

## SESSION SIX


 rap-Up

Since 1930, when *Animal Crackers* was released, much has changed. Jewish humor has evolved to a point where the Marx Brothers (none too easy to shock) would be very surprised to see how Jews behave and are depicted in film and on television. Not that they wouldn't enjoy watching Gilda Radner dance in an "advertisement" for "Jewess Jeans"; they just might not have expected it.

And the lives of American Jews have greatly changed. Since immigrant times, large numbers of American Jews have prospered and made great gains in terms of education, careers, personal finance, standard of living, and also in terms of being more accepted in American life. However, many feel that although they're closer to the center than ever before, they're still in the margins, whether out of their own choice or because they're excluded.

The non-Jewish world has changed too, in its knowledge about and openness to Jews. When *Animal Crackers* was produced, most non-Jews would never have heard of a Bar Mitzvah. Now, not only do many non-Jews understand what the ceremony and celebration are about, but they might have attended one. So it's not shocking to see a Bar Mitzvah scene on *Saturday Night Live*.

As mentioned in the introduction to this course, Jewish comedy reflects something about the status of Jews and how comfortable they are in America. American Jews have remained, to varying degrees, both Jewish and American. Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich has spoken of the "internal bilingualism" of Jews. American Jews are simultaneously Jewish and American, religious and secular. Jewish humor continues to reflect that paradox.

It is worth noting again that some of the comic artists whose works were studied – as well as many other American Jewish comedians – had complicated feelings

about being Jewish. They did very little to identify themselves as Jews; in fact, they did much to hide the fact – changing their names, marrying non-Jewish women, steering their lives away from the Jewish community. Mel Brooks is unusual in not trying to camouflage the connections between his Jewishness and his comedy. However, sometimes in spite of themselves, there is still something undeniably Jewish about their sense of humor. That Jewish sensibility is evident in their art.

Groucho Marx once described Woody Allen as “an absolute comic genius . . . the best there is.” There was much admiration among the comedians for one another’s work, and they were great influences on one another. Viewers will see traces of Groucho Marx in Woody Allen, and shades of *Your Show of Shows* in *Saturday Night Live*.

These comedians have real talent, much chutzpah, and imagination. Watching these films and television programs can inspire awe as well as an appreciation of the challenge of creating good comedy. Anyone who has told a joke knows that it’s hard to be funny. And it’s particularly hard to be funny week after week, as the television shows managed to be. Lorne Michaels, producer of *Saturday Night Live*, has stated: “The show is working when we’re doing exactly what you were hoping we would be doing, in a way that you hadn’t thought we’d be doing it. In a way that is truly funny and original.”

These film and television shows, especially when viewed in context of one another, have much to offer to heighten an appreciation of comedy and an understanding of American Jewish life – how Jews view the world and how they view themselves. Moshe Waldoks has commented that Jewish humor ultimately deals with the complexities of being a Jew at the end of the twentieth century. Jewish humor helps us to poke fun at ourselves even as we ponder such a serious question.

Jewish life in America continues to evolve, and future humor is certain to reflect those changes. Audiences can anticipate hearing jokes by and about Russian Jews newly arrived in America, Jewish women whose roles are changing, and Israelis, whose relationship with American Jews is changing. We have much laughter to look forward to.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- ◆ Is all comedy by Jewish comedians “Jewish comedy”? After watching the films and television sketches and discussing them, how would you define Jewish comedy?
- ◆ Did you find your sense of humor similar to the other people you viewed these films with? Are you surprised by anyone else’s reactions? How do you account for different senses of humor?
- ◆ Do you think of yourself as an “outsider”? Do you see the world in that way, and does your world view impact on your work, whatever you do, or on the way you live?
- ◆ What’s the difference between “Jewish style” and “Jewish substance” in terms of humor?
- ◆ Does a sense of irony seem like a Jewish sensibility? Do ethics play a role in this sensibility?
- ◆ Is it possible to take Judaism seriously and make fun of it?
- ◆ Is nostalgia an element of Jewish humor? Do we long for the past as we make fun of it?
- ◆ In Pauline Kael’s review of *The Producers* she says that “screenwriters used to take the Jewish out” and now “are putting the Jewish in.” How is this reflected in the films you’ve seen in the course? In other films?
- ◆ Gerald Mast has written that before Woody Allen, it was box office poison for a film comedian to be “too Jewish.” What has changed?

