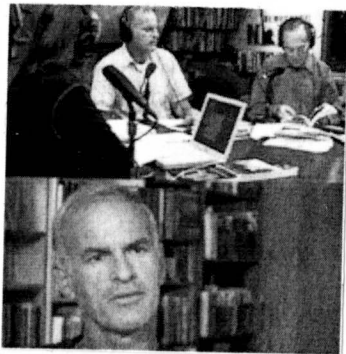


Norman Finkelstein, The Political And The Personal

by George Robinson
Special To The Jewish Week

One of the low points in Yoav Shamir's recent documentary, "Defamation," comes when he interviews Norman Finkelstein. Prodded by Shamir's seemingly naïve questions, the author of "The Holocaust Industry" begins to rail at his interlocutor, virtually daring him to use the footage in the finished film. But "American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein," a new documentary by David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier that has a weeklong run beginning Feb. 11, presents a more balanced portrait of Finkelstein, who, when his passion doesn't carry him off on a wave of anger, is shown to be thoughtful, intelligent and deeply melancholy.

Finkelstein will be familiar to Jewish Week readers as the son of Holocaust survivors who has denounced the state of Israel for



the usual litany of crimes, including its policies on the West Bank, and has accused many of the nation's more vociferous defenders of manipulating Holocaust remembrance as an excuse to give Israel a free pass for its conduct. His war with Alan Dershowitz is notorious; he accused Dershowitz of plagiarism and, in turn, Dershowitz helped block Finkelstein's tenure application at DePaul University. Even Finkelstein's closest friends and colleagues agree that his tone is frequently unhelpfully shrill and his behavior self-defeating.

Ridgen and Rossier have given full vent to those accusations and to more damning ones from Dershowitz, David Olesker and others. Finkelstein's detractors certainly get plenty of

screen time, although Dershowitz in particular seems to be more hell bent on name-calling than making a coherent argument. And the film rehearses all the major conflicts that Finkelstein has been involved in: the whirlwind surrounding "The Holocaust Industry," the demonstrations at his 2004 appearances at Canadian universities, the tenure fight at DePaul and his ill-advised tour of Lebanon after the second Lebanon war.

For someone who has been the target of much wrath in the Jewish community, Finkelstein has surprisingly ordinary positions on the basic issues of the Middle East conflict. He insists on Israel's right to exist, essentially supports the two-state solution and, in a scene in one of his DePaul classes, argues forcefully for the placement of a Jewish state in the region rather than in one of the more fanciful options considered by early Zionists such as Uganda. He is anything but a Holocaust denier, and speaks frequently of his parents, who survived Auschwitz, Maidanek and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The problem, as the late Raul Hilberg says in the film, is "the tone of his voice," both in his books and his public appearances.

It is his connection to his parents that is at the heart of the film and his work, and it is the private Finkelstein who emerges as a fully rounded human being rather than the public one. He speaks affectionately of growing up in Borough Park and Mill Basin, "We were not poor; we were simple." He acknowledges the powerful influence of his mother Mary, which a childhood friend ruefully says reached "an unhealthy extent." Even Finkelstein himself admits that Mary's reaction to the injustices she saw on the evening news "bordered on hysteria."

As the film goes on, he opens up more and the insights into family life become more complicated. "My father never said a word at home," he recalls. "My mother was always trying to derive lessons from what happened. Forty years later, she would suddenly say, 'Now I understand,' as if some great revelation had come to her." Although he protests that he had a happy youth, there is no escaping the sense that he is not a happy adult.

But, as he himself says when asked whether there are elements of self-hate in his political stance, "It's very possible, but the only relevant question is whether what I'm saying is true or false." In that respect, although the filmmakers' sympathies clearly lie with Finkelstein, their film's tone is judicious, certainly more so than Finkelstein's at any rate.

"American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein" will be playing at Anthology Film Archives (Second Avenue and Second Street) from Feb. 11-17 at 7 and 9 p.m., with an additional 5 p.m. screening on Saturday and Sunday. Finkelstein and the filmmakers will be present for Q&A sessions on Feb. 11-13. For more information, call (212) 505-5181 or go to www.anthologyfilmarchives.org.

Norman Finkelstein with arch-nemesis Alan Dershowitz, top. "American Radical" gives full vent to Finkelstein's enemies while showing him to be thoughtful and deeply melancholy.