



Hollywood's search for the next 'Shtisel' brings boom times to Israeli TV



Lihi Kornowski and Gal Toren in "Losing Alice" on Apple TV+.

By DINA KRAFT FEB. 1, 2021 5 AM PT

Tel Aviv, Israel — A wiretapping soldier in 1973 warns breathlessly that Israel is about to be overrun by 1,600 Syrian tanks. An undercover female Mossad agent in Iran hacks into a computer system to help sabotage its nuclear program. A wayward, black-hatted ultra-Orthodox artist angers his family by exhibiting his paintings.

They may all be characters on Israeli television shows, with situations that reflect the distinct outlines of life there, but in the eyes of Hollywood — and American and international audiences — their stories are universal.

Israeli television has inspired several American series, beginning more than a decade ago with "In Treatment," a psychotherapy drama on HBO, and including the most successful adaptation of them all, [Showtime's counterterrorism thriller "Homeland."](#) With the rise of streaming, though, this pipeline has seen a notable shift: As indicated by [the success of Netflix's "Shtisel"](#) among others, more stories from Israel than ever are available to international audiences in their original form, available to watch via subtitles or dubbing.

"We live in a very complicated, political place, with lots of different groups, including different religious groups, brewing with tension between them, so that's good ground for good stories on the one hand. And on the other hand, our budgets are not very big ... so we dedicate most of the time to writing scripts," said Karni Ziv, head of drama and comedy for the Keshet Media Group, one of Israel's main production companies.

"Every good series depends first of all on very good scripts, that is the key ... Most Israeli writers are writing very personal stories, something they are connected to and often coming out of a kind of pain. And that improves the level and depth of the story."

Danny Syrkin, director of "Tehran," the first non-English language series on Apple TV+, echoed that sentiment. "We have to invest in interesting characters, in writing, in relationships, in the plotlines, something that can go deeper. You need to capture the audience, because resources are limited," he said. "Limitations are sometimes a blessing."



Dovale Glickman, Ayelet Zurer and Michael Aloni in "Shtisel" on Netflix. (Dori Media)

The Israeli TV boom comes at a time, Ziv notes, in which "the world has become a more international village and audiences are more willing to hear foreign languages and discover foreign settings. At the end of the day, it can be a

story that is very far from your culture and what you know, but if it's a good story, it can touch you in a very personal way that makes it feel like it happened nearby."

The most recent Israeli show to debut in the U.S. is "Losing Alice," launched on Apple TV+ last month and starring Ayelet Zurer — whom viewers may know from her roles in "Munich" and "Angels & Demons."

"Hebrew is the language I grew up with, it's my roots, it's where I feel very much myself," said the Los Angeles-based actress, who also appears in "Shtisel." For American viewers getting to know her now in Israeli shows, she added, "It's like knowing someone for many years and then being invited into their house."

"Losing Alice" is a noir-inflected story of a woman in her late 40s determined to rediscover her artistry and her relevance — a departure from the prevailing trend among Israeli series with a dedicated international fanbase, which typically meld the personal and the political by casting war, conflict or religion as the backdrop.

Sigal Avin, "Losing Alice's" American Israeli creator, writer and director, says Israel's spartan productions means she has more control and freedom to focus on her own vision.

"I didn't have all the notes and all the talking heads you have in the States, where it's harder to leave others' voices out and make sure you are going on your own path," she says.

Avin, one of only a handful of female directors working in Israel, credits the pressures of making television in the country — a relatively new industry here — with winnowing it down to its most dedicated and determined creators. To make TV in Israel means killing yourself over your project, said Avin, who has also sold two series for the American remake treatment. "It's so hard, there's not enough money, you have to work fast. It's just hell. Anyone doing TV here is working from blood, sweat and tears. And the level has gone up to such a high level, so I think the world would benefit if they go with taking the shows 'as is.'"



Niv Sultan as a Mossad agent in "Tehran." (Apple)

'A fearlessness that is palpable'

Ester Namdar, a writer and the head of drama at Artza Productions, said the industry is abuzz with a feeling of triumph now that their original shows are reaching audiences around the world in Hebrew (and in some cases also in Arabic and Farsi). Israel is not alone: Other countries — [Denmark with "Borgen,"](#) Japan with "Atelier," Korea with a raft of soaps known as "K-dramas" — are also finding audiences overseas in their original form via streaming.

"Everyone is telling us that they're trying to figure out what's the secret to a show that will be picked up internationally," said Namdar, who wrote the Israeli version of Showtime's "Your Honor," starring Bryan Cranston, and "Red Lines" ("PMTA" in Hebrew), which was a hit in Israel but had no takers abroad. "Every show written with the purpose of being international did not go international. I can tell you that as a creator."

What unifies Israeli series that have traveled abroad may not be a particular subject matter, then, but what HBO's senior vice president for programming, Nora Skinner, called "a creative sensibility and a fearlessness that is palpable."

"Shtisel," the surprise Netflix hit about an ultra-Orthodox family in Jerusalem, is a window into a world whose rules and customs are unknown by outsiders. "Tehran," a spy thriller, employs a Mossad agent in deep cover as guide into a conflict widely known, but perhaps little understood, the world over. "Valley of Tears" (HBO Max), about the 1973

Yom Kippur War that brought the country to the brink of defeat, is an invitation into one of the most searing, life-altering moments in Israeli history. And the HBO-Keshet co-production “Our Boys,” based on the true story of the lead-up to the 2014 war in Gaza, [attempts to capture the trauma of that time](#) from the perspectives of both Israeli and Palestinian characters.



Tzahi Grad and Shlomi Elkabetz in “Our Boys” on HBO. (Ran Mendelson/HBO)

Created by two Jewish Israelis and a Palestinian citizen of Israel, “Our Boys” opens shortly after the funerals for three Israeli teens who had been kidnapped and killed by Hamas militants, as Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a Palestinian 16-year-old, goes missing. The series was blasted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as anti-Semitic for focusing its narrative on Abu Khdeir’s death at the hands of young Jewish extremists. He called for a boycott of the Israeli channel that aired the series.

“It presented a side of Israel that the politicians did not want to see, and that’s always a great sign,” said Adrian Hennigan, TV critic for Israeli newspaper Haaretz. “It’s something Israeli film has done well over the years — holding up a mirror to the flaws in Israeli society.”

Syrkin, the director of “Tehran” — who learned Farsi so he could communicate with the Iranian expatriate actors in the Athens-shot show — said his series has similarly struck a nerve.

“The most moving reactions we had came from Iran, from people who were courageous enough to reach out to me and say they love the show, the way we depicted Iranian culture,” he said. “Others criticize us for being Zionist, others for being too soft on the Iranians.”

While these series may also be instructive — “this is also a part of history that most Americans aren’t familiar with, and we wanted to bring awareness to American audiences,” HBO Max’s senior vice president of international originals, Jeniffer Kim, said of “Valley of Tears” — there are notable limitations. Namely, with the exception of “Our Boys,” most Israeli shows set against the background of regional war and conflict are written by Israeli writers, from the Israeli perspective, and in turn promulgate a decidedly Israeli narrative — even when individual characters, as with the Iranians in “Tehran” or the Palestinians in “Fauda,” are relatable and multi-dimensional.



Doron Ben-David, left, and Lior Raz in Netflix’s “Fauda.” (Netflix)

Moving past ‘macho Israeli thrillers’

Helping fuel the global rise of Israeli TV is its regulatory system, which has codified into law that Israeli satellite TV stations must put 8% of their revenue back into production; for commercial channels, that number is 15%.

“That means we can take bigger risks in terms of subject matter. We are not spinning off millions of versions of ‘Grey’s Anatomy,’ because we need to see ad dollars coming in,” said Danna Stern, managing director of Yes Studios, a production and distribution company. Yes sold “Fauda,” its most popular program ever, to Netflix as the streamer’s first Hebrew-language series after a deal for its American remake fell through. It also sold “Shtisel” after plans for an American remake of that series stalled as well.

“I think we’ve matured as an industry and have more stories to tell that are not just about the Mossad or macho Israeli thrillers,” said Stern. She points to a show currently in production at Yes, “The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem,” a period piece and family drama starring “Shtisel’s” Michael Aloni set in Jerusalem in the first half of the 20th century and based on an Israeli novel of the same name.

Although it’s one of the more expensive productions made in Israel, the cost amounts to craft services tab for one episode of [“The Crown,”](#) joked Stern.



HBO Max’s “Valley of Tears” is set during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. (Vered Adir/HBO Max)

There is at least one drawback to the growing footprint of streaming services — versus local satellite providers like Yes — in the Israeli TV business: a decline in overall revenue that threatens to squeeze production budgets.

As such, Stern and other Israeli executives have called on streaming platforms to invest on the ground in Israel with co-productions and other investments, as seen with HBO and “Our Boys” and an Apple TV+ post-production partnership on “Tehran.” International media companies are also beginning to buy Israeli players, as ViacomCBS did when it acquired Ananey Communications last spring.

“I’ve been worried that this enthusiasm over Israeli content has been a new form of content colonialism. We don’t have natural resources to take like diamonds or oil, but we have art,” said Namdar, referring to the buying of remake rights or other concepts, versus finished products. “But the last few deals made... have not been like that.

“This is the best version of this, not just coming here to buy things for cheap and sell elsewhere for big profit, but to come bringing larger budget here for us to make our shows.”

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2021-02-01/netflix-shtisel-fauda-apple-losing-alice-tehran-hbo-max-valley-of-tears-our-boys>