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## Interview with Vladimir Friedman

By Lars Kristensen and Andrei Rogatchevski

Vladimir Shulimovich Friedman was born in Kursk in 1959. He graduated from GITIS (State Theatre Institute) in Moscow and played dozens of different roles on stage, in film and on television, in the Soviet Union and in Israel. He is one of the most recognizable Russo-Israeli actors both in Israel and beyond – and a fine guitar poet, too. We've been talking to Mr Friedman about his career in cinema.

### How did your film career in Israel begin?

By pure chance. I came to Israel in 1991 and, strangely enough, did not even know for five or seven years, while I worked in Israeli theatre, if Israeli cinema existed. I remember well the moment when an Israeli actor asked me: "Who's your film agent?" – "I don't have one." – "How do you act in films, then?" – "I don't. Do they make films in Israel?" – "Of course they do, what's the matter with you?" These days, many new Russian-speaking arrivals in Israel get in touch with me and ask about agents, casting directors and so on. I had no idea about such things back then.



My first film role came about accidentally. It was a film called *Ha-Chaverim Shel Yana* (*Yana's Friends*), released in 1999. They were looking for an actor to play a part – the part that ultimately went to me, even though I was not in any of the agents' databases at the time. Luckily for me, an actress, who had already been cast in *Ha-Chaverim*, saw me acting before. She said to the director Arik Kaplun: "Have you tried Vladimir Friedman?" – "Who's that?" – "An actor." – "He's not registered with any agent." – "I know him." She phoned me and I came to do a screen test, for the first time ever. (In the Soviet Union I only worked in the theatre. Film camera was something entirely new to me.) I got the part straightaway.

And on the first shooting day – I hadn't quite understood what happened but it was explained to me afterwards – one of the film's producers came to the set and got in touch with the person who is now my film agent, Zohar Jacobson. He told her: "There is this new Russian actor on the set. He is not very experienced but seems to be quite good. I have a feeling that he'll be in demand. Would you consider taking him on?" In my case, it was fortunately the opposite of what usually happens. Normally it's the actor who is looking for an agent. And here, miraculously, it was an agent who called me and asked: "Would you like me to represent your interests?"

This was my first cinema role. At the first rehearsal, during a break, the famous actor Mosko Alkalai (who played Yitzhak) asked me in Hebrew: "So, how many parts did you play in your Soviet Union – about a hundred?" – "This is my first." – "How come? I can see you know full well what you're doing." It came as a kind of shock to me. I even asked the director what Mosko meant. In any case, I felt fairly confident on the set. Not sure where the confidence came from.

Now I know the answer. My Soviet theatre training (five years at a Moscow theatre institute) helped me a great deal. I remember well what my teacher Elina Bystritskaya taught us: don't playact. It's enough to think on stage and in front of the camera – and this will be reflected in your face and eyes. This advice has been part of my subconscious ever since.

### Are you still with the same agent?

Yes. The only difference is that when I joined it, the agency represented ca. 150 actors. Now it represents around 500, 250 men and 250 women. When someone is interested [in trying me for an assignment], they call the agency and the agency helps them find me.



### Does it mean that these days, more than twenty years later, when casting for a particular role, someone thinks specifically of you?

It would have been nice if it happened exactly like that. But what comes first is the script, even with the directors who filmed me in their graduation projects when they were students, and it seemed to me that we'd become friends and work together regularly... If the script has no part for you, what will you play? As a rule actors are secondary to the story (I am talking about myself here). If it's an all-female cast, where do I fit in?



**It looks as if a promising bright talent is usually given a chance or two in the Israeli film industry but may nevertheless disappear off the radar even after a significant breakthrough. How do you explain the fact that the prize-winning *Ha-Chaverim Shel Yana* has had such a lasting impact on your film career?**

I am not sure that the phenomenon you are referring to is linked to a particular profession, be it a director's, a scriptwriter's or an actor's. As they say, anyone can do an acting job well – once. The problem is, what's next. So I'd like to tell you about



what helped me to continue working as a film actor on the same level that I've started at.

As far as *Ha-Chaverim Shel Yana* is concerned, no one knew that it would become the best Israeli film of the year, would travel to festivals, etc... Meanwhile, my agent informed me that someone would like to try me for another role. The film was called *Circus Palestina* – and upon its release it became the best Israeli film of the year, too. So two films released one after another became the best Israeli moving pictures in a row – and I acted in both of them! These two first successes have thus made me a kind of lucky mascot.

