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Presents:

ONCE UPON A TIME AT 55th AND HOOVER

A short documentary

by

Andrés Enrique-Arias

(USA and Spain, Color, 28 minutes, 2013)

English and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), with English subtitles

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Linguist and First-Time Filmmaker Andrés Enrique-Arias Presents
Once Upon a Time at 55th and Hoover
New Short Documentary Film

Cambridge, MA – Linguistics Professor Andrés Enrique-Arias has completed his first film, *Once Upon a Time at 55th and Hoover*.

This documentary short tells the story of the Sephardic Jews from the island of Rhodes who arrived in Los Angeles in the first half of the 20th century and established a community in the area around 55th St and Hoover, what is today South Central Los Angeles.

The Sephardic Jews are the descendents of Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 after the Spanish Inquisition. These exiles settled mostly in what is today Turkey and the Balkans, including the island of Rhodes. Despite five centuries of forced separation from Spain the Sephardim maintained their Judeo-Spanish dialect, also known as Ladino, and their unique Hispano-Jewish culture.

In the first decades of the 20th century a considerable number of Sephardim from Rhodes moved to Los Angeles in search of a better life. They concentrated in the area south of Exposition Park where they established a synagogue and continued many aspects of the life they had left behind in the old country (traditions, celebrations, food, songs, and the Judeo-Spanish language).

When the Nazis took over the island of Rhodes towards the end of WWII and annihilated those Jews who had remained behind, the Los Angeles group became an important repository of the island's unique Sephardic cultural heritage. However, as the immigrants prospered and moved to other areas and their US born children embraced American language and culture, the old traditions faded away. Eventually the community disbanded and the synagogue was sold to an African Methodist Episcopal congregation.

Through compelling interviews with two immigrants born in Rhodes –what will probably be the last recorded testimony from this generation– and one second generation Rhodesli who grew up in the area we learn how the Sephardim of Rhodes, as all immigrants of that era, were torn between assimilating into mainstream American culture and maintaining their identity. The film is also a valuable historical document: filled with seldom seen movie footage and previously unpublished archival photographs it brings to life a little known aspect of the history of Los Angeles.

Once Upon a Time at 55th and Hoover reveals the intimate connection between community, language and culture. "In many ways," notes Andrés Enrique-Arias "Spanish-Ladino language is at the heart of a unique, rich Jewish culture." Once this generation of Ladino speakers is gone many of the stories, legends and memories that have accompanied the Sephardim for centuries will be gone forever.

Andrés Enrique-Arias is a professor of Spanish Historical Linguistics at the University of the Balearic Islands in Palma de Mallorca (Spain) and currently a visiting scholar at Harvard University. More information available at www.55thandHooverFilm.info.

SCREENINGS

Film festivals (official selection)

Los Angeles Sephardic Jewish Film Festival
Seattle Jewish Film Festival
New York Sephardic Jewish Film Festival
Cine Latino (Tubinga, Alemania)
Ethnografilm (París)

Academic settings:

Harvard University
UCLA - University of California (Los Angeles)
Duke University
University of Illinois Urbana – Champaign
University of Western Ontario
Eastern Connecticut State University
Hebrew University of Jerusalem

SYNOPSIS

Brief

This documentary film tells the remarkable but largely unknown story of the Sephardic Jews from the island of Rhodes that arrived to Los Angeles on the first half of the 20th century and established a community in the area around 55th St and Hoover, in what is today South Central Los Angeles. In their new home the immigrants continued many aspects of their rich Hispano-Jewish culture; however, as they spread around to other areas and their US born children embraced American language and culture, the old traditions began to fade away.

Complete

The area of South Central Los Angeles, South of Exposition Park, is today an ethnically diverse community that is primarily home to African Americans and Hispanics. What hardly any people know is that back in the 1920's and up until the 1950's this part of the city was home to a vibrant Spanish-speaking community of Sephardic Jews from the island of Rhodes.

