



Setting the Standard: *Sid Caesar in Your Show of Shows*

Producer: Sid Caesar
 Directors: Greg Garrison, Clark Jones,
 Max Liebman
 Television Director: Bill Hobin
 Writers: Mel Brooks, Sid Caesar,
 Lucille Kallen, Max Liebman, Mel
 Tolkin, Tony Webster
 Featured Performers: Sid Caesar,
 Imogene Coca, Nanette Fabray,
 Howard Morris, Carl Reiner

Running Time: 79 minutes

Sketches from the television series,
 1950-1954, and from the follow-up
 show *Caesar's Hour*, 1955-1958. The
 sketches included are:

1. "Marriage Is Fun"
2. "The Professor on Mountain Climbing"
3. "The Shadow Waltz"
4. "The Professor Expert on Space"
5. "The Cobbler's Daughter"
6. "The General Dresses Up"
7. "The Professor Expert on Sleep"
8. "The Five-Dollar Date"
9. "Aggravation Boulevard"

The laughter you hear in the background is real. *Your Show of Shows* was performed in front of a studio audience and broadcast live – no editing, no retakes.

Your Show of Shows is often hailed as a masterpiece in American television history. It was one of television's first successful programs, when the medium was still in its infancy, broadcast to a national audience every Saturday at 9:00 P.M. on NBC for five seasons beginning in 1950. *Your Show of Shows* offered viewers a brand-new ninety minute Broadway revue each week, with musical presentations and guest stars, but it is best remembered for its inspired comedy. Setting a standard that has rarely been matched and perhaps never surpassed, *Your Show of Shows* was the result of a unique congruence of extremely talented people.

The resident company of *Your Show of Shows* came to television from the revue and variety stage. Sid Caesar (b. 1922) was the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who owned a luncheonette in Yonkers, New York. Of his father, who came from Poland, Sid Caesar wrote:

God knows what the family name really was (Kaiser? Saisarovich?), but Caesar was the name bestowed on him by the immigration officer at Ellis Island. Those immigration officers played a lot of jokes with names on those innocent, non-English-speaking refugees from Eastern Europe. The name Caesar seemed to be one of their favorite jokes. There were a lot of newly arrived Jewish Caesars in New York.

The customers at his parents' St. Clair Buffet Lunch (a "greasy spoon," as Sid Caesar describes it), were immigrants from many countries, speaking many different languages. "I would go from table to table," he writes, "listening to the sounds. I learned how to mimic them, sounding as if I actually were speaking their language." The customers loved it, and, as he says, "it was the

Ann Victor: *Bob danced his way into my heart. And as soon as he got there he sat down.*

beginning of a comic device that helped me earn millions later on.” Sid Caesar began performing comic routines in the Catskills, then in Coast Guard revues during World War II and in a film, *Tars and Spars*, based on these shows. He eventually appeared in two Hollywood films, in New York nightclubs, and in *Make Mine Manhattan*, a successful Broadway revue, before starting his television career with *Your Show of Shows*. Imogene Coca (b. 1909), one of the few non-Jewish members of the company, grew up in a theatrical family and spent years performing as a singer, dancer, and comic actress on the vaudeville circuit, in revues, and in Broadway musicals before she appeared on television. In contrast with the Marx Brothers, whose characters appeared the same in film after film, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca were admired for their artistic versatility. Coca performed skillful and hilarious parodies of modern dance, ballet, and opera, while Caesar had a remarkable facility with dialects and phony foreign languages and a great comic physicality.

Your Show of Shows ran for five seasons. The following season Imogene Coca had her own show, and *Caesar’s Hour*, starring Sid Caesar, was placed in the same time slot as *Your Show of Shows*, and ran for three years. To the audience, the only visible change was that Nanette Fabray – who had appeared as a guest on *Your Show of Shows* – replaced Coca as Caesar’s comic partner.

Nanette Fabray was born Ruby Bernadette Nanette Theresa Faberes (1920). She grew up in Los Angeles and, at the age of three, began her Vaudeville career, appearing on the circuit as “Baby Nanette.” As a child actress, she was featured in a series of *Our Gang* films. In 1940, she made her first New York appearance in a Broadway revue, and she later starred in several musicals and plays.

Most of the writers from *Your Show of Shows* worked on *Caesar’s Hour*, with a few additions. The writers included some of the most gifted people in comedy, many of whom went on to become famous and are still prominent in the comedy field – among them Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Selma Diamond, Larry Gelbart, Lucille Kallen, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, and Mel Tolkin, as well as Sid Caesar and the producer, Max Liebman. Many later testified to the incredible synergism of working in the

midst of so much talent, a combination of cooperation and competition, brilliance and madness that produced superlative comedy.

Sid Caesar in *Your Show of Shows* presents a sampling of the range of comic sketches featured on the program as well as from *Caesar's Hour*. It includes interviews with Caesar's character The Professor, a mock-authority on just about everything; parodies of various performance genres as well as satires of serious culture; and an example of a running series of skits about Ann and Bob Victor, an "average" married couple. Many in the audience will identify with characters like the Victors and in laughing at them will be able to laugh at themselves.

A New Medium

The new medium of television provided an opportunity for many talented writers, performers, directors, and producers to work creatively, experimenting with new forms of entertainment and reaching an increasingly wide and diverse audience. As with the motion picture industry, a significant number of those working in television were Jewish. In *Your Show of Shows*, not only Sid Caesar but the producer, Max Liebman, and a majority of the writers came from Jewish backgrounds.

How is the Jewishness of many of the artists expressed in *Your Show of Shows*? While the scripts of *Your Show of Shows* feature an occasional Yiddishism, like the Marx Brothers' films, there are no characters or stories that are explicitly identified as "Jewish." Yet some observers of the show have felt that it reflects, through its comedy, the sensibilities of American Jews in the post-World War II era. As with the Marx Brothers, the delight in language-play and parody and the mocking of high culture may be seen as emblematic of Jewish humor. The comic flouting of the "ordeal of civility" – a term used by John Murray Cuddihy to describe Jews' attempts to mold their behavior to a WASP norm – was a specialty of Sid Caesar's, as was humor inherent in the predicament of the common man.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, American Jews reaped many of the benefits and opportunities that the postwar economy offered. Many – although not all – barriers to participation in mainstream American society

faced by earlier generations of Jews were weakened or gone. In addition, the Jewish population was increasingly Americanized, and for many American Jews, feeling more “at home” in America meant distancing themselves from their ethnic background and religion.

This was also the beginning of the Cold War era, the time of the notorious anticommunist investigations by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (known as HUAC) and by Senator Joseph McCarthy, as well as the “atom spy” trial and eventual execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. HUAC targeted the entertainment industry, in which Jews were prominent, and many who worked in radio, television, and film were blacklisted and could no longer find work in their professions. In this climate of fear and anxiety, media images of Jews, which had been more explicit in the early years – with such films as *Abie’s Irish Rose*, *His People*, and *The Jazz Singer* – but steadily less frequent in the 1930s and 1940s, became even more scarce. Thus, manifestly Jewish characters who were more than comic foils did not appear regularly on prime-time television until the 1970s.

The new medium of television also arrived in a country savoring peace and prosperity after war and Depression, conservative socially, and believing in the paradise of neat suburban yards behind white picket fences. This was the medium where “Father Knew Best,” and father and mother slept in separate beds. So it should not be surprising that in an effort to reach a broad, non-Jewish American audience, *Your Show of Shows* did not foreground Jewish characters or themes. As critic Todd Gitlin observed in a later, more tolerant era:

Given the large number of Jews who hold top positions in the networks and production companies, it seems surprising that Jewish characters are scarce on the [television] screen. But television is . . . a site for the great American drama of assimilation, and . . . in the end, the networks fell back in their sense of marketplace predilections, compounded perhaps by self-protectiveness against any real or conceivable anti-Semitic charge that Jews are too powerful in the media. . . . Many people who work in the television industry feel [that] a large part of the audience prefers its Jews Gentile.

Those working in *Your Show of Shows* celebrated their new-found sense of comfort in American society by

Rutherford: *Sir, you've been waiting by that phone for four years. At least have something to eat.*

Rex Handsome: *No . . . The phone may ring at any minute and I don't want to have food in my mouth.*

Rutherford: *Maybe they forgot your number, sir.*

Rex: *How could they forget Crestview 1? I was the first person in the whole world to get a telephone.*

indulging in the luxury of making fun of the very culture where they struggled to belong. Satires of opera, ballet, and foreign “art” films made fun of the elitism surrounding “high art.” While the Marx Brothers’ comedy often assaults elite culture from the perspective of outsiders, *Your Show of Shows* does so from closer to the inside – although it’s a newly arrived and anxious-producing status, and still in the margins. In “The Shadow Waltz,” Caesar calls attention to the pretentiousness of the staged musical performance. Similarly, “Aggravation Boulevard” – a longer-than-usual, thirty-three minute sketch – makes fun of Hollywood stars and the film industry.

As Caesar explains in his autobiography, “Aggravation Boulevard” was based on the story of John Gilbert, a star of the silent movies whose career plummeted when “talkies” arrived because of his high, squeaky voice. “In keeping with our particular brand of satire,” Caesar writes, “we took it just one half-note further.” As Rex Handsome, Caesar is hilarious as the heartthrob with the effeminate, soprano voice. This very funny sketch does have a happy ending.

While Jews never appeared as Jews on *Your Show of Shows*, themes and issues associated with Jews were sometimes addressed obliquely in comedic terms. Several sketches, although not in this collection, explore the “ordeal of civility” – the belief that in order to be a part of civilized society, one must not talk too loud, eat too much, complain, shout or interrupt.

A target of satire in several of the sketches is German culture, a subject that was not only meaningful for the general American public, who had celebrated victory over Hitler only a few years before, but had special significance for Jewish viewers. The comedy hinges on a shared understanding of the stereotypical portrait of Germans as arrogant, militaristic perfectionists.

In “The General Dresses Up,” Sid Caesar portrays a pompous man who barks orders, military-style, to his uniformed aide (played by Howard Morris). His language is a blend of German and English that comes close to sounding like Yiddish. Stamping his foot, the aide repeats each order, as he dresses Caesar in an ornate military-looking uniform. When the elaborate dressing ceremony is

concluded, the General steps out of the room, looking like he's on his way to an important meeting. He walks past a group of elegantly clad guests, to take his position as a doorman. The inspiration for this scene, Caesar stated in his autobiography, was a routine from the German silent film *The Last Laugh*, in which Emil Jannings played an army general who ends up working as a doorman.

The Professor – who takes on a different German-sounding name in each scene – speaks in a pseudo-Viennese German accent and caricatures the pompous excesses of an eccentric European academic. Dressed in a squashed top hat, ragged coat, and crooked tie, he often answers the reporter's questions with non sequiturs. He seems to know a lot, but may know nothing.

The humor in *Your Show of Shows* seems less dependent on jokes that are one-liners than the Marx Brothers, who quickly pitch line after line. In the sketches featuring Caesar and Fabray (or Caesar and Coca), the humor is more related to the development of very funny story lines, with characters playing their roles to the fullest.

Interestingly, “The Five-Dollar Date,” in which Caesar recalls – and acts out – two dates he went on, was the first sketch he did on television. Imogene Coca's huge talent is showcased in “The Cobbler's Daughther,” a parody of an Italian film. Caesar, her cobbler father, is none too pleased with her interest in dancing or her particular interest in a dancer who comes to the shop to have his shoes fixed. They speak their own version of pseudo-Italian mixed with English. Coca's expressiveness, and her dancing, are unforgettable.

Your Show of Shows was known for creating new visual elements of television at a time when situation comedies were often little more than filmed radio plays. In “Marriage Is Fun,” for example, the camera uses a close-up of Sid Caesar and Nanette Fabray (the Victors) as they hide their public brawl with smiles. In “The Shadow Waltz,” Caesar – the man not enjoying being sung to – tries repeatedly to light Fabray's cigarette. This innocently suggestive gesture is sustained by Caesar beyond the point where it might be expected to cease being funny.

Professor: *Brain, would you please go to sleep. Come on, everyone else is sleeping, why don't you?*

The Writers' Room

The writers of *Your Show of Shows* were the most conspicuous group of comic talent perhaps ever assembled for television, before or since. They would meet on Monday morning to start on the show for the following Saturday night. "Someone would begin by saying, 'How about a . . . ?' and we'd all start screaming and yelling and discussing it," Caesar writes in his autobiography. "The place was littered with cigarette butts, partly smoked cigars, and half-empty cups." The ideas that came out of Caesar's and Mel Brooks's and Larry Gelbart's and the other writers' mouths would be written down, if it looked like they had potential, by Lucille Kallen. By Wednesday night her notes would be transcribed and they had the beginnings of a script. They then began rehearsing. "We never could tell if a routine was going to work until we 'put it on its feet,'" Caesar explains. Even material that survived was changed constantly, and would be improvised on the air.

The life of working "behind-the-scenes" on the show is a subject of ongoing interest for those who were involved. It seems to be a perpetual subject for comedies, with a television situation comedy, Carl Reiner's *The Dick Van Dyke Show*; a feature film, *My Favorite Year*; and Broadway shows, Neil Simon's *Laughter on the 22nd Floor* and a recent musical version of *My Favorite Year*, based on the theme.

In a tribute to *Your Show of Shows* on the *Nightcap* television program, Sid Caesar, Carl Reiner, and Mel Brooks discussed with Studs Turkel and Calvin Trillin how this worked. Caesar explained that within the confines of 1950s television, they couldn't talk about sex, politics, and religion; so they talked about "the human condition." The writers' room was charged with "competitive madness," said Brooks, where anger often led to humor. "We were all going to psychiatrists," he said. Trillin asked, "Was the same thing wrong with all of you?" "Yes," replied Brooks. "Being Jewish."

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ What is the particular comic genius that characterizes these sketches?

- ◆ How do the performers relate to the live studio audience? How do they relate to the broadcast audience?

- ◆ What hints do you have of a “Jewish sensibility” behind the scenes?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Why do you think *Your Show of Shows* was so successful?
- ◆ How would you compare Groucho Marx and Sid Caesar, both in terms of their comic abilities and their roles in Jewish comedy?
- ◆ How are the sketches that poke fun at “serious” culture similar to, or different from, the Marx Brothers’ mockery?
- ◆ What changes in American Jewish life from the 1930s to the 1950s are reflected in the way material is presented in *Your Show of Shows* and *Animal Crackers*?
- ◆ The interviews with the Professor and the Prussian-general sketch make fun of Germans or Germanic culture, in different ways. These programs were made not many years after World War II. How do you think the original audience might have reacted? Do you think they are evidence of a particularly Jewish perspective? This issue will come up again in the next unit, *The Producers*.
- ◆ The lives of the writers who created *Your Show of Shows* might not have looked very Jewish in terms of religious observance or involvement in the community; they might have married non-Jewish women; they didn’t live in Jewish enclaves. Yet, their sensibilities can be seen as unmistakably Jewish. Can that “Jewish sensibility” – which they grew up with – be transmitted or taught to other generations?
- ◆ *Your Show of Shows* is often cited as setting a standard for American television-comedy writing. Which of the situations in these sketches remind you of other, later television programs?

- ◆ Are sight gags universal? Compare Sid Caesar to Steve Martin (John Cleese, Lily Tomlin). What about them makes you laugh?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. View other collections of comic sketches from *Your Show of Shows* that are available. Do you find other issues that are implicitly or explicitly Jewish? What genres are parodied? How are ethnic groups satirized?
2. Watch the names of writers from *Your Show of Shows* in the credits of television programs, films, and plays. You will have a chance to look at the work of two of these writers, Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, in the next two programs of this course. Others include Larry Gelbart (*M*A*S*H* television series, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*); Neil Simon (*The Odd Couple*, *The Sunshine Boys*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*); and Carl Reiner (*Enter Laughing*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Where's Poppa*). To what extent do these writers appear to draw on their work from this series as inspiration? To what extent do they appear to have cultivated their own individual style?
3. View episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-66), created by Carl Reiner, or the feature film *My Favorite Year* (1983), directed by Richard Benjamin, both based on the antics in the writers' room of *Your Show of Shows*. Compare the oblique Jewish presence in *Your Show of Shows* with the explicit Jewish presence in *Dick Van Dyke* as maintained by Morey Amsterdam playing Buddy Sorrel, a member of the writing staff, and in *My Favorite Year*, whose protagonist is a young Jewish production assistant on a television series. You might also want to look at the script of Neil Simon's *Laughter on the 22nd Floor*.
4. Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner collaborated on a series of comedy recordings featuring interviews with a "2,000-year-old-man" (also available on videocassette with cartoon animation). Although these recordings are out of print, they are sometimes available in libraries and other sources of old recordings. In addition, some of the routines were published (see "For Further Reading"). Compare these routines to the interviews with the Professor in *Your Show of Shows*. (Brooks wrote a number of the Professor sketches, and Reiner often played the reporter who interviewed him.) How is it signaled to the audience that

the 2,000-year-old man is Jewish? What is the significance of his Jewishness?

5. Think of an idea for a sketch that you think would have worked well as a vehicle for Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.

FOR FURTHER READING

- ◆ Caesar, Sid, with Bill Davidson. *Where Have I Been?: An Autobiography*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1982.
- ◆ Sennett, Ted. *Your Show of Shows*. New York: Macmillan, 1977.
- ◆ Wilk, Max. *The Golden Age of Television Comedy*. New York: Delacorte, 1976.