

Hava Nagila – The Movie

*Hava Nagila Kicks off 2013
Festival in Style*

By Michael J. Solender

All it takes is the first five notes and every Jew is running for the dance floor – it's Hava Nagila! The 9th annual Charlotte Jewish Film Festival has selected for its opening night a new film on that quintessential Jewish folk song that will launch the festival on a joyous and lighthearted note and just may have the audience dancing in the aisles.

What could possibly be more Jewish than Hava? The question is one the film asks of its subjects early in the opening scenes at Canter's Deli in Los Angeles. When the question is posed to the counterman who hovers over such delicacies as herring, lox, and bagels – “Which is more Jewish, Hava Nagila or gefilte fish?” he unhesitatingly responds, “Hava Nagila!”

And thus begins a journey that travels more than 150 years exploring the origins of the niggun that has its roots in the shtetls of the Ukraine, follows the tune to the beginnings of the Zionist state of Israel and provides cultural back-story and context to Hava's arrival into the Jewish American weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and a storied pantheon of music.

The evolution of a true cultural icon is not without controversy and it is in the exploration of the relationship between two families laying claim to Hava's original authorship that the film displays its serious research chops, laying bare two equally plausible versions of a shared truth leaving the viewer to decide for themselves (or not) which story has more veracity.

Filmmaker Roberta Grossman has an extensive background in documentary filmmaking both for public and cable television. The question of what Hava Nagila was so vexed her that after conversations with scholar Josh Kun, she decided she simply had to find the answers behind this important cultural marker in her life. Grossman enlisted the help of *Friends* co-creator/producer Marta Kaufmann along with a team of talented writers and support personnel and the Hava Nagila quest was on.

“The film was originally titled, Hava Nagila – What is it?” said Grossman, who said her quest led her down a “rabbit hole” of exploration uncovering more layers and nuances to the Hava story than she ever imagined.

The film has quick pacing and features interviews with musical scholars, historians, chazzans, and most entertainingly performers. Turns out Hava Nagila has more covers than the couches in the lobby at New York City's Waldorf Astoria. Glen Campbell, Regina Spektor, Connie Francis, and Hava's greatest ambassador, Harry Belafonte all share for the film what the song has meant to them and how it came into their repertoire. Other versions heard in the film feature Elvis, Bob Dylan, and a wildly energetic version by Catskill performer Irving Fields, at a spry 90 years old.

Clearly a labor of love, Grossman's film underscores the enduring power of music as story, lesson and spirit.

Fair warning: You may leave the theater with an endless loop of Hava playing in your head. Rejoice! ☆