

Fascinating, Infuriating Injustice in ‘Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The title event of “Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem” is a prison sentence with no predictable day of release. The prisoner is Viviane (a fascinating Ronit Elkabetz), a soft-spoken middle-aged woman well beyond the point of a content unhappiness. She is trapped to a farce, as the divorce laws of Israel demand that a husband agree to the divorce before it can be finalized, with three rabbis and a lawyer each to discuss the event. Viviane’s desire to start a new life away from her current husband Elisha (Simon Abkarian) becomes a hell on earth as he proves a warden with no empathy, who refuses to show up for many of the hearings (he doesn’t have to unless it gets really bad, according to law). It takes him about a year and a half to finally appear first time, and even when he’s in the room, he is impossible.

During the proceedings, this nightmarish situation becomes even more impossible with the dialogue of which the judges and lawyers are trying to interpret her relationship. While her lawyer Carmel Ben Tovin (Menashe Noy) speaks passionately on her behalf, Elisha’s lawyer, Rabbi Shimon (Sasson Gabai) is her brother-in-law, who defends his brother to three elderly, progressively unamused rabbis with the backing of patriarchy, and ancient gender roles.

The frustrations within this fitfully stagnant film are frighteningly legitimate, as this narrative is based on non-fictional circuses. According to even the most fleeting of Google perusals, these very regulations affect hundreds, possibly even thousands of women who have a marriage recognized by Israel. With this context the film becomes highly political, expressing the farce within the procedure, its near-comical expanse of time and tediousness a gesture towards the very real experience had by many.



‘Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem’

Photo credit: Music Box Films

On top of this, the film has striking ground as an examination of a relationship, following in the steps of an epic like Ingmar Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage" in which a husband and wife's life together is expressed intimately, through extensive dialogue. In Bergman's film it was conversation, as private as a moment between two people whose faces are merely inches apart. In this movie, it is the uncomfortable setting of a courtroom, in which a spouse must try to prove her case against a patriarchy of why she should be freed, even though her husband refuses to let her go. Various witnesses are brought in, and their scattered perspectives create a fitfully incomplete idea of what their marriage is really like. How do you prove unhappiness with tangible evidence, when the narrative of "trying again" is easier to promote? Even worse, the spouses must have their perspectives interpreted through biased lawyers. This concept is poetic but it also brings home the insanity of the procedure on home — imagine the hell of trying to prove why you must get out of a terrible relationship, especially if there's no immediate grounds? The Elkabetz' film is at-once political and personal, but thoroughly claustrophobic.

The big question that rings through "Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem" is rightfully unanswered: Why doesn't Elisha just let her go? There are many reasons Elisha could be holding onto this marriage, and he seems to embody all of the true life ones. Perhaps its pride, perhaps its that he really doesn't want to even imagine her with another man, or that she wants parts of her financial keep, or that he doesn't want to be associated with the term divorce. Maybe he just has a very screwed up idea of what love is. A few hints are provided toward the end, but no concrete solution is given. Elisha becomes the unmovable object that makes for a fascinating journey, as madness fills an unspeakable amount of time in their lives, with only a few people in the room.



'Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem'

Photo credit: Music Box Films

Told in such compact settings, the Elkabetz' magnetic madness would be able to maintain its veracity if its screenplay were to take place on a theater stage. The project is specifically cinematic from its staunch shot choices, in which a small list of characters often exchange medium shots. But its when this same formal camera captures a performance that can't be contained within its frame, as with Elkabetz, that movie stands out for its silver screen opportunity, and becomes a jarring visual moment. The camera gets closer to its characters on very specific moments, as the film makes grand performances out of the eyes. For the most part, Viviane remains a captivating force; silent, seething.

"Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem" opens in Chicago on February 27. Starring Ronit Elkabetz, Simon Abkarian, Sasson Gabai, and Menashe Noy. Written and directed by Ronit & Shlomi Elkabetz. Not Rated



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