

Roadside Attractions Presents

# THE WEDDING PLAN

Written and directed by Rama Burshtein

RUNNING TIME: 110 Minutes



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**Logline:**

A romantic comedy about a young woman with an elaborate wedding planned ... and just one month to find a groom, writer-director Rama Burshtein's (*Fill the Void*) funny and poignant second feature was a nominee for Best Film at the 2016 Venice Film Festival.

**Synopsis**

At 32, Michal is finally looking forward to the comfort and security of marriage, when she is blindsided by her fiancé's decision to call off the wedding with only a month's notice. Unwilling to return to lonely single life, Michal decides to put her trust in fate and continue with her wedding plans, believing Mr. Right will appear by her chosen date. Confident she will find a match made in heaven, she books a venue, sends out invitations and buys a wedding dress, as her skeptical mother and sister look on with trepidation.

During Michal's month-long search for a spouse, she enlists the help of two different matchmakers, goes on a series of disastrous blind dates and finds an unexpected connection with a charming but utterly unsuitable pop star — all while dismissing pleas by concerned friends and family members that she reconsider her risky plan. As the day of the ceremony grows closer and no suitor appears, Michal puts everything on the line to find happiness.

The second film from American-Israeli writer and director Rama Burshtein (*Fill the Void*), *The Wedding Plan* is a poignant and funny romantic comedy about love, marriage and faith in life's infinite possibilities. A nominee for Best Film at the 2016 Venice Film Festival, the film stars Noa Kooler, Amos Tamam, Oz Zehavi, Irit Sheleg, Ronny Merhavi, Dafni Alpern, Karin Serrouya, Erez Drigues, Oded Leopold, Udi Persi and Jonathan Rozen.

*The Wedding Plan* is produced by Assaf Amir. Associate producers are Tammy Cohen and Adar Shafran. The cinematographer is Amit Yasur. The film was edited by Yael Hersonski. The art director is Uri Aminov. Costume designs are by Hava Levi Rozelsky. The casting director is Michal Koren. Original music by Roy Edri.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

When Michal, the Orthodox heroine of *The Wedding Plan*, finds herself suddenly un-engaged at the age of 32, she hits on a decidedly unorthodox scheme. Rather than giving up, she continues with the arrangements for the wedding she has long dreamt of, putting her faith in the belief that God will provide her with a groom.

Writer-director Rama Burshtein found the inspiration for her unconventional romantic comedy in a story she heard about two couples that both dearly wanted to have a child. “So they all went to a righteous man to get a blessing,” she says. “He told both couples that in a year they would have a son. The next year they all came back, but one had a son and the other one didn’t. When the couple that didn’t have a child asked why, he said it was because the first couple went out and bought a baby carriage. I love that story. It says that it’s not enough to get the blessing. You have to believe in the blessing. Once you do something to show your belief, you open the possibility.”

Although *The Wedding Plan’s* protagonist is a deeply religious woman, the film is not about religion, says Burshtein. “It is a journey of faith,” she explains. “Anyone can relate to Michal’s dilemma. The fact that she is religious is only set dressing. Faith has nothing to do with religion. It’s about being either a believer or a nonbeliever. Do you believe in good? Do you believe that everything is possible? These are not questions of religion. It’s a journey we all take and I think this is why people all over the world have enjoyed this film.”

Michal, like Burshtein herself, was raised in a secular family and only came to religious life as an adult. After more than 10 years of matchmakers, blind dates and disappointment, Michal believes she has finally found her soul mate, only to have the rug pulled out from under her at the last moment. In a world where marriage represents love, family, companionship and social acceptance, she is wondering if she will ever find what she is searching for.

At first glance, Michal is not the kind of woman one would expect to take such a bold step, observes Burshtein. “She’s scared and she doesn’t have a lot of self-confidence. She’s a normal woman — the girl next door. That’s not the type you would picture taking a risk like this. She’s not wild, but she’s very honest and she’s not afraid to speak her heart in

terms of being vulnerable and being true. So, as Michal says, she's got the date, she's got the wedding gown, she's got the apartment. She believes that God would not be this cruel."

The film's Hebrew title, which translates as *Through the Wall*, was changed because to some American audiences it sounded more like a political drama than a romantic comedy, but its symbolism remains strong for Burshtein. A reference to a chance meeting Michal has with a possible suitor, it also has a more mystical meaning. "It's not about climbing the wall and it's not opening the door in the wall," the director says. "It's passing through it. This is how dramatic, even miraculous, what Michal does is for her. She suddenly finds herself on the other side of the wall. Even though it's kind of a crazy story, when people see the movie, they believe it can happen. Somehow they suddenly feel they can go through the wall to the other side."

The date of Michal's planned wedding, the eighth day of Hanukkah, also has special significance. Each candle in the menorah represents a specific blessing. The eighth and final candle traditionally represents a beacon of peace and happiness. "She is insisting on that date only because it was the date she picked with the guy she was supposed to marry," according to Burshtein. "But I picked the day carefully. The eighth candle of Hanukkah is like the world beyond. This life has only seven parts. The eighth part is the world of faith and belief. That's from Kabbalah, the mystic side of Judaism."

