The 18th annual Rutgers Jewish Film Festival offered a multidimensional view of the dynamic and diverse global Jewish experience, all through the lens of cinema. The festival—which has found a home at both AMC Loews New Brunswick and the Princeton Garden Theatre—was held from October 29 through November 12.

The film selections included documentaries that explored topics as wide-ranging as Iraqi music, immigration to Israel in the 1950s, and the monkey business of Curious George's creators. Feature films brought to life the stories of two courageous young Jewish brothers in occupied France; a modern twist on the biblical story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar; and an Orthodox bride who plans a wedding before she finds the bridegroom.

The annual festival offers a carefully curated slate of thought-provoking and entertaining films. Yet it distinguishes itself by providing a venue for audiences to engage in meaningful discussions with guest speakers who put the films in social, cultural, and historical context. Among those who participated this past year were directors, actors, and screenwriters, as well as Rutgers faculty and other experts from the academic world. There were even a few special guests whose surprise appearances delighted festival audiences.

Menashe Lustig, the lead actor in the film based largely on his own life, made an unannounced appearance at the Saturday night screening of Menashe. Shot in secret within the insular Hasidic community in Borough Park, Brooklyn, and performed entirely in Yiddish, the movie tells the story of a widower in a custody battle for his son. Menashe's presence at the festival gave audiences a unique opportunity to discover what the on-screen character shared with the real-life personality.

When Israeli director Joseph Cedar's travel to New York coincided with the festival, he agreed to attend the screening of his film Norman: The Moderate Rise and Tragic Fall of a New York Fixer. His first English-language film, Norman stars Richard Gere as a small-time operator who befriends a young Israeli politician visiting New York. Cedar, who has an Academy Award nomination under his belt for his film Footnote, has had a warm connection with the Rutgers Jewish Film Festival since he attended ten years ago, when his film Beaufort was featured.

David and Sylvia Steiner sponsored the festival's showing of Keep the Change, the Audience Choice Award winner for favorite feature film. Starring a cast of young adults on the autism spectrum, this romantic comedy tells the story of a couple who meet in a Jewish community center support group in New York City. Director and screenwriter Rachel Israel and four cast members participated in a Q&A with the audience following the weekend matinee screening of the film. The discussion offered an inside look at the casting and complexities involved with making this award-winning film. Audiences valued the chance to ask the actors about their real-life challenges and how it felt to explore them as part of their on-screen roles.

Shot in black and white and filled with striking symbolism, 1945 follows a pair of survivors who arrive in a Hungarian village shortly after the war with fragile packages in tow. Their arrival at the train station unsettles the locals, who begin to worry about the nature of their visit. As co-screenwriter Gábor T. Szántó explained to the audience, he wanted to address the silence in Hungarian society about what happened during the war by exposing corrosive prejudices barely hidden beneath the surface. Szántó adapted the script from his original short story “Homecoming.”

Director Yariv Mozer attended two screenings of Ben Gurion: Epilogue, providing filmgoers with a wonderful opportunity to engage in deeper conversation about this important documentary. The film brings to light in-depth footage from interviews with Israel’s first prime minister filmed seven years after he retired. Ben Gurion: Epilogue won the Audience Choice Award for favorite documentary.