Nuances and Subtleties in Jewish Film Humor

Michael W. Rubinoff

From a purely an American viewpoint, people might think Jews became “funny” in this country or perhaps in relatively modern times. But such has not always been the case. As we know from documented studies, Jews and other minorities have borne the brunt of jokes for a long time. However, only in the post-World War II decades have Jews really been permitted to enjoy, if not enthusiastically contribute to, these entertainments.

Naturally, this presupposes that there is either a unique subgenre of Jewish film or at least Jewish comedic film. Over the past twenty-five years, American Jewish popular culture has attracted serious and scholarly attention.1 These works have helped define various contexts. In studying film, there is also a risk. As illustrated herein, the humor shown in one decade or period does not always hold well with age. Arguing what distinguishes Jewish comedic film and/or a “Jewish film” suggests that the two are not mutually inclusive or exclusive. One does not have to be Jewish to even make a Jewish film. Inglourious Basterds (Tarantino, 2009) is but one of many such films made by gentile filmmakers. This study will analyze how these dynamics play against one another with examples from the early twentieth century through the heyday of Mel Brooks. The focus will be on six select films, both well known and lesser known, as primary source documents. Upon their examination, each movie reveals its own take on Jewish humor.

The definition of a “Jewish film,” much less what is comedic Jewish film, has changed over the years. The average movie scholar or buff might think the original version of The Jazz Singer in 1927 is a “Jewish film.” The movie stars Al Jolson, and the film’s opening is replete with Lower East Side scenery. Moreover, the story centers on a cantor and Yom Kippur and includes the chanting of Hebrew in synagogue scenes. With the exception of Jack Robin’s girlfriend played by May McAvoy, the principal cast appears to look “so Jewish.” In reality, neither Warner Orland nor Eugenie Besserer, who portrayed Jake’s parents, were of Jewish ancestry. However, for authenticity, Warner Brothers recorded the famed Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt for the prayer sequences. From the passage of seven decades, The Jazz Singer can be seen as a nostalgic allegory simultaneously enshrining pure melodrama. The humor in the film might best be seen in the story between the lines. With the narrative about a frustrated boy who runs away from home and generational conflict, the plot unfolds against
the thematic backdrops of assimilation and Americanization. But long before *The Jazz Singer*, there had been precursors presented to audiences.

The origin of narrative film goes back to the late nineteenth century stage. Jews were considered comical figures in vaudeville. Ethan Mordden has discussed the phenomenon of the German comic—which prior to World War I literally was understood to be a “Jewish comedian.” American-born Jews like Joe Weber and Lew Fields were the leading “Dutch or German” figures on the burlesque circuit. When amusement was required, the bill would call for a “German Comic.” Such a figure was not necessarily German but a Yiddish-speaking Jew who could mime the accent. The largely unsophisticated immigrant audiences focused on the stage antics, not the performer’s diction. Once Russian Jews arrived in great numbers, they became subjects and/or targets of the vaudeville stage and early film.

Thomas Edison’s near monopolistic control over the infant film industry made it understandable that American Protestant mores would become the staple of movies. Thus, Jews and other groups were depicted as foreigners in early cinematic representations. This could be found in the 1907 American Mutograph and Biograph release, *Fights of Nations*. The movie consists of several mise-en-scène vignettes captured by a single camera. Essentially, the shooting was done on a primitive indoor stage trying to simulate outdoor scenery. Absent any intertitles to weave the plot, several sequences depict ethnic groups: Spanish, Jewish, African American, Scots, and Irish.

In “Our Hebrew Friends,” a street scene opens with a bearded man wearing a bowler arguing with a necktie peddler in a top hat. This fairly physical melodrama shows the actors obnoxiously finger-poking one another to make a point. Suddenly a clean-shaven, respectable-looking (i.e., gentile) man wearing an overcoat tries to get by them several times. Impatient with the arguing, the man put his arms between the two Jews and finally passes—noticeably, he wears gloves and touches neither Jew. As this man disappears from view, another bearded man with a bowler promptly enters. He is dragged into the animated argument with the two Jews. The newcomer is grabbed by his necktie, breaks free, and soon wants to punch the other Jews. Then, the men inexplicably try to kick one another from behind. Their frenzy resembles a hora-like dance as they place their hands on one another’s shoulders. Suddenly, a policeman comes up and grabs the necktie peddler. As the peddler moves out of the way, the two other Jews take over. One Jew whispers something to the cop and points to the late arrival. The policemen talks to the other Jew who gets on his knees and appears to be pleading. Rising to his feet, he also whispers to the cop. The officer turns around but offers the back of his hand,
by which he takes a cash bribe and places the money in his rear pocket. As he leaves, the cash is attached to a string and one of the Jews with a single pull reclaims the bribe. The scene ends with the three Jews joyously hugging each other and breaking into dance again.

In seventy-five seconds, this short segment presents an image of unkempt, quarreling, and pretentious Jews. They get into the way of polite society. Thomas Cripps succinctly stated, “they’re petty merchants, they jabber, and they corrupt cops.”

Ethnic audiences of the early twentieth century were accustomed to this kind of humor from burlesque and vaudeville. The different immigrants mingled with one another, uneasily at times. They saw each other frequently, and this dry humor was common. With hindsight, the Edison image can be seen as more pernicious. At a time when New York street gangs were giving lessons to a young Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky, a film like this was already implanting ideas to the country about Jews and corruption. The Dillingham Commission on immigrant crime specifically connected Jews with this problem and fueled nativist sentiments for quotas.

