

# ONE ANGRY WOMAN

*Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem*

Viviane Amsalem can't seem to catch a break. In the foreign film "Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem" all Viviane (Ronit Elkabetz) wants is a divorce from Elisha Amsalem (Simon Abkarian), her devout Israeli husband of thirty years. The only problem? Elisha refuses to grant her *gett*: 'divorce document' in Hebrew. The trial spans five years—yes, *five* years—of arguments, unkept promises of freedom, and no-show husband syndrome. It's no wonder, then, why Viviane becomes increasingly flustered. From the get-go, the film reminded me of the 1957 classic *12 Angry Men*. Instead of twelve angry men who can't seem to agree on anything, we have one angry woman who simply wants to dissolve the life she's endured since the ripe age of fifteen—and rightfully so.

Ninety-five percent of the film takes place in the same room: a claustrophobic courthouse that looks like a classroom for grade school children—or prison inmates, depending on who you ask—rather than one that houses the Supreme Court of Israel. The set-up feels like pages of a play or book where the acts or chapters are noted by the passing of time. Some sections last longer than others, some are quick snippets, but all are bordered by 'insert-number-here months later' or 'insert-number-here weeks later'. After months and months pass, the time span increasingly begins to feel comical—to the audience and, apparently, to Viviane who at one point outwardly yawns in court.

The comedy is further enhanced by the court's repeated reluctance to accept that a woman would want to divorce a man—*gasp!*—who seemingly loves, cares, and provides for her and her children. Amid the drama and tension, the fact that the court is genuinely befuddled by Viviane's request for a divorce, especially in a society where power resides in men, spurs the absurdity of the situation. One outspoken witness to the stand, in defense of Viviane, even screams, "A divorced woman in Israel eats shit." Viviane laughs aloud—unapologetically—at the remark. Even the tension between the two lawyers—Carmel Ben Tovim (Menashe Nov) representing Viviane and Rabbi Shimon (Sasson Gabai) representing Elisha—feels like a game of 'Who's The Big Bad Clever Man?'

We learn quickly that Viviane has lived away from her husband for three years now, on the basis of incompatibility, and her first lines indicate exactly how she feels about him (aka the situation): "I'm not going back. I'm not going back." Between Elisha's game of 'I-promise-I-will-show-up-in-court' to 'just-kidding-I'm-not-coming-after-all', to the court's suspicions of the case, to the flood of witnesses who argue for Viviane or Elisha (respectively), the courtroom soon resembles a circus—one where everyone puts on a performance for entertainment's sake. But for Viviane, this isn't entertainment at all. This is real life.

Aside from the human characters, the camera acts as another character—or rather, a liaison—to facilitate the message at the core of the film. We are not just witnesses to the story that unfolds; we, at times, jump into Viviane's skin and see, at times, the world she sees. This is apparent from the start when the first shot is Elisha looking straight at the camera to the lens that is Viviane and the viewer combined—as if we, too, are on trial. It's an interrogating choice because the

audience is forced to experience what Viviane experiences. As the shots pan from Elisha to Carmel, the camera is tilted back forcing us to look up at these men just as she does as she sits, planted in her chair. The camera, then, is both subtle and probing. It represents, by way of its use, Israeli standards of how women ought to behave. This is further confirmed when Rabi Salomon, the Head Rabi on the court, reacts to Viviane muttering “Idiot” to a witness on the stand. He chides, “Know your place, woman” to which Viviane responds, “I know my place, Your Honor.”

The performances in “Gett: The Trial of Vivian Amsalem” are believable in their own right, but it is no doubt that Ronit Elkabetz as Viviane was a memorable (and intelligent) choice on the part of Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz—siblings and writers of the film. Ronit’s way of showing both strength and restraint with her face is impressive, especially in the quiet moments when Viviane hardly speaks at all. And as tempers flare and walls close in, as the tension builds and comes to its full height, the characters come to a screeching halt. A decision must be made and it is well worth the wait.