**Thank You Speech by Renen Schorr Upon Receiving the Chevalier Medal of the Ordre Des Arts Et Des Lettres** 

**The French Embassy to Israel – 11.1.16**

When I told my 23-year-old daughter that I was to be conferred the title of a knight, *chevalier,* she was quite excited and thought immediately of the implications: “Wait one minute, Dad…. Does that make me the Daughter of a Knight?!”

“*Oui*,” I replied. “*Vraiment!*”

Thank you for bestowing this honored title upon me.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues who have joined us here tonight.

My remarks this evening are also in memory of **Marc Nicolas,** director of La Fémis Film School in Paris, a friend and colleague for 14 fruitful, cooperative years who died of cancer one month ago.

Several – not so many – years ago, when I was a grammar school student in Tel Aviv of the Sixties, we had the option to choose which foreign language to study, French or Arabic. I chose French so that I could understand the words of the great French *chansonniers:* Piaf, Brel, Brassens, Aznavour, Montand, Greco, Barbara.

The teacher, Madame Ezra, insisted that we call her “Madame Ezra,” and that we greet her each lesson in a *falsetto* tone, “Bonjour, Madame Ezra!”

And then, “Knock, knock, knock.”

* *Je frappe a la porte.”*  (I’m knocking at the door.)
* *Qui est la? Denis? Gilles?* (Who’s there? Denis? Gilles?)
* *Ouvrez la porte, Denis. Ouvrez la porte, Gilles.*” (Open the door, Denis. Open the door, Gilles.)

After that, every day, it was time to sing, *J'ai Perdu Le Do de ma Clarinette*, (I’ve lost the do of my clarinet.)

Let me sing the song for you:

*“J'ai Perdu Le Do de ma Clarinette,*

*J'ai Perdu Le Do de ma Clarinette.”*

My fellow *chevalier* Alon Garboz, the prominent outgoing director of the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, and I grew up in Tel Aviv of the Sixties. The influence of the pioneers of the French New Wave, the revered Truffaut and Godard, was at its height. The Israeli cinema was at the dawn of its course, and Tel Aviv was a barren cinema wilderness. There were no Hebrew-language books on cinema, no publications. You couldn’t watch movies a second time.

The first book that I read in English on cinema was *The Cinema* by the French critic Georges Sadoul. The book’s motto was “The more that French cinema is French, the more it is universal.” This sentence was absorbed and engraved on my mind as an Israeli filmmaker, with the clear understanding that the more that Israeli cinema is Israeli, the more it is universal.

I was 17 years old the first time that I travelled abroad. Naturally, I went to Paris. The Cinematheque was only in Paris. Henri Langlois, the father of this institution, had spearheaded a revolution in modern cinema. From the airport, I caught a taxi to the temple, the Palais on Trocadero, where I simply moved in. All day, all night, I watched every movie that was screened there: French classics, American musicals, Japanese films from the 40s with French subtitles, and *avant garde* films from the world over. From time to time, I went out to drink some water. I think that I visited the Eiffel Tower….

I was mesmerized by the cinema. I understood and didn’t understand. I was possessed.

On my last night, I’ll never forget, I watched Abel Gance’s 1927 silent film *Napoleon* for the first time. I experienced an exquisite film gem that combined my two loves: cinema and history. After the screening, I was electrified. I walked and walked along the bank of the Seine. It was raining, and I wanted to be singing in the rain. I sang, “I will be a film director.”

Three years later in 1973, as the film critic for the IDF weekly *Bamachane,* I wrote about the cultural pioneer Langlois in approach of the establishment of the Tel Aviv Cinematheque.

At those Cinematheque nights in Tel Aviv, the moment I longed for, time and again, was the movie *Baisers Volés* (“Stolen Kisses”) by Truffaut. There, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Truffaut’s autobiographical main character, deliberates between his love for the shoe shop owner or for her daughter, who was the same age as Léaud’s character. He stands before the mirror and recites their names in varying rhythms, trying to decide:

Christine Darbon? Fabienne Tabard?

Christine Darbon? Fabienne Tabard?

Christine Darbon? Fabienne Tabard?

I deliberated along with him; I had no idea which of the two I’d choose. I’m still deliberating today…

When I finished my military service, I too found myself standing in front of the mirror deliberating between two options for film schools: NFTS - National Film School, England, La Femis - National Film School, France.

I stood before the mirror and faced the dilemma head-on:

Femis? NFTS?

Femis? NFTS?

I chose the NFTS.

Unfortunately, they did not choose me, so I went to study in Tel Aviv.

In the year 1975, at age 23, as well as the following year, I already travelled as a student to the Cannes Festival. This time I was a journalist and a film critic representing a number of newspapers. The Cannes Festival was already the crème de las crème of art cinema, although then it was smaller in scope and attracted fewer participants than today. No more than 10-12 people came from Israel to attend, most of them being distributors who were travelling primarily to gamble in the casinos and along the way to gamble on films to distribute.

Even with the distance of years, I can recall several insights that struck me during those auspicious journeys to Cannes:

**I understood that the cinema is the center of the world –** I saw how over 10 days, thousands of people were involved **only** in cinema – producers, directors, actors, distributors, journalists and film lovers. How each day, six or seven cinema newspapers alone were published in French and English. In Israel, the cinema was of marginal consciousness. In Cannes, it was given meaning. The cinema is of importance to the thousands of people present here, who represent millions.

**I understood that the screening of films is holy –** The projection men wore white smocks and gloves. The projection itself, of course, was splendid.

**For the first time, I experienced the power of the loudspeaker system.** This was at the world premiere of the film *Taxi Driver,* and I felt the ceiling of the Palais begin to rise from the reverberation of the applause. The next day, I saw Robert Di Niro, Martin Scorsese, and screenwriter Paul Schrader at a press conference. As they were answering questions, I could watch the realization begin to trickle into their heads that they were international stars, grasping the feeling in the air that the American cinema had changed.

This happened before my very eyes. I was one small participant in an immense historical moment. I was intoxicated. I felt part of an all-encompassing international film community.

Throughout the years – as a student, a filmmaker, and a teacher – the French film culture in all its aspects has served as a beacon for me: the filmmakers, the Cinematheque, the critics Sadoul and Andre Bazin, actors Jean Gabin, Simone Signoret, Jeanne Moreau, John Paul Belmondo, Alain Delon, Lino Ventura, the concept of "*Auteur*," the publications *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif*, the modern winds of change of the French New Wave, Minister of Culture André Malraux, the Cannes Festival, the decision of French filmmakers in 1968 to demand far-reaching changes in Cannes, the neighborhood movie theaters in Paris, the word "Hommage," Minister of Culture Jack Lang, the CNC, the IDHEC and Femis schools, the Clermont-Ferrand Festival, ARTE, restorations in "Cannes Classics." All of these and more had a tremendous influence on my course in life as an artist and as an Israeli film activist.

The French passion for cinema, its position as the center of modern art, the respect for filmmakers, the respect for film actors, the majesty of *une grande vedette,* the romance, the rigor, the patriotism, the pathos. What polyphony and inspiration!

In the year 1978, a short time after my return from those fateful festivals, I collaborated with directors Judd Ne'eman and Yeud Levanon to create the model for the Israel Film Fund. In a world with no Internet and with limited means of research, the basic models which we analyzed and used for inspiration were the supporting funds of the CNC in Paris.

And thus, in the wake of the French New Wave and the CNC, in 1979 the Israel Film Fund was opened, marking the first time in Israel that the film director was placed at the crux of the cinematic creation, the "*Auteur*." And the Israeli cinema embarked on a totally new course.

In 1984 I served as head of the Beit Zvi Film School in Ramat Gan. The distributors David and Dahlia Shapira acquiesced to my appeal to host the Israeli premiere of Truffaut's *Vivement Dimanche* as a fundraiser for student scholarships.

At the same event, we decided to take the opportunity to grant an Hommage to the Israeli film pioneer, newsreel cinematographer Natan Axelrod. This marked the first Hommage ever presented by an Israeli institution for an Israeli filmmaker.

The idea was crucial, but not sexy. Axelrod wasn't of much interest to the students or to the press. I convinced Shapira to ask God Almighty, Truffaut himself, if he would telex his personal congratulatory message to Axelrod. There was only one problem. Truffaut had never heard of the man. But despite that fact and despite being ill with cancer, in his great largesse, Truffaut signed the text which I had composed. And in my great and boundless *chutzpah*, I had written there that if Axelrod ever came to Paris, Truffaut would very much like to meet him.

At the official ceremony held in Tel Aviv’s Zafon Cinema to grant the title "Honorary Fellow," the 80-year-old Natan Axelrod heard that Truffaut viewed him as “*Le Lumiere Israélien*".

“What? Truffaut knows who I am?” asked Axelrod, to the affectionate laughter of the audience. “He wants to meet me?”

That is true international cinema camaraderie.

It was only natural that when we founded the Sam Spiegel School in Jerusalem in 1989, we began an intensive dialogue with the French Institute in Tel Aviv, both with a number of top French filmmakers and with all of the main institutions of the French cinema.

I’ve tried to count how many times I’ve gone to the Cannes Festival since that first visit as a student. I can’t remember. It’s not important. It’s hard to describe the excitement that grips me afresh each time that I arrive as the director of a school of students and graduates whose films are being screened in the official competitions, in every category; to see films in Cannes that took off from the airport of the Sam Spiegel International Film Lab – films from Israel, Singapore and Hungary making their international debuts in Cannes. To see the film that would represent the Ivory Coast for the Oscar, Philippe Lacôte’s *Run,* and to meet dozens of government and cultural officials of the Ivory Coast on the Red Carpet, in all their finery, and to know that not only did this film originate from the Film Lab in Jerusalem, but its cinematographer, 28-year-old Daniel Miller, is a Sam Spiegel Film School graduate who learned French especially to make the film in Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast.

Above all, how challenging it is to contend with the French theory of the "*Auteur*" which so profoundly influenced me and those of my generation, to expand it and even to position it as an alternative in creating the school’s professional tracks, granting a place of honor to not only the work of the director, but also the screenwriter and the producer.

(pause)

When I look at the number of years which have passed since my lessons with Madame Ezra, I still have the feeling that –

*Je n'ai pas perdu le do de ma clarinette.*

And I continue to knock, knock, knock on the doors.

*Mille mercis!*