Edison-style comedy was fairly single-dimensional. But fast-forward in time twenty years from the *Fights of Nations* to 1927. The Broadway drama based on “Day of Atonement” by Samson Raphaelson actually suited theatrical audiences. When it was renamed *The Jazz Singer* and starred George Jessel in the lead role, the production was maudlin even for its time. With the show set in New York and with many Yiddish theater patrons moving uptown, Jack’s returning to the synagogue and assuming his father’s cantorial career was quite satisfying. Despite the popularity of the similarly-themed *Abie’s Irish Rose*, there was little the original stage drama did to challenge deeply held beliefs. After all, the setting is Orthodox, and many theater patrons were only one boat generation removed from the old country and arranged marriages.

But in transferring the play to the screen, the Warner Brothers adaptation created a new paradigm for the lead star and the story ending. Warner initially announced Jessel would soon be seen on film. Jessel, then a dramatic stage personality, was caught between the salary of filming a silent movie and an additional contract for making Vitaphone recordings—he insisted on separate payments. Additionally, the star was incensed about the new assimilationist ending Raphaelson wrote with Alfred A. Cohen. The Broadway script had Jack return to the synagogue and continue the family’s cantorial line. For the screen, the finale showed Jack chanting *Kol Nidrei* and then racing to the Winter Garden in time to sing, “Mammy.” This was not the only major script change. As for the final scene, Jessel said, “Money or no money, I would not do this version.”
In the interim negotiations, Jessel had dinner with Jolson and spent the night at the singer’s hotel. The next day, Jessel awoke to see Jolson casually dressing. The singer said, “Go back to sleep, Georgie, I’m going to play golf. I’ll see ya later.” The nap had consequences, as Jessel subsequently read the *Los Angeles Times* and news of Jolson using golf time to close with Warner on *The Jazz Singer*. It also helped Jolson’s cause to ante $180,000 and secure part ownership of the picture. Both Neal Gabler and Donald Weber believe the substitution of Jolson for Jessel was not due to the latter’s high salary demands. They have argued that Jessel, “a strident professional Jew,” might have been fine for the New York audience but would have been “too Jewish” for national distribution in the hinterland.

Jolson, the son of a lay rabbi in Washington, DC, was cast as Jack Robin. Perhaps as a concession to an ego-driven star, Warner allowed the unusual insertion of an intertitle bearing Jolson’s name. This segues between young Jake (Bobby Gordon) running away and the nightclub scene where an adult Jack (Jolson) sings “Blue Skies.” While audiences heard young Gordon and Rosenblatt singing earlier, the positive reaction to “Blue Skies” helped sell Vitaphone’s sound-with-film technology. Actually intertitling Jolson’s name was unique. He was such a bigger-than-life star that Warner interjected him deep into the movie. It is purely speculative if Jessel would have been accorded the same status had he remained in the movie. This was more than the quintessential definition of a star vehicle; it also is a novel film technique. They changed out the character and the actor, making both interchangeable. This might be called early “method acting,” where Jolson plays both Jack and himself. This was the man who used to stop his Shubert shows and ask his audiences if they wanted him to scrap the skits and sing “April Showers” or “Toot, Toot Tootsie.” So for an ego, Jolson was more than legendary as the intertitle displayed.

Robert Carringer quotes Raphaelson’s own opinion of a Jolson stage appearance. Fresh out of college, he caught a performance of *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.* As he later recalled immediately following release of *The Jazz Singer*:

This grotesque figure in blackface, kneeling at the end of a runway which projected him into the heart of his audience, flinging out his white-gloved hands, was embracing that audience with a prayer—an evangelical moan, a tortured, imperious call that hurtled through the house like a swift electrical lariat with a twist that swept the audience right to the end of the runway. The words didn’t matter, the melody didn’t matter. It was the emotion—the emotion of a cantor.

Raphaelson did not see much humor in the meretricious musical. By this time, King Oliver was quickly moving northward with his New Orleans Dixieland sounds. But the budding writer concluded upon hearing Jolson, “My God, this
isn’t a jazz singer. This is a Cantor!” The distinction between Jessel and Jolson was manifest. The Broadway version had Jessel abandon show business and follow a cantorial career. In the redone script Warner Brothers conveniently left Jolson as he was known on the Shubert circuit: an unembellished, blackface pop singer. At a time when Jews were trying to blend in, the movie was retro. As Eric Goldstein observed, “The former East European immigrants were increasingly adapting to American life,” and many young Jews in the interwar years wanted to “shape their self-consciousness as white.”

Director Alan Crosland was anxious to give the film authenticity and shot the Lower East Side scenes on location. The film’s opening shows the immigrant pushcart environment accompanied by strains of “East Side, West Side” heard on the soundtrack. The song itself dated back over thirty years. The montage of scenes moves from the overcrowded, ragged, ghetto look of the old Lower East Side and merges into a cheerful merry-go-round scene with children. This transitions the audience to the underlying themes of the film: mixing the old with the new along with multigenerational conflict between parents and children. While Jewish adults are depicted as foreign-appearing immigrants, the children are joyfully ensconced on a carousel bedecked with American flags. From this opening series of actualities, Warner allowed the older Jews to appear odd-looking and alien while the younger generation seems “American.” Thus, with the assimilation theme established, The Jazz Singer underscores a serious issue set against melodramatic conventions.

Inextricably part of Crosland’s film is the injection of humor. With the infant talkies already being stigmatized as “canned vaudeville,” it took little imagination to make the well-known connections. This is evidenced with the character of Moysha Yudelson. He was portrayed by Otto Lederer, an Austro-Hungarian-born actor. The bearded Yudelson is a nouveau riche. Probably by design, his very last name is a corrupted version of the Yiddish word for “Jew”—this might have been a little “insider” humor. In the context of the times, Yudelson’s entire countenance was common for immigrant aspirations. He is dressed as a vested dandy wearing dark slacks and a fashionable white sport coat; he boasts of a conspicuous watch fob.

His white hat suggests an entirely different persona [Bildung] than a mere street hawