

## Interview: Debut Film ‘Empathy’ From Israeli Filmmaker Adi Refaeli to Screen in Chicago

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CHICAGO – Adi Refaeli, who’s currently touring the U.S. with her short film debut “Empathy,” has taken a circuitous route to the finished project. Born and raised in Tel Aviv, Israel, she spent three years in Toyko to start a family. All the while, she never let go of her interest to pursue filmmaking.



When she returned to Tel Aviv, she completed “Empathy” as a student project. Its power and purpose, though, has caught the attention of film festivals all around the world and has won at the Jerusalem International Film Festival and the Syracuse International Film Festival.



“Empathy” by writer and director Adi Refaeli.  
*Photo credit:* [Other Israel Film Festival](#) [10]

“Empathy” has often been described as an Israeli version of the 2006 best-picture Oscar winner “Crash”. Refaeli, though, points out that principal filming for the 37-minute short film ended before “Crash” was released.

It begins with a woman driving down a highway in Israel while speaking of a new love on her mobile phone. After ending the call, the car drives out of frame. There is a squeal of brakes and a scream. The story then morphs into a series of interrelated events told in flashbacks and flash forwards with a timeline technique that allows the consequences to unfold.

There is a fed-up wife leaving a harried husband and their handicapped son. Also, a Russian immigrant has lost his job while his son is being coerced into committing a crime. Even more, an Arab family suffers a grievous accident and the woman driving the car faces a moral dilemma.

All of these divergent people and situations come together and converge on each other. To get through the crisis, they will all need the strength of empathy.

On Thursday from Chicago, we interviewed “Empathy” writer and director Refaeli in anticipation of her appearance and the screenings of the

film this weekend in Chicago. She added: “I was inspired to do the story when a similar instance from the film happened to me. I was driving my car with my husband and we were sitting at a red light.

“Before the light turned green, someone started honking their horn behind me. My husband and I started thinking about why the driver behind us would do something like that. Maybe his wife was having a baby or something else. Suddenly, instead of getting angry, I wanted to help him. I felt empathy toward him.”

Despite the low budget of the film, the acting in it is uniformly excellent. They’re all engaged and appropriately expressive in a myriad of different situations. Refaeli added: “While each individual actor had a different story, they all fit. They all wanted to do it. They all gave me their free time and talent for no pay. I was very lucky the way it worked out.”

Most compelling is a breaking-and-entering scene that’s the centerpiece of the film. Both characters (the teenage burglar and the surprised, middle-aged wife) play out a rape/violation scene with a subtlety that’s poignant and shocking at the same time. Refaeli says she had a more difficult time with the scene than the actors.

“The subject was really hard for me especially as a beginner filmmaker,” she related. “Here the actors were working for free and he had to touch her inappropriately at times. I was so embarrassed to have to tell them this. The actors were professionals, though, and they just said: ‘Say what you want us to do and we’ll do it.’”

The film also emphasizes the melting pot of Israel with the spotlight on the various ethnicities of the region crowded together in the narrative.

“I decided to go with it because – on one hand – there are a lot of stereotypes about the ethnicities (Russians, Arabs, Jews, etc.). On the other hand, I wanted to explore the ‘why’ behind the stereotypes and why they are the way they are,” Refaeli said.

The strongest message in the film is the commonality of emotions and the hope that – in feeling other people’s pain, sorrow and even joy – we can come together.

“If you feel empathy toward other people, you’ll feel better with yourself,” Refaeli concluded. “You can feel the benefits with less anger and tension. It makes life better and easier.”

*“Empathy” will screen twice this weekend in Chicago with special appearances by filmmaker Adi Refaeli. The first screening is on March 29 at 12:30 p.m. at Landmark’s Century Centre Cinema at 2828 N. Clark St. in Chicago. The second screening is on March 30 at 2 p.m. at Landmark’s Renaissance Place Cinema at 1850 Second St. in Highland Park, Ill. [Click here](#) [11] for more details.*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [13]  
Staff Writer  
[HollywoodChicago.com](http://HollywoodChicago.com)  
[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [12]

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