

SESSION FIVE



Just a Little Off-Center: *Saturday Night Live*

Television series, 1975-1980

(Selected Sketches)

Producer: Lorne Michaels, for NBC

Director: David Wilson

Featured Performers: Dan Aykroyd,
Jane Curtin, Kirk Douglas, Garret
Morris, Bill Murray, Laraine Newman,
Gilda Radner, Maureen Stapleton

Length: 30 minutes

The *Saturday Night Live* sketches selected for inclusion in this package are from programs that originally aired from 1975 to 1980. They include:

1. Newscast: "Rosh Hashanah in Times Square"
2. Newscast: "Michelangelo's David is circumcised"
3. "Rhonda Weiss loses her credit card"
4. Commercial: "Bris in the luxury sedan"
5. "Bobby Farber on the phone with her mother"
6. "Gilda visits her mother"
7. Commercial: "Jewess jeans"
8. "Bar Mitzvah" sketch

Some of the most memorable characters and sketches on *Saturday Night Live* – Roseanne Roseannadanna, John Belushi's Samurai swordsman, the Coneheads – have virtually no Jewish content, but the program did showcase some hilarious examples of an emerging style of Jewish humor for a national television audience.

A television phenomenon, *Saturday Night Live* is one of the longest running comedy shows on American television. Like *Your Show of Shows*, *Saturday Night Live* is performed before a live audience – with plenty of real laughter – and broadcast from NBC's studios in Rockefeller Center, in New York City, at 11:30 on Saturday nights. Both feature a series of unrelated comedy sketches with musical interludes. But whereas *Your Show of Shows* drew on revue and variety shows to create a new genre for the new medium of television, *Saturday Night Live* turned for inspiration to television itself, from variety shows and situation comedies to talk shows, news broadcasts, and even commercials.

One distinction of *Saturday Night Live* is its confrontation of television taboos. Like the groundbreaking 1970s situation comedies, *All in the Family* and *M*A*S*H*, *Saturday Night Live* ventured into areas that were considered beyond the realm of humor – drug use, euthanasia, pornography, and religion. Segments of American society that had been ignored or treated gingerly became grist for *Saturday Night Live's* satire. Among ethnic groups, Jews and African Americans in particular were lampooned in ways never before dared on television. The show adopted a fresh style of satire from a new generation of comedy clubs and satirical magazines. Self-consciously different, deliberately startling and unsettling, its humor was called "cut and slash" and its cast, "video guerrillas." As

Rhonda Weiss: *I got them [earrings] from my brother. He's a dentist and a jeweler.*

Clerk: *Really. My brother is a doctor and a lawyer.*

Rhonda: *Really*

Clerk: *And a furrier. When I had my accident he examined me, defended me, and replaced my coat.*

Rhonda: *My other brother is a dentist, jeweler, doctor, lawyer, accountant – and the owner of a Sweet-and-Low factory.*

Dan Aykroyd put it, “Every show was an assault mission.”

The *Saturday Night Live* sketches selected for inclusion in this course are from programs that originally aired during the 1975-1980 seasons. They include parodies of television newscasts and commercials, as well as satires of American Jewish culture, including middle-class Jewish family life and a Bar Mitzvah celebration.

Lorne Michaels, the creator of *Saturday Night Live* and producer of the show during its first five seasons, is a self-described member of “the generation that grew up on television.” In addition to several years of writing, performing in, and producing innovative programs for Canadian radio and television, Michaels worked as a writer for a number of Hollywood television comedy programs, including *Laugh-In* and a Lily Tomlin special, for which he won an Emmy award. Born Lorne Lipkowitz in 1945, like Mel Brooks and Woody Allen he changed his name.

In 1975 Michaels was asked to create a new ninety-minute show to be broadcast on NBC after the Saturday evening news. The new series was to be a comedy-variety show that would attract a young audience. Michaels gathered a staff of writers and performers who had little or no experience working in television but had background in the improvisational troupes and humor magazines that had begun to flourish during the 1960s. A number of the writers and actors, including Michaels, were Jewish. Working in a collaborative style with some resemblances to the team that put together *Your Show of Shows*, the staff found its distinctive comic voice. Although parts of it seem improvised, the show was fully scripted.

Saturday Night Live's great popularity has launched the careers of a number of comic performers, including Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Chevy Chase, Jane Curtin, Gilda Radner, and later, Dana Garvey and Eddie Murphy. The series has influenced the style of television comedy much as *Your Show of Shows* did a generation before. Although *Saturday Night Live* has undergone several changes in personnel, it continues to entertain a large audience.

A New Climate for Comedy

For this course, the sketches in *Your Show of Shows* were chosen simply as outstanding examples of the program's

Announcer's voice: *A car with a ride so smooth that a circumcision can be performed inside of it. We went to Temple Beth Shalom in Little Neck, New York, and asked Rabbi Meyer Teppletz to circumcise eight-day-old Benjamin Kantor while riding in the backseat of the elegant Royale Deluxe Two . . .*

comedy, but the selections from *Saturday Night Live* were selected for their Jewish content.

The fact that Jewish sketches appeared on national television is indicative of a change in the climate and the acceptability of ethnicity on TV, an enormous change since *Your Show of Shows*. After the mid-1950s, Jews were an infrequent presence on television, despite the many early Jewish comic stars, including Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, and George Burns. No Jewish family replaced The Goldbergs (1949-54, 1956-57 as Molly) among the characters that populated situation comedies and other dramatic series. Indeed, there are several instances of television series created during the 1960s in which characters based on Jews or conceived of as Jews were deliberately changed. For example, *The Dick van Dyke Show* (1961-66) was originally conceived by Carl Reiner as an autobiographical work based on his experiences as a writer for *Your Show of Shows*. Reiner starred in the series' pilot, but was replaced, at the request of network executives, with a "Midwestern type" – Dick van Dyke.

During the 1970s, television entertainment programming expanded to embrace a greater range of character types and issues. *Saturday Night Live* broke through other barriers as well, not only in subject matter but in the subversive nature of its humor. The show was distinguished for bringing this kind of comedy to television, and for establishing a venue for the humor of a new generation.

Just a Little Off-Center

This is not "Borscht-belt" humor, or subtle comedy. It's comedy with an edge. Sometimes shocking, or a hairline short of bad taste, the sketches can be unforgettably funny. While there are traces of the Marx Brothers' antics, the self-consciousness of Woody Allen's humor is absent. The sketches might be closest in sensibility to the work of Mel Brooks in *The Producers*, deliberately challenging conventional notions of good taste.

Producer Lorne Michaels often spoke about humor as being "derived from the one off-center element in a setting of absolute normality." The "bris in the back seat" commercial, for example, is based on a real commercial

Bobby Farber: *My Overeaters*
Anonymous class . . . I love it,
I love it. I mean, it's just great.
Being in a class with compulsive
people. Everyone's always got
cigarettes and gum. Everything
you need.

in which a jeweler splits a diamond while traveling in a luxury sedan to demonstrate the smoothness of the car's ride. The parody features the same kind of salesman's voice-over and similar close-ups of how the car handles potholes and short stops, letting the viewer imagine the consequences of a slip. The "rabbi" takes his role quite seriously. Part of the comic experience of this and other "commercials" was their placement during what seemed to be a real commercial break; it usually took viewers several seconds to realize that they were watching a send-up rather than a genuine commercial.

In "Rosh Hashanah in Times Square," newscaster Laraine Newman reports from a rooftop at Times Square, where we see the bright lights in the background and the traffic below – leading the audience to believe that she is describing the traditional New Year's Eve in Times Square. She talks about the lighter, quieter crowds, beginning to make the viewer skeptical. It becomes clear that something is definitely off when she starts to describe the ball dropping down from the Allied Chemical Tower, the numbers 5737 appearing, the book of life opening and God deciding the fate of the world for the next year. She is totally oblivious to the fact that she has taken two separate holidays of different cultures and combined them into one. The studio anchor Jane Curtin brings it to Laraine's attention that she is indeed talking about the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, which is usually celebrated privately in homes or synagogues. Not skipping a beat, Laraine answers, "I thought it seemed a little quiet."

In a second parody newscast, "Michelangelo's David is circumcised," Garret Morris, broadcasting from Florence, Italy, stands in front of the sculpture of David as he tells us the story of a man sneaking into the museum "wielding a hammer and chisel," using them to circumcise the famous sculpture of David. He moves aside so that the audience can observe a bandage-covered David. Straight-faced, he tells us this was done for health reasons. Museum officials, he reports, feel David will never be the same. But a Hasidic rabbi introduced by Garret to give his opinion on the matter exclaims, "He did a beautiful job!"

In a commercial for "Jewess Jeans," Gilda Radner is dancing away in her skin-tight jeans, sporting the star of

David on each rear pocket. She twirls her various gold chains, which also include the star. The commercial's jingle is sung to a disco beat:

Jewess jeans, they're skin tight, they're outta sight,
Jewess jeans. She's got a lifestyle that's uniquely hers.
Europe, Nassau, and wholesale furs. She's read every
best-selling book, she's a gourmet blender cook, she's
got that Jewish look. She shops the sales for designer
clothes, she's got designer nails, and a designer nose.
She's an American Princess and a disco queen. She's the
Jewess in Jewess Jeans.

A voice-over remarks, "You don't have to be Jewish."

Gilda responds, "But it wouldn't hurt."

In another sample, the sketch showing Bobby Farber talking on the phone to her mother while preparing a stuffed chicken for dinner presents a low-key, comic portrait of a recognizable character type – the middle-class suburban Jewish housewife – in a scene rich in authentic detail. And the "off-center element" is the premise: Mrs. Farber's absurd notion of changing her children's first names. She is so upset by the fact that everyone's children seem to have the same names, and that her earlier belief that she "originated those names" is mistaken. Bobby feels that since they're children, they'll learn to adjust.

The Bar Mitzvah scene features Gilda Radner and Kirk Douglas as the proud parents of Greg Lieberman and hosts of the gala party, and Bill Murray, who plays Nick the Lounge Singer, drunk on the party's free-flowing liquor. Nick, here singing about "the chosen people," was a frequent presence on the show, doing gigs at a ski lodge, Auto Train, and honeymoon hotel. The Jewish setting – where Hebrew and Yiddish are spoken (Mr. Lieberman welcomes Tante Vilde Chaya, Aunt Wild Animal) – is one of a series in which Nick croons and lampoons his audiences.

The writers take what could be called "easy shots," that is, they select obvious targets for their satire – Jewish mothers, conspicuous consumption by Jewish daughters, wealthy fathers, suburban housewives, rabbis, and family celebrations. Just saying the word "bris" causes some people to giggle. But they also push their satire further than earlier comedians might have. Some viewers might find the stereotypic depictions offensive, particularly the

Nick (sung to the tune of
"There's no business like show
business"): *There's no religion
like the Judeo-Hebrew tradition.
Like no condition I know.*

*Everything about is so
ancient . . .*

*There's no people like the
chosen people.*

There's no people I know . . .

Gilda: *Mother, I don't want to walk into a restaurant with a brisket.*

Mother: *You can check the brisket.*

Gilda: *I don't want to check the brisket.*

Mother: *Why? Is there a law that says you can't check a brisket . . .*

portraits of Jewish women. *Saturday Night Live* broke new ground in presenting the “Jewish American Princess” in full color, epitomized by Gilda Radner’s Rhonda Weiss character (who appears in the “Jewess jeans” commercial and the “credit card” sketch).

However, they often get it just right, and they make it very funny. Many Jewish daughters will identify – and laugh heartily – when Rhonda Weiss/Gilda Radner objects to her mother’s (Maureen Stapleton) insistence on giving away her fur coat, brisket, tea set. About that brisket, her mother won’t take no for an answer.

Baby-Boom Humor

The openness with which *Saturday Night Live* takes on Jewish subjects, and pokes fun at them, reflects a greater societal openness. Lorne Michaels and his colleagues – Jews and non-Jews – understood that Jews were comfortable enough in America to lampoon them.

Interestingly, this show is linked to the others in the series in some personal ways. Gilda Radner was married to Gene Wilder, who starred with Zero Mostel in *The Producers* (and also in Woody Allen’s *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex*.) The guest host on the third *Saturday Night Live* show, in its first season, was Rob Reiner, son of Carl Reiner, who, as one of the main writers on *Your Show of Shows*, collaborated with Mel Brooks and Woody Allen.

Watching these sketches and being reminded of Gilda Radner’s remarkable talents, her early death to ovarian cancer looms as a huge tragedy. She lights up the scenes she is in, and she is missed. Had she lived, no doubt she would have made great contributions to the world of comedy and, in particular, Jewish comedy.

While you watch consider:

- ◆ Think about the comic and Jewish aspects of each sketch, and how they are integrated.
- ◆ To what extent do these sketches resemble those from *Your Show of Shows*? How are they different?

- ◆ Does Gilda Radner have an “attitude” as she portrays Jewish women?

- ◆ Do you think any of the sketches goes too far?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Consider the sketch in which Gilda Radner plays a young woman visiting her mother (played by Maureen Stapleton). To what extent is this a portrait of a Jewish family dynamic? What contribution does the identification of the mother and daughter as Jews make to the comedy? Could they be another ethnic group? Why or why not?
- ◆ How does the “Bar Mitzvah” sketch play on the convention of Jews as outsiders to create comedy? How might watching this scene be different for Jews than for non-Jews?
- ◆ Gilda Radner’s character Rhonda Weiss appeared in a number of sketches on *Saturday Night Live* besides the two included in this selection. How does her caricature of a “Jewish American Princess” compare with other caricatures of young Jewish women you have seen in television and film?
- ◆ What do the Rhonda Weiss and Bobby Farber sketches say about the status of women – Jewish or in general – in American humor in the late 1970s? Is this different today? If so, how? Are women of other races or religions shown in other ways?
- ◆ Do you think any one of these sketches will offend Jewish viewers? Is the fact that Gilda Radner is herself Jewish significant?
- ◆ How is the sense of Jews in American life expressed in these sketches different from the Marx Brothers’ movies? *Your Show of Shows?*
- ◆ How do the parodies of television genres in *Saturday Night Live* (the bogus newscasts and commercials)

compare to the parodies of television in *Your Show of Shows* (the interview with the Professor)?

- ◆ Are there any Jewish subjects that might have been taboo for *Saturday Night Live* to target?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Watch other *Saturday Night Live* shows. Compare the satirical images of Jews in the sketches included here with those of other groups - African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, gays, women, the elderly, and the disabled. Consider what elements of character and situation (names, speech, tastes, professions, clothing, emotions, etc.) are associated with the various groups – and how they are evoked as the subject of satire.
2. Compare the humor of *Saturday Night Live* to such innovative comedy-variety programs as *Laugh-In* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (available in syndication or on videocassette) and such current situation comedies as *In Living Color*. To what extent do these programs reflect a particular cultural-historical content? To what extent do they speak to special audiences? How does *In Living Color's* humor about African Americans act as a kind of self-portraiture, similar to the portrait of Jews on *Saturday Night Live*? What's the difference in the portraits? In the humor?
3. Design a special edition of the show with Groucho Marx as host. What sorts of sketches would you feature?

FOR FURTHER READING

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- ◆ Hill, Doug, and Jeff Weingrad. *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- ◆ Michael Cader, ed. *Saturday Night Live: The First Twenty Years*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- ◆ Radner, Gilda. *It's Always Something*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.
- ◆ Woodward, Bob. *Wired: The Short Life and Fast Times of John Belushi*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.
- ◆ Zweibel, Alan. *Bunny Bunny – Gilda Radner: A Sort of Love Story*. New York: Villard, 1994.