

JOIN US FOR A SPECIAL SCREENING OF THE MOVIE

CASA SUSANNA

FOLLOWED BY OUR PANEL'S DISCUSSION AND AN OPEN
CONVERSATION WITH THE AUDIENCE

American Experience: Casa Susanna

With archival footage, rare photographs, and the testimony of surviving habitués and their families, filmmaker Sebastien Lifshitz delivers a fascinating window into a more challenging era for those seeking their identity.

Here is the story of a private resort in the 1950s and 1960s located in Hunter, New York, in the Catskill Mountains. Casa Susanna was a safe haven for cross-dressers and transgender women during a time when societal acceptance and understanding of gender identity were extremely limited. Many of the people who came to the house were married crossgender men. Some simply enjoyed the free exploration of cross-dressing, while others would go on to make full transitions and live as women. They found a safe haven to explore who they were — many for the first time in their lives.



Susanna

Casa Susanna was established by Tito Valenti, a court translator who went by Susanna when dressed as a woman, and his wife, Maria, who owned a wig shop in Manhattan.

In the sexually repressive atmosphere of the 1950s and early '60s, a Latino broadcaster and his wig-making wife create a clandestine haven for cross-dressers in a small Catskills resort. With only old photographs and the oral histories of two of the last surviving members of this early chapter of trans identity, filmmaker Sébastien Lifshitz rescues a fascinating history from obscurity.

Sébastien Lifshitz's Documentary

“Casa Susanna” remembers a community of cross-dressing men and transgender women who found refuge in the Catskills in the 1950s and '60s. The couple ran Casa Susanna until the late 1960s, but its existence came to broader awareness with the 2005 publication of a book collecting Casa Susanna snapshots that had been found in a New York flea market.

The New York Historical Society Event



Panel Discussion: Diana Merry-Shapiro, computer programmer, visitor to Casa Susanna; Gregory Bagarozzy, business developer, grandson of Maria Tonell, founder of Casa Susanna; Betsy Wollheim, book publisher, daughter of science fiction writer and Casa Susanna guest Donald Wollheim.



A Weekend with the Girls at Casa Susanna

If the photographs had been revealed 50 years prior, people like Susanna Valenti, Katherine Cummings and Diana Merry-Shapiro could have been arrested or institutionalized, lost their jobs and been ostracized by their families and communities. For more than a century, cross-dressing was criminalized in the United States through statutes like "masquerade laws," which were used to persecute many forms of gender expression in public spaces under the guise of limiting prostitution and "immoral performances" — an echo of the drag-show bans currently being passed in Tennessee and other states.

Where do you stand? Are many of the GUESTS enjoying a weekend at Casa Susanna CRIMINALS or are they just a bunch of PEOPLE enjoying each other's company with the freedom to be themselves?

JOIN US FOR AN OPEN DISCUSSION

Event Title (suggested):

*Weekend with the Girls - A Journey of Empowerment and Identity:
Unraveling the Impact of "Casa Susanna"*

Description:

Experience an evening filled with nostalgia and profound exploration as attendees gather for an often emotionally charged discussion following a screening of the movie "Casa Susanna."

The movie "Casa Susanna" chronicles the remarkable story of Casa Susanna, a haven hidden away in the Catskill Mountains during the 1950s and 1960s, where cross-dressers and transgender individuals found solace and acceptance. It delves into the lives of a vibrant group of individuals who sought refuge from a society that often misunderstood and marginalized them.

Following the movie presentation, the evenings panel will introduce themselves and each share some anecdotes and personal remembrances of Casa Susanna. This will be followed by a question-and-answer discussion with the audience. Every discussion is different depending on those in attendance. Past events found audience members coming to grips with heartfelt emotions, reflecting on the film's portrayal of resilience, authenticity, and the importance of finding one's true self in a world that struggles with acceptance. While there are sure to be a range of opinions expressed, the audience is likely to find themselves deeply moved by the personal narratives of the Casa Susanna community, and many shared their thoughts on how this hidden slice of history had remained untold for so long.

As the conversation unfolded, attendees praised the efforts to preserve and promote the memories of this unique sanctuary, making sure that this vital part of LGBTQ+ history was not lost to time.

During the discourse at a recent NYC event, there was a palpable sense of admiration for the individuals who had inhabited Casa Susanna. The movie's portrayal of their courage to embrace their identities, defy societal norms, and form an intimate community resonated deeply with the audience. Participants marveled at how Casa Susanna had provided a safe space for people to explore their gender identity, fostering an environment of acceptance and belonging.

The discussion also veered into the wider societal context, with participants reflecting on how the struggle for acceptance and understanding still persists today. They acknowledged the progress made in LGBTQ+ rights over the years, but also acknowledged that there is still much work to be done to achieve true equality.

The movie hopefully lights a flame of empathy and compassion in the hearts of those who attend, prompting them to reflect on their own prejudices and biases. The discussion will leave a lasting impression, and attendees should leave the event with a renewed commitment to be promoting inclusivity and acceptance in their own lives and communities.

In the end, the screening and the ensuing conversation are not just about a movie but about a powerful celebration of humanity's collective journey towards understanding, empathy, and compassion. The legacy of Casa Susanna and its inhabitants will undoubtedly continue to inspire generations to come, fostering a world where diversity and identity are embraced, cherished, and celebrated.