The *Circus Palestina* screen test was rather remarkable. When my agent sent me the script, it had the part of a circus director in it, a Mangiafuoco type, a corpulent man twenty years senior than his lover (who was played by [the well-known Russian-speaking Israeli actress] Evgenia Dodina). I was not corpulent then and Dodina is only five years younger. I said to the agent: "Why screen-test? I don't fit the image!" She replied: "It doesn't cost to have a go. The script is the director's own and if he likes you he can alter it". And it turned out to be yet another lucky moment for me.

I went to the test. There I saw Evgenia, whom I had met before, and the [Russian Israeli] cameraman Valentin Belonogov who'd filmed *Ha-Chaverim Shel Yana*. He didn't expect me to turn up and said in Russian: "Hello, which role are you being tried for?" – "The circus boss". The director Eyal Halfon turned to me: "Have you read the script?" – "Yes." – "But the circus boss must be sixty-three, not thirty-eight years old!" – "Well, I was told to come anyway, and that an informal person like yourself might change the script if my acting proves to be likeable." – "Do you know your part?" – "Yes." – "Have you met Evgenia before?" – "Yes." – "Have you met Valentin before?" – "Yes." – "OK, let's give it a try." After the test Halfon said: "It was me who imagined that the circus boss should be fat and old. Now I can see that you and Evgenia look well together. Let's keep it like that".

And then fate smiled at me yet again. A film that in Israel wins accolades as the annual best usually represents the country at international festivals, big and small. And organisers tend to save money. A couple of times it so happened that it was decided to send me alone as an actor who took part in both *Ha-Chaverim* and *Circus* and could talk about the two films together. And as I speak Russian and am a guitar-playing singer-songwriter, I could also give concerts to Russian-speaking communities. Three in one. Thus by sheer magic I attended a number of festivals and saw the world. There were several other actors in *Ha-Chaverim*, which started together with me but didn't continue the same way. This is rather cruel. The agent loses interest, while saying "These are mine" about the more successful actors.



#### How do you manage your busy schedules as a film and theatre actor?

This question should better be addressed to a major Hollywood, or former Soviet, actor who plays thirty theatre shows a month and then acts in films if s/he wants to. I haven't been in such a situation. I am a freelancer in charge of my own schedule. If I am cast in a film part after screen testing (the testing is obligatory more often than not), I am asked: "Are you available on dates such and such?" I reply, for example: "Can't make this and that date, I've got a show on". If the film needs me badly, my show is taken into consideration. If not, they may say: "Can you move your show to alternative dates?" If I can't, they'll employ a different actor.

Yet only once it occurred that I was invited to act in two films that were shot simultaneously. I'd love to be in both. One of them, *Letters from Rishikesh* (2004), in which I was engaged in one of the leading parts, was being made in India and another in Israel, and the schedules partially overlapped. Thanks to my agent, who held sleepless negotiations, I was extracted from one particular scene and thus managed to participate in both movies. As a rule, however, there is no need in compromises like this. I would be glad if they did occur, so that I'd have many more films and roles and get to choose all the time.



#### Do you prefer playing leads, supporting roles or bit parts? (There's nothing wrong with bit parts, some of which can remain memorable long after the film itself is forgotten.) Is our impression correct that in films directed by Russian-speaking Israelis you are more likely to land a bigger role?

The size of the role does not matter to me. There are smaller parts that can be a thousand times more interesting than the leads. It is true, however, that my roles in Russo-Israeli cinema tend to be more sizeable. This is probably because Russo-Israeli scriptwriters are people with a life story similar to mine, and therefore are more likely to write a part that I could play. In Israel (and elsewhere) there are certain stereotypes about male Russian speakers (partly based on reality): they drink too much, they work as guards or somebody's assistants... To my advantage [as an actor], some 25% of Israelis speak with a Russian accent, which is common enough not to grate on the ear, like the sound of rustling leaves. Yet when an Israeli scriptwriter works on a script about contemporary life and includes a character who speaks Hebrew with a Russian accent, this is something familiar from the writer's personal experience, e.g. a dentist. A character like this cannot hold the dramatic interest because the [non-Russian speaking] Israeli scriptwriter does not know enough about the inner life and background of such a dentist. But a Russian-speaking Israeli scriptwriter and director (and there are more and more of these, fully trilingual,

graduating from Israeli film schools) can put a character like this at the centre of action – and trust me with impersonating this character.

#### You've also had experience with Arab cinema when playing the role of a medical doctor in the prize-winning feature *Attack* (2012), shot in Israel by the Lebanese filmmaker Ziad Doueiri who has been working in the US and Europe. Did you feel any difference?