Burshtein's previous film, *Fill the Void*, also dealt with matters of faith and marriage from a completely different but equally personal point of view. "I think I will always do movies that are connected to men and women because that is the most interesting thing to me," says the director. "In my world, the only way to consummate love is through marriage. This is our rule. So my films may seem like they are about marriage, but they are about love. So if it's a happy story it's going to end up with marriage. This is our way."

### **Looking for Mr. Right**

For Israeli audiences, *The Wedding Plan* is full of familiar faces, including some of the country's best-known actors, starting with Oz Zehavi, as Yos, a handsome and lighthearted musician Michal meets by chance. "Oz is probably the biggest heartthrob in Israel right now," says Burshtein. Amos Tamam, who plays Shimi, the owner of the venue Michal has booked for the wedding, was the lead actor on a very successful Israeli television

series. “We also have Irit Sheleg, who is well known for her work across the media, playing Michal’s mother.”

Noa Kooler, who plays Michal, is less well-known than her co-stars, but that’s already changing due to her performance in *The Wedding Plan*, for which she received the Ophir Award (the Israeli version of the Oscar<sup>®</sup>) for best actress as well as the best actress award at the Haifa Film Festival. “She’s never been seen in a major film role before,” notes Burshtein. “I can’t understand why. I don’t think that anyone here in Israel can really compete with her ability. She is a brilliant actress.”

Although Kooler auditioned for the role several times before being cast, Burshtein was sure from the beginning that she was the one. “The minute I saw her I just knew,” she explains. “The character is very complicated. She has to make you laugh and cry at the same time. That dichotomy is essential to the story. It was a hard character to write and then to find someone to do it seemed almost impossible. She was the only one.”

The actress brings her character an authentic simplicity and warmth that will have audiences rooting for her, despite the unconventional tactics she adopts. Kooler came to her audition with an out-of-the-box concept of who Michal is. “Usually when you think of an Orthodox Jewish woman, you picture someone wearing drab, dark clothes,” she says. “Grey, maybe, or brown and nothing too flashy. That’s the stereotype. But I wore a blue and yellow dress that was very cheerful, because I decided that Michal is essentially a happy woman. She’s not up praying all night. She’s not miserable. And Rama liked that idea, so I got the part!”

While Kooler likes to think of herself as a determined woman, she admits she would not take the risk Michal does. “Michal is a very strong, funny, and devout woman, even if she’s confused right now,” says Kooler. “She loves truth. She is brave and crazy at the same time. I hope I’m brave, but I couldn’t do what she does in the movie. I would never, ever plan a wedding without a groom.”

Michal’s mother and sister would rather she did not go through with her plan, but they try and stand behind her. “Her family is scared for her,” says Kooler. “They love her. but they are worried. They support her even though they think the idea is crazy. They do everything she asks of them. Her mother and sister even shop with her for the wedding dress. But I think they are afraid of what will happen to her if this doesn’t work.”

Kooler has only unbridled praise for Burshtein. “It sounds like a cliché, but Rama is an amazing director,” says the actress. “She’s also my friend and my teacher. She knew exactly what she wanted and she trusted me. I think the real love story in *The Wedding Plan* is the love between Rama and me.”

### Finding What’s Lost

*The Wedding Plan* was shot almost entirely in Israel, with one short but pivotal sequence filmed in Uman, Ukraine. Most the exteriors were shot in Jerusalem, with interiors in the Tel Aviv area, including Jaffa, an ancient port in the oldest and southernmost part of the city. The hall that Michal books for the wedding and reception is in Bnei Brak, a center for the ultra-Orthodox that has a unique ambiance harking back to a simpler time.

Uman has special significance to Burshtein that made it important for her to film there. Michal visits the tomb of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, an influential Hasidic spiritual leader who lived and taught in Ukraine during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Every year, tens of thousands of Hasidim make a pilgrimage to his grave in Uman to pray for his blessing. While the Ukrainian exteriors were shot on location, filming is prohibited inside the sacred site, so an exact replica was built on a soundstage.

“It is very hard to explain the importance of Michal’s trip to Uman,” says the director. “The Rebbe Nachman, who is buried there, promised that whoever comes to him will get back something that has been lost. It could be something tangible or it could be something like your dignity. People from all over the world come to a place where there’s nothing but this tomb. No hotels, no shopping, no restaurants, nothing. It doesn’t matter if you’re religious or not, it’s very powerful to be there.”

For Michal, the rebbe is her teacher, as well as her spiritual leader. “In her way of thinking, he is the most important rabbi of all,” says Kooler. “She has spiritual questions: ‘What should I do? I’ve lost my way and I want you to show me. Am I going right? Should I go somewhere else?’ She goes to him for help finding the answers.”

The trip opens Michal to possibilities she has not been considering. While praying on the women’s side of the tomb, she hears a comforting voice. It belongs to Yos, a secular pop star on a journey of his own, but more as a spiritual tourist. “He shows her a point of lightness,” says Kooler. “He connects her to her joy. That’s his job: to show her how to be

happy, how to be light. Meeting him is a blessing for her, but is he supposed to be the groom?”

