



Stretching the Limits: *The Producers*

Feature film, 1968
 Producer: Sidney Glazier, for
 Springtime/MGM/Crossbow
 Director and Screenplay: Mel Brooks

Max Bialystock: Zero Mostel
 Leo Bloom: Gene Wilder
 Franz Liebkind: Kenneth Mars
 Roger De Bris: Christopher Hewett
 L.S.D.: Dick Shawn

Length: 88 minutes

Zero Mostel and the cast of *The Producers* keep the audience laughing all the time. This broad, outrageous comedy bursts the limits of acceptability and challenges the boundaries of offensiveness. You might find yourself humming “Springtime for Hitler” at some unexpected time.

The Producers tells the story of an oversized, overconfident, overeverything down-at-heels Broadway producer, Max Bialystock, played by Mostel, and the shy, mild-mannered accountant, Leo Bloom, played by Gene Wilder, whom he recruits as his accomplice in crime. The two men scheme to produce a show that is sure to fail, so that they can abscond with money invested by backers.

In their pursuit of the ultimate “bad” play, Bialystock and Bloom stage a work entitled “Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva in Berchtesgarden” written by Franz Liebkind, an unreconstructed Nazi who dresses in uniform and sings Nazi songs. To ensure that the play bombs, the producers hire a campy gay director known for his failures named Roger De Bris, and they cast a spaced-out hippie named L.S.D. in the role of Hitler. Bialystock and Bloom are convinced that the viewers will walk out after the first act of a musical about Hitler and Eva Braun. But a lavish production, spectacular costumes, and their strange leading man overcome any scruples the audience might have had, and the play – to their dismay – becomes a hit.

The Producers is the first feature directed by Mel Brooks, the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who was born Melvin Kaminsky in 1926 in New York City. His father was from Danzig, his mother from Kiev. His father died before he was three (just as the Depression was about to begin), and his mother raised four boys (Mel was the youngest) by working in the garment district.

Bialystock: *Don't forget the checkie. Can't produce the play without the checkie.*

Old lady: *You can count on me.*

Brooks began his career as a comedian and a drummer, performing in Jewish resorts in the Catskills. Brooks was a neighbor of Don Appel, who as social director of a Catskills resort first put Sid Caesar on a comedy stage, and introduced the two comics to each other. Following military service in World War II, through his contact with Caesar, Brooks began writing for *Your Show of Shows*, and became the youngest writer on the team and one of its key players. In the sixties, he wrote and performed the “2,000 year-old-man” series of comedy recordings with Carl Reiner. Brooks also helped create *Get Smart*, the 1960s situation-comedy spoof of Cold War espionage. With *The Producers*, Brooks brought his satiric talents to film audiences. The most overtly Jewish of his films, it won a 1968 Academy Award for best screenplay. His other films include *Blazing Saddles*, *Silent Movie*, *Spaceballs*, *History of the World, Part 1*, *High Anxiety*, and *Young Frankenstein*.

A “Spectacularly Jewish” Master of Parody

More so than the other Jewish comic artists whose work is presented in this course, Brooks was outspoken about the relationship between his Jewishness and his comedy, and his connections to what he called “old-fashioned Yiddish comedy.” The old immigrant neighborhood seems to be an essence of his being. Viewers of his films frequently hear Yiddish words and phrases and Yiddish-inflected accents. Brooks once described himself to a *Playboy* interviewer as “spectacularly Jewish.”

Lester Friedman writes that Brooks “locates the roots of his own comedy in Jewish pain.” As Brooks puts it:

Look at Jewish history. Unrelieved lamenting would be intolerable. So, for every ten Jews beating their breasts, God designated one to be crazy and amuse the breast-beaters. By the time I was five I knew I was that one. . .

He told an interviewer that comedy was a defense: “If your enemy is laughing, how can he bludgeon you to death?” In his childhood, Brooks has explained, comedy became his ammunition:

I was scrawny. I was the last one they picked to be on the team. . . . But I was brighter than most kids my age, so I hung around with guys two years older. Why should they let this puny kid hang out with them? I

became their jester. Also, they were afraid of my tongue.
 . . . Words were my equalizer.