None whatsoever. At the time of the filming I didn't know anything about the director. Later somebody told me that he was quite prominent. He spoke English, which I'm not very good at. Evgenia Dodina was in the cast again. We spent a considerable amount of time on the set with Ali Suliman, the Palestinian actor who played the principal male part. I did not feel any difference. In my view, if there is one, it is usually linked to the director's individual approach, not his or her ethnic background.

#### You have also worked with Russian film directors from Russia, haven't you?

Yes, for example with Ilya Makarov. A Russian crew from Channel One's police procedural TV series *Zhurov* came to Israel to film one episode [Shabes goi, the last in the first season, 2009]. The series' lead, a police officer called Zhurov, was played by the famous actor Andrei Panin, now deceased. I acted the part of Zhurov's old friend from school, who had left Russia for Israel and became a police investigator there. He helps Zhurov to solve a crime. Thus I worked in the Land of Israel with a Russian team and the merited artist Panin. I was afraid of him and didn't know how to address him properly, as he was a TV idol and I felt awkward. But everything turned out to be fine. Once again, I did not notice any big differences on the set. Probably it's because filmmakers understand each other well, wherever they come from.

The only thing is, I am not always familiar with professional terminology in Russian. And it leads to funny situations on the set sometimes. Say, we're about to film a scene when someone says: "We have to wait, the *fokusnitsa* is not here yet". In standard Russian the word *fokusnitsa* means «a female magician». I was puzzled. There was no female magician in the script. Yet in the professional Russian film argot the same word also means "a female focus puller". Also, it turned out that lighting techs are referred to as *svetiki* [from *svet*, light, and simultaneously reminiscent of the diminutive form of the female first name Svetlana]. It was amusing: we spoke the same language but I didn't always fully understand what was being said. This is the only problem that I had on the Russian sets.

I acted in a Russian TV series *Semeinyi al'bom* (2014), too, and even lived for a month and a half in St Petersburg – but this series was directed by the Russo-Israeli Leonid Prudovsky and my screen test for it took place in Israel.

**How has your television work been going? You also were in an episode of the joint Russian Israeli TV production *Pod nebom Verony* (Under the Sky of Verona, 2005) by Valery Uskov and Vladimir Krasnopolsky, as well as *Mezhdu strok* (Between the Lines, 2009) by Evgeny Ruman, a 50-part Israeli TV series with the exclusively Russian speaking cast.**

They mostly spoke Russian in *Pod nebom Verony*, too, but it was not an Israeli TV series in a full sense of the word because it was not broadcast to the Hebrew-speaking audiences, [only to the viewers of Channel 9, the Russian-language Israeli TV channel, and to the Russian-speaking audiences in the former Soviet Union]. By contrast, *Mezhdu strok* was subtitled into Hebrew and broadcast to Hebrew speakers. The rationale was "Let's give it a try".

**Unfortunately, *Mezhdu strok* was not successful enough, given that its second season had been planned but never materialised. We'd like to ask, though, if there is a difference for you as an actor in working in films and working on television.**

Personally, I don't distinguish between a film and a TV series. Even the genre doesn't mean much to me. For example, I acted in a telenovela called *Ha-Alufa* (*The Champion*, 2006-07), filming approximately one episode a day. Its first season consisted of a hundred and twenty episodes, while the second, of a hundred. This is a wildly intense crash course for an actor, not dissimilar to a boot camp. There is no chance for a retake, everything should be done really quickly. This genre is a kind of fairy tale for grown-ups. If the story and role are interesting, it works well. From a technical viewpoint, both movies and TV series are filmed with the same camera, so not much difference there either.



I'd like to add something about *Mezhdu strok*, though. The fact that the second season did not come to fruition should not reflect badly on this series. It was an experiment. In order to boost its ratings, the Russian-language Channel 9 broadcast South American and Turkish telenovelas, among others, while large Israeli TV companies kept thinking of how to get through to the local Russian-speaking viewers. It was decided by one such channel, called Yes, to invest in a "Russification" of some of their programmes, with a Russian-themed TV series as a cornerstone. In the [promotional video](#) for *Mezhdu strok*, Evgenia Dodina and I (the two of us together again!) would do some ice skating, then I'd take my hat off and she'd exclaim "I'm so fed up with the Israeli heat! Isn't it time to make a Russian-language series that would take place in Israel? Yes!" and so on. Several scriptwriters were engaged and the entire cast was Russian-speaking. The Yes channel did it on purpose. Yet the setting had to be justified: what are all these Russians speakers doing together in one and the same place in Israel, so that it would not look strange? Editorial offices of a Russian-language newspaper provided a solution.

