

BY JOHN FISHER

FILM-MAKER Simon Glass is putting the finishing touches to *The Last Tribe*, his documentary about the Leeds Jewish community, which will have its premiere at this year's Leeds International Jewish Performing Arts Festival.

He's no stranger to the festival. Four years ago Simon's second short film, *Yakov My Boy*, was premiered there.

Simon has come full circle since his first outing. In those days, he recalls, he and his team were full of confidence and really believed they had the 'knack and know-how' to make it work.

"It was the first time for us, we were young and I suppose we were naive and we had so much to learn," he said.

"I remember being terribly cautious — careful not to tread on anybody's toes and always strived to paint the Jewish community in the 'right' way.

"But of course you come to realise that painting your subject in any way is a good thing. So with *The Last Tribe* the confidence is certainly there and we are helped by a terrific subject."

After *Yakov* was premiered, Simon funded his own flight to Cannes where he was successful in selling the film's rights.

This led to further offers from festivals in Miami and Ashkelon. He hopes to travel the same path with *The Last Tribe*.

Born in Leeds in 1986, the eldest of three children, Simon expressed himself through art from an early age.

"I did a lot of drawing when I was young and I think this is where my artistic nature has come from."

An interest in cinema started early too, mostly with children's films and then an admiration for the work of actor Jim Carrey.

When Simon started studying cinema seriously, he moved on to the 'big boys' like Stanley Kubrick, Martin

Simon chronicles the history of the Leeds Jewish community



POLISHED: Simon Glass ponders a shot with actor Ben Casper

Scorsese and some French New-Wave greats like Francois Truffaut, Louis Malle and Jean-Luc Goddard.

"These were energetic directors, full of life and ready to take a chance in their films, which were always interesting to watch."

Educated at Leeds University where he read cinema and photography, Simon currently teaches other students the same subject at the same university.

For the last six months though he's been putting together the hour-long film charting the history of the Leeds Jewish community, from the slums of the inner city to tracing the social and economic climb to the leafy suburbs north of Leeds.

He has worked closely with his photographer and editor

Stefan Fairlamb.

"The film charts how the community has progressed — not so much the Russian immigrants who came to Leeds in the 19th century — but the second generation," he said.

"In a way it's a huge success story about how they built themselves up from the Leylands — most of the people interviewed in the film were born there or their parents were."

Simon has a penchant for filming the story's human interest. You can show new audiences a whole film of archive footage on vintage areas, he says, but it doesn't really mean a lot.

"Show them the people who actually lived in those streets and it will hold more resonance."

Simon and his team picked

about 20 people to interview and surprisingly they don't all tell the same story.

"It was interesting to see the effect the war had on them; this completely alters their outlooks on life," he said.

"A lot of the men said they went into the war as boys and came out as men."

The project has given Simon the opportunity to meet some amazing people from all elements of the community.

The thing is, he says, the ghetto mentality tends to remain, the wish to stay together in one area.

What fascinates him is the journey the community has made since it started to migrate north, from the Leylands, North Street, Chapelton, Harehills, to Moortown, Roundhay, Alwoodley and beyond.

"Having been born towards the end of the 20th century, my generation hasn't experienced a war and lived through dark times so we just took it for granted we would go to university," Simon said.

"We owe this second generation a huge debt of gratitude because it was this group who realised it was only through education that their children would succeed."

"They wanted a better life for their offspring so they made huge sacrifices and worked hard to achieve these goals for their children."

"They produced the lawyers, barristers, judges, doctors, dentists, surgeons, businessmen and entrepreneurs who contributed enormously to the city, proving that education was always paramount for the

progression of our community and the city that gave us shelter.

"As well as the Russian immigrants and the second generation, the film also deals with European immigrants who came to Leeds during the war. To hear some of the Holocaust survivors' testimonies is very heart-rending indeed."

A strand that runs throughout the film is the introduction of a fictionalised character.

Leeds actor Ben Casper plays a 19th century Russian immigrant who has arrived in 21st century Leeds in search of his last, lost tribe.

Antisemitism was a topic everyone discussed, Simon adds, but there were different opinions. He said: "A lot said they had experienced racial abuse, so it was interesting to hear how differently they dealt with it."

"Some stood up to antisemitic attacks and fought back physically; others were more humble and tried the voice of reason."

The film also deals with the next chapter in the Jewish community's history, because Simon feels the community is at the crossroads preparing to face the challenges of the future.

"Currently there's talk of a great decline and I don't want to air-brush it in anyway because it's part of the human evolution."

"Times change, so do people's aspirations and expectations. People either move away, or marry out and some don't want to be associated with religion like their forebears — that aspect is terribly sad."

"Nevertheless there is still

a Jewish community so I want to be realistic; we have some wonderful resources in Leeds and amazing organisations.

"Making this film has brought me much closer to the Jewish community."

I think it's an amazing privilege to be invited to share these reminiscences."

Simon has also been involved with Leeds Jewish youth centre The Zone's Young Filmmakers, who is making its first short film, *Where Did All the Bagels Go?*, to be screened prior to *The Last Tribe*.

The film deals with the decline of kosher shops and businesses such as butchers, bakers and delis and is an exploration of the community; the title is a metaphor for where has all the community gone

"Going into The Zone and seeing a hive of activity really does instil you with hope for the future," Simon said.

"The Leeds community will never be as big as it was, but nevertheless it will still maintain, and is as vibrant and exciting as it always was."

"I hope in 50 years time a group of young film-makers will document their community in the same way."

"People change — it is part of our evolution so it's important that future generations document our history and take the story a step further."

The Last Tribe and *Where Have All The Bagels Gone?* will be screened at Northern Ballet, Leeds, on Monday, June 27 (9.15pm).