Parody, as Friedman notes, is the basis of Brooks's "personal brand of humor." Parody, according to Webster's, is a work "in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule." In order for parody – which involves interplay between the original work and its comic offspring – to be effective and indeed funny, the audience must have some familiarity with the original. Friedman also points out that Brooks's parodies, which involve both imitation and distancing, are responses to being Jewish in America; the structure gives him room to comment on American culture from the perspective of an outsider. "He adopts an attitude of cultural superiority and pokes fun of the very traditions that exclude him."

Two Gentlemen of New York: Bialystock and Bloom

The Producers was released toward the end of a decade in which Jewish characters and themes, both serious and comic, were presented more openly than ever before in Hollywood. This was a period of great upheaval in American society, with the civil rights struggle, assassinations, turmoil over the Vietnam War, and the countercultural revolution of the Beatles, Haight-Ashbury, and Woodstock. It was a time when diversity, ethnic and individual, became more acceptable, certainly much more so than in the conformist fifties.

In film, the decade began with the release of the highly successful *Exodus*, the story of the founding of the State of Israel, directed by Otto Preminger and starring Paul Newman. This film also marked defiance of the overtly anticommunist, implicitly antisemitic witch-hunts that had banished so many Jewish writers from Hollywood, when Preminger openly hired then-blacklisted Dalton Trumbo to write the screenplay. In 1961, *Judgment at Nuremberg* made audiences aware of the Holocaust against the Jews, and in 1965 Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* presented the powerful, disturbing portrait of a concentration camp survivor, played by Rod Steiger. Later in the decade, satirical portraits of American Jewish life reached the screen, with such films as *Bye, Bye, Braverman* (1968),

Bloom: *I spend my life counting other people's money. People I'm smarter than. Better than. Where's my share? Where's Leo Bloom's share? I want . . . I want everything I've ever seen in the movies.*

Bialystock: *Leo, say you'll join me.*

Bloom: *I'll do it. By God, I'll do it. I'm Leo Bloom. I'm me. I can do whatever I want.*

I Love You, Alice B. Toklas (1968), *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), and *The Producers*.

The humor in *The Producers* relies on the parody of Broadway musicals and on an overblown style epitomized by the performance of Zero Mostel as Max Bialystock. Every ounce of Mostel's hefty body is animated; his face, particularly around the eyes, is eloquent, and makes viewers laugh. Graceful he's not, but he's fun to watch.

Hyperbole is the key artistic motif of *The Producers*. The first scene introduces the character of Bialystock and establishes one of the basic components of the plot: his scheme of flirting with elderly women and conning them into investing in his plays. In confronting the audience with Bialystock's absurd sexual role-playing, the scene announces that this film tests the conventional limits of appropriate subjects for humor.

The opening scene also introduces the other major character of the film, the accountant Leo Bloom, who becomes his sidekick, straight man, and pal. Bloom's and Bialystock's ideas complement one another, and their personalities are comically balanced archetypal opposites. Bloom is innocent, Bialystock outrageous; Bloom is the uptight voice of conscience to Bialystock's unbridled license. Their friendship is portrayed in scenes that parody the blossoming of a romantic relationship.

Though Bialystock's and Bloom's Jewish identity is never overtly mentioned, it is signaled by their names, their professions, and the actors who portray them. As they are the only major characters who are identifiable as Jewish, they implicitly represent Jews in the spectrum of different groups that populate the film: a hippie, a former Nazi, gay men, elderly women. Unlike the other characters in the film, Bialystock and Bloom develop a relationship in which each character develops by learning from the other. The great energy and charm in both Mostel's and Wilder's performances also contribute to the attractiveness of the characters.

“Springtime for Hitler” – Kudos, Laughs, and Complaints for Brooks

The “Springtime for Hitler” production number is the film's ultimate offering of comic bad taste. Indeed, the scene's

Old lady: *Say it again, Bialy.*

Bialystock: *I swear it on my very life. You don't look a day over sixty-five.*

very offensiveness is central to the film's plot. It is partially mitigated by the portrayal of Hitler as a bumbling fool, and by distancing the audience from its full potential to offend by watching theatergoers "watch" the production. In this way Brooks "shatters taboos and provokes uncomfortable laughter," as Patricia Erens has written, and yet places the film's controversial subject in a context that makes it "safer."

