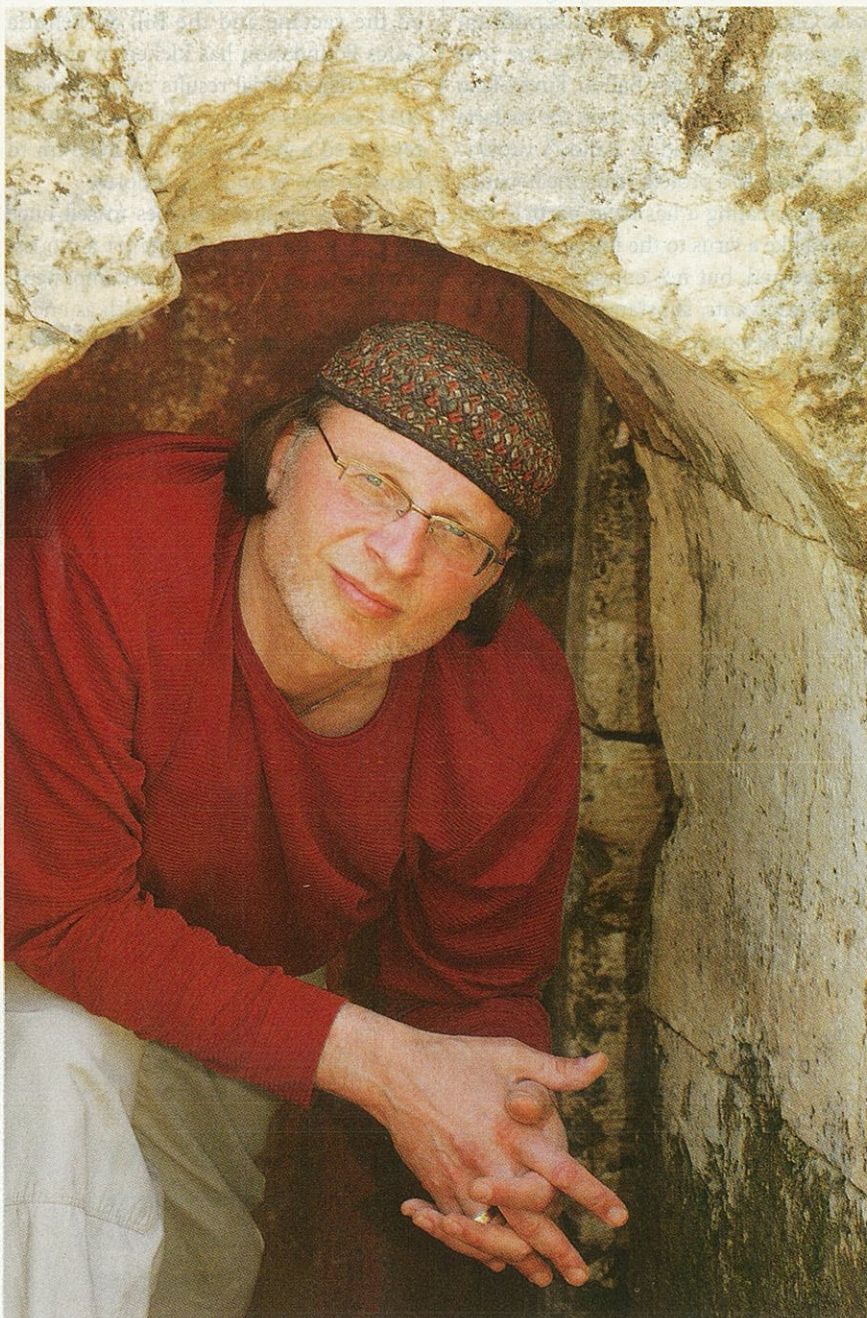


# Tales From the Crypt

*The Naked Archaeologist* brings ancient history to life—  
and makes a profit, too | By Devon Pendleton



"Ali G meets Indiana Jones": excavating the biblical stories for entertainment.

IT IS HIGH NOON AND 95 DEGREES on the set of the History Channel series *The Naked Archaeologist*. A wilting nine-person film crew with a gear-laden donkey has picked its way up a rocky embankment in the limestone ruins of ancient Petra in Jordan for today's episode, "Who Are the Nabateans?" (answer: Arabians who flourished from the fourth century B.C. until the Roman invasion in A.D. 106). Everyone feels rushed: The show's producer and star, Simcha Jacobovici, wants the shooting wrapped up by nightfall. "A Nabatean condo," he shouts, gesturing to a 2,000-year-old cave. "Action!" he barks before clambering into the old residence, gleefully reenacting Fred Flintstone's evening homecoming, shouting, "Wilma?" He pops out, grinning for the camera. "Did you get it?" The crew, cameras on sweat-stained shoulders, nods. "Let's go, then," he says. "I want to do a shtick with that shrine up ahead." The caravan prepares for a two-hour hike to the hilltop monument—completing one more half-hour installment of the series, an unscripted concoction of historical detective work, amateur archeology and tomfoolery.

