

**Reel Peak Films**  
In association with  
TIME Studios and Chicago Media Project  
Presents

# TANTURA

**A film by Alon Schwarz**

Israel | 95 min. | 2022

**World Premiere**  
Sundance Film Festival 2022 - Opening Day

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## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

When the State of Israel was established in 1948, war broke out and hundreds of Palestinian villages were depopulated in its aftermath. Israelis know this as the War of Independence while Palestinians call it “Al Nakba” (the Catastrophe). This is a story about one such village: Tantura. The film examines why the Nakba is taboo in Israeli society and explores the country’s inability to come to terms with its dark past.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS**

The tape-recorded words “erase it” take on new weight in the context of history and war. When the State of Israel was established in 1948, war broke out and hundreds of Palestinian villages were depopulated in its aftermath. Israelis know this as the War of Independence. Palestinians call it “Al Nakba” (the Catastrophe). In the late 1990s, graduate student Teddy Katz conducted research into a large-scale massacre that had allegedly occurred in the village of Tantura in 1948. His work later came under attack and his reputation was ruined, but 140 hours of audio testimonies remain.

Director Alon Schwarz revisits former Israeli soldiers of the Alexandroni Brigade as well as Palestinian residents in an effort to re-examine what happened in Tantura and explore why the Nakba is taboo in Israeli society. The now elderly ex-soldiers recall unsettling acts of war while disquietly pausing at points they either don’t remember or won’t speak of. Audio from Katz’s 20-year-old interviews cuts through the silence of self-preservation and exposes the ways in which power, silencing, and protected narratives can sculpt history.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Like others who grew up in Israel, I was educated on a story that is very beautiful. Our Jewish founding fathers came to "a land without a people." The Arabs who lived here before 1948 fled by their own will. We are a pure nation; our people were righteous then, like today. We have the most moral army in the world. These stories we Israelis tell ourselves survived in my mind as absolute truths for my entire adult life, even after I was a young soldier during the "Intifada." I have always identified myself as a member of the moderate left side of Israel's political spectrum and, like my friends, I believed all these stories and rarely questioned them.

When I started this project, it was conceived as a film about young human rights activists from Israeli NGOs that oppose the 1967 occupation and are working to try to end it. I was saddened by how these activists, who I see as patriotic heroes, are labeled as traitors by Israeli politicians, media and general society, and I was eager to fight this evolving reality.

One night, I accidentally stumbled across a web page about Teddy Katz and his research on the events of Tantura in 1948. Everywhere I looked on Israeli websites, I found a story about a man that all systems – academic, judicial, press, and social – labeled as a liar. I found it particularly peculiar that someone would find himself in that position after recording over 100 hours of testimonies on audio tapes. After calling Teddy the next morning, I went to visit him, not sure what I would find. I encountered a physically broken man with a deep need to bring his truth to light after everything was taken away from him twenty years earlier.

Listening to the tapes slowly opened my eyes to a shockingly complex reality I was not even remotely aware of.

As I started to listen to the tapes, I made a conscious decision not to focus on whether Teddy's thesis was well-written according to academic standards or if he was 100% accurate in quoting the tapes in his work. I also decided not to spend much of my time on the Arabic-language testimonies that were the main focus of Teddy's original investigation. These testimonies Teddy recorded were transcribed at the time and the argument around their accuracy was put into question during the defamation trial in 2000 and later as part of the investigation in the academic committees that ultimately rejected Teddy's thesis and crushed his credibility. Instead, I was interested in focusing on the audio recordings of the Jewish soldiers and coming to my own conclusions of what had happened based on these oral testimonies. I decided to listen to all the Hebrew audio testimonies prior to reading the transcripts that were prepared by the opposing parties in 2000, realizing that the transcripts may miss very important layers of information – intonation, mumbles, badly recorded parts with problematic audio, and words omitted.

Modern digital audio enhancement tools enabled me to hear what even Teddy Katz and other transcribers couldn't originally hear on the noisy analog tapes. As I listened to more and more interviews, I was amazed by the detective and collection work Teddy accomplished, with zero budget, interviewing dozens of witnesses. Many of the then 70-year-old military veterans told him directly or hinted about a story that was simply amazing. I also listened carefully to vocal nuances of some veterans that said "nothing happened" or that they didn't want to speak about what

happened, and understood between the lines what had indeed probably occurred.

I had potentially found a documentary treasure chest by acquiring access to these never-before publicly heard tapes and started feverishly scouting for contacts of any remaining veterans, now in their nineties. I began to realize the most interesting story here is not only the events of Tantura in 1948, but the systematic silencing that has gone on in Israel for decades around anything and anyone who dares challenge our nation's founding myths.

Once I sat down with the veteran soldiers and turned on the camera I could see how sensitive the subject of Tantura was for many of them. To my surprise, some veterans started talking about the battle of Tantura and what happened after without my prompting. It was as if they wanted to share a truth buried deep inside their soul. It made me think about what we choose to remember and what we try to forget. What would you do if you had a dark secret in your past? Would you die with it? Would you tell your wife about it? Were they waiting for an opportunity to let go of their secrets? Regardless, once a few veterans gave me chilling confessions in front of my cameras, I knew we were on our way to a potentially historic document.

For me, the film is more than anything else an intimate, eye-opening document about our culture – a nation of people wanting to keep their story pure and beautiful – and a historical reality that must be faced and acknowledged as we mature as a society.

Today, I know the war of 1948 was not a one-sided story. Killing of unarmed people after battles ended were committed by both sides – in Tantura as well as other places. These soldiers went to war believing it was an act of survival, and in the context of a post-Holocaust world the story of a nation under attack was their lives' narrative.