The Sephardic Jews or Sephardim are the descendants of the Jewish people forced to leave Spain and Portugal in 1492 after de Decree of Expulsion promoted by the Spanish Inquisition. Most of these exiles settled in the coastal areas of the eastern Mediterranean including the island of Rhodes. Despite five centuries of forced separation from Spain the Sephardim maintained their Judeo-Spanish dialect, also known as Ladino, and their unique Hispano-Jewish culture.

In the first decades of the 20th century a considerable number of Sephardim from Rhodes moved to Los Angeles in search of a better life. They concentrated in the area south of Exposition Park where they established a synagogue and continued many aspects of the life they had left behind in the old country (traditions, celebrations, food, songs, and the Judeo-Spanish language).

When the Nazis took over the island of Rhodes towards the end of WWII and annihilated those Jews who had remained behind, the Los Angeles group became an important repository of the island's unique Sephardic cultural heritage. However, as the immigrants prospered and moved to other areas and their US born children embraced American language and culture, the old traditions faded away. Eventually the community disbanded and the synagogue was sold to an African Methodist Episcopal congregation.

DIRECTOR

Andrés Enrique-Arias (writer, director and producer). Andrés Enrique-Arias is a Professor of Spanish Historical Linguistics at the University of the Balearic Islands in Palma de Mallorca (Spain), and currently a visiting scholar at Harvard University. He completed an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Hispanic Linguistics at the University of Southern California. While attending graduate school he also took courses on music performance and screen writing for non fiction television. As a linguist he has investigated different aspects of Jewish culture in Medieval Spain and has collected and studied linguistic data from Judeo-Spanish speakers in Los Angeles. The documentary short *Once upon a Time at 55th and Hoover* is his first film.

PRODUCTION PERSONNEL

Miquel Llinàs Forteza (editing and post-production). Miquel Llinàs has worked in recording and television studios in Mallorca (Spain) and has participated as a producer, arranger and sound engineer in a wide array of musical productions, from small ensembles to film scores and to symphonic recordings. Since 2008 he has worked in post-production and music in Mallorca based Nova Televisió in a number of TV series and talk shows.

Pilar Campanario Pallás (additional editing). Pilar Campanario studied media arts at the Audiovisual Production Center Salduie in Zaragoza (Spain). Currently she works in Mallorca in video editing and post-production for a number of production companies and for the public local television station IB3.

Sarah Levy (photography in Los Angeles, USA). Sarah Levy is an award-winning Director of Photography and camera operator of narrative and documentary feature films and television. Sarah graduated from the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television. Currently Sarah is working as a Director of Photography and the camera operator on her forth season of NBC's "The Office".

Ricard Peitx (additional photography in Mallorca, Spain). Ricard Peitx studied media arts at the MK3 and ITES Schools in Barcelona with a specialization in audiovisual recording and post-production. He completed his education with courses on film editing in San Antonio de los Baños (Cuba). He has worked in the advertising industry and in television shooting and editing entire audiovisual projects, such as television shows, music videos and corporate videos. Currently he works in Mallorca as a camera operator and producer for the public local television station IB3.

Tolo Prats (composer). Tolo Prats is a sound specialist and musician with experience in a wide array of audiovisual genres: documentary and narrative feature films, theatre, television, video art and animation. He has worked as a composer, sound mixer, sound editor and sound designer for all major Spanish TV networks (TVE, Antena 3, Telecinco) as well as local channels, theater productions and private corporations. His music is a combination of different contemporary styles: experimental music, minimalism, serialism, ambience, industrial sound. He also incorporates influences from Mediterranean music and from the great film scores of all times.

PARTICIPANTS:

Regina (Notrica) Hanan: was born in Rhodes in 1907. She came to Los Angeles in 1937 where she worked as a seamstress for the legendary Hollywood costume designer Adrian. In 1939 she married Reuben Hanan, also from Rhodes, who had settled in Alabama, with whom she had three daughters. The marriage did not work and eventually Hanan moved back to Alabama and Regina was left in charge of raising the three girls in Los Angeles. Regina's favorite passion was singing, and her knowledge of many traditional Sephardic songs caused her to be sought out by researchers. She passed away in 2001, just a few months after being recorded for this film.

