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TV

A HOUSE OF ACCEPTANCE

'Casa Susanna' became a haven for the silenced

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Gregory Bagarozzy was born in 1951 in New York City and raised in a traditional Italian-American family. His grandmother, Marie Tonell, was the lynchpin to the family.

She was an independent woman who ran a Fifth Avenue wigmakers shop that soon became a haunt for the city's cross-dressing and transgender community.

Tito Arriagada — later known as Susanna Valenti — entered the store in search of a wig, not realizing he would meet the woman who changed his life.

The pair married in 1958 and their Catskills estate became a haven for the cross-dressing and transgender community.

"This story is my life," Bagarozzy says during an interview. "It's a story that touched so many lives and needed to be heard."

The story caught the attention of filmmaker Sébastien Lifshitz, who then began to hear the story from Bagarozzy and others who were involved.

"Casa Susanna" will air at 8 p.m. Tuesday, June 27, on New Mexico PBS, channel 5.1. It will also be available to stream on the PBS app.

The documentary begins in the 1950s and '60s, when an underground network of transgender women and cross-dressing men found refuge at a modest house in the Catskills region of New York.

Known as Casa Susanna, the house provided a safe place to express their true selves and live for a few days as they had always dreamed — dressed as and living as women without fear of being incarcerated or institutionalized for their self-expression.

Told through the memories of those who visited the house, the film provides a moving look back at a secret world where the persecuted and frightened found freedom, acceptance and, often, the courage to



Gregory Bagarozzy



Sébastien Lifshitz



COURTESY OF COLLECTION OF CINDY SHERMAN

Susanna (center) and two guests in outside Casa Susanna, circa 1962.

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live out of the shadows.

The film won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2022 DOC NYC Festival.

Bagarozzy says the film uses a rich trove of color photos of Casa Susanna's guests, archival footage and personal remembrances.

It introduces viewers to Diana and Kate, two people whose lives were forever changed at Casa Susanna.

The film also recounts the forgotten life of Susanna Valenti, the courageous woman who ran the house.

From her enlistment in the army as a man to her marriage to Marie, an eccentric older Italian woman, Susanna led a life that, even today, many would find hard to imagine. Like Susanna, many who came to the Catskills house had ordinary jobs, were in heterosexual marriages and had fathered children.

Also featured is Betsy Wollheim, who discovered after his death that her father was a regular visitor to Casa Susanna.

Bagarozzy, Marie's grandson, shares warm memories of unconventional summers at his grandmother's home.

"It was emotional for me too," Bagarozzy says. "This



COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF ELIZABETH WOLLHEIMX

Donna, New York City, circa 1963, in a scene from American Experience's "Casa Susanna."

was their lives and I'm the one who holds the history and the memory. From five-years-old, I would go visit. It didn't come that easy. As I began to tell the story, I thought to myself, 'Why should I be ashamed or embarrassed of it?' This is my family and this is my life. I wanted the memory of my grandmother to live on. Casa Susanna helped so many people."

Lifshitz took time to hear the stories and wanted the film to be impactful.

"I have been lucky enough to be able to bring this secret history, this invisible world, back to life with the help of Kate, Diana, Betsy and Gregory," says Lifshitz. "Now their

story, the story of this clandestine community, is there for all to see. The unsettled nature of their existences and their bravery ring loud and clear."

Bagarozzy says he was skeptical at first when Lifshitz reached out.

During the filming, Bagarozzy got the opportunity to go back to the property.

"When I was little, we had the run of the mountain," he says. "I was disappointed to see the property fell into disrepair."

ON TV

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