

NOTES FOR THE COURSE LEADER

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 Directors: Three Visions of the American Jewish Experience

by Lester D. Friedman and David Desser

This course examines the American Jewish experience as represented in the work of three important directors, each of whom deals with issues that define and distinguish American Jewish life. While each director – Woody Allen, Sidney Lumet, and Paul Mazursky – has a unique creative vision, their films also express a shared concern with American Jews confronting questions of their own identity.

Key topics addressed in the course:

- What it means to be Jewish in America.
- Our notions of family; how the directors' views may or may not coincide with our own; and how intermarriage may affect this vision.
- The role of the Holocaust in the identity of American Jews.
- The role of such traditions as Yiddish culture and social activism in the lives of American Jews.
- The importance of the past.

THE INTRODUCTION provides background on the Jewish experience in America, from the major wave of immigration around the turn of the century and the encounter with American life. It discusses key trends including the establishment of Jewish communities in major urban centers, the family, the growth of education, professionalism, and economic success in the middle decades of the century, antisemitism, the commitment to social justice, and the importance of Israel and the Holocaust to American Jews.

Woody Allen: The Schlemiel as Modern Philosopher discusses Allen's roots in Brooklyn, his early career as a comic writer and standup comedian, the strains of traditional Jewish humor reflected in his work, the role of cinema in his films, and his own role as one of the preeminent American filmmakers of his time.

SESSION ONE

Annie Hall, generally considered Woody Allen's comic masterpiece, is the story of a romance between opposites – Alvy Singer (Allen), the archetypical New York Jew, and non-Jewish, Wisconsin-bred Annie Hall (Diane Keaton).

Key issues addressed:

- The perception of antisemitism and its relation to Jewish identity.
- The Jewish family, as remembered and depicted, in caricature and reality.
- The power of opposites, in romance and in comedy.
- The presence or absence of religion in defining Jewish identity.
- Images of Jewish men and women – truths and fictions.
- The role of the past in personal and communal life.

SESSION TWO

Crimes and Misdemeanors, Woody Allen's startling look at the amorality of an admired, respectable man, raises questions about Judaism, faith, morality, love, justice, and human nature.

Key issues addressed:

- The use of comedy to address serious issues.
- The process of questioning, examining, and affirming one's faith.
- The complexities of family relationships.
- Morality and immorality in the modern world.

Sidney Lumet: The Memory of Guilt discusses the filmmaker's background in Yiddish theatre, his preoccupation with questions of guilt and atonement, his interest in the family, and his focus on the need to remember.

SESSION THREE

The Pawnbroker is the powerful, disturbing story of a Holocaust survivor, Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), who confronts the present and the past as the operator of a Harlem pawnshop.

Key issues include:

- The place of the past in the present.
- The character of the survivor, Sol Nazerman, as an individual and as a symbol.
- The appropriateness of apparent comparisons between the Holocaust and contemporary situations of deprivation and injustice.
- The power and limitations of film in increasing awareness of the Holocaust.
- The importance of the Holocaust to the identity of American Jews.

SESSION FOUR

Daniel, a fictionalized account based on the experiences of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, follows the son who embarks on a painful journey to learn the truth about his parents' deaths and to create his own future.

Key questions addressed:

- The role of social activism in American Jewish life, and in defining Jewish identity.
- The relationship between children and parents in Jewish life.
- The importance of remembering, and making peace with the past.
- The connection, or the conflict, between politics and religion in Jewish life.

Paul Mazursky: *The Price of Freedom* examines Mazursky's interest in American Jewish experience, the "partially inside/partially outside" perspective characteristic of Jewish artists in many cultures, and his particular focus on, in his own words, "freedom, and the price of freedom; change, and the price of change."

SESSION FIVE

Next Stop, Greenwich Village is an autobiographical, bittersweet comedy about a young man who leaves his family home in Brooklyn to make his own life across the river, in Greenwich Village.

Key issues include:

- The image of the Jewish mother, in pictures and in reality.
- The motivation to break with the past – and the costs.
- The association of Jewish identity with lifestyle and worldview, rather than religion.
- The family dynamics – for parents and children – of coming of age.

SESSION SIX

Enemies, A Love Story, an adaptation of an Isaac Bashevis Singer novel, is a tale of Holocaust survivors in New York.

Key issues include:

- How the legacy of the Holocaust affects those who experienced it.
- The difficulties of faith in a post-Holocaust world.
- The capacity of Americans to respond to, and understand, the Holocaust.
- The role of children in the continuation of Jewish life.
- The challenges of reconciling the past with the present.

SESSION SEVEN

Wrap-Up provides an opportunity to revisit the central concerns of the three filmmakers, and of American Jews, and to make some comparisons among the films that were viewed.

Issues addressed include:

- The centrality of the Holocaust.
- The recurrent theme of social justice.
- The much less visible topic of Jewish religion.
- Images of Jewish women and men in the films.
- Perceptions of antisemitism, and its reality.
- The quest for Jewish identity.
- The distinct Jewish visions of the three directors.
- The extent to which the films do and do not accurately represent American Jewish life.