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Ruth Gordon and Lee Strasberg in "Boardwalk."

David Rosen and his wife of 50 years had been living happily in their Coney Island home, but when the tranquility and safety of their Jewish community came under attack from a violent street gang, the aging cafeteria owner was forced to take a stand.

"I left one country; I'm not about to leave another. This is where I choose to live, and nobody, but nobody, is going to make me leave."

It is this declaration by Rosen that is at the heart of the 1979 film "Boardwalk." Unavailable to audiences on the big screen for more than 30 years, this nearly lost film will be shown by the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival at the Laemmle Music Hall in Beverly Hills at 7:30 p.m. March 20, just days before its March 25 release on DVD.

The film was co-written and directed by Stephen Verona, a prolific artist whose work spans several mediums, including film, painting and photography. A pioneer of music videos — creating dozens of promotional films for artists ranging from The Beatles to Barbra Streisand — Verona was once called "a modern-day Renaissance man" by People magazine.

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He was born in Illinois, but, like the characters in his film, raised in Brooklyn.

“My mother was Jewish. We’re not sure about my father because my mother left my father before I was 6 months old,” Verona told the Journal during an interview at his Bel Air home. “When my mother left my father, we moved in with my grandparents in Brooklyn. I was raised Jewish, I was bar mitzvahed, but we were not religious — even though my grandmother did light candles on Friday.

“My grandfather owned a cafeteria, and my mother worked for him. So did her sisters and brothers,” he continued.

It is that family dynamic, coupled with a magazine article Verona read about the struggles of an old Jewish man, titled “The Old Man in the Bronx,” that served as the inspiration for Verona’s third feature film, “Boardwalk.”

Verona’s prior films include “The Lords of Flatbush” (1974), which helped launch the careers of previously unknown actors Sylvester Stallone and Henry Winkler. The nostalgic film, co-written and directed by Verona, was based on Verona’s childhood in Brooklyn growing up in a motorcycle gang. The low-budget feature received some notoriety and success, unlike his 1976 follow-up “Pipe Dreams,” which starred singer Gladys Knight.

“ ‘Pipe Dreams’ was a failure for a variety of different reasons,” Verona said. “It just wasn’t the movie that I envisioned.”

For his next project, Verona chose a more personal subject.

“I decided that if I was going to do a movie, I should do something I know,” he said. “My grandparents I knew very well, so I wrote ‘Boardwalk.’ That was about them. In the movie, Lee Strasberg plays David Rosen, which was a little bit of my grandfather.”

Years earlier, Verona had been a director protégé of Strasberg at the famed Actors Studio. His time there inspired Verona to create a short film titled “The Rehearsal,” which earned the young director an

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Academy Award nomination for best short film in 1972.

He described "Boardwalk" as an homage to his grandparents.

"My grandfather was very powerful, very respected. Every Sunday, everybody in the neighborhood came over and paid respect to him like he was the Godfather. They'd all have lox and bagels, the usual, and then, Chinese food."

Verona's grandfather owned a restaurant in downtown Brooklyn called the Sagamore Cafeteria.

"It was a pretty legendary place," he said. "So I used that, but my grandfather and grandmother's relationship was fictionalized. In actual fact, they were married for 71 years and had seven children. They met somewhere in Belarus, came to America, and my grandfather started out sweeping floors, and the next thing he knew, he owned his own deli and then the restaurant.

"They didn't talk for the last 40 years that they were together, but I guess if you talk for 31 years, you've said it all. I took the love portion of their life, and I fictionalized it to what I would have wanted them to be."

For the part of his grandmother, Verona chose veteran screenwriter/actress Ruth Gordon.

"My grandmother had a great sense of humor, and Ruth Gordon had a great sense of humor," he said. "But Ruth Gordon was the least Jewish person you could ever meet."

"Boardwalk" was shot on location around New York and Brooklyn, including the famous, but now defunct, Dubrow's Cafeteria. In addition to Strasberg and Gordon, the film also stars Janet Leigh and features composer Sammy Cahn and 1920s singing sensation Lillian Roth in small roles.

"Boardwalk" was co-written with Verona's then-live-in girlfriend, Leigh Chapman, whose credits include the 1974 film "Dirty Mary Crazy Larry" and TV's "The Wild Wild West." After writing the script, it took seven

years for Verona to raise the money for the film. He finally got \$2 million from his friend Gerry Herrod, a travel agent from New York who made a fortune after going into business with American Express travel.

“Two million was the most I ever had to make a movie, but it was really tight. And because of the age of the actors, there was no overtime,” he said. “A lot of the scenes were shot in one take.”

When Verona and Herrod went shopping for a distributor, Herrod suggested they go with Atlantic Releasing Corp., a small company that could give the “tender loving care” needed for a film about old Jewish people. Atlantic had recently taken the French film “Madame Rosa” from obscurity to the Oscars, where it won best foreign language film in 1977, but the company still had very little capital.

It opened in New York and Los Angeles, but the distributor went broke and the film languished in bankruptcy court for years. It bounced around different studios until it ended up at Universal, and Verona eventually got his film back.

Last year, while he was looking for a home video distributor, Verona got a call from the music video company MVD Entertainment Group, which wanted to release some of Verona’s 1970s music videos. MVD also agreed to release “Boardwalk,” which was digitally restored from a 35-millimeter print owned by Verona.

At the upcoming screening, which is presented in association with the Journal, the Actors Studio West and Temple of the Arts, Verona will participate in a Q-and-A with fellow director and friend Mark Rydell (“On Golden Pond”) and Bruce Goldsmith of the Actors Studio.

“Boardwalk” will be shown on March 20 at the Laemmle Music Hall, 9036 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills at 7:30 pm. For tickets visit www.lajfilmfest.org or call 1-800 838-3006.

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