Brooks is far from the first Jew to make fun of Hitler and Nazism. As seen in the previous unit, Sid Caesar satirized Germans (though not Nazis explicitly) in *Your Show of Shows*. Earlier examples can be found in Purim celebrations among Jewish survivors of World War II living in Displaced Persons' camps in Europe, who made analogies between Hitler and Haman, the antisemitic villain whose defeat is the subject of the holiday. Even during the war, humor helped sustain the spirit of those in the most dehumanizing circumstances, as the record of jokes that made the rounds of the Warsaw Ghetto shows. Of this phenomenon Albert Memmi has observed:

Besieged, starving, bombarded, condemned to death, the Polish Jews continued to tell jokes. One would have to be blind not to see that it was precisely the sense of the comic which permitted them once again, thanks to . . . long conditioning, to face a practically unlivable reality; that all the salt, all the learned and varied spices of the ingenious Jewish mind were necessary in order to endure such a continually destructive fate.

Critics have had varying responses to the two central Jewish characters in the film, as well as to Brooks's use of humor to address the topic of the Holocaust. To Patricia Erens, "Max represents the scheming money-hungry Jew, always looking for a deal. He is a modern-day Shylock, obsessed with money." Whether Bloom should be called a shlemiel or a shnook, she states, "except for his blind devotion to Max, there is little we can admire. And with Max there is even less." In her view the film, "even without the Springtime production, can be seen as an exercise in Jewish self-deprecation." Lester Friedman sees in *The Producers* a tendency toward "self-aggression," the negative self-image of the oppressed that Memmi has described. He observes that Bialystock and Bloom

are a compendium of ethnic clichés that, in the past, might well have been attacked as blatantly anti-Semitic:

the cunning Jew who sacrifices all morality in his quest for riches, the manipulating Jew who trades on the finer emotions of others for his own gain . . . the mild-mannered Jew who is easily bullied by more powerful personalities. . . the sexually insecure Jew who exploits women . . . the smart Jew who becomes the victim of his own cleverness.

But, he asks,

So why is all this so funny? What Brooks does in *The Producers* is to create a film in which the Jewish characters, however unappealing they may be, are far more attractive and loveable than the people they exploit.

The “Springtime for Hitler” sequence breaks all the rules, but works – at least for most viewers – in several ways. “If a black comedian like Dick Gregory tries to deflate the sting in the word ‘nigger’ by making it serve as the title of his book,” Sanford Pinsker writes, “Brooks does much the same thing by reducing the grotesquerie of the Holocaust world to screamingly bad theater. His humor is at once a defense mechanism, one that holds the heinous event at arm’s length, and a weapon designed to beat Nazism senseless.” Friedman sees “Springtime for Hitler” as in fact satirizing “an American public willing to find humor, however grotesque, in the Third Reich. Bialystock and Bloom fail to find their flop because they underestimate their audience’s deadened sensibilities.”

What does all this add up to? Andrew Sarris sees an internal contradiction that, to him, negates the significance others might see in the satire:

The characters played by Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder are obviously if not blatantly Jewish, and they carry their pasts around with them while they humor a psychotic Nazi author to the point of singing “Deutschland uber Alles” and wearing swastika armbands. Here Brooks tries to play it both ways by having Wilder spit on the swastika after they are deposited in a trash basket, but it is too late. The hypothesis contradicts the history.

Pauline Kael commented:

The Producers isn’t basically unconventional; it only seems so because it’s so amateurishly crude, and because it revels in the kind of show-business Jewish humor that used to be considered too specialized for movies. Screenwriters used to take the Jewish out, but now that television comedians exploit themselves as stereotypes,

Bloom: *Your honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Max Bialystock is the most selfish man I have ever met in my life. Not only is he a liar and a cheat and a scoundrel and a crook who has taken money from little old ladies, but he's also talked people into doing things – especially me – that they would never in a thousand years have dreamed of doing. But your honor, as I understand it, the law was created to protect people who were wronged.*

screenwriters are putting the Jewish in, pushing it for laughs - and getting them.

