good movie about her inspires us to do just that.

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