



PRESENTS

UNMISTAKEN CHILD



OPENS JUNE 3 AT FILM FORUM IN NEW YORK
NATIONAL EXPANSION TO FOLLOW



Written & Directed by: Nati Baratz

Produced by: Ilil Alexander, Arik Bernstein, Ron Goldman and Nati Baratz

Running Time: 102 minutes

Rating: Not Rated by the MPAA

World Premiere: Toronto International Film Festival, 2008

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- SYNOPSIS

The Buddhist concept of reincarnation, while both mysterious and enchanting, is hard for most westerners to grasp. UNMISTAKEN CHILD follows the 4-year search for the reincarnation of Lama Konchog, a world-renowned Tibetan master who passed away in 2001 at age 84. The Dalai Lama charges the deceased monk's devoted disciple, Tenzin Zopa (who had been in his service since the age of seven), to search for his master's reincarnation.

Tenzin sets off on this unforgettable quest on foot, mule and even helicopter, through breathtaking landscapes and remote traditional Tibetan villages. Along the way Tenzin listens to stories about young children with special characteristics, and performs rarely seen ritualistic tests designed to determine the likelihood of reincarnation. He eventually presents the child he believes to be his reincarnated master to the Dalai Lama so that he can make the final decision.

Stunningly shot, UNMISTAKEN CHILD is a beguiling, surprising, touching, even humorous experience.

- NOTES ON THE FILM

Nati Baratz's new documentary UNMISTAKEN CHILD is a real time documentation of the search for a reincarnated Tibetan master, told through the eyes of his lifelong disciple. Visually stunning, emotionally gripping, and shot over the course of four years, the film follows an ages-old sacred quest through the eyes of a remarkable attendant.

After 26 years of isolated meditation in a mountain cave, Lama Konchog became worldly renowned as one of the greatest Tibetan Masters of our times. In 2001, at the age of 84, he passed away and his shy and devoted disciple, Tenzin Zopa, was instructed by the Dalai Lama to search for his master's reincarnation. The 'unmistaken child' must be found within 4 years, before it becomes too difficult to separate him from his parents.

Tenzin entered the service of his master at age of 7, at his own request, and had been with the master continuously for the 21 years until his death. The loss of his teacher leaves him bereft and utter loneliness and he is unsettled by his responsibility to carry out this highly secretive search, that of finding his beloved spiritual father embodied in a little boy that may be anywhere in the world.

His search crosses lands, passing through starkly beautiful mountains and small villages that appear to be unchanged for hundreds of years. Assisted by astrology, signs in dreams and the whispers of villagers, Tenzin travels by helicopter, mule and foot, and when he does come upon an apparent contender, we join Tenzin and his young charge through the mysterious procedures that will—or will not—confirm the reincarnation. We have seen similar tests before in movies like Martin Scorsese's KUNDUN; but to witness the real thing is even more magical.

While UNMISTAKEN CHILD brings to light a rarely seen aspect of the Buddhist faith, the true revelation is the journey of Tenzin the man. Modest, shy, but with a delightfully impish sense of humour, we come to know a man who appears to be of another time and place and yet is profoundly living in the present. Alone on his quest, he is only able to share his thoughts and feelings with filmmaker Baratz and his simple honesty and unselfconsciousness make the viewer a privileged partner in Tenzin's passage to the next phase of his remarkable life.

- DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My interest in Tibetans started back in 1993, while backpacking in Tibet. The Tibetan Lamas looked to me like the embodiment of wisdom and compassion and reminded me of ancient Greek philosophers. The humble, non-violent and happy nature of the Tibetan people touched me in a very unique way. It was followed by a strong feeling of moral responsibility to help preserve this extraordinary culture, which is in grave danger due to the Chinese occupation and suppression. Since then I have had a great desire to share all this with others.

