

demanding and one asks why at 48 he should marry someone of 44 who looks as old as his mother. As the camera follows the two main subjects, Meir, 43, and Yigal, 45, during their "dates" at the hotel coffee shop in Kherson, the viewer's distaste turns to pity. Often with no common language (some of the women do speak a smattering of English), they use Rami's wife Olga to translate their questions, such as what the woman knows about Israel and what she's looking for in life. Meir, a gray-bearded bachelor from Tel Aviv, talks about his loneliness and the nightmares he has from his army experiences; heavyset Yigal from Ra'anana says he's looking to "click" with someone.

After three days Meir decides on 20-

"Life is a soap opera," says the statuesque director with a smile. Her film is proof. Yigal and Galina find true love and are still living happily ever after in Ra'anana. Meir and Natasha reveal, to each other and the viewers, the tragedies that have struck them both in life. She was orphaned after her first birthday party when her father, in a drunken rage, killed her mother; Meir, Natasha discovers only after marrying him and coming to Israel, suffers from mental illness due to his war experiences. Eventually she runs away from him, and now lives with her Moldavian boyfriend in Tel Aviv, working as a cleaner for 17 families. With Tal's help, Natasha hopes to get refugee status in Israel and bring her daughter here to live. Although getting a residency permit is an uphill battle, Tal says that after the documentary was shown on Channel Two in late October, a

and help. I feel that I have the chance to influence and make a difference in this world," says Tal.

The only subject she has filmed who receives none of her sympathy is Gilad Shemen, who murdered his teenage girlfriend Einav Rogel in 1996 in a fit of rage. "Violence is something I hate most of all. If you can't curb your jealousy, then kill yourself," says Tal as she pulls out a file with morgue photographs of Rogel's mutilated body. "Do you know how difficult it is to sit opposite and interview someone who is capable of such gruesome acts?" she asks emotionally.

Filming the story became a crusade for Tal even though the killing of women by their partners was not considered important enough then to make front-page news and not one television station was interested in funding a documentary on the subject. With equipment she borrowed from the Tel

Hai film school where she was lecturing and with the help of two students, she made the 1998 film "Till Death do us Part," which includes interviews with Shemen in jail, family members and friends, and footage of the court proceedings. Tal made headlines herself as the only journalist to be allowed into the Nazareth court house to film the trial, which landed Shemen in prison for life.

"It's very rewarding that in the last few years the subject has become prominent," says Tal, "and each year around October my phone starts ringing with requests from schools, TV stations and organizations who want to show the film on November 25, the official day of protest against the abuse of women."

Tal's latest cause is fighting the law banning the sale of human organs for transplant. Her documentary for Israel Television, "Staying Alive: Looking for a Kidney," tracks Geula Halawi, a 13-year-old girl in Tel Aviv who desperately needs a transplant. "Unfortunately, if the film isn't about the Palestinians or some political issue, it's very difficult to get the project in the public eye these days," laments Tal.

Always ready to balance the often grim subjects she films with something lighthearted, Tal is set to film a real-life soap opera of her own making. "While filming 'Ukrainian Brides' I thought that if men can do it why can't we, so I put an advertisement in the newspaper for older women who would like a *shiddukh* with a younger man. I got 300 replies." This month, she set sail with a group of eight women on a singles cruise to the Bahamas. ●

'It's either shoot and run or shoot and help. I feel that I have the chance to influence and make a difference in this world.'

Nili Tal

number of prominent people called and offered to help.

HUMAN INTEREST STORIES have fascinated Tel Aviv-born Tal since she began her career in journalism in 1966 for the Hebrew daily Ha'aretz. After 10 years as a feature writer, she left print journalism to produce and direct documentaries and investigative reports for the Israel Broadcasting Authority, and since 1992 she has worked independently. Last year her film "The Bridge — the Story of the Maccabiah Disaster" won first prize in the Investigating Film category at the Doc Aviv Festival at the Tel Aviv Cinéma-thèque; and "Ukrainian Brides" is a nominee for Best Documentary in this year's local Academy Awards in November. "When I am bothered by something, I write or film," says the gravel-voiced filmmaker as she lights another cigarette.

While she admits the written word can hold more power than a fleeting image, making films can be more personally rewarding. "You cannot treat your subjects as objects and ignore the people you are following. It's either shoot and run or shoot

MAKE ME A MATCH: (Clockwise from top left) Natasha (left) and filmmaker Tal; Yigal found true love with his bride Galina; Natasha married Meir in Kherson, but left him in Israel

year-old Natasha, a soft-spoken, naturally pretty mother of a 1-year-old daughter. Tal films the two-room apartment Natasha shares with her 78-year-old grandmother; the elderly woman holds up for the camera the water and electricity bills she says she has no money to pay. Yigal finds his match with Galina, 23, a graphic designer with a large, close, extended family. Neither woman is Jewish, but no one brings up the subject.

The first movie ends with dramatic soap opera music; in a tone of mock suspense, the narrator wonders what will happen to Natasha and Meir, and whether Vera will decide to marry 50-year-old Avinoam after all. Part Two answers the questions, and deals with the wedding preparations, the civil ceremonies in Kherson, and the reality of living together back in Israel.