

On these pages you will find an outline of the course, with synopses of each chapter and the main points that are covered in the discussion questions for each session.

American Jewish Comedy: An Introduction

Curatorial and Research Services Provided by the Jewish Museum

This course examines different views of the nature of Jewish humor and traces the tradition of Jewish humor from the Old World to American shores. It presents five superlative examples of American Jewish comedy produced over a fifty-year period, places them in the context of their times, and considers how and why they continue to make us laugh today.

The overall themes of the course include:

- Aspects of Jewish experience that may contribute to a characteristic world view.
- The distinction between humor that reflects a Jewish sensibility and humor based on Jewish subjects and characters.
- The particularity and universality of Jewish humor.
- The evolution of Jewish comedy, and the way each production reflects the time in which it was created.
- What humor may tell us about ourselves, our society, and topics that may be serious as well as funny.

THE INTRODUCTION asks the question “What is Jewish humor?” and suggests that there are as many different responses as there are writers on the subject. From the time of the Talmud, states one critic, Jews have been “indestructible moralists and teachers,” using “the joke” and “the quip” “to illustrate, to illuminate, and to improve.” Says another: “The butt of a cruel joke,” the Jews may have been “chosen,” but for what? Among the aspects stressed by those who look seriously at the subject of humor are internal contradictions; suffering that, far from ennobling, seems “faintly ridiculous”; self-mockery as well as self-aggrandizement. The way humor affects us, and the specific historical context of the comedy programs viewers will see, are also discussed.

SESSION ONE**Assault on Authority: *Animal Crackers***

This 1930 Marx Brothers film was made only a few years after the close of the great wave of immigration, and in the first year of the Great Depression. It shows the Marxes as irreverent outsiders in establishment society, making us laugh at their wild antics as they mock the highfalutin' habits of the rich and would-be rich.

Key issues addressed in the discussion questions include:

- The role of the "outsider," what it allows and what it reveals.
- Ways that the film reflects the experience of American Jews at the time it was made.
- How the original audiences, Jewish and non-Jewish, might have identified with characters in the film.
- The unique personalities of the Marx Brothers, and their universal appeal.

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

The weekly comedy-variety program *Your Show of Shows*, starring Sid Caesar, was a triumph of the early years of television. It set a standard for humor and originality that has rarely, if ever, been equaled. In an era of severe restrictions on what could be shown on the tube, *Your Show of Shows* found plenty of material for comedy in "the human condition." Nine skits showcase the comic brilliance of Sid Caesar as well as his costars, who included Imogene Coca, Nanette Fabray, and Carl Reiner, and the show's uniquely talented writers, among them Caesar, Mel Brooks, and Neil Simon.

Key issues addressed include:

- The comic genius that characterizes the program.
- The ways "high culture" is satirized.
- The unstated Jewish sensibility that underlies much of the humor.
- The influence of *Your Show of Shows* on the development of television comedy.

SESSION THREE**Stretching the Limits: *The Producers***

Mel Brooks's first feature film was produced in 1968, toward the end of a decade that saw ethnic identity, challenge to authority, and the freedom of the counterculture transform notions of what is acceptable, in humor as in other areas of life. *The Producers* is an outrageous comedy with larger-than-life characters and a plot involving the ultimate in tastelessness, a musical about Adolf Hitler and Maria Braun. Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder

star in a film that has no right to be as funny as it is.

Key issues addressed include:

- How humor can be used to address serious subjects.
- The impact, positive and negative, of ethnically stereotyped roles.
- How we may be offended, shocked, and laughing all at the same time.
- Mel Brooks as a Jewish writer/director.

SESSION FOUR

From New York to L.A., via Wisconsin: *Annie Hall*

By the 1970s most American Jews felt themselves comfortably middle-class, largely accepted by society—and much less certain of what it meant to be a Jew than their predecessors. This 1977 film depicts the many ambiguities and ambivalences of modern American Jewish life, at least as seen by director Woody Allen, who stars in the film along with Diane Keaton. With humor and poignancy, it tells the love story of very Jewish, very neurotic New Yorker Alvy Singer and breezy, Wisconsin-bred Annie Hall—the forces that draw them together and, inevitably, push them apart.

Key issues addressed include:

- The effect of being an “outsider” on one’s view of oneself and society.
- The unexpected contrasts that contribute to humor.
- The apparent conflicts and contradictions about Jewishness that beset the main character, and the filmmaker.
- The connection and separation between art and life.

SESSION FIVE

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

The lowering of barriers to explicitly ethnic humor, as well as humor mocking other social groups, made possible – and was in turn strongly influenced by – *Saturday Night Live*. This weekly television program, which debuted in 1975, broke new ground for comedy that could be incisive, hysterical, and insulting. This tape presents a series of skits about Jewish subjects, displaying the brand of off-center humor that typified the program and bringing a special perspective to both serious and frivolous topics of Jewish life.

Key issues addressed include:

- How the comic and Jewish aspects of the skits energize and play off each other.
- The use of stereotype in humor, and its effects on viewers.
- The contribution of what producer Lorne Michaels called the “one off-center element”

to the humor of the skits.

- The relation of *Saturday Night Live* to both the past and future of television comedy.

SESSION SIX

Wrap-Up

This session presents questions that reflect back on the course, looking at both Jewish humor generally and the connections between specific films.

Key issues addressed:

- Whether there is a difference between Jewish style and substance in terms of humor.
- The aspects of humor that make it “Jewish.”
- The varying extent to which some programs are explicitly or implicitly Jewish.
- Whether some topics should be off-limits for humor.