

Unorthodox: Netflix series tells story of young woman's flight from Hasidic community in New York

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Unorthodox, a four-episode series on Netflix, tells the story of Esty Shapiro, a 19-year-old unhappily married woman in Brooklyn who leaves her Jewish ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community, traveling to Berlin to find her mother and begin a new life.

The series is loosely based on *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, the 2012 memoir by Deborah Feldman. Feldman, who collaborated with Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski, the creators of the television series, now lives in Berlin. However, as explained in *Making Unorthodox*, a brief program accompanying the series, the present-day scenes of Esty in Berlin are “entirely made up.”

Unorthodox, directed by Maria Schrader, is an international effort. It was produced in Germany, but uses mostly Israeli actors, and much of its action is set in Brooklyn. Much of the dialogue is in Yiddish, the language used by the Hasidim. The Brooklyn exteriors are filmed on site, but the interiors have all been filmed in Berlin.

The story begins with Esty's flight from the Williamsburg neighborhood that is home to thousands of Hasidic families from the Satmar sect. It then proceeds through a series of rapid flashbacks and the intercutting of scenes between Brooklyn and Berlin.

Wed at 18, it takes months before Esty (Shira Haas) is able to consummate her marriage to her husband Yanky (Amit Rahav). Increasingly unhappy, and discovering that she is pregnant, she decides to leave without telling Yanky. Using papers given to her previously that grant her German citizenship through her maternal grandparents, she sets off for Berlin.

The family consults a rabbi (Eli Rosen), and Esty's husband is dispatched, along with a somewhat older cousin, Moishe (Jeff Wilbusch), to bring his wife back. Meanwhile Esty has begun to see possibilities for a new life in Berlin, and the series concludes with a confrontation between the new and old traditions. Many questions are left unanswered, including Esty's impending motherhood and other details

about her future.

The series, fast-paced and suspenseful at times, is strongest in its portrayal of Hasidic life. This includes the arrangement of the marriage between the two teenagers who have never met; the first, stilted conversation between Esty and Yanky; some glimpses of the lives of families and young mothers; and Esty's close relationship with her grandmother, Babby (Dina Doron). The acting is wonderful, especially Shira Haas, who is some five years older than the teenaged Esty, but perfectly depicts both the fragility and the determination of the character.

One of the more extended scenes is that of the boisterous and joyful wedding of Yanky and Esty, with men and women celebrating in separate circle dances. Esty's mother Leah (Alex Reid), whom Esty has not seen for many years, watches from just outside the festivities, before she is spotted and escorted out of the building.

Esty's happiness does not last past the wedding night. She is unable to consummate her marriage with her somewhat naïve and uncomprehending husband. At their first meeting, she had told him that she was “different.” She is interested in music, but in the ultra-Orthodox world women are not allowed to perform, not even to sing publicly. Esty is alienated from the other young wives, all giving birth on a nearly annual basis and none having any interests apart from their husbands and children. Esty, like the others, has no skills, no connections to what the ultra-Orthodox term the “secular world.” As her mother-in-law wonders angrily and impatiently after Esty's disappearance is reported, “Where would she go?”

Before her wedding, Esty lived with an aunt and her grandmother. She is referred to as an orphan. Her father, who has a drinking problem, is treated by the community with contempt and plays no role in her life. Her mother has been ostracized and left the family long ago, later establishing a same-sex relationship in Berlin.

Some knowledge of Hasidism, a religious revivalist

movement within Judaism that began in the 18th century, is helpful in understanding the dilemma facing Esty Shapiro and others. Hasidim, today divided into numerous sects, are characterized by an extreme religious conservatism and insularity. The characteristic dress and rituals derive from but are not always identical to those of Orthodoxy. The various branches of Hasidism constitute about 5 percent of the world's Jewish population of nearly 20 million.

The Satmars, one of the newer sects, was founded in Hungary in the early 20th century. It is now the largest of the branches of Hasidism, with tens of thousands of adherents in the US, mainly in New York City and the nearby suburb of Monsey, New York, tens of thousands more in Israel and smaller numbers elsewhere.

As the documentary *One of Us* (also on Netflix) explains, only two percent of the Hasidic population leaves the community. The fanatical obscurantism is reinforced by a combination of social insularity and ostracism of those who stray. In many cases they pay a high price. Fathers as well as mothers usually lose custody of their children, and in some cases even any involvement in their children's lives. The doctrine of the "status quo" in custody cases means that courts usually rule that the best interests of the children dictate that they should continue to be raised as they have been up to the dissolution of the marriage. The ultra-Orthodox authorities turn to high-priced and experienced lawyers to ensure this outcome.

While the social backwardness and the mistreatment of those who question ultra-Orthodoxy is made very clear in *Unorthodox*, the lives of its adherents are depicted with some sensitivity. The historical basis for the continuing grip of Hasidism is also suggested, as in a scene in which Esty comes across her grandmother crying, the old woman explaining that she was thinking of her parents and her entire family, all lost in the Holocaust. The Satmars suffered immensely at the hands of the Nazi genocide, and one of the consequences of that tragedy has been to reinforce the argument that extremely large families are needed to replace the "lost souls" of that period, and also that children must not be "lost" to the religion in the cases of divorce. Those who are brought up in the sect find it difficult to cut their ties.

The parts of *Unorthodox* that are set in Berlin are far weaker. There is a sleekness, a glamorized quality to life, as soon as Esty sets foot in the city and begins to walk its modern streets, including the areas around Potsdamer Platz and other areas that have witnessed growing prosperity—at least until the coronavirus pandemic.

Of course, the viewer is meant to look on this with the same eyes as Esty, who has hardly ever left Williamsburg, much less the United States. This is a legitimate approach at

the outset, but the problem is that Esty's fairy-tale life in Berlin continues without much pause. Some of this stretches the bounds of credulity. Esty has her mother's address, but decides to walk the streets for a while, runs into a music student at a nearby café, and then is introduced, in a Cinderella-type series of scenes, to a group of students who immediately welcome her, with few questions asked. Later that same evening, she sneaks into the music school where they study, where she spends her first night in Berlin.

The students, including an Israeli, an Algerian, a Nigerian, a Yemeni and a German, call to mind the admirable West-Eastern Divan Orchestra founded almost 20 years ago by famed conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim along with Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. While the multicultural and international atmosphere is certainly welcome, Esty's connection is not believable. There is also an element of complacency and self-congratulation in the one-sided depiction of Berlin. Much of it does not ring true. These plot devices highlight a version of middle class modernity that is available only to a small section of the population.

Certain scenes set in Berlin, such as those dealing with the attempt of Yanky and Moishe to track down Esty, are more effective. Both the sincerity and naïveté of Yanky and the cynicism and crudity of Moishe are communicated. In another Berlin scene which strikes a more honest note, Leah finally explains to her daughter why they have been separated for so many years. She tells Esty that she was at her wedding only about a year earlier, but was forced to leave. She also explains how she lost Esty in a court case, after leaving her alcoholic and abusive husband, when her daughter was no more than four years old. Esty, who has always been told that her mother deserted the family, is at a loss for words.

The world of the ultra-Orthodox is not often depicted, and there are many similar stories around the world, including some even more tragic. Despite its weaknesses, *Unorthodox* deserves a broad audience.



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