- ◆ Now, more than ever, Jews hold prominent positions in government, business, as well as in the arts. Is that a sign that the sense of alienation, which fueled so many Jewish comedians, is decreasing? Is there less a need for Jewish comedy?
- ◆ How do you imagine Jewish humor will evolve, relative to contemporary trends in the American Jewish community?
- ◆ If you were to design a serious panel discussion on the subject of Jewish humor, who would you invite to participate?
- ◆ How is a sense of humor transmitted, or passed down, from generation to generation?

### **Comparing the Programs**

1. The five films that you have seen during this course were made over a period of fifty years, from 1930 to 1980, and were screened in chronological order. With this order in mind, consider the following:

- ◆ What does the progression of shows suggest about changes in the nature of American Jewish comedy over these five decades? How has humor changed? How does the way that the films/programs can be identified as “Jewish” changed or stayed the same?
- ◆ How would you describe the nature of Jewish comedy, as represented by these five films, over this fifty-year period?
- ◆ What does the progression of these five works suggest about changes in American comedy? About changes in the image of Jews presented in the American media?

2. Compare *Animal Crackers* with *Your Show of Shows*. Although neither includes any characters, stories, or

subjects explicitly identified as Jewish, many people consider these to be examples of Jewish humor. Do you agree? Do you think there is an “implicit Jewishness” in both *Animal Crackers* and *Your Show of Shows*? In what ways is it different? How do you account for the difference?

3. Compare *Animal Crackers*, *The Producers*, and *Saturday Night Live*. All three have been described as examples of rebellious, outrageous humor. How is comedy created similarly in all three? In what ways is their rebelliousness or outrageousness distinct? In what ways does Jewishness figure in the creation of rebellious or outrageous humor?

4. Compare *Your Show of Shows* and *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, the screenwriter and director of the film, was one of the writing staff for the television show). Does *The Producers* employ any approaches to creating comedy that are also used in any of the television sketches? In what ways do you think that differences in their humor are due to the fact that *Your Show of Shows* was made in the early fifties, while *The Producers* was made in the late sixties?

5. Compare *Annie Hall* with *Saturday Night Live*, both of which were produced in the late seventies. Both were made by Jewish men (Woody Allen, Lorne Michaels) who work in New York, and both deal in part with depicting contemporary American Jewish life. Are there any similarities in their approach to creating comedy? In what ways do their approaches to comedy reflect differences?

**FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

1. Select a current television program that you consider to be an interesting example of American Jewish comedy. Watch the program at home and discuss the following:

- ◆ How does this television program compare with the films and programs screened in class as an example of American Jewish comedy? Are there characters, themes, plot situations, and use of language, that can be identified as Jewish?

- ◆ Do any of the approaches to explaining Jewish humor that came up in previous class discussions seem particularly appropriate to understanding this film?

2. Select an interesting example of Jewish comedy from another country – for example, Canada, France, or Israel, or a Yiddish comic film, whether made in the United States or abroad. Screen the film and consider the following:

- ◆ How does this film compare with the others screened in class as an example of Jewish comedy? Are there characters, themes, plot situations, use of language, etc., that can be identified as being Jewish in ways similar to any in the films seen in class?

- ◆ Do any of the approaches to explaining Jewish humor/comedy that came up in class discussions seem particularly appropriate to understanding this film as an example of Jewish comedy?

3. Visit a local comedy club when some Jewish comics are performing. How would you characterize their humor? How does it fit in with the tradition of Jewish comedy, as it has been explored in this course?

**NOTES**

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- Page 10 Schechner, p. 155.  
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- Page 23 Groucho quoted in Charlotte Chandler, *Hello, I Must Be Going* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), p. 125.  
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- Page 32 Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 184.

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