There's no nonsense about Jacobovici's Toronto production company, Associated Producers. Last year it netted an estimated \$100,000 on \$7 million in revenue, coming from 16 hours of documentaries and so-called factual TV programming. (*Naked*, now in its second season, accounted for 13 hours.) After 23 years in this business Jacobovici (pronounced "Ya-KOH-bo-vitch") now presells broadcasting and other rights before the shooting starts. He won't comment on his arrangements for *Naked*, but here's the deal he cut for *The Exodus Decoded*, a documentary purporting to deconstruct Moses' bib-

lical epic into fact and fiction, which aired in August 2006: 85% of its \$2.8 million budget came from licensing fees from the History Channel, Discovery U.K. and Canadian cable channels; \$125,000 kicked in from Asian, European and Latin American broadcast rights; and \$75,000 from DVD sales. The show did pretty well in the U.S., drawing an average 2.3 million viewers, though far shy of the 5 million who tuned in at the same time to Lifetime's *The Fantasia Barrino Story: Life Is Not a Fairy Tale*.

Jacobovici, 54, wasn't always so disciplined. As a doctoral student of international relations at the University of Toronto in the early 1980s he became obsessed with the plight of the Falasha, Ethiopia's persecuted Jewish minority who were being forced off

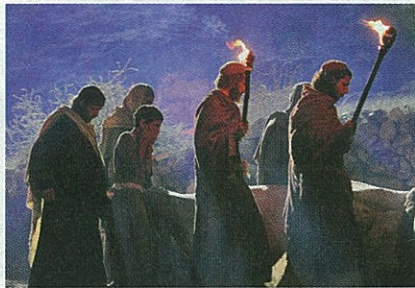
their land by Marxist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. He wrote an Op-Ed for the *New York Times*—"I was the first one," he claims, "to bring it to the attention of what you might call the 'regular' media"—

then raised \$50,000 from grants and individuals, cobbled together a camera crew and flew to Ethiopia. During the filming there and in Sudan and Israel, he recalls, "We had a guy with an AK-47 with us all the time." Broke and malaria-stricken when he returned, Jacobovici bankrolled the editing process by selling bits of footage to the likes of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and to NBC. The film had a short run in an art theater in Manhattan's SoHo district in 1985, the same year Israel launched "Operation Moses," an airlift rescue effort to repatriate the Falasha. Jacobovici dropped out of grad school and—with university pal Elliott Halpern, a frustrated lawyer—formed Associated Producers.

Over the next 15 years the duo produced 25 documentaries but didn't really grab much attention until a decade ago. *The Plague Monkeys* (1994), a film about the 1989 outbreak of Ebola virus in a Virginia primate lab, and *The Selling of Innocents* (1996), focused on child sex slavery in India, won Emmy Awards. "We were telling stories other people wouldn't—or couldn't," says Jacobovici, who does not

suffer from underconfidence.

The partnership with Halpern disintegrated in 2000. They were then co-producing shows—among them *O'Shea's Big Adventure*, tracking rare and deadly reptiles, and *Stunt School*, a series about an Australian boot camp for aspiring stunt doubles—on both sides of the Atlantic. Jacobovici felt they were moving away from scrappy investigative fare in favor of what he calls "hundreds of hours of cooking shows." Halpern argued that the market was changing and they needed to change with it. "Dealing with Simcha was challenging," says Peter Raymond, a Toronto filmmaker hired by Jacobovici to direct



**"Facts" vs. artifacts:** on location shooting the controversial documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*.



the Falasha film. The two haven't worked together since their return from Ethiopia 25 years ago.

Unleashed, Jacobovici developed the idea for a new series that would apply camp journalistic snooping to ancient history. "If somebody comes on the market with a product that purports to cure cancer, it's okay to say, 'Prove it to me,'" he says. "Why not archeology?" Tough sell, though. Several channels turned him down. One British broadcaster, he says, drew him two big circles—one for history and religion, another for humor. They're both big markets, he was told, but they rarely intersect. Finally, Canada's VisionTV bit—but only after Jacobovici agreed to front 28% of the

\$126,000-per-episode first-year budget of *Naked*, half from AP's coffers, the rest borrowed against anticipated sales.

Last year the show got picked up in Britain ("Ali G meets Indiana Jones" blared U.K. TV) and by the History Channel. The series skirts the edges of raunchiness and bad taste. In "Jezebel: Bible Bad Girl," Jacobovici investigates whether the Phoenician princess was the whore the Old Testament made her out to be (conclusion: She was). In "Crucifixion," he simulates the experience of being nailed to a cross and gets advice from a Long Is-

land pathologist whose hobby is studying the grisly form of execution.

Then there was his 90-minute special, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*. The \$4 million film, co-produced with friend and director James Cameron, scandalized

millions when it aired on the Discovery Channel in March, alleging that a 1980 excavation had uncovered the tomb of Christ, his bones buried alongside wife Mary Magdalene and kids. The explosive implication was that the resurrection—the very foundation of Christianity—had not physically occurred. The "evidence": Six Aramaic inscriptions found in the tomb matched the names of six important New Testament characters; a statistics professor pegged the odds of those names being found together in one tomb as 600-to-1. Pushed hard by its sponsors ("The greatest archeological find in history!" ran newspaper ads, entwined with clips from *The Da Vinci Code*), the show drew 4 million-plus viewers but was widely panned by archeologists and historians. A Harvard religion professor featured in the film later complained his comments were misused. No way, says Jacobovici. "We succeeded!" he adds, characteristically unapologetic. "At the end of the day, no one could poke a hole in our investigation." Discovery declined to re-air the show.

With the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. and Blueprint Entertainment, Jacobovici is developing a new drama, *Codebreakers*, about a group of forensic archeologists who use knowledge of ancient symbols to crack modern crimes. Sound familiar? Self-promotion is a subject he knows very well. **F**