

The New York Times

Moshe Mizrahi, 86, Who Won an Oscar for 'Madame Rosa,' Is Dead

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Moshe Mizrahi, an Israeli director whose “Madame Rosa,” one of several movies he made in France, won the Academy Award for best foreign-language film in 1978, died on Aug. 3 at a hospital in Tel Aviv. He was 86.

His son, Daniel, said the cause was pneumonia.

Mr. Mizrahi, who was born to a Jewish family in Egypt that emigrated to Palestine when he was a teenager, did not begin directing feature films until 1970. But he started impressively: Two films that he shot in Israel — “I Love You Rosa” (1972) and “The House on Chelouche Street” (1973) — were nominated for Oscars for best foreign-language film. (Neither won.)

So when Mr. Mizrahi asked Simone Signoret, the French star known for her smoldering sexuality, to star in “Madame Rosa” as an aging former prostitute and Holocaust survivor — a frumpy character with frizzy hair who wears unappealing makeup and dresses — she put aside her resistance to the part because she admired his work.

“I tried to persuade him to do something else,” Ms. Signoret told The New York Times in 1978, recalling Mr. Mizrahi’s approach to her. “I tried to buy him, but he bought me.” Citing his upbringing in Egypt and Palestine (and later Israel), she added: “He’s immersed in the two cultures, Arab and Jews. They’re his two loves. I surrendered.”

Based on a novel by Romain Gary, the movie follows Rosa as she raises the children of other prostitutes in a small apartment in Paris and grows particularly close to Momo, an Arab boy.

The Los Angeles Times film critic Charles Champlin wrote in his review that “one of the most impressive aspects of Mizrahi’s skills as a filmmaker is his ability to convey the real world at its most sordid without creating a movie that is itself sordid, or nearly so.”

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Ms. Signoret won the César Award, France's equivalent of the Oscar, for best actress. And "Madame Rosa" remains the only winner of the Oscar for best foreign-language film directed by an Israeli (although it counted as France's victory).

As an Israeli, Mr. Mizrahi felt ambivalence about winning the award because his film was made in France, and one of the four films it beat was "Operation Thunderbolt," Israel's entry in the category.

"Because I won for a non-Israeli film, it made me 'not one of us,' " he told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz in 2009. "Outside Israel, the Oscar did help, but of course that fades over the years."

He would continue to make films in Israel, France and elsewhere. He directed "Every Time We Say Goodbye" (1986), with Tom Hanks, on location in Jerusalem, and "War and Love" (1985), a Holocaust story set in Poland that featured Kyra Sedgwick, was filmed in Hungary.

Moshe Mizrahi was born on Sept. 5, 1931, in Alexandria, Egypt, to Haim Victor and Dora (Behar) Mizrahi. His father, a store clerk, died of an abscess when Moshe was 9, forcing his mother to do housework to support her four children.

Entranced by movies early on, Moshe saw as many as seven films a week in Alexandria, mostly from the United States.



Simone Signoret in Mr. Mizrahi's "Madame Rosa," which won the Academy Award for best foreign-language film in 1978. Atlantic Releasing Corp./Photofest

"At some point," he told Haaretz, "I discovered there was such a thing as directors, and that they were the magicians who made the movies."

Daniel Mizrahi said in an email that his father "credited growing up in cosmopolitan Alexandria as being decisive in establishing his humanistic and pluralistic worldview, and he was a firm believer and supporter of the possibility of good will and understanding between Arabs and Jews."

The family left for Palestine in 1946. During the Israeli war for independence two years later, Mr. Mizrahi's brother, Shabtay, was killed in an Egyptian bombing raid. Mr. Mizrahi did not stay there for long. In 1950, courtesy of a Jewish group that paid his way, he moved to Paris, where he satiated himself on films noir and westerns and hoped one day to work in America.

Returning to Israel, he worked as a newspaper reporter and wrote Hebrew movie subtitles before heading back to Paris in 1958. There he found work in television and was eventually hired by Telfrance Films, where he rose to production manager and producer.

When he turned to film directing, he used some of his family's lore in telling cinematic stories. For "I Love You Rosa," he drew on his maternal great-grandmother's experience for a story set in the late 19th century about a young widow (Michal Bat-Adam) obliged by Old Testament law to marry her brother-in-law, who is only 11 years old.

In his review for The New York Times, A. H. Weiler wrote that Mr. Mizrahi "sticks to his theme and avoids religious or distaff proselytizing," adding, "He is a refreshingly professional craftsman who allows a viewer his own judgments."

A year later Mr. Mizrahi directed "The House on Chelouche Street," whose story echoed his own: A widow moves her family from Alexandria to Israel before its independence.

Those films helped establish his reputation for creating strong matriarchal characters. "I was raised in a Mediterranean type of culture where women were predominant," he told The Los Angeles Times in 1982. "The households were filled with powerful mother figures — grandmothers, aunts and all the rest. It was the kind of background that helped me feel my material thematically."

He married Ms. Bat-Adam, a screenwriter, actress and director, in 1980, after she had appeared in five of his pictures. They continued to collaborate for many years, she as an actor in his films and he as an actor and producer in some of hers. In "Rachel's Man" (1975), Ms. Bat-Adam played the title role, while Mr. Mizrahi directed and wrote the script with his former wife, Rachel Fabian.

In addition to his son and wife, Mr. Mizrahi is survived by his daughter, Orit Mizrahi; two sisters, Silka Erez and Lea Pinto; and two grandchildren.

Mr. Mizrahi continued to direct until 2007, when he made “Weekend in the Galilee” in Israel, his first film in 11 years — and also his final one. He had been teaching cinema at Tel Aviv University since the 1990s, which occupied him as directing assignments became scarce because of financing and other issues, his son said.

But Mr. Mizrahi suggested that he had fallen out of step both with Israeli and with French culture — and it did not seem to bother him.

“Anyway, if you’ve directed quite a few movies,” he said in remarks cited by Tablet magazine after his death, “it’s not that big of a tragedy if you never direct another one.”

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