In 2002, I traveled to Tibet with my wife Liat. During our last month, we cycled 800 kilometers from Tibet's capital city Lhasa to Katmandu, Nepal to attend a one-month course at Kopan Monastery, so as to deepen our understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. At the end of the course, a monk named Tenzin Zopa came to talk about his life experience with his master, Geshe Lama Konchog, who had recently passed away. Tenzin spoke of his master with great love, and his big heart, modesty and humor were overwhelming.

If he had not concluded his talk with a request from us to pray for the swift return of his master's reincarnation, it could have been just another inspiring night in Asia, but it was not - I could not sleep the whole night, realizing that this great young man was actually searching for his master's reincarnation. This was a story that had to be turned into a movie.

In the morning I snuck out for a cigarette outside the monastery gate and shared my feelings with Liat. She had tears in her eyes, "What are you waiting for? This is the film you've been looking for all these years." At the time, I was far from realizing how fortunate I really was.

I could never imagine that this thin and modest monk was actually a philosophical prodigy. That his master meditated for 26 years in total isolation in a snowy mountain cave, and was considered by many as the greatest Tibetan meditator of our time (he is called the "modern-may Milarepa" by the Tibetans). That Geshe-La was actually the one who saved Tenzin's life when he was born and physically delivered him. I knew that since age of 7, for 21 years, he had never left his sight, but did not realize what the serving and devotion meant, not to mention faith.

After a few days I met with Tenzin and shared with him my wishes for making this film in a very direct way... I told him that I am not a formal Buddhist, but I feel that the preservation and spreading of Tibetan Buddhism is important to the entire world civilization. I said that in order to make this film I would need his full cooperation and all access, including meetings with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, if and when it comes to that.

Tenzin replied that he thought it was a very good idea, and that he also wished to expose his master to as many people as possible, but at the same time he was worried that it would be too much for me to handle. He tried to convince me to give up, "What if we never find a reincarnation? What if it takes 20 years?"

I was lucky enough to answer that I was willing to take all the risks, with a very happy mind, but there was only one thing I truly needed – his full cooperation. After a long break Tenzin replied, "OK, but you have to ask for Lama Zopa Rinpoche's permission. You can tell him that I agree!" And that was the gong sound marking that my journey was about to begin.

It took me a few months until I got final permission from LZR, a very high-ranking busy lama. They tested my patience (hours of waiting for meetings), my persistence (three 30-hour bus rides for meetings), and then on my last trip from Katmandu to Bodhgaya in central India, I got the chance to meet him face to face. It was a long day, with a few conversations between his

meetings and even lunch together. In the evening his disciple told me that LZR was close to making a decision and that he was doing some divination checks regarding the film.

After an hour or so Zopa Rinpoche, with his majestic gestures, came out of his room with some gifts and gave me a fatherly tap on the shoulder. I assumed the gifts were consolation gifts, but his disciple came and said, "So how do you feel? You got the job!" When we discussed the matter further, they told me that I could not show the rushes to anyone until the final confirmation of the reincarnation. I promised to do so, knowing how generous and incredible their approval was to allow me into the most holy rooms of their religious and tradition.

For three years, I had to keep this movie a secret, which was an extremely complicated issue, since I had to finance all the filming privately, and could show the materials to no one.

I spent 4 years with Tenzin - long months on the road, wild nature, we shared with him the tent while searching, and his monastery room. We come from such different worlds and cultures, which made our relationship one that required a great deal of patience and learning from both sides. The camera and myself became intimate participants in Tenzin's secret quest. I think it took Tenzin more than six months to feel at ease with the camera and to truly trust me, and a year later when he first called me "my brother" (as he does to this day), I was in tears.

In the peak of the filming, when we knew that the Dalai Lama was about to confirm the reincarnation, my wife and two-year-old daughter moved to southern India, close to Tenzin's monastic university, for more than a year, until the filming ended and the small "translation factory" for the film was established.