Other critics noted that the film's offensiveness was not confined to "Springtime for Hitler." Renata Adler wrote, "The audience laughs with apparent misery at all the lewd, hideous tumble of old ladies at the start. . . . One can feel the relief when the much more comic, much less cruel, Hitler scenes occur later on."

Audiences may express a variety of reactions to this film. Some viewers will find it offensive, in poor taste, antisemitic, misogynist, or homophobic, while others may not find it amusing or consider the humor dated or too broad. Most viewers, though, will probably find *The Producers* side-splittingly funny. With comedy that continually defies established notions of what we could possibly find amusing, the film seems to work in spite of itself – in spite, or because, of our own disbelief.

Brooks's comedy is raucous, energetic, and inventive. It would seem natural to hear someone in the audience describe him as mishugah, Yiddish for crazy – but it would be meant as a compliment.

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ How do the comic talents of Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder contribute to the characters of Bialystock and Bloom?
- ◆ How are the title characters identified as Jews? Do the characters' names have significance?
- ◆ Which of the characters appear to be stereotypes?
- ◆ Is there anything dated about this film?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What did you find particularly funny in this film? Did anything disturb you?
- ◆ Although Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom are never identified explicitly as Jews, it is likely that viewers – at least Jewish ones – “know” that they’re Jewish. How is this signaled to the viewer? How are they, according to critic Lester Friedman, a “compendium of ethnic cliches”?
- ◆ How is the film a lampoon of the world of the theater? Why do you think Brooks selects Broadway as one of his targets?
- ◆ What was your reaction to “Springtime for Hitler”? Did you find it funny? How does Brooks allow us to laugh at it?
- ◆ To what extent is the fact that director and screenwriter Mel Brooks is Jewish a factor in understanding the film’s portrait of Jews and of Nazism? Do you think the film would be different if it was the work of a non-Jewish director? Would your reaction be different?
- ◆ In what ways might he be using the film as a deliberate means of provoking shock? How does *The Producers* work as a “safe” place to say “dangerous” things about antisemitism or neo-Nazism in America? About the world of show business?
- ◆ How does the humor of Mel Brooks compare with that of the Marx Brothers?
- ◆ In discussing the films screened earlier, we spoke about comedy by “outsiders?” Is Brooks also an outsider? What about Bialystock?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Compare *The Producers* to other comic responses to Nazi-era fascism, such as Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), *To Be or Not to Be* (both the original 1942 version, starring Jack Benny and Carole Lombard, and Brooks's 1984 remake, starring himself and his wife, Anne Bancroft), *Me and the Colonel* (1958), Lina Wertmuller's *Seven Beauties* (1975), or the 1960s situation comedy *Hogan's Heroes*. How is the conventional image of Nazis as the embodiment of ultimate evil manipulated to generate comedy? See also the chapter on "Black Humor" in Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
2. Look at Art Spiegelman's series of Maus books. How does his comic book-style approach to the Holocaust compare to Brooks's comedy in *The Producers*?
3. Most of Brooks's feature films are available on videocassette and appear frequently in revival houses and on television. Compare *The Producers* to his other lampoons of film genres, such as the satire of Westerns in *Blazing Saddles*, of horror films in *Young Frankenstein*, of silent movies in *Silent Movie*, of Hitchcock suspense thrillers in *High Anxiety*, and of documentaries in *History of the World*.

FOR FURTHER READING

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- ◆ Holtzman, Will, *Seesaw: A Dual Biography of Anne Bancroft and Mel Brooks*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979.
- ◆ Pinsker, Sanford. "Mel Brooks and the Cinema of Exhaustion." In *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, pp. 145-156.
- ◆ Sinyard, Neil. *The Films of Mel Brooks*. New York: Exeter, 1987.
- ◆ Tynan, Kenneth. "Profiles: Frolics and Detours of a Short Hebrew Man." *The New Yorker*, October 30, 1978.
- ◆ Yacowar, Maurice. *Method in Madness: The Comic Art of Mel Brooks*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.