

Filmmaker unravels night cook's strange, tragic life

Jordana Divon
Special to The CJN

He holds court behind the counter at the run-down greasy spoon Vesta Lunch, doling out souvlaki and stories about his rebellious youth in Prague, his cats (whom he adores) and his mother-in-law (whom he doesn't).

You may have even grabbed a stool at the Toronto diner, on Dupont Street, after a late night out, and started chatting with the world-worn but craggily handsome George Golias, and wondered how a charismatic, educated, multilingual 66-year-old ended up slinging 3 a.m. poutine to a motley crew of drunken urbanites and insomniacs.

That question is what prompted Jay Irving, then a 23-year-old film student at Humber College, to pick up his camera and spend the next two years unravelling the mystery of Golias' strange, tragic life.

His efforts have resulted in *The Night Cook*, a gripping documentary set to air at 9 p.m. on March 9 on TVO.

"My friend had dragged me to the Vesta after a party and George was serving us," recalls Irving from an uptown coffee shop. "So when he told me he was just a cook I was like, how is that possible? You could tell right away how smart he was. He was just juggling everything."

Irving's curiosity yielded some startling answers.

"I started asking him about his life, how he ended up in this job. I thought why is this guy living by himself behind the diner where he works? Why hasn't he spoken to his family in 37 years? Why does he have all these cats? The more I got to know him, the more I wanted to reunite him with his family and make a film out of it."

Gaining access to Golias' personal life involved its share of challenges, beyond any initial trust issues.

"It was really difficult getting a hold of [Golias] because he doesn't have a phone or computer, or even a credit card," says Irving.

"He goes to this off-track betting where he gambles on horses. So he's either there or he's at Future Bakery [a café], where he hangs out, or he's working. I always had to track him down."

Irving's patience paid off. Golias proved a fascinating and willing subject, allowing the camera inside the dirty one-room apartment he shares with dozens of cats, and discussing everything from his gambling problem, the abandonment of his wife and baby daughter, and why he hasn't returned home since 1968.

"I think it was therapeutic for him," says Irving. "He's an emotional person, so he cries a lot and often broke down. But it was therapeutic more than anything else."

Those looking for their own catharsis may find themselves challenged and uncomfortable by the film. The documentary's strength comes from Irving's decision not to sentimentalize his subject, but to present a por-

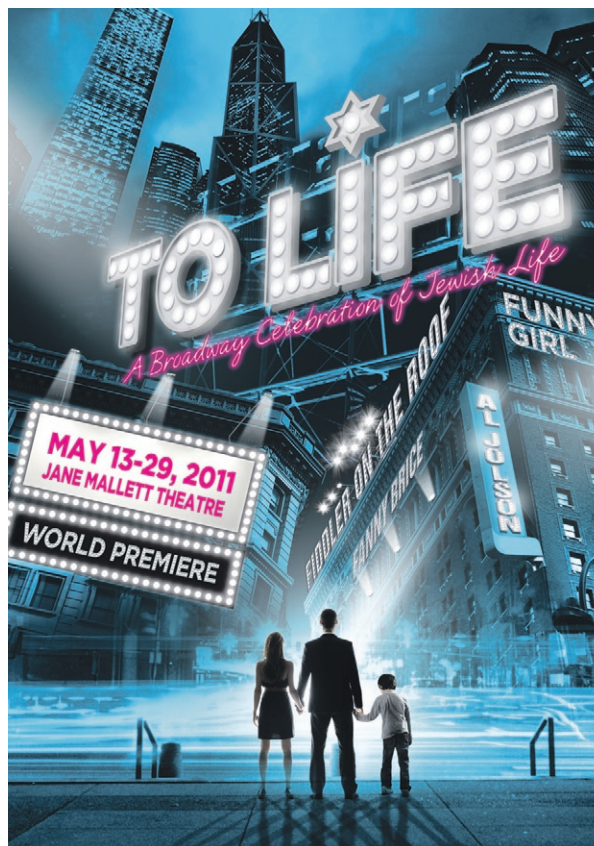
trait of raw, flawed and poignant humanity.

Whether you like Golias at the end of the hour you spend in his world is less important than the fact that you've engaged with him on his level. And even though his story is only one of a thousand similar tales of city life, a chance encounter has led to the preservation of its meaning.

"I want people to take away that here's an ordinary person on the fringes of society and he has an incredible life, and here's me, this film student who just took the initiative to go make a film about him," says Irving.

"When he dies, this film will always exist. Otherwise no one will know about him. That for me means more than anything."

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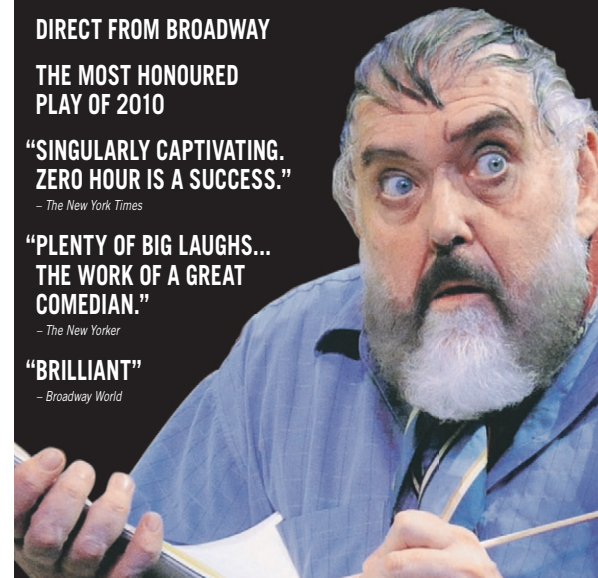
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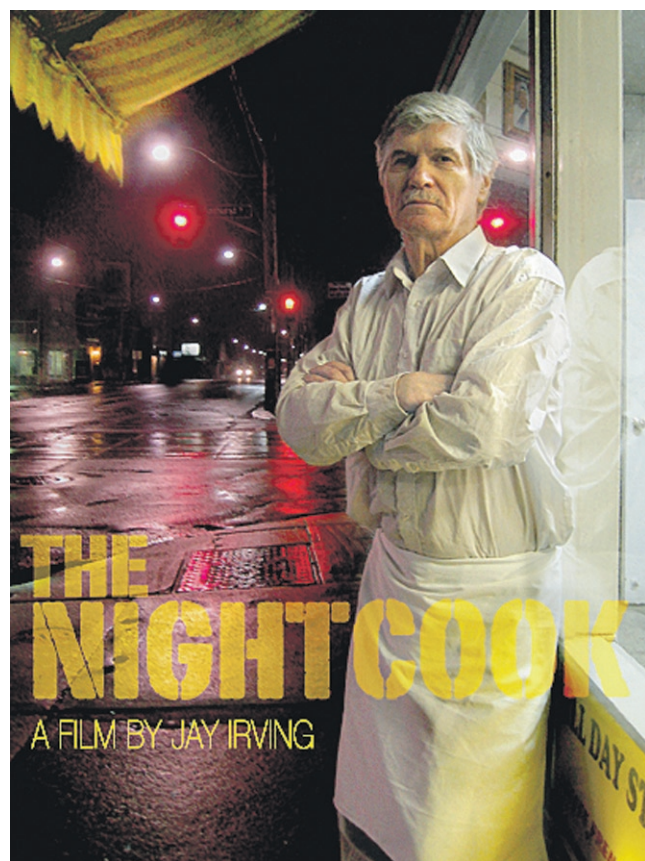
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