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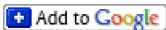
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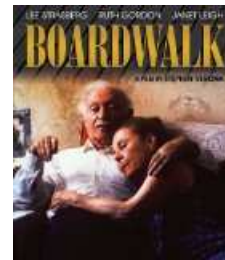
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Review by [Stuart Galbraith IV](#) | posted April 6, 2014 | [E-mail the Author](#)

Arguably the most obscure American feature released to Blu-ray format to date, *Boardwalk* (1979) was heretofore unknown to this writer despite an excellent cast of important actors. Spottily distributed by Atlantic Releasing, *Boardwalk's* run may have been limited to a few prints distributed to a handful of theaters in major cities only.

The movie, however, is excellent. It vividly captures its time and place (Coney Island in the late 1970s) and its aging population of Jewish immigrants dying out, driven off by encroaching violent crime. It's impressively authentic in depicting one multi-generational family running a modest local cafeteria (played by the late, lamented Dubrow's); rarely have I seen a movie get so right the relationships between adult, middle-aged children as well as their aging parents.

The Blu-ray, from MVD Visual, utilizes notably grainy but borderline acceptable elements. That the film is so obscure yet worthwhile offsets this somewhat. The only extra is a spoiler-filled trailer you'll want to avoid until after seeing the film.



- CONTENT ★★★★★
- VIDEO ★★★★★
- AUDIO ★★★★★
- EXTRAS ★★★★★
- REPLAY ★★★★★
- ADVICE ★★★★★
- Highly Recommended**
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Boardwalk is not the Neil Simon-esque comedy the Hirschfeld-designed poster art implies.

Lee Strasberg and Ruth Gordon play an elderly Jewish couple, David and Becky Rosen, who've lived in the same Coney Island neighborhood for their 49 years of marriage. Becky teaches private piano lessons out of their home while David owns a Dubrow's Cafeteria, which he runs with his two middle-aged sons, Leo (Joe Silver) and Eli (Eddie Barth), with their sister, Ruth (Janet Leigh), working as cashier.

David and Becky are devoted to one another but various crime and health issues

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threaten their relationship. A local gang begins terrorizing the neighborhood, boldly breaking into homes in the middle of the day and physically assaulting their frail, aged victims. What's left of the Jewish population moves away in droves, driving down business at the cafeteria and making David and Becky's neighborhood more susceptible to crime than ever. In one particularly haunting scene David discovers the bodies of a same-aged married couple, embraced in death in their bed, having gassed themselves. "Better this than to live in fear," reads their suicide note.

The film is quite bleak, like a *Death Wish* film with no Paul Kersey-type vigilante to ride to the rescue. But it's absolutely mesmerizing for its acting, the authentic relationships the actors and the screenplay by Leigh Chapman, as well as director Stephen Verona generate. The family's working relationship at the cafeteria and simply hanging out at David and Becky's house, huddled around the TV watching *The Price Is Right*, all ring true.

Across the board the acting is nicely understated. Strasberg and Gordon are, predictably, very good, but so too are Silver and Barth, two actors instantly recognizable even if one doesn't know their names. Janet Leigh is also very good, cast against type yet effectively fitting right in as a chain-smoking (Marlboro Reds), working class single mother. The only bona fide movie star among the leading players, Leigh quickly makes the audience forget her as a Hollywood personality and one accepts her lonely, workaday character utterly. (She eventually marries in the course of the film, amusingly to a man who, to put it mildly, is no Tony Curtis.)

Besides ruddy-faced Silver (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Deathtrap*) and gravelly-voiced Barth (for years the go-to guy when casting agents needed a cabbie, cop, or butcher), minor roles are filled by songwriter Sammy Cahn (as a temple member leaving the community) and, in her last film role, songstress and early talkie star Lillian Roth. Even specialty character player Zvee Scooler turns up as, inevitably, the local rabbi.

The movie falters slightly in two respects. The group terrorizing everybody is the kind of Equal Opportunity Gang that probably exists only the movies, particularly vigilante pictures. In such films, as here, they're a jumble of races: white, black, Hispanic. Did such gangs ever actually exist in any major American city? What's particularly odd about the gang in *Boardwalk* is that in the group is a single female member played by Linda Manz. She had just given one of the best film performances of the entire 1970s in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) and the following year would star in director Dennis Hopper's interesting *Out of the Blue* (1980). So what's Manz doing here billed fairly high among the "Satan" gang members, but in a non-speaking part that amounts to a background extra?

Another minor problem with the film is its efforts to appeal to a broader audience through a) a mostly disconnected subplot concerning Ruth's 24-year-old aspiring studio guitarist son, Charley (Merwin Goldsmith), and his relationship with (apparently non-Jewish) girlfriend Marilyn (Forbesy Russell); and b) attempts to give David and Becky a *Harold and Maude*-type hipness. For instance, they look at *Playboy* magazine while in bed together, and when they see Charley perform at a local club, Becky admires the smell of Marilyn's grass.

Mostly though, *Boardwalk* impresses greatly with its rich, completely believable characterizations, an aforementioned understatedness, and as a kind of time machine capturing Coney Island community life in upheaval.

Video & Audio

Boardwalk is presented 1.78:1 full frame, approximating its original 1.85:1 original theatrical aspect ratio. The film elements sourced are notably grainy, especially the title elements. The color (original prints by Technicolor) is pretty accurate and the detail is good, but the grain at times is a distraction, especially footage looking out at the beach, where the sand becomes a veritable blizzard of dancing film grain. The LCPM 2.0 mono audio, English only with optional HOH subtitles, is acceptable. The lone **Extra Feature** is a give-away-the-store trailer, best avoided until after viewing the film.

Parting Thoughts

A significant find most welcome to Blu-ray, *Boardwalk* is Highly Recommended.

Stuart Galbraith IV is the Kyoto-based film historian and publisher-editor of [World Cinema Paradise](#). His credits include [film history books](#), [DVD and Blu-ray audio commentaries and special features](#).

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