

AGGI FILMS, ARTS FRAMES and AMERICAN EXPERIENCE FILMS
PRESENT

tiff. toronto
international
film festival

**GIORNATE
degli AUTORI**

CASA SUSANNA

A FILM BY SEBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

con la collaborazione di SIBELLE BONNETI. Produzione di MARCEL MÉRINARD. Conoscenza: PAUL GAZDAR, AG. Sema: FRANCIS GREGORIAN. DANIEL SORIN, NATHY MARTIN, JAVIER DELPANTO.
per coproduzione: PAUL PIERRE, PHILIPPE LÉVESQUE, PHILIPPE LÉVESQUE. Produzione: MARCEL MÉRINARD. Distribuzione: SIBELLE BONNETI. Coproduzione: SIBELLE BONNETI.
in coproduzione con: ARTS FRAMES, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE FILMS. Presentato in occasione del FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DU FILM DE TORONTO. Distribuzione: SIBELLE BONNETI.
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CASA SUSANNA

A FILM BY SEBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

2022 - France, USA - Documentary - English - 1,85 - 5.1 - 97'

PBS INTERNATIONAL

Joe Barrett

Vice President, Sales
jfbarrett@pbs.org

Tom Koch

Vice President, International
tkoch@pbs.org

PRESS

Susan Norget Film Promotion

Susan Norget & Curtis Russell
Cell: 917-833-3056 / susan@norget.com

FILMS & FESTIVALS

Julie Rhône

julie@agatfilms.com / www.agatfilms-exnihilo.com

ABOUT THE FILM

In the 1950s and '60s, 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 for them to express their true selves and live for a few days as they had always dreamed—dressed as women without fear of being incarcerated or institutionalized for their self-expression. Told through the memories of those whose visits to the house would change their lives, the film provides a moving look back at a secret world where the persecuted and frightened found freedom, acceptance and, often, the courage to live their lives out of the shadows. A co-production with ARTE, *CASA SUSANNA* is directed by the critically acclaimed French filmmaker Sebastien Lifshitz.

Using a rich trove of color photos of Casa Susanna's guests, archival footage and personal remembrances, the film reconstructs 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 were married and fathers, working as airplane pilots, tugboat captains, film directors and authors. They found each other and Casa Susanna through word-of-mouth and *Transvestia*, a magazine for and by the trans and cross-dressing community. In the film, two people whose lives were forever changed at Casa Susanna, Diane and Kate, travel back to the now-abandoned site and share their memories of a time when people like them, from all over the country, came to a place where they were free to dress and live as women from morning to night.



CAST

KATHERINE CUMMINGS

KATHERINE CUMMINGS (she/her), was born in Scotland in 1935 and realized as a child that she was attracted to feminine attire. In college, she researched scientific literature for a better understanding of what that meant, but the literature gave no clue. Moving to Australia, Kate obtained a copy of the underground magazine called *Transvestia*, which allowed her to correspond with a network of US-based trans women and cross-dressers.

In 1960, she moved to Toronto to continue her English studies and was able to frequent Casa Susanna. Working as a librarian all her life, Kate (then John Cummings) married and had three children before opting for gender affirmation surgery in the late '80s. She published an autobiography in 1992 and became an activist for transgender people's rights.





DIANA MERRY-SHAPIRO

DIANA MERRY-SHAPIRO (she/her) was born into an Iowa farming family in 1939. Her mother's religious culture and the general prejudices of the era prevented her from letting anyone know how badly she wanted to be a girl. As a student, she discovered the *Transvestia* network and subsequently New York's Casa Susanna. There she met Katherine Cummings and Gloria, a well-known benefactress of the Casa Susanna community, who soon enabled a trip to Tijuana, Mexico for Diana's gender affirmation surgery.

