

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Reliving the Days of a Looser Borscht Belt

By BRUCE BENNETT

The slate for the 21st New York Jewish Film Festival, which begins Wednesday at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, includes 34 films from 11 countries. Aspects of the Jewish experience explored within the two-week program, co-presented by the Jewish Museum, range from first-person accounts of the Holocaust ("Shoah: The Unseen Interviews") to a depiction of contemporary Tel Aviv's gay music community (Eytan Fox's Israeli drama "Mary Lou").

'Welcome to Kutsher's' examines the history, influence and ethos of the Catskills resort.

While the festival offers no shortage of films with local origins and focus, the closing-night selection, the documentary "Welcome to Kutsher's: The Last Catskills Resort," examines the history, influence and ethos of the fading Sullivan County resort with an eye and ear for the hotel's legacy that transcends East Coast American Judaism.

"Kutshers and the Catskills resorts are inexorably tied to all of American pop culture," said Ian Rosenberg, who co-produced and directed the film with his wife, Caroline Laskow. "That's what we think is so fascinating—the way Kutsher's sort of created these elements of pop culture that people wouldn't necessarily think of as Jewish or as rising from the Catskills."

In a mere 73 minutes, Mr. Rosenberg and Ms. Laskow state the case for the cultural dominance of Kutsher's in its influential 1950s and '60s heyday with persuasive enthusiasm.

The resort emerged in 1907 as a low-budget bucolic escape for immigrant Lower East Side Jews locked out of exclusively gentile vacation options. By the mid-'60s, postwar prosperity and assimilation had pushed Kutsher's

to the forefront of an energetic and unapologetically kitschy style of summer fun. For one price, families could gorge on all-you-can-eat kosher meals, play tennis, golf, swim or even ice-skate. A revolving door of name entertainment, from Henny Youngman to Andy Kaufman, enabled guests to enjoy the same Saturday night comedy routines in person that they'd seen the previous Sunday at

home on "Ed Sullivan"

Unlike several generations of local Kutsher's vacation veterans, Ms. Laskow and Mr. Rosenberg—both products of the Midwest—said what they knew of the Catskills ethos growing up was second-hand at best. Then in 2002, the now New York-based couple booked a weekend at Kutsher's on a lark.

"For kicks," as Ms. Laskow put it. "It was fun to go without

any background."

"It had this amazing, faded beauty to it," Mr. Rosenberg said. "We kept walking through room after room, many of which were empty, saying, 'We can't believe this is still here.' We decided we really had to capture it."

The first two thirds of "Welcome to Kutsher's" comprises historical materials detailing the hotel's 100-year history first as a

family-owned farm, then hotel, interpolated with footage from a 2007 visit to the resort in high season. First-person interviews with owners and operators Helen Kutsher and her son, Mark, and longtime employees like skating instructor (and Zamboni driver) Celia Duffy cozily share screen time with historical testimony from Catskills experts.

The primacy of Kutsher's as a proving ground for "Borscht



Life at Kutsher's, the historic Catskills resort, is chronicled in the closing-night selection of the 21st annual New York Jewish Film Festival. At left, a Kutsher's postcard from the 1950s. Below, bellhop Wilt Chamberlain helps a guest out of his car, also in the 1950s. Below left, the grounds of the resort shortly after it opened.



Belt" comedians like Freddie Roman, Sid Ceaser, Billy Crystal and Jerry Seinfeld is one of the better known aspects of the resort's legacy. "Welcome to Kutsher's" details Mr. Roman's rise at Kutsher's via clips of his act captured in the Starlight Ballroom. But the resort's lesser-known hosting—and, in the case of Wilt Chamberlain and Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach, employing—of NBA legends came as a surprise to the filmmakers.

"We sort of knew about the food and we knew about the Borscht Belt, but the whole sports thing was a revelation," Mr. Rosenberg said.

"Every major star in the NBA came [to Kutsher's]," Mr. Roman said recently. "They all played an annual exhibition game and raised a ton of money. I met Wilt Chamberlain, I met Bob Cousie, Bill Sharman, all the Knickerbockers, Richie Guerin..."

The film's final third depicts the efforts of Yossi Zablocki, a guest turned resort lessee, to enable the hotel's survival in an era of diminishing interest in Catskill hospitality, including Kutsher's multiyear (now ended) tenure as host of the All Tomorrow's Parties alt-rock festival.

While most agree the writing is on the wall for the few remaining Catskills hotels, the Kutsher's website offers online booking for Passover 2012, while Mark Kutsher's son, Zach, recently opened a TriBeCa restaurant bearing the family's name on a menu adapted from the hotel's dining traditions.

Nevertheless, for Freddie Roman, last week's announcement by Gov. Andrew Cuomo that New York State would permit and partner in legal gambling venues proved bittersweet.

"Had gambling come in 35 years ago like it was supposed to have, that would have changed everything," Mr. Roman said. "The ironic part is that his father [former Gov. Mario Cuomo] was the one who said, 'there will be no gambling in New York. I don't want New Yorkers to gamble.' That really killed it for the Catskills."

Clockwise from top left: Zach Kutsher; Mark Kutsher (2)