It was a wonderful period when you'd meet on a set with practically every Russian-speaking actor who lived in Israel. They all work in different theatres, some at the Cameri, some at the Habima, some elsewhere. Using each other's patronymics became popular on the *Mezhdu strok* set: "Good morning, Aleksandr Sergeevich, how are you feeling? Ready for filming?" – "Thank you, Vladimir

Shulimovich, would you like some coffee?"

The series was directed by Evgeny Ruman, whom I met in 2006. I played the leading role in his Tel Aviv University graduation short, called *Miracle*. This is when I also met Dmitry Malinsky, a future *Mezhdu strok* scriptwriter, who studied together with Ruman and was helping him on the set of *Miracle*. One of the latest films in which I play one of the leading roles – *Golden Voices* (2019) – was also directed by Evgeny Ruman, so our collaboration goes a while back. *Golden Voices* is exactly that rare case when the part I played was written specially for me.

But let's return to *Mezhdu strok*. The author Sergei Dovlatov used to say that the writing process takes up some 5% of your time and effort. The rest is taken up by the attempts to sell what you've written. The same applies to *Mezhdu strok*, in a way. Everyone knew it was a solid piece of work. However, it proved impossible to convince viewers to switch to a new channel instead of the one they've got used to. Maybe it would have been better to wait with the series and use other programmes to attract the viewers instead, and launch the series only when the public for it was already in place.

So the problem actually lay with the marketing. The important people in the Yes channel



management decided that it would be too long to wait until Russian speakers switch to Yes – and cancelled the second season, even though the ending of the first was deliberately kept open. We all felt a bit sad, but what can one do? I am still in touch with Ruman, though. And Prudovsky, whose *Semeinyi al'bom* series engaged me in St Petersburg, studied together with Ruman and Malinsky, too. Meeting all three was a lucky occasion for me.

**If you look back at your career as a film actor in Israel, are there any general tendencies that you can identify twenty-five years later?**

What a serious question! It is normally posed to someone at the end of their career. I need to think of what to say (smiles). Nothing to do with me in particular – let's talk about actors' fate in general. Now I am offered fewer parts to play, simply because those actors who are 35-45 years old have more choice than those who are within the 55-65 age bracket. And those aged 75-95 get even fewer offers, regardless of how talented they are.

There was a time when I had a lot of work. I don't think that I am employed less often these days because I am not that good anymore. It's simply that I used to get scripts where my prospective character would be defined, say, as a forty-year-old man. And now I am getting scripts with characters who are sixty and even seventy plus. Time flies and there are fewer roles as a result. On the other hand, the male lead I played in my latest film, *Golden Voices*, could not have been played when I was forty. [On this occasion], my age was identical with the age of the main guy in *Golden Voices*.



Someone – not me – subdivided an actor's career into five stages. I'll demonstrate it using my own name. Stage 1: "Who is Vladimir Friedman?" Stage 2: "We want Vladimir Friedman." Stage 3: "We want someone like Vladimir Friedman". Stage 4: "We want someone like Vladimir Friedman, only younger". Stage 5: "Who is Vladimir Friedman?" My surname can be substituted with any other. I am at the stage that I am at. It would be silly to wish that I'd be forty and had more parts to play. This is how life goes. It begins and ends with the question "Who is it?"

**The last question from us. How do you rate the future of Russophone Israeli cinema?**

Film reflects reality. As I've already said, Hebrew with a Russian accent is nothing special in today's Israel. Such an accent does not confuse the filmgoer because at his or her place of work s/he is surrounded by Irenas, Sergeis, Borises and Alexes. This is part of life. Then there exists a growing number of those who study film directing in Israel and come from a Russophone background. Themselves, they may have been born in Israel – but into a Russian-speaking environment. The story that such filmmakers can tell, especially in their debut features, would be more often than not based on their background and environment. Since immigrants from the FSU just keep coming to Israel, there will be more stories like this in the future.

Such stories are more likely to be told in Hebrew than in Russian because Hebrew is the language most widely spoken in Israel. But still. *Golden Voices* is an interesting precedent. In it, characters speak Russian for about 90% of the screen time. We thought: how will the audiences watch it all with subtitles, as if the film is foreign-made? Yet it was received very well. In the future, the fate of Russophone Israeli cinema will continue to depend on the place that Russian speakers occupy in Israeli society. One thing in particular makes me an optimist. It's the number of children of Russian immigrants who have chosen filmmaking as their profession. This brings hope. Maybe thanks to them I'd still be given a part even if I'm confined to a wheelchair because of my age.

*Translated from Russian by Andrei Rogatchevski*

The interview was conducted by Lars Kristensen and Andrei Rogatchevski on 4 and 15 September 2022, by zoom and by email.

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