Rebeca (Amato) Levy: born in Rhodes in 1912; left the island with her first husband, Moshe Hasson, in 1939 under threats from Italian fascists. Because of complications to their travel plans caused by the war breaking out the couple had to stay in Tangier, Morocco, where daughter Mati was born in 1943. Hasson died the next year, and the young widow moved to Los Angeles in 1946. There she married Victor Levy. Rebecca Levy had an amazing memory about the roots of the Jewish Sephardic culture of Rhodes which she gathered in her historic memoir, *I Remember Rhodes*, a book published in English and Ladino. She passed away in 2001, barely one year after participating in the film.

Art Benveniste: born in Los Angeles in 1933 from Rhodesli parents. He grew up in the Jewish neighborhood around 55th and Hoover. After attending the University of Southern California he worked as a teacher in John Muir High school, which he had attended previously as a student. He had two sons which he ended up raising after a divorce. During his college years Art became aware of the unique Sephardic culture of his ancestors and ever since has been active in studying many aspects of it and collecting books and audio recordings on the subject. Benveniste, who also participates in a Ladino-speaking havurah, has made numerous sentimental journeys to Rhodes.

SCREENINGS

Film festivals: official selection:

Los Angeles Sephardic Jewish Film Festival
Seattle Jewish Film Festival
New York Sephardic Jewish Film Festival
Cine Latino (Tübingen, Germany)
Ethnografilm (Paris)

Screenings at Universities:

Harvard University
UCLA - University of California (Los Angeles)
Duke University
University of Illinois Urbana – Champaign
University of Western Ontario
Eastern Connecticut State University

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I heard about the ethnic neighborhood of Jews from Rhodes that had existed around 55th and Hoover while working as a language instructor just a few blocks away, at the USC University Park Campus. At that time, in the late 90s, I was doing linguistic fieldwork among the Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) speaking community of Los Angeles. And coincidentally I was attending a broadcast journalism class for which I had to write the treatment for a documentary. It seemed to me that the story of this particular group of Sephardic Jews and their vanishing language and culture was a good topic to write on for this assignment, and so I started researching it and conducting preliminary interviews.

For this particular project I decided to interview Regina Hanan and Rebecca Levy, the two consultants that were fluent Ladino speakers and had a better, firsthand knowledge of the Sephardic culture from Rhodes. I also interviewed a younger US born participant, Art Benveniste, a very articulate and knowledgeable member of the community who even took us around the neighborhood sharing his childhood memories there. Sadly both Regina and Rebecca passed away within the following year.

It was only recently that I was able to continue working on the film. I returned to Los Angeles and reconnected with Art and the families of Rebecca and Regina, who gave me access to their private photo collections. Furthermore I had access to the archives at Temple Tifereth Israel. And as I was spending a sabbatical year at Harvard University I was able to use their immense bibliographic resources to find even more information on the subject and additional historical pictures.

Now I had some substantial material to work with but still there were many holes and gaps in the story. I considered using a narrator or text on screen to complement the interviews, but neither seemed to work. Finally I decided to introduce myself as another participant, not only as an expert that has conducted research on the topic, but also as someone that had met the people interviewed in the film and had been fascinated by their story. Introducing this role of expert and facilitator that shares the story with the audience worked better than any of the other solutions I considered.

There are quite a few documentary films about the Sephardic Jews. My take on the topic is influenced by my background as a linguist and educator. On the one hand there is a focus on linguistic issues. I find particularly compelling how the participants express their views in the face of the decline and loss of their language conveying attitudes such as resignation, defiance or regret. Likewise the movie takes an educational slant: it aims to inform viewers about the history of the Sephardic Jews and their cultural heritage and at the same time help them understand the experiences of speakers of vanishing minority languages.

Even though the film deals with a very specific group of people and their rather peculiar story I feel that what really makes it work is its treatment of topics that appeal to a wider audience and never get old: the adventures of immigrants that leave their home in search of a better life, the nostalgia of vanishing cultures, the reality of minority language decline and loss as a condition of the modern world, and the changes in the cultural and linguistic landscapes in urban settings.

Stills from *Once Upon a Time at 55th and Hoover*

