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**Boardwalk** (1979/MVD Visual Blu-ray + DVD)/**The Front** (1976/Columbia/Sony/Twilight Time Limited Edition Blu-ray)/**When Jews Were Funny** (2013/First Run DVD)

Picture: B- & C/B/C+ Sound: C+ & C/B-/C+ Extras: C-/B/D Main Programs: C+/B/B

**PLEASE NOTE:** **The Front** Blu-ray is a limited edition from our friends at Twilight Time, only 3,000 copies will be produced and you can order it while supplies last from the link below.



Judaism and what it is to be Jewish becomes the topic of three new releases, including two underseen feature films just released...

Stephen Verona's **Boardwalk** (1979) is an underseen independent film released long ago by the long gone Atlantic Releasing with Lee Strasberg as the patriarch of a Jewish family in a declining Brooklyn with a great wife (Ruth Gordon) and a nice deli business watching his business decline with the neighborhood. He has help from his family including his daughter (Janet Leigh) and longtime friends, but his grandson Peter (Michael Ayr) is estranged a bit from his mother by not following old ways of living.

He wants to be a singer (performances include him on stage singing the late, underrated Gerry Rafferty's *Mary Skeffington*) and make a career out of it instead of playing it conservative and safe. The cast is pretty good here and I liked the drama, comedy and how it deals with Judaism, but there is a subplot about local hoodlums (all of who turn out to be ethnic minorities) terrorizing the neighbors, robbing them, assaulting them and more. Besides the obvious tired stereotypes (more aged in the Spike Lee era), this variant is weak, then laughable and pathetic as it ruins the film more than it should and becomes a bizarre spoof of itself.

The film had a chance to deal with this aspect of the story as progressively as anything else, but the young actors (as menace) becomes a race-baiting plot point that is not even fully developed and it is why the film has likely been forgotten for so long. For what I like here, the film is still worth seeing, but it could have been so much more.

A trailer is the only extra in both format versions.

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- > [Performance \(1970/Warner Archive Blu-ray\)/Paths Through The Labyrinth: The Composer Krzysz](#)

Martin Ritt's **The Front** (1976) is the often forgotten drama comedy about the horrible Hollywood Blacklisting madness that happened in the 1950s by artists who were blacklisted. Woody Allen is a cashier who has a friend (Michael Murphy) who is a professional writer and has suddenly found himself out of work because of not playing the get-the-commie game with HUAC (the House of Un-American Activities committee) but unlike an actor or director, could get his friend Howard (Allen) to pretend to be the writer of his work. Howard would get some free money and no one would know the difference.

He starts to take on even more writer works to cash in, but the situation is getting uglier as more mysterious men are investigating anyone and everyone in the entertainment business (TV in this case) and they even start wondering about Howard. Sadder still is a big comedy star (Zero Mostel, channeling several actors including Stan Laurel and Jackie Gleason at times, but implying the many talents who never got to have a career under highly unfair circumstances) is now going to be a big target of HUAC and as much as the network wants him on because he is a money-making star, they'll allow HUAC anything.

Though this has some comic sidelines and some great performances, it is a drama about a time that was hideous and that many on the far right very recently (and highly erroneously) have claimed was a good thing and act like it was the country at its best when it was the country at its most authoritarian, fascist and lame. One of the other writers tells Howard that this is to get everyone on the anti-Soviet/Cold War bandwagon, but the film at least implies it is as much a witch-hunt for Jews in the industry as much as anything else and the line tells me how naïve even smart people (maybe in denial) were at the time.

Many think Allen directed this great film, but he is so good and surprised many, but the film did not do the business it should have, yet is more relevant than ever since we saw a variant repeat of this starting in 2000 and especially after 9/11, leading up to the controversies about surveillance taking place as you read this and we post this. Along with Irwin Winkler's also-under seen/underrated **Guilty By Suspicion**, are excellent in showing and telling this story whose basic truth needs to be reiterated more than ever before. This has aged incredibly well (including

being a period piece with a limited budget) and I cannot strongly recommend this one enough.

Extras include an Isolated Music Track, Original Theatrical Trailer and feature length audio commentary track with film scholars Nick Redmond, Julie Kirgo and the terrific female lead of this film, Andrea Marcovicci. Just remember this is a limited edition release and all serious fans and collectors should get this Blu-ray before supplies run out.

Finally we have a terrific new documentary from Alan Zweig called **When Jews Were Funny** (2013) tracing the legacy of great stand-up comics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and how so many were bold, Jewish (even if they did not talk about that part) and how they shaped what we now consider American comedy, as well as how we have lost the richness of that comedy in a melting pot (or whatever you would like to call it) in the vastness of globalism, multi-media and generic boredom since the 1980s.

I got to watch this just before the unexpected death of comedian David Brenner, who was not the oldest interviewee here, but many greats who had passed (including a few shown in clips like Rodney Dangerfield) are discussed and many you may not have heard of or remembered are here along with Sheckey Green, Howie Mandell, Gilbert Gottfried, David Steinberg, Shelley Berman, Jack Carter, Norm Crosby, Bob Einstein and more tell priceless stories in a long overdue, much needed record of comedy history that can never be long enough here (hard to believe they put so much in 89 minutes, but this could have been 5 hours and worked)

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so if you love to laugh, you must consider this a must-see release.

Extras include five more comic clips that did not make the final cut of the film.

The 1080p 1.85 X 1 digital High Definition image transfers on the Blu-rays have print that can show the age of the materials used, but **The Front** is a newer transfer and does not have the age issues **Boardwalk** tend to have, besides the fact that it was a more low-budget affair. Still, they are both very watchable (**The Front** even has a few demo shots for your HDTV) and I was happily involved re-seeing both. The anamorphically enhanced **Boardwalk** DVD is much softer than expected, but watchable, though no match for the much nicer Blu-ray. The anamorphically enhanced 1.78 X 1 image on **Funny** fares somewhere in between with mostly new interview footage, but it has vintage clips and they are not bad.

The DTS-HD MA (Master Audio) 1.0 Mono lossless mix on **The Front** has the best sound here and even for a monophonic film, is well mixed, recorded and presented due to being so professionally recorded to begin with. **Boardwalk** has had its mono sound bumped up to lossy Dolby Digital 5.1 on the Blu-ray and DVD versions, but that cannot hide the age or production limits of the film, but it sounds less compressed on the Blu-ray. That leaves a lossy Dolby Digital 5.1 mix on **Funny** that tries to expand the sound, but this is mostly talking and that can only do so much, yet it is well recorded enough.

You can order **The Front** and many more limited edition Blu-rays from Twilight Time while supplies last at this link:

[www.screenarchives.com](http://www.screenarchives.com)

- Nicholas Sheffo