When we were filming in Kopan my wife and daughter always joined me. It was true bliss to be so close to Tenzin, having my daughter live in the monastery and even play with the young reincarnation. It was an enlightening and mind-opening experience for us all. If I had to pinpoint the most important things I learned during this journey, I would say that they are the capacity of doing and acceptance.

Watching Tenzin and his endless care for others, never resting, never saying no, always having time to do more, and then late at night finding time to memorize and study, I learned that I have the capacity to do 10 times more than I believed I could.

Throughout those years I never saw Tenzin blame anyone or anything whenever he encountered an obstacle. He always said that he was responsible and accepted everything with a happy mind and vitality. To evidence it all in action for years, without even a single slip, is a true teaching.

Reincarnation

Since the film ended, people often question my belief in reincarnation, and I feel it's better not to give a direct answer to this question for various reasons. To determine about the existence of the mind or soul is very pretentious and will always remain a question of faith. No matter what people see in a film, they will not be convinced either way. Giving an answer will damage the self-exploration process of the viewer, which was always a major goal for me in this film.

It was enough for me to understand that Tenzin was truly searching for the unmistakable reincarnation, and at the end, to realize that the Tenzin Phuntsok is for him the true embodiment of his beloved master in a small child.

One thing I must say: whether you believe in reincarnation or not, after seeing the incredible chosen child, I think we have to admit that they do know how to choose!

Filming Challenges

The filming, especially in the remote Himalayas in Nepal and Tibet, was very challenging, since we lived outdoors in extreme conditions. There were several times when the cameraman or myself suffered from serious altitude sickness (which can be deadly). At one point we had to cross an abyss on a path that was narrower than our shoes. One of our horses fell off the cliff, but luckily it landed on some bushes and was then pulled back up by the locals.

There is no electricity or phones in Tsum Valley, so we built a solar charger that was put on a horse saddle, and the “solar horse” charged our batteries throughout the journey.

All these are only physical difficulties, while the biggest challenge was to gain trust and develop intimacy with the people. To achieve this you must live with them for a long time. I spent a total of eight months only at Kopan Monastery.

Since many of the situations were extremely intimate and sometimes difficult, especially when filming the rarely seen aspects and rites of Tibetan Buddhism, our big challenge was to stay as inconspicuous as possible. Our crew consisted of a maximum of two people - a cameraman and myself - with the smallest equipment we could find.

Style

I was aware of the mythical and visual power of this quest, which crossed countries and entered the most secret unrevealed places of Tibetan tradition, but I always felt that the heart of this film was the faith and love of Tenzin Zopa, and this is what made the film “larger than life”, I often say that for me Tenzin’s relationship with GLK and the boy reincarnation is an ultimate love story.

I wanted the movie to focus on Tenzin and the story, and was afraid that the colorful and exotic nature of the material would obscure the human drama, so in order to differentiate this documentary from a traditional Tibet doc, we shot everything hand-held, even when it came to the meeting with the Dalai Lama. Secondly, we filmed and edited with many inter-cuts between extreme long shots and extreme C.U.S, always to return the focus on the personal and intimate point of view of the heroes within the historical/epical context of the story outline.

In the film I tried to show the complexity of holy and earthly, joy and sadness, which are mixed together. I tried to give the audience the right distance and opportunity to gain their own understanding and belief regarding the subject matter.

In a very systematic way, from the middle of the film, the plot continuously shifts between earthly scene to magical scene, happy scene to sad scene, up until the end. It was important for me to keep the audience emotionally and thematically challenged, thus encourage them to contemplate rather than just experience. This style was also inspired from Buddha’s teachings. Buddha asked his disciples not to believe anything he says, but to check everything themselves.