However, I also know that as a strong nation we must now know our past, assume responsibility for our wrong-doings, and look at our Palestinian adversaries differently, acknowledging their narrative too, and start addressing *their* pain, not only ours.

I believe that only after Israeli society goes through this deep transformative and difficult process, will we have a chance for meaningful dialogue and the beginning of a fruitful discussion on a lasting co-existence with our Palestinian neighbors. I believe peace will one day come. I do not feel naïve saying this, and I hope this film can serve as a step in a path of new consciousness and new hope for my beloved country and people, who have been robbed of their true historical story by the forces of our founding myths.

- Alon Schwarz

## BIOGRAPHIES

### **Alon Schwarz - Writer, Director and Producer**

Alon Schwarz is an award-winning documentary director. In 2017, he directed and produced the feature documentary *Aida's Secrets*, which premiered at Hot Docs, won the Audience Award at Tel Aviv's Docaviv Festival, and was theatrically distributed in the United States and Israel. Prior to his filmmaking career, Alon held management positions in the software and technology sector after being a serial entrepreneur.

### **Shaul Schwarz - Writer and Producer**

Shaul Schwarz is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, producer and cinematographer. His debut documentary film, *Narco Cultura*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013. In 2016 he directed the Emmy-winning series *A Year In Space*, produced with Time's Red Border Films, co-directed the documentary *Aida's Secrets*, which premiered at Hot Docs in 2016, and co-directed the Emmy-winning documentary, *Trophy*, which premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2017. Shaul is a co-founder of Reel Peak Films with Christina Clusiau. More recently he was an executive producer and cinematographer on the Netflix documentary series, *Unnatural Selection*, and the co-director, producer, and executive producer, of the Netflix Original Docuseries, *Immigration Nation*.

### **Maiken Baird - Producer**

Maiken Baird has been an independent documentary filmmaker for 25 years, specializing in international and political affairs. Maiken executive produced the Academy Award-winning film *Icarus*. She is a frequent collaborator of Academy Award-winning filmmaker Alex Gibney and his Jigsaw Productions, first producing *Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer* in 2010 and, later, serving as an executive producer of *Totally Under Control*, *Divide and Conquer: The Rise and Fall of Roger Ailes*, as well as *No Stone Unturned*, *Elián*, and the BAFTA-nominated *City of Ghosts*. Most recently, Maiken executive produced Matthew Heineman's *The First Wave*, shot in NYC in the harrowing early weeks of the pandemic. Maiken also directed and produced the feature documentary *Venus and Serena* about the legendary Williams sisters.

Maiken began her documentary career at ABC News as a researcher for Peter Jennings News Specials. She went on to produce documentaries for New York Times Television and National Geographic. She co-produced *Chicago 10*, directed by Brett Morgen and produced by Graydon Carter. Prior to becoming a documentary filmmaker, Maiken worked at the United Nations in New York, the European Union in Brussels and the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. She holds a Master's degree in International Relations and Political Science from Stanford University and a B.A. in Political Science from Columbia University. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

### **Halil Efrat - Writer and Editor**

Halil Efrat is an Israeli-American editor and director. He is among the most acclaimed editors in Israel, working on documentaries, narrative feature films and episodic television. Films he has edited include: *Foreign Land* (Israeli Film Academy 2017 Best Documentary Award), *Trophy* (Sundance 2017, News & Documentary Emmy Award – Nature Documentary), *Aida's Secrets* (Hot Docs 2016), *Souvenirs* (Award winner - 2006 San Francisco FF, SilverDocs, IDFA), *Sweet Mud* (Winner, 2007 Sundance World Cinema Dramatic Competition, Best Feature Film, 2007 Berlin

International Film Festival ), *Album 61* (director and editor, Best Director 2013 Jerusalem FF). Halil has been a film lecturer at the Sam Spiegel Film School, a member of the Pedagogical Board, a consultant on editing for various projects (Docdoctor), and an artistic advisor and Mentor at The New Fund for Cinema and Television (NFCT) and the Gesher Multicultural Film Fund. He lives and works in Brooklyn, NY, and is the founder of Roshem LLC, an editing and post production studio.

#### **Amir Sevilla - Editor**

Amir Sevilla is an Israeli-born editor of both documentary and feature films. He has fifteen years of experience both as an editor and assistant editor in major Israeli productions. His editing work includes *Families* by Tomer and Barak Heymann (co-editor in the documentary series), *State-less* (Best Documentary, 2017 EPOS International Art Film Festival), *Masks On* (2018 Israel-Los Angeles co-production, short feature film), *100 Million Views* (co-editor, Haifa Film Festival, YES TV channel), and *Chancela, the New Black* (broadcast on Kan 11 national TV channel, Festival Choice Award - Golden Wheat Award Festival, Istanbul, Turkey).

## **CREDITS**

### **Director**

Alon Schwarz

### **Producers**

Shaul Schwarz

Alon Schwarz

Maiken Baird

### **Writers**

Alon Schwarz

Shaul Schwarz

Halil Efrat

### **Editors**

Halil Efrat

Amir Sevilla

Sagi Bornstein

### **Executive Producers**

Ian Orefice

Mike Beck

Steve Cohen

Paula Froehle

Jamie Wolf

Nathalie Seaver

Barbara Dobkin

Eric Dobkin

### **Line Producer**

Marc Zahakos

### **Associate Producers**

Christina Clusiau

Ronnie Merdinger

### **Cinematographers**

Or Azulay

Avner Shahaf

Yonatan Weitzman

Ilya Magnes

### **Original Music Composer**

Ophir Leibovitch