It seems to Burshtein that Rebbe Nachman was watching over the production. “When you go to see him, something dramatic is bound to happen,” she says. “We brought a brand-new camera that we tested many times before the trip. When we got there and started shooting, it just stopped working. We tried contacting the manufacturer through the internet to help us, but suddenly all electricity went down in Uman. We couldn’t fix the camera and we had to go back without any footage.”

But what initially seemed like a disaster turned out to be an advantage for the filmmakers. “We went back after we shot the rest of the film,” says Burshtein. “Not only did we get the footage we needed, but the whole scene changed. After we had shot everything else, we had a different perspective. I knew exactly where the characters were emotionally. It made the scene much stronger in the end.”

### **A Brilliant Creature**

The inspiration for the film’s visual esthetic came from an unusual source, an exotic-looking aquatic creature called a nudibranch. A tiny variety of sea slug, nudibranchs come in a wide range of brilliant colors and shapes, often sporting contrasting stripes or spots and flamboyant appendages.

“They measure about four or five millimeters long and come in hundreds of colors, like artwork,” Burshtein says. “They live very deep in the ocean and are very small, so to see the beauty you have to really look.”

The image not only informed the look of the film, it came to represent the rich emotional life of the characters. “The cast, the production designer, the costumer, everyone was working with those images,” Burshtein reports. “In Michal’s room in the film, there’s a big poster of one of them. It was very important to me that the energy of the film be of life.”

Burshtein and cinematographer Amit Yasur devised a way to use the camera that communicates the same vitality. “I believe the cinematographer has to breathe with the characters,” she says. “We had a four-month rehearsal period and Amit was there the entire time. He got to know the characters through the camera for four months before we started shooting. He had to learn to really feel them instead of just looking for the right angle to shoot. The camera was never on a tripod. It is on his shoulder during the whole film.”

As simple as the technique was, it helped to create the immediacy she was looking for. “The audience feels very tense, like it’s a thriller,” Burshtein says. “Some people feel it very strongly. I think the suspense and emotionality of the movie have a lot to do with the way it’s shot. The camera work has no ego and it’s very, very moving.”

*The Wedding Plan* has received an outpouring of praise and support wherever it has screened, proving the universality of its story. “Everyone, man or woman, wants to believe that good things can happen,” says Kooler. “It’s not all terror or wars. There are some beautiful things in life. There is falling in love, having children, even having a great meal or watching a good movie. It is about faith, believing in good, and about love. Everybody wants to fall in love and there is a great deal of love in this script. It’s not just about marriage, but about having love in your life. It’s about knowing that good things can happen.”

Burshtein wants the film to inspire hope in the people who see it and open them up to the endless and often unexpected possibilities in life. “I am trying to give my audience a gift,” she adds. “We all have the power to change and the potential that lies in front of us. I think that when you come out of the film, you will see that in yourself. The audience in Israel had that reaction and I hope Americans will feel that, too.”



## CAST AND FILMMAKER BIOS

**NOA KOOLER (Michal)** has been an ensemble member of the Gesher Theater Group since 2007, where she wrote and starred in the play “One Pulse One.”

She has performed on numerous Israeli TV series, including “Srugin,” “Jonny and the Galil Knights,” the Israeli version of “Everybody Loves Raymond.”

On stage her roles have included Dorin in Moliere’s “Tartuffe,” Maria in Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night” and Miryam in Meir Shalev’s “Yona Vanaar.”

A graduate from the Yoram Levinstein Acting School, she was born in 1981.

**RAMA BURSHTEIN (Director, Writer)** won Ophirs (Israeli Oscars) for best film and best director for her first feature, *Fill the Void*. The film received a total of seven Ophirs as well as critical acclaim when it premiered in competition at the Venice Film Festival where star Hadas Yaron won the Coppa Volpi for best actress. The film was shown at numerous other international film festivals including Sundance, New York and Toronto. It was Israel’s official entry for the Best Foreign-Language Oscar.

Before that, Burshtein wrote, directed and produced films for the orthodox community, some of them only for women. She has also taught directing and scriptwriting in various film and television institutions within the orthodox community.

Burshtein was born in New York in 1967, and raised in Israel. She graduated from the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem in 1994. During those years she became deeply religious and upon her graduation dedicated herself to promoting film as a tool for self-expression in the orthodox community.

**ASSAF AMIR (Producer)** has produced an array of dramatic and documentary series and features. Norma Productions, the company he founded in 1995, has produced films including *Fill the Void*, *Broken Wings*, *Afula Express*, *The Cemetery Club*, *Intimate Grammar* and *Epilogue*. Amir’s debut production, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* by director Elia Suleiman, won the Luigi De Laurentiis Award at the 1996 Venice Film Festival.

His productions have won four Ophirs for best film, four best film awards at the Jerusalem Film Festival, and an array of prizes at major international festivals including Venice, Berlin and Tokyo.

Before beginning his professional career, Amir studied film in New York and San Francisco.