From Shtetl to Stardom

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Foreword

For all its fame, the history of Jewish Hollywood remains underwritten. Who could have imagined that the strange brew of movies made by Jews and censored by Catholics for a largely Protestant audience would change the world and have such a profound impact on the Jewish people? This issue of the Casden Annual, From Shtetl to Stardom: Jews and Hollywood, sheds fascinating new light on the roles—literally and figuratively—Jews and Judaism have played on the big and small screens, behind the scenes, and in running Hollywood.

Despite the fact that most studios during the Golden Age of Hollywood were run by Jews, many actors and actresses—whether by choice or because of studio pressure—hid their Jewish identity well into the twentieth century. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Nazis and fascist Silver Shirts in Los Angeles, and even several US Senators, delighted in writing articles and giving speeches exposing the real names of many of the nation’s most famous Jewish film stars: Emmanuel Goldenberg was Edward G. Robinson, Betty Joan Perske was Lauren Bacall, Asa Yoelson was Al Jolson, and Frederich Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund was Paul Muni.

As the volume’s Introduction notes, even after World War II and the revelation of the full extent of the Holocaust, many Jews inside and outside Hollywood continued to downplay their Jewishness. But, as several of the volume essays point out, Jews would eventually emerge from the shadows and make their ethnic identity very much part of their screen identity. From Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld to Jon Stewart to Amy Schumer, a new generation of performers celebrated what their elders avoided for decades, what Jon Stewart might call their “Jewy Jewsteiness.”

Vincent Brook and Michael Renov, the volume’s co-editors, have brought together a series of original, informative and provocative looks at the transformation of the film and television industries from their early days to the present. They divide their mosaic of evolving Judaism into three parts: Histories, Case Studies, and Up-Close and Personal. Taken together, these nine essays offer us fresh and exciting new looks at the ways in which Jews have shaped the nature of American entertainment.

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