

Synopsis Shock Therapy (working title)

It is impossible to understand the process of privatization that has swept across Israel without understanding the “Wisconsin program” – the program that led the way to the privatization of the employment services in Israel. The process of privatization in Israel met with almost complete silence from the public. The Wisconsin program, on the other hand, caused stormy debate.

The basic idea was that private companies would provide services for the state and receive money according to the number of people placed in jobs.

“Employment is a kind of ‘personal problem’, an addiction to dependence on the state,” says Aki Efron, the Israeli partner of the Dutch company Agens in the Hadera branch. “This program is a good way of kicking the habit.”

Workers’ organizations and NGOs pointed out the problems inherent in the program. They noted that many unemployed people are not able to work (because of their age or health problems), and that the main problem was a lack of positions offering a fair wage for the population sector included in the program (mainly people with low levels of education).

The film will expose the human puzzle as it moves between the optimistic and affluent world of the program’s operators and the hopeless world of the program’s participants. It will demonstrate the changes that Israel is undergoing, from a society of solidarity to one of glaring social inequalities.

We have chosen to focus on the Dutch company Agens and Ye’ud Human Resources, who operate the program in the Hadera region together. The participants in this area are Jewish, mainly recent immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia, and Arabs. In addition to the program’s operators, we will focus on three participants, three women who are considered “success stories” by the operators. The women may have indeed escaped unemployment, but have they escaped the cycle of poverty? Our initial research suggests not. Most participants in the program earn less than the minimum wage and do not receive even basic social benefits. They have simply joined the production line of workers in poverty.

Treatment

Israel celebrates its 60th anniversary this year. The film will express Israel's turnabout from a relatively equal society of solidarity to a society wherein the profit motive is the guiding principle.

For Amwa Ababa, the corridor seems endless as it cuts right across the entrance floor of the Tel Hashomer hospital. Beside her is the cleaning trolley from the cleaning company, a contractor. Her eyes are fixed on the rag on the floor. She goes up and down the corridor, enters the washrooms to empty the garbage cans, then goes back to the mopping. She is unseen among the morning visitors at the hospital. The contractor has spread out its workers in such a way that they cannot meet and talk during work. Amwa doesn't dare complain. Compared to the fate of those being brought to the hospital, she and her five children are fine. None requires hospitalization. Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lies in coma somewhere in the hospital. She doesn't know where, despite the fact that it is because of *him* that she is there, cleaning the floor as a participant of the Wisconsin program that was launched during Sharon's tenure as prime minister. In a few hours, her shift will end and Kaukab el-Hija will take over, when the Arabs from the Wadi Ara region take over from the Ethiopians of the Hadera area.

The film *Shock Therapy* follows the "success stories" of the privatization program and Agens in particular. Amwa Ababa, a "new" immigrant from Ethiopia and a single mother, and Kaukab el-Hija from Ar'ara both work through the program as cleaners in Tel Hashomer hospital. Their miserable wage, around NIS 3000 a month (€545), turns irony to tragedy. This is how Agens removes names from the list of unemployed and increases its own profits. Kaukab and Amwa have not been integrated as full-time employees, and therefore they don't receive full social benefits like the other workers. Even though they spend most of their day at work or on the road back and forth, they are still deep in the cycle of poverty, and the way out seems further than ever.

The film is a drama of contrasts between various fascinating personalities that represent polarized positions in Israeli society. The program's operators are from Israel's economic elite, applying the principles of the free market. The program's participants, the chronically unemployed, are thrown into the "flexible" labor market. We will accompany each one through his or her personal struggle and personal story.

Orna Asdon, from Pardes Hannah, left the program. "I am a single mother," she says. "I escaped Agens. I prefer to work in the supermarket here for about NIS 3000 [€545, less than the minimum wage] and never to go back there." With Orna, the program succeeded: after many years of living on social security benefits, she found herself work – work that leaves her below the poverty line. "The shift work plus the travel to and from work undermined the family. Today I am struggling for the future of my children, to lift them out of the cycle I live in, and so I don't tell them about what I'm forced to do."

Amwe, Orna and Kaukab were among Agens' first "clients." The change in terminology, from "chronically unemployed" to "clients," is the start of the process. First, the clients were obliged to show up each day at the Agens premises where they

received cursory training – lessons in improving personal appearance, speech, behavior etc. – to improve their chances in the job market. Kaukab finds it all very boring, but she must show up in order not to lose her income maintenance benefits. When in the training center, there is a line of computers connected to the internet. The tutor for the course on “personal responsibility” told her to take the initiative and seek work on the web. She moves the mouse over the Y-Jobs page and sees an ad – “Wanted: young people to join the entertainment staff at the Dead Sea, good conditions.” Igor (40), sitting next to her, enters “general” in the “area of work” field, “general” in the “position” field, and “north” in the “region” field of the search engine. The result: “Wanted: dynamic people for telemarketing.” They’ve been left behind by the modern world. The next stage for them is perfunctory job training. Those who don’t find work for themselves are sent to learn how to work, and end up working shifts with a cleaning contractor. And that’s where they stay.

Acki Efron, one of the Agens owners, opens his house to us and opens his heart. His fervent belief in the program’s success is one of the principle components of the irony evident in the film. “The big problem is the addiction to unemployment, addiction just like any other addiction – it does them no good, but they can’t stop. That’s why there is such a fuss, but in the end they thank us. We have just got approval for a new center in Netanya.”

Through the film and the characters within it we will witness the ideological battle over the nature of the Israeli labor market – a free market or an economy based on social responsibility. At the heart of the battle is the Wisconsin program.

The complex human puzzle exposed by the film and the gap between the program’s operators and its participants will shed light on the socioeconomic issues that challenge Israel on its 60th anniversary. What is the future that awaits Amwe, Orna and Kaukab, the program’s “success stories,” in the new society being created before our eyes?

Structure and Style

The difference between the world of the program’s operators and that of the participants will be reflected in the filming.

The film moves between two main axes. The first, more general axis will shed light on the dramatic upheavals Israel has undergone socially and economically. It will also sharpen the conflict and differences of approach between those in favor of and those against privatization. The operators live sheltered, comfortable lives; thus their views on economics, privatization, and the Wisconsin program will be presented in their own living rooms, within a frame of clean, clear lines.

The second axis is the participants. We will accompany them on the long, dynamic, super-realistic and unstable journey which each undergoes every day anew. The camera will not view the participants from a distance (fly on the wall), but will close in to get nearer to their thoughts, what they do, the world they inhabit – and thus expose a world in which they have been left behind.

The difference between the styles of filming is a way of expressing the difference between the two worlds visually. In the Wisconsin program and Agens, the two worlds meet – and an Israeli society of deep rifts is exposed.