-Nati Baratz
April 2009

- BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF REINCARNATION

According to the scriptures, the Buddha taught a concept of rebirth that was distinct from that of any known contemporary Indian teacher. This concept was consistent with the common notion of a sequence of related lives stretching over a very long time, but was constrained by two core Buddhist concepts: annatta, that there is no irreducible atman or "self" tying these lives together; and anicca, that all compounded things are subject to dissolution, including all the components of the human person and personality. At the death of one personality, a new one comes into being, much as the flame of a dying candle can serve to light the flame of another.

Since, according to Buddhism, there is no permanent and unchanging self (identity) there can be no transmigration in the strict sense. Buddhism teaches that what is reborn is not the person but that one moment gives rise to another and that this momentum continues, even after death. It is a more subtle concept than the usual notion of reincarnation, reflecting the Buddhist concept of personality existing (even within one's lifetime) without a "Self". Instead of a fixed entity, what is reborn is an evolving consciousness or stream of consciousness, whose quality has been conditioned by karma.

Buddhism suggests that samsara, the process of rebirth, occurs across five or six realms of existence. It is said in Tibetan Buddhism that it is very rare for a person to be reborn in the immediate next life as a human. This depends on the karmic potentialities (or "seeds") they have created with their actions and upon their state of mind at the time of death. If we die with a peaceful mind, this will stimulate a virtuous seed and we shall experience a fortunate rebirth; but if we die with a disturbed mind, in a state of anger, say, this will stimulate a non-virtuous seed and we shall experience an unfortunate rebirth. This is similar to the way in which nightmares are triggered by our being in an agitated state of mind just before falling asleep.

Tibetan Buddhists also believe that a newborn child may be the rebirth of an important departed lama.

- CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING TIBETAN REINCARNATION

Despite its officially secular stance, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has claimed the power to approve the naming of high reincarnations in Tibet, based on the precedent set by the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing Dynasty. The Qianlong Emperor was said to have instituted a system of selecting the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama by means of a lottery which utilized a golden urn with names wrapped in barley balls. Controversially, this precedent was called upon by the PRC to name their own Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhists in exile do not regard PRC's Panchen Lama to be the legitimate Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama has recognized a different child, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, as the reincarnated Panchen Lama. This child and his family have been taken into protective custody according to the PRC, although there has been no mention of what or whom the child must be protected from. All attempts by members of the EU parliament and US government to garner guarantees of the family's safety have been denied by the PRC. In September 2007 the Chinese government said all high monks must be approved by the government, which would include the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama after the death of Tenzin Gyatso. The People's Republic of China may attempt to direct the selection of a successor using the authority of their chosen Panchen Lama.

In response to this scenario, Tashi Wangdi, the representative of the 14th Dalai Lama, replied that the Chinese government's selection would be meaningless. "You can't impose an Imam, an Archbishop, saints, any religion...you can't politically impose these things on people," said Wangdi. "It has to be a decision of the followers of that tradition. The Chinese can use their political power: force. Again, it's meaningless. Like their Panchen Lama. And they can't keep their Panchen Lama in Tibet. They tried to bring him to his monastery many times but people would not see him. How can you have a religious leader like that?"

The Dalai Lama said as early as 1969 that it was for the Tibetans to decide whether the institution of the Dalai Lama "should continue or not." He has given reference to a possible vote occurring in the future for all Tibetan Buddhists to decide whether they wish to recognize his rebirth. In response to the possibility that the PRC may attempt to choose his successor, the Dalai Lama has said he will not be reborn in a country controlled by the People's Republic of China, or any other country which is not free.

In 2007, two monks from Tashilhunpo monastery of Tibet committed suicide following a campaign of exclusion by Chinese officials. These two monks had recognized the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, and could therefore have been requested to recognize the next Dalai Lama.

On March 10th 2009 Dalai Lama criticized China for oppressing his people and misrepresenting his wish for Tibetan autonomy. He warned Tibetans to prepare themselves "in case our struggle goes on for a long time". The Dalai Lama also spoke of his own exile, and that of the 90,000 Tibetans who followed him, as a period of "unimaginable hardship, which is still fresh in the Tibetan memory."

