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IF THE SHOE FITS: Hanna Laslo, left, and Yael Abecassis star in Israeli helmer Amos Gitai's "Alila," set in Tel Aviv neighborhood.

Aviram Lupo Berkowitch
 Ilan Liron Levo
 Schwartz Yosef Carmon
 Eyal Amit Mestechkin
 Linda Lyn Shiao Zamir

By DAVID ROONEY

After three features that reflected on the historical roots of Israeli conflict, Amos Gitai chooses an especially turbulent time in his country's history to make one of his more sociological, less overtly political films in "Alila." An ensemble drama laced with lighter moments that depicts the vitality, resilience and moral dilemmas of the people of Tel Aviv, the film is absorbing and at times moving. But there's a distinct feeling that much of the deeper significance will be lost on audiences beyond national borders, making this less likely to travel than some of Gitai's recent work.

Action revolves around an apartment block on the working-class outskirts of Tel Aviv, where Hezi (Amos Lavie) rents a room for his mistress Gabi (Yael Abecassis), whose bedroom vocals call attention to their trysts. Screaming neighbors and the din of construction work further destroy any semblance of peace and quiet as one of the residents builds an unauthorized extension into the courtyard.

Interwoven with the story of Gabi's growing dissatisfaction with the terms of the relationship, Gitai recounts the problems plaguing a neighboring family. Ezra (Uri Klauzner) has been pushed aside by wife Mali (Hanna Laslo), now romantically involved with a younger man (Liron Levo). Ezra also gets into trouble with cops for hiring illegal Chinese construction workers, while his son Eyal (Amit Mestechkin) has gone AWOL instead of reporting for military service.

The mosaic of everyday life mapped out by Gitai and co-screenwriter Marie-Jose Sanselme — expanding on Yehoshua Kenaz's novel "Returning Lost Loves" — also covers a Holocaust survivor (Yosef Carmon) and his Filipina housekeeper (Lyn Shiao Zamir), a solitary neighbor living alone with his dog (Lupo Berkowitch) and a ranting policewoman (Ronit Elkabetz). The film touches on animosity in the city not only between Jews and Arabs but also between Jews of different extraction.

A profound mistrust of authority emerges through the scathingly funny observation of the cop — a kind of half-crazed witch — and of

the army through the conflict between Ezra and his son over Eyal's desertion. But it's the unconventional relationships more than the political context that keep the film interesting, painting a picture of a chaotic, corrupt, incestuous society where courage and human contact endure against crushing odds.

Capturing the action in long static takes or with only minimal camera movement, Gitai draws strong performances from his cast and some powerfully felt moments. Standouts arguably are the scenes between Mali and Ezra, with Laslo and Klauzner communicating achingly the sadness of bonds that survive long after the end of marriage.

ALILA

(FRANCE-ISRAEL)

An Agav Hafakot/ICP/Hamon/MP Prods./Agav Films/Intereurop/Arte France Cinema/Yehoshua Rabinovitch Foundation production in association with Canal Plus. (International sales: Celluloid Dreams, Paris.) Produced by Amos Gitai, Michael Tapuach, Laurent Truchot. Co-producers, Michel Propper, Alain Mamou-Mani.

Directed by Amos Gitai. Screenplay, Gitai, Marie-Jose Sanselme, based on the novel "Returning Lost Loves," by Yehoshua Kenaz. Camera (color), Renato Berta; editors, Kobi Netanel, Monica Coleman; music, Pri ganach; production designer, Miguel Martin; costume designer, Laura Dinulescu; sound (Dolby Digital), Daniel Ollivier, Alex Claude; casting, Ilan Moscovitch. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Venezia 60, competing), Sept. 4, 2003. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentation.)** Running time: 121 MIN.

Gabi Yael Abecassis
 Ezra Uri Klauzner
 Mali Hanna Laslo
 Ronit Ronit Elkabetz
 Hezi Amos Lavie