

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Walk on Water*]

### The One About the Mossad and the Gay German

By Steve Sailer

THE ENTERTAINING Israeli comedy-drama “Walk on Water”—in which a macho Mossad assassin must ingratiate himself with a gay German tourist to ferret out the whereabouts of his almost 100-year-old ex-Nazi grandfather and kill him—paradoxically calls to mind the remarkably small impact Israelis have on popular culture.

Although Israel is always in the headlines, Israelis almost never make news in the entertainment pages. The country is so short on globally recognized celebrities that Israelis sometimes brag to foreigners that Gene Simmons, the lizard-tongued bass player for ’70s trash-rock band Kiss, lived in Haifa from 1949 to 1958.

The paltry performance of Israel’s five million Jews in the celebrity industry in which their six million American cousins do so well partly reflects the limitations of speaking a unique national language, although many Israelis speak other tongues as well. “Walk on Water,” for example, is mostly in English because the Mossad agent hides his ability to speak German, which he learned from his concentration camp survivor mother, so he can eavesdrop on the German’s conversations with his family.

More fundamentally, as Berkeley historian Yuri Slezkine detailed in his bril-

liant 2004 book *The Jewish Century*, the founding Zionists always intended the Jewish state to be as un-Jewish in jobs as possible. While the modern economy has slowly made the rest of the world more like Jews—“urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible,” in Slezkine’s words—the early Israelis strove to become more like the warriors and farmers who then predominated among other peoples.

These days, though, filmmaking expertise is so widespread that competently made movies can come from anywhere, even Israel. The key requirement is an interesting script, which is more likely to be found in a low-budget import than in a Hollywood movie, where the typical nine-figure investment in production and marketing requires a screenplay dumbed down to the globalist common denominator.

“Walk on Water” is powered by Israeli actor Lior Ashkenazi’s star-making performance as the callous hitman. In a compelling opening scene in Istanbul, where he poisons a Hamas leader vacationing with his family, Ashkenazi displays the same cold charisma that his near-double, American actor Liev Schreiber, delivered in the spy movies “The Sum of All Fears” and “The Manchurian Candidate.”

When he returns to Tel Aviv and finds that his beautiful wife has killed herself, he reacts so stoically that his worried bosses give him a frustratingly cushy assignment. He must go undercover as a tour guide showing a naïve young German around the Sea of Galilee so he can find out where in Argentina the visitor’s grandfather has been holed up for the last 60 years.

While the American media treat Nazi-hunting as a self-evidently essential task, the Mossad agent sees tracking a nonagenarian Nazi as a waste of time when he

could be killing Arabs instead. Moreover, his German client, a gangly, goofy, good-hearted boy-man—a less handsome Ashton Kutcher or an unathletic Bill Walton—drives the cynical Sabra nuts.

There’s also an amusing altercation with an Arab shopkeeper that hints at the trouble multiculturalism generates as Israelis, who might be the brusquest people on earth, rub up against etiquette-revering Arabs, who assume any rudeness is an intentional insult that honor demands must be avenged.

Unfortunately, director Eytan Fox and screenwriter Gal Uchovsky indulge in the usual insincerities of out-of-the-closet gay filmmakers. Isn’t it odd that male homosexuals in the movie business were often more honest in the past when they had to sublimate their sexuality?

Although they claim their movie critiques Israel’s tradition of machismo, they are obviously infatuated with their Hebrew-speaking he-man.

Moreover, as is common among politicized homosexual filmmakers worried about “validating stereotypes,” they’ve stripped their gay character of all gay characteristics. This sloppily dressed, shambling quasi-hippie would not set off anybody’s gaydar.

Finally, making the German a putative homosexual leeches the intended irony from the movie. The point of “Walk on Water” is supposed to be the Israeli’s eventual realization that the German, despite being the grandson of a mass murderer, is a better human being than he, who uses his ancestors’ victimization to justify his homicides. But if the German really is gay, then the motivation for his kindness toward the madly attractive Mossad man appears less than pure-hearted. “Walk on Water” would have worked better as a conventional odd-couple buddy movie. ■

Unrated, but would be a soft R.

## BOOKS

[*Against Leviathan: Government Power and a Free Society*, Robert Higgs, Independent Institute, 408 pages]

## Enemy of the State

By Daniel McCarthy

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, Robert Higgs published *Crisis and Leviathan*, a work that has since become a landmark in the study of political economy. Upon its release, the book attracted favorable reviews from nearly every quarter, with a *Harper's* editor calling it "a thoughtful and challenging work" and the *American Spectator's* R. Emmett Tyrrell writing, with characteristic hyperbole, that he could "think of no more important reading than Mr. Higgs' book, apart from the Constitution itself." Economists from Murray Rothbard to James Buchanan similarly praised it.

What made *Crisis and Leviathan* a milestone was the rigor with which it elaborated upon the logic of James Madison's 1794 warning against "the old trick of turning every contingency into a resource for accumulating force in government." Other political economists had studied the growth of state power during times of war, depression, and general upheaval before, but none had done so as thoughtfully and thoroughly as Higgs. He took special care in describing the "ratchet effect"—once a crisis has passed state power usually recedes again, but it rarely returns to its original levels; thus each emergency leaves the scope of government at least a little wider than before. Just as importantly, Higgs paid close attention to the role of ideology in nourishing Leviathan, a factor often dismissed out of hand by economists for whom what cannot be quantified does not exist.

Higgs is an economist of a different kind, as his new book, *Against Leviathan*, shows. His background is well within the scholarly mainstream—a Johns Hopkins Ph.D., he has taught at colleges large and small, from the University of Washington to Pennsylvania's Lafayette College, where he held the William E. Simon chair in political economy before joining the Independent Institute of Oakland, California and becoming the editor of its quarterly journal, the *Independent Review*. But he has long questioned the assumptions, and the numbers, on which the pillars of political economy rest. Against the public-choice school, with whom he otherwise has much in common, Higgs contends that government cannot simply be treated as if it were a business or a means for reducing the "transaction costs" of contracts—force and ideology play too great a role. This new volume, carrying on from *Crisis and Leviathan*, makes that case powerfully.

The 40 short chapters here are drawn from Higgs's journalism in the *Independent Review* and elsewhere; yet despite the variety of sources, this volume comes close to being an organic whole. It is a polemic, as the title suggests, but one built upon meticulous scholarship. "Although I express a definite point of view in these essays," Higgs writes in his introduction, "I have also been at pains to present evidence, explanation, and analysis—this book is not just a bunch of op-ed diatribes." What's more, "I have sought to express my ideas in clear, forceful, and vivid English"—for which the reader can be grateful. Political economy hardly makes for a sexy subject matter even with the lucid prose, cutting wit, and moral intensity Higgs brings to this book; without those qualities, all else would be lost.

That Higgs sets out in his first chapter to overturn the Left's most sacred idol helps enliven things immediately. That opening volley is entitled, provocatively, "Is More Economic Equality Better?" One need not be a Marxist to think so: too wide a gulf between the riches of the elite and the meager lot of the poor

promises to be a recipe for turmoil. But Higgs cannily approaches the question from an oblique angle, showing that inequality can have structural causes that no sensible person would want to remove. By way of illustration he suggests, tongue in cheek, seven radical measures that could drastically reduce income inequality—compelling housewives to enter the workforce, for example. "Because housewives are not rewarded for their efforts in the home by explicit monetary payments, their presence in society increases economic inequality—at least as now measured." Higgs here lampoons those sophisters and calculators whose statistics paint an unworldly picture of human misery. Statistical inequality need not mean societal instability; what must be examined, Higgs argues, is whether the actions that lead to more or less equal distribution of wealth are themselves just or not.

Two further chapters explore the ethos and practice of income redistribution in detail before the author turns his attention to the men who built the welfare state, whom he calls in his next section heading, "Our Glorious Leaders." These include a few of the usual bogeymen execrated by critics of big government, notably Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Richard Nixon. But Higgs does not conjure their ghosts simply to condemn them again (and again and again); he has a new take. The chapter on Nixon, for example, does not dwell on his price controls or Watergate or even that part of the Vietnam conflict fought during his tenure. Instead, Nixon represents for Higgs a common type—not a monster but a politician who keenly understood the ways of patronage and power and whose example teaches us a great deal about the nature of the trade. That nature, according to Higgs, was adumbrated long before Nixon by the words of Lord Bolingbroke, who wrote of his own political fortunes, "we came to court in the same dispositions that all parties have done ... our principal views were the conservation of [governmental] power, great employments to our-