- FILMMAKER BIOS

NATI BARATZ – WRITER/ DIRECTOR/ PRODUCER

Nati Baratz was born in Jerusalem, Israel. He has been working as a freelance director and producer since graduating from the Film School at Tel-Aviv University in 2000. His most notable films include TEL AVIV-KYRGYZSTAN (2001) and NOCHES (2004). Both documentaries were broadcast on TV in Israel.

ILIL ALEXANDER – PRODUCER/ CO-WRITER

Israeli Academy award-winning documentary filmmaker Ilil Alexander has been working as a freelance director, writer and producer since graduating from Tel-Aviv University's Film School with Honors and MFA degree seven years ago.

Her documentary film ORTHODYKES (released in Canada as: KEEP NOT SILENT) won the Israeli Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2004, as well as 9 international awards and a nomination for the UK's Grierson Award for Best Foreign TV film 2004 and was shown on various TV channels around the world, including BBC, SUNDANCE, CBC Canada, CBS Australia, the Polish and Danish TV and others.

Alexander was the Co-Director and Co-Producer of the Tel Aviv International Student Film Festival 2000, the Director of the Los Angeles - Tel-Aviv Producers Workshop 2001 and has been teaching development and script workshops in Nazereth for Arab-Palestinian filmmakers for Channel 2.

From 2001 to Jan. 2005 she was a Board Member of AIDF (Association of the Israeli Documentary Filmmakers) fighting for promoting original Israeli creation on the Israeli TV and for setting regulations for the Israeli Public Broadcasting Authority.

Alexander has been teaching cinematic language, directing and documentary studies in various places including Tel Aviv University as part of her M.F.A. cinema studies and as a freelance lecturer in H.I.T, the Academic Holon institute for Technology. She has been tutoring a group of young Arab filmmakers in Nazareth whose films are being produced by Channel 2 Authority of Television.

ARIK BERNSTEIN – PRODUCER

Arik Bernstein has been a leading force in the Israeli film industry for the past 15 years. He has initiated and overseen numerous productions: documentaries, documentary series and drama series, most of which as international co-productions. These films and programs have been screened in major film and television festivals worldwide, and were awarded many Israeli and international prizes. To name a few, HOT HOUSE, winner of Special Jury Award at Sundance 2007; MOMENTS, ISRAEL 2002 and ISRAEL, 2003 – I HAVE A DREAM, screened at Sundance, Miami, SilverDocs, Human Rights Watch and Tribeca; and YASMIN, winner of first prize at Jerusalem Film Festival.

In addition to UNMISTAKEN CHILD, Bernstein's producing credits also include SIX DAYS IN JUNE; MATZPEN – ANTI-ZIONIST ISRAELIS; 5250; YITZHAK RABIN – AN UNCLOSED CASE; THE LAST WITNESS; THE BLUE LAMB; THE HISTORY OF ISRAELI AND JEWISH HUMOR"(10 episodes); and END OF THE ORANGE SEASON.

His recent projects include THE BOIDEM; and GAZA-SDEROT, a coproduction with Ramattan Studios & BoTravail! & Trabelsi Productions Ltd. and in collaboration with ARTE France, which is presented as a daily cross-platform documentary series (2 stories, 2 minutes each) on internet and TV. In October 2008, GAZA-SDEROT won the Prix Europa Exploration Award in Berlin for its exceptionally creative way to reflect both sides of the story of Palestine and Israel.

CREDITS:

Director & Scriptwriter

NATI BARATZ

Producers

**ILIL ALEXANDER,
ARIK BERNSTEIN and
NATI BARATZ**

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YARON ORBACH

Co-scriptwriters

**ILIL ALEXANDER and
RON GOLDMAN**

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CYRIL MORIN

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ALEX CLAUDE

Production Companies

SAMSARA FILMS / ALMA FILMS

FEATURING:

TENZIN ZOPA

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA