

New documentary takes fresh look at Outremont tensions

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The nuances of the long-running tensions between Hasidim and other residents of Outremont are given sensitive treatment in a new documentary by independent filmmaker Eric Scott.

In *Outremont and the Hasidim*, Hasidim and French-Canadian neighbours talk frankly and thoughtfully about their relationship. Scott, who is neither seen nor heard, avoids stereotyping and draws no conclusions on who is right and who is wrong.

The 52-minute film does convey that change for the better is happening in the borough.

That Scott was able to get people to speak on camera about how they feel suggests attitudes are evolving and harmonious co-existence is possible.

Scott, who worked on the project for several years, says his goal is to “deepen the dialogue” underway after decades of acrimony.

According to Scott’s figures, Hasidim number 7,000 or 23 per cent of Outremont’s population and with their rapid growth, the troubles intensified.

The hardest part was gaining people’s confidence, he says. The Hasidim traditionally shun publicity, while French-Canadians (the only non-Jews heard from in the film) are, as one woman puts it, wary of being labelled anti-Semitic.

Scott’s aim was evenhandedness, presenting each interlocutor “as they see themselves.” Those who said “awful things, the most outrageous things” off-camera he left on the cutting room floor.

Outremont and the Hasidim, which was supported by Radio-Canada and the Canadian Media Fund, was launched at a private screening at the Outremont Theatre on May 19. (A broadcast date is to be determined.)



Pierre Lacerte, left, and Mayer Feig air their grievances in *Outremont and the Hasidim*.

A significant number of Hasidim accepted Scott’s invitation, joining a variety of other people, including borough Mayor Philippe Tomlinson. He lauded the film for underlining the civil discourse he believes is necessary.

Tomlinson, who was elected in November 2017 and is in the film, is intent on healing “the black eye” the ongoing disputes have given Outremont.

The film’s most contentious scene is at the outset when Mayer Feig, a plain-speaking activist for the Hasidic community, and Pierre Lacerte, who for more than a decade blogged about the Hasidim in a biting satirical manner, have it out.

Feig accuses Lacerte of lying, or at least “twisting the facts,” while the latter suggests he is denounced by Hasidim as racist to deflect from their leaders’ irresponsibility.

Still, the two adversaries are talking to one another and evidently have a grudging mutual respect. (Lacerte attended the

screening, and continued the informal discussion that followed in the lobby.)

Scott gives much credit for the improving atmosphere to Mindy Pollak, a Hasidic woman first elected a borough councillor in 2013.

Defying the conventions of her own community, she has reached out to Outremont residents to explain what the Hasidim are all about. Her fluency in French and calm, reasoned demeanour help. The Hasidim have never had an ambassador like her.

Besides the alleged bylaw infractions, such as “illegal” synagogues and buses clogging residential areas, the most common complaint about the Hasidim is their unfriendliness and apparent obliviousness to everyone else.

Monique Jeanmart, a 40-year Outremont resident, is more blunt: she says groups of Hasidim don’t let you pass on the sidewalk, even when she was in a wheelchair they didn’t step aside. She also thinks they

should learn French.

Jeanmart is more reluctant about dialogue, wondering if it might be futile.

The Hasidim talk about feeling unfairly targeted, with the complicity of (previous) municipal administrations, most damagingly by bylaws that infringe on their rights.

A revealing segment is a discussion among younger Hasidic men. They are more attuned to how their community is perceived than may be thought, and show a willingness to change, but they want some understanding in return.

The thorniest issue remains the future of Bernard Avenue. A bitter campaign preceded the November 2016 referendum on whether new houses of worship of any religion should be permitted on that attractive commercial artery – read by the Hasidim as a further squeezing out.

The “no” vote was a defeat for a Hasidic congregation that wants to build a second synagogue there. (In February, Tomlinson and the Projet Montréal council made an agreement with the developer to allow that to go ahead with modifications, only to be blocked a month later when a citizens’ group sought a court injunction.)

A documentary maker for close to 40 years, Scott (who is Jewish) seeks out provocative subjects. His more recent films include *Leaving the Fold* (2008), about young haredi Jews who have left their community; *The Other Zionists* (2004) on Israelis who advocate for Palestinian human rights; and *Je me souviens* (2002), an unflinching look at anti-Semitism in Quebec in the 1930s.

“This was a sneak preview where Hasidim and francophones actually sat down together to watch a film about their complex relationship. What made me happiest was walking into the foyer afterward and seeing everyone interacting. It seems the film gave them a pretext to talk,” Scott said. ■

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