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Home Economics, Shoah Style

Maya Zack's short film, 'Mother Economy,' is poised on the edge of impending disaster.



Idit Neuderfer in a scene from "Mother Economy": Counting out portions for survival.

by George Robinson
Special To The Jewish Week

A few years ago, the Israeli artist and filmmaker Maya Zack went to Kosice, Slovakia, to look at the house that had once belonged to her grandmother. When she found it, she was unable to go in, but she tried to imagine what the interior might look like, both in her grandmother's time there and in the present. The imagined distance between those two eras — the prelude to the Holocaust and the epilogue of the communist era — is the subject of her stunning short film, "Mother Economy," which is playing at The Jewish Museum this summer.

The film opens with a slow overhead tracking shot across a table. We hear the sound of a sewing machine, which slowly comes into view. From

the overhead vantage point, we can see that a young woman is struggling to pull fabric through the machine, and then Zack cuts to the film's title. Then she cuts to a shot of the young woman, dressed in a high-necked, long-sleeved lace blouse, her hair up in a neat bun, to all appearances a young, probably European hausfrau from the 1930s.

Gradually the camera explores the apartment in which the film takes place and we become aware of many anomalies. The woman (Idit Neuderfer) uses a modern felt marker, the walls are covered pink-brown paper filled with diagrams of a house interior and life-size pictures of an absent family, the floors are similarly covered, with outlines around the household objects lying there, like silhouettes of the dead at a crime scene.

The entire film is brilliantly shot by Zack's frequent collaborator, Stanislav Levor, in an oddly evocative sepia-tone with just the slightest hint of fog or smoke. The soundtrack is composed of a carefully calibrated mix of domestic sounds (a pencil on paper, scissors cutting, the sewing machine, faint footfalls), a striking chamber score by Ophir Leibovitch, and radio broadcasts in German and English of World War II newscasts and snatches speeches by Hitler and Churchill.

The result of this mixture of anachronism and mysterious imagery is a haunting sense of impending disaster, or disaster already experienced, of a woman trying to recreate by sheer force of will and "home economics" a family and home that have been destroyed by all-too-conventional means and a historical moment that Jewish viewers know only too well. Zack never pushes her metaphors too far. "Mother Economy" is nothing if not understated and, at a running time of about 20 minutes, is just long enough to make its point and clear the stage.

When it is discussed by those who were fortunate enough not to have been present, one inevitable question is asked about the Shoah: "How did people survive?" On the most basic level, Zack's short film offers a chilling answer. In the film's second half, we see the young woman working with an abacus and notebook. Slowly we begin to understand that she is making calculations for a round noodle kugel, which we see here take out of the oven. Zack cuts once more to an overhead shot as we watch her use a protractor to carefully calibrate the size of the pieces to be allotted to each of the absent family, then she cuts it into several different-sized pieces and it lies there, an ominous pie chart. In short, some survived by reluctantly making just such calculations for survival. How much food do you need to go on living another day?

"Mother Economy" is, no pun intended, economical in its means and cunning in its design. Zack, who is a faculty member at Tel Aviv University department of film and television, has worked as production designer on several feature films; one suspects that her working methods aren't that different from what we see in this short film, adding another layer of meaning to an already impressively dense text. At any rate, despite its brevity, "Mother Economy" is one of the most powerful Jewish-themed films of the year and by itself well worth a trip to The Jewish Museum.

"Mother Economy" will be shown at the Jewish Museum (Fifth Avenue and 92nd Street) through Oct. 23. For information, call (212) 423-3200 or go to www.thejewishmuseum.org.

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