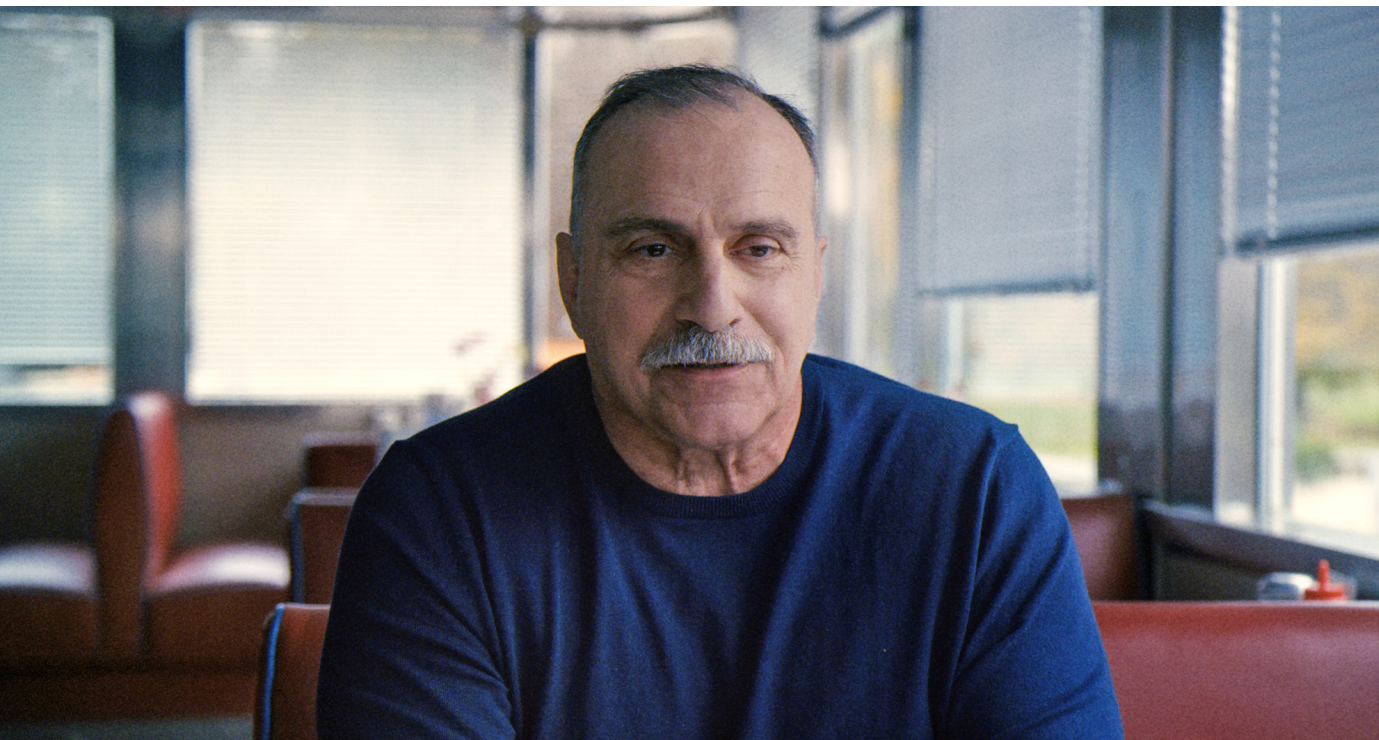
She then embarked on a brilliant career as a computer programmer at the Xerox Company's Palo Alto Research Center. As one of the original co-inventors of the Smalltalk programming language, she helped write the first system for overlapping display windows. Today, Diana lives with Carol, her wife of 30 years, in New York City.

BETSY WOLLHEIM

BETSY WOLLHEIM (she/her) is the president, co-publisher and co-editor-in-chief of Daw Books, a science-fiction and fantasy publishing house. Her father, Donald Wollheim, was a well-known science fiction writer. After his death, she discovered that he had belonged to the Casa Susanna community, with his wife's support.

In 1966, under a pseudonym, Wollheim published *A Year Among the Girls*, to tell the story of his life as a cross-dresser at Casa Susanna.





GREGORY BAGAROZY

GREGORY BAGAROZY (he/him) was born in 1951 in New York City and raised in a traditional Italian-American family, whose lynchpin was his grandmother, Marie Tonell. Marie, a fiercely independent woman, 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 that he would meet the woman who changed his life forever. Marie and Tito married in 1958 and their Catskills estate became a haven for the cross-dressing and transgender community. Gregory grew up in this unusual ambiance, remaining close to Marie and Tito/Susanna till the day they died.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In the early 2000s, while writing *WILD SIDE*, a movie about a transgender person, I plunged into Paris' underground scene. Over the months, I met a host of transgender women. The chaotic nature of their life stories came across as a terrible reflection of the way society had rejected and misunderstood them. Meeting these women convinced me that I had a duty to depict their lives, so trans identity might be better understood and accepted.

While researching *WILD SIDE*, I stumbled on a book mysteriously entitled *Casa Susanna*. To my surprise, I discovered this contained a collection of images depicting a US-based trans and cross-dressing community of the 1950s and '60s. The most striking thing was that they did not seem to be in costume. Quite the opposite: you could tell that they were carefully, sensitively, intent on embodying elegant, upper-middle-class American womanhood, a woman next door as *Life Magazine* or *Harper's Bazaar* might have wanted us to see her. There was no accompanying text, just a short preface explaining that these pictures had been found by an antique-dealer couple at a flea market in New York City. There was nothing on the back of the pictures either and no correspondence to support provenance or history. The only words that did appear in one of the pictures was a wooden sign on a tree trunk that read *Casa Susanna*. Beside the tree stood a tall, long-haired brunette in a flower-print dress. It was summer. The weather was very sunny. This, people felt, must be Susanna, proudly standing outside what must be her own house.





Years passed. I made *WILD SIDE*, then a film portrait of Bambi, one of the first transgender women in France, and most recently *PETITE FILLE (Little Girl)*, a documentary about Sasha, a seven-year-old trans girl. All three movies relate to trans identity in different eras. Together they make up a history of sorts from the 1940s to the present in France.

Then in 2016, I was offered the opportunity to organize a vast photographic exhibit, showing images from my own collection. This was *Mauvais Genre (Under Cover: A Secret History of Cross Dressers)*. The show contained more than 500 amateur photographs depicting various forms of cross-dressing from the 19th century to the 1980s. As a result, I met Isabelle Bonnet, a photographic historian who had written a paper on the Casa Susanna pictures. Sheer grit had enabled Isabelle to identify and meet with some of the people shown in these mysterious photographs and to discover the true identity of Susanna herself.

When I read Isabelle's paper, the mass of archival material found, and the discovery of surviving eyewitnesses convinced me I had to make a movie. So I went to New York in the late summer of 2021 and traveled up to the Catskills in search of Casa Susanna. 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. Now their story, the story of a clandestine community, is there for all to see. With it, a fragment of queer history, stretching from the McCarthy era to the 1970s, is revealed. The unsettled nature of their existences and their bravery ring loud and clear. But now a new conservatism is rearing its head again and the rights of yesteryear, fiercely won, may yet again be challenged. The struggle isn't over.

Sébastien Lifshitz

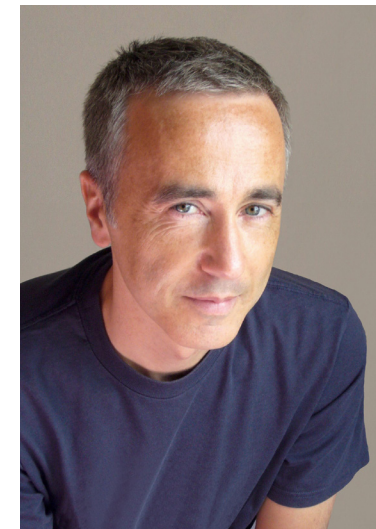


SEBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

Sébastien Lifshitz was born in 1968 in Paris, France. After studying art history at the Ecole du Louvre, he decided to devote himself to cinema and directed his first feature film, *COME UNDONE*, in 2000, which was acclaimed by critics and distributed worldwide.

This was followed by the documentary *THE CROSSING* (2001), selected for the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, then *WILD SIDE* (2004) and *BAMBI* (2016), both of which won awards at the Berlin Film Festival.

After *THE INVISIBLES* (2012), an official selection at the Cannes Film Festival, and *THE LIVES OF THERESE* (2017) at the Directors' Fortnight, he directed two new documentaries: *ADOLESCENTS*, awarded at the Locarno Film Festival, winner of Louis-Delluc Prize for Best Film and of three César in 2021, and *LITTLE GIRL*, presented at the Berlin Film Festival in 2020 and distributed worldwide, including in the United States, in 2022.



FILMOGRAPHY

- 2022 **CASA SUSANNA** / *Documentary*
- 2021 **BAMBI, A FRENCH WOMAN** / *Documentary*
- 2021 **SENSITIVE BOYS** / *Documentary*
- 2020 **LITTLE GIRL** / *Documentary*
- 2019 **AVENUE DE LAMBALLE** / *Short*
- 2019 **ADOLESCENTES** / *Documentary*
- 2016 **THE LIVES OF THERESE** / *Documentary*
- 2013 **BAMBI** / *Documentary*
- 2012 **THE INVISIBLES** / *Documentary*
- 2009 **GOING SOUTH** / *Feature*
- 2008 **JOUR ET NUIT** / *Short*
- 2006 **LES TEMOINS** / *Documentary*
- 2004 **WILD SIDE** / *Feature*
- 2001 **THE CROSSING** / *Documentary*
- 2000 **COME UNDONE** / *Feature*
- 1999 **COLD LANDS** / *TV Movie*
- 1998 **OPEN BODIES** / *Medium-length feature*
- 1995 **CLAIRE DENIS LA VAGABONDE** / *Documentary*
- 1994 **IL FAUT QUE JE L'AIME** / *Short*





CREW

A film by

In collaboration with

Produced by

Director of Photography

Sound

Editing

Sound Editing

Mixing

First assistant director

Producer manager NYC

Production manager

Post production manager

Executive producer for American Experience

SEBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

ISABELLE BONNET

MURIEL MEYNARD

PAUL GUILHAUME (A.F.C.)

FRANCOIS ABDELNOUR

TINA BAZ

FANNY MARTIN

JEANNE DELPLANCQ

DANIEL SOBRINO

PHILIPPE THIOLLIER

PARADOXAL INC.

STÉPHANIE GARNES

PIERRE HUOT

CAMEO GEORGE

PHOTOS

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