

The amazing 'Miss Vertigo'

Rona Soffer's autobiographical short film is an inspiration to people living with significant disabilities **By Paul Alster**

THE HIT 1998 movie "Sliding Doors" was based on the concept of how a split-second decision or reaction can impact the rest of your life. A second earlier, or a second later, and things might have been completely different.

Rona Soffer's life changed in a split second when, at just 15 years of age, she was involved in a terrible road accident. She only just survived, against all the odds, but living with significant disability hasn't stopped her achieving academic success and following her dream of being a filmmaker. Earlier this year, she had the honor of representing Israel at the world-renowned Cannes Film Festival in the south of France, presenting her latest film, 'Miss Vertigo,' an autobiographical Virtual Reality (VR) short movie.

Feisty, funny, and with an infectious joie de vivre, Soffer's story is one that should inspire all those living with disability, and make the able-bodied think again about their perceptions of those who are handicapped or challenged by a physical or mental condition.

She lives in a trendy part of Tel Aviv, not far from Rothschild Boulevard, in the direction of the hip Shenkin area. Parking there is always a nightmare so I had to ditch my car and walk in extreme heat to her street, which had been blocked off due to road works. Five minutes were spent skipping in and out of traffic, avoiding manholes, uneven pavements, screeching cars.

Standing in the shade awaiting her return from a prior appointment, I gazed down the road and saw her approaching, a woman with a cane walking slowly in my direction. Every step seemed considered; her balance was clearly an issue. Her body swivels slightly as she takes each step, as though she is gently spinning a hula hoop around her waist, but there's no hoop there. As she drew closer, she saw me and smiled; a ginger ponytail, red glasses, a short, patterned summer dress, black, white and, of course, red.

Aided by her full-time carer who came down from the building to help her back

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Rona Soffer: The world really needs more films about disability

inside, the 38-year-old reached me and we shook hands.

We arrived at the door of her apartment and she checked her step-counting app. "I've done 1,571 steps," she proudly declared, but when she declares something it is in nothing but a faint whisper. One of her disabilities is barely having a voice. You must move very close to hear her properly.

From the first moment there is an immediate intimacy that is highly unusual.

Born and raised in the Ma'alot Dafna area of Jerusalem, Rona Soffer went to a religious girls school, a place at which she felt stifled and struggled to fit in. She felt different to the rest, and, according to her, she asked too many questions.

"I was never a 'regular' schoolgirl. I never

was,” she tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “I was kicked out of a very prestigious high school. I’m very proud of it. I was a red-haired, very rebellious teenager. I see it in a rather ‘romantic’ way now. I was rebelling against the rules, asking questions about God. I felt the world needed to change. I was an artist.”

Her world well and truly changed soon after. She had been on a day trip to the Sea of Galilee with the religious scouts movement. On the way back to Jerusalem, the group made a stop just off the main Route 90 and Rona got into an argument with one of the youth leaders. She stormed away in a fit of rage, running out into the main road where she was struck by a car travelling at high speed on the notoriously fast road.

“I suffered very severe injuries,” she recalls. “I was transported from one hospital to another – from Rambam to Hadassah, and others. I wasn’t conscious for some time. I sustained major spinal cord and head injuries, so severe that they thought I would never be able to move or to think.

“It wasn’t like I woke up one day and said, ‘Where am I?’ It was totally not like that. I regained consciousness very, very slowly. I was in Intensive Care for around six months and have only a few flashbacks. I could only communicate with my eyes. Then I went to Dr. Bresner, who pretty much saved my life. The other doctors had looked at my scans and CTs and were sure that I would be permanently paralyzed. Then Dr. Bresner came to Hadassah to see me, he looked at the CT’s and said that maybe, just maybe, there was a chance that [the spinal cord] was not completely cut. He decided to send me to Alyn Hospital in Jerusalem, which has a very good reputation.”

At Alyn, specialist physical therapists and other medical experts worked intensively to try and stimulate movement in Rona’s battered body. The treatments were exhausting, and she admits there were many times when she begged them to stop and leave her alone.

“I can’t take any more,” I told them, but they kept saying, “You can. You can do more.”

It’s a situation most people must have imagined, and with it wondered how they personally would react? Would they want to go on in this life-changing state? Would you want to live?

“You know, it’s a funny thing. I think that before the accident I was just this rebellious angry teenager. I’d sometimes say I didn’t want to live, “This life is stupid, bla, bla,



A scene from ‘Miss Vertigo’ in which Soffer dances

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bla.” Then after the accident I remember how ironic it was that even if I wanted to kill myself, I couldn’t do it because I was paralyzed. I was at Alyn for three years.”

There had been significant milestones along the way during those three difficult years, none more so than learning to walk again. That particular moment, after a year of hospitalization and intensive treatment, remains crystal clear in Rona’s memory.

“They told me I had to walk unaided. Actually, I knew that they were right behind me all the time, but they’d said, “You must do it by yourself.” The moment I managed to get out of that wheelchair and stand on my feet, my father just happened to arrive and he saw me standing. It was so exciting. I shouted, “Ani omedet, a bba!” (Daddy, I’m standing!)”

During her time at Alyn, Soffer learned to speak good English as a number of her medical team were native English speakers. We’d been chatting in English, but the moment she recalled standing up for that first time she instinctively slipped back into Hebrew, making the story even more dramatic and heart-rending.

It would be two more years before she was able to leave hospital and go home, two years during which, remarkably, she managed to successfully complete her high school exams.

“The day I was released I walked out on my feet,” she added. “With a cane, of course. It was very difficult leaving the greenhouse environment of Alyn, where people are with you all the time, telling you how great you

are. And then you leave and see [the true reality of your situation], that, in fact, [compared to everyone else] you’re not doing so good.”

Undaunted, she enrolled at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and completed a degree in Theater Studies, then decided to change direction and studied for five years at the Sam Spiegel Film School, also in Jerusalem, before going on to do a second degree in Cinema Studies at Tel Aviv University. It was at the Sam Spiegel School that this woman, who speaks in the faintest of whispers, began to truly find her artistic voice, drawing on her own personal experiences of disability, asking questions about love, sex, and relationships.

In 2010, her documentary film “Love, Davka” was released and caused quite a stir, focusing on her own attempts to find love and intimacy. It was viewed widely, is still shown on Israel’s documentary channel, and is available to view on YouTube.

“I had wanted to be an actress but understood this was a broken dream, so I decided to go behind the scenes, originally in theater. At Sam Spiegel I understood that people don’t know enough about the lives of disabled people. There are two basic definitions [or caricatures of disabled people in the media]: one is of the disabled superhero who climbs Everest and does extraordinary things given his disabilities; the other representation is of disabled people needing pity, living off National Insurance, but the world of the disabled is so far more varied than those two extremes.”

Israel

It was on a course for disabled directors that Soffer was first introduced to the world of VR filming. She began studying this new, cutting-edge medium and quickly understood it would be perfect for giving the viewer a genuine experience of what it is like to live in her world, experiencing her day-to-day battle to keep her balance that she describes as like walking a tightrope every step she takes. The immersive technology would literally place the viewer in her shoes.

There were initial concerns that ‘Miss Vertigo’ might make people feel dizzy, but that hasn’t been the case. The film is viewed through special VR goggles and centers on Rona’s daily battle to be stable, her love for music and dance, and how when someone helps her to dance, his body becomes a stabilizing influence and she feels something akin to normal control of her body movement. It gives her a rare taste of physical freedom.

“When I look at the horizon, that horizon is straight but I am tilting all the time from side to side and I lack stability,” says Soffer. “In the past people have told me that my films have changed the way they think of and feel about disabled people. They told me when I started making the film that this might make it to the Cannes Film Festival. I didn’t believe them.”

But it did.

The world famous Cannes Film Festival is the showcase for some of the most famous directors and actors on the planet, and running alongside the main festival is the Cannes Pavilion, where different nations are able to showcase their work. The layout of the Pavilion is planned according to geographical regions, and so it was that Israel was placed between the Palestinian and Saudi Arabian contingents, just as deadly violence flared on the Gaza border and the international media focused on the deaths of Palestinian protesters and terrorists attempting to breach the border fence protecting Israel. It made for a tense atmosphere in the Middle Eastern area of the Pavilion.

“There was lots of talk of not allowing the Israelis to come and take part, but I just walked in and went straight over and introduced myself [to the Palestinians and Saudi Arabians]. I simply said, “Shalom. My name is Rona and I’m from Israel.” People there experienced the VR film from my point of view, seeing the world as I see it. There were a few who were crying when the film ended.”

Being a disabled person anywhere in the world is not easy, and in Israel people are famously direct, often coming alarmingly straight to the point. I wondered if that is a good or bad thing where disability in this country is concerned?

“Israelis are very different to people abroad who tend not to ask questions, whereas here the first thing many people – especially taxi drivers – say when they see me is, ‘What happened to you?’ But when I go out in the street people are always offering to help me. At first I found this awkward, but now I have no problem with it and appreciate it when people want to offer me a hand.”

Through her work as a film director, Rona Soffer is carving out a special niche for herself focusing on the disabled and issues surrounding disability, but there must be a danger that this specific focus could prove a double-edged sword.

“I have often thought to myself,” she declares in her trademark whisper, “Am I limiting myself in only making films about disabled people? The word in Hebrew for disabled is *necha*, which also means “crippled,” and when I was young I was very affected by this word. I was insulted and would get angry. ‘Don’t call me *necha*! I’m also a woman, a filmmaker, a redhead.’ I didn’t want to be defined by my disability. But today, I’ve been through so many definitions; being disabled is just one of my categories.

“The world really needs more films about disability. They really do. There is very little representation of disabled people in film.

When I talk about wanting to show disabled people as sexy, I’m not talking about sex. It’s just wanting to talk about a disabled person as a whole person. I’m a very physical person, I can’t change the way I look, the way I walk, the way I stand. So for you to acknowledge that I’m also a sexy person, it makes me feel whole. It is an ideology.”

One of her dreams is to work overseas, with America topping her wish list. At the moment she’s working on a video for blues singer Itamar Beck, who has cerebral palsy.

Having overcome so many challenges in life, I wouldn’t bet against this lovable eccentric achieving any of her goals, whatever and wherever they may be. She’s one of a kind. By accident, not design, she has emerged from the brink like a phoenix from the flames, so it’s wholly appropriate that her one-eyed pet cat should be called Phoenix. She chose him specifically because, like her, she says, “He’s ginger and he’s disabled!”

“I was in a taxi – another taxi,” she concludes with a laugh. “I seem to spend my life talking with taxi drivers. He just came straight out and said to me, ‘If you could pay anything just to be healthy, would you do it?’ I said, ‘Look, I am healthy.’ Then he asked if I would give up my disability? And I’m not sure what the answer would be. I’ve created a good life for myself. I’m in a very special place.” ■

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Living with significant disability hasn’t stopped Soffer from following her dream of being a filmmaker