■ Tickets: 0113 220 8000 or 0113 268 0899.

Nava has last laugh as she adapts book

BY SIMON YAFFE

ISRAELI author Nava Samel's book *And the Rat Laughed* is being adapted for the big screen.

"I am really excited about the project," Nava said from her Tel Aviv home.

"I was approached by the film company and am writing the script at the moment."

"We are hoping to make it an international production, with scenes being filmed in Israel, England and Poland."

The story resembles a relay race in which the characters transfer memories from one another, while travelling on the axis of time.

Jaffa-born Nava said: "It deals with the future of the Holocaust in Israel when survivors and their children are no longer around."

"We know the Holocaust is — and will continue to be — preserved with documents and testimonials, but there is a way of preserving it emotionally, too."

An opera based on the book, produced by the Israeli Chamber Orchestra, had its premiere nine years ago.

It has also been released on Kindle, the electronic book reading device.

Nava explained: "The Kindle represents a new world and so many books about the Holocaust will be accessible at the click of a mouse."

"It opens up a new horizon for authors and for preserving the memory of the Holocaust."

"I have already had requests from a PhD student in India, who is writing a thesis on my book."

"I don't think any hard copies were sold in India, so it's fantastic."

"My dream is that the book will reach those Arab countries which are still hostile to Israel



FILM BOUND: Author Nava Samel

"Perhaps I am being naive, but I remain hopeful of a world without boundaries."

Nava was born to parents who had lived through the Holocaust.

Mother Miri is an Auschwitz survivor, while father Yitzhak Artzi lived in Bukovina, which is currently split between Romania and Ukraine.

Yitzhak later served as deputy mayor of Tel Aviv and was also a member of the Knesset.

Nava, who grew up on a moshav in the Jezreel Valley, said: "It was only when I got to adulthood that I realised my parents' survival of the Holocaust had had an impact on me."

"Of course, everyone in Israel knew about the Holocaust, but my mother seldom mentioned it."

"It was as if she had an amputated biography."

Her Zionist activist father met her mother when he was scouring Europe looking for Holocaust survivors to take to then-Palestine.

Nava explained: "My parents embarked

on an illegal ship, the Knesset Israel, in 1946.

"But they were captured by the British and exiled to Cyprus where they spent 11 months."

"They were legally allowed into the British Mandate of Palestine in 1947."

Her father's original surname was Herzig, but he was encouraged to Hebracise his name, as were many other immigrants to the fledgling state.

Nava's first book was a compilation of poetry, *Poems of Pregnancy and Birth*, which she wrote in 1982 while pregnant with her first child, Iyar.

But she claimed she wanted to write books from an early age.

"I used to tell myself stories even before I could read and write," she recalled.

Since her first book, Nava has had 15 works of fiction published, as well as four plays performed on the stage.

Hat of Glass, the first Israeli book in prose to focus on the children of Holocaust survivors, was her second book, followed by *Becoming Gershona*, which won America's National Jewish Book Award in 1990.

Five years later, *Flying Lessons* was adapted for Israeli television and her one-woman play *The Child Behind the Eyes* ran on the Israeli stage for 11 years.

It would seem creativity runs in her family — her brother is legendary Israeli musician Shlomo Artzi.

A winner of Israel's Prime Minister's Award for Literature in 1996, she read art history at Tel Aviv University.

Nava added: "I am a great believer in the ability of art to push through the importance of emotional memories."

"I think the word 'proud' can be legitimately used when describing how my mother felt about *And the Rat Laughed*."

"Although she remained silent about

what she went through in the Holocaust, she was aware of the fact that her past is her descendants' legacy."

Nava returned to her parents' birthplace of Bukovina 13 years ago with her father, who died in 2004 at the age of 82.

She recalled: "It was a very emotional event for him."

"We tried to track down the orphanage where, as a 24-year-old, my father went to try and take the Jewish orphans to then-Palestine. I saluted his unbelievable bravery."

Her mother was reluctant to go with them, instead she went on an organised trip to Auschwitz.

Nava, whose husband Noam is general director of a Tel Aviv theatre, said she had an observant upbringing.

She explained: "My parents were very rooted in their Jewish traditions — my father went to shul most Shabbats."

"I am connected to my Jewish traditions — underneath my Israeli layer, a Jewish clock keeps ticking."

"To describe what I am now, I would hesitate to use the word secular, because it is misplaced."

"I am pro-religious choice — I observe kashrut, I observe the high holy days and I fast on Yom Kippur. It keeps me connected to my ancestors."

Nava, who teaches creative writing at Tel Aviv Public Library, also wrote *Australian Wedding*, a 2008 semi-fictional account of visiting her son in Australia and seeing if Israel is the only place for Jews to live.

She also wrote a children's book, *The Backpack Fairy*, and is currently working on a Holocaust novel telling the story of an Italian Jewish musician during the Second World War whose life is saved by his non-Jewish opera singer girlfriend. It is due out in the autumn.

Hip-hop Holocaust tribute

HIP-hop musician Bekay has recorded a tribute to the victims of the Holocaust.

Bekay joined forces with DJ Dbefekt to record the track Remember.

The YouTube video is equipped with an interactive transcript that translates the lyrics into French, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish.

"Remember means a great deal to me personally and to those who have dealt with oppression in any capacity," Bekay said.

"I have relatives who fled from Europe due to religious persecution during the Holocaust."

"So my involvement with this project is a matter of intense personal interest both as an artist and more importantly as a human being."

"Although this video captures the oppression of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, it's intended for any man, woman or child that has dealt with racism or oppression in one form or another."

■ Watch Remember at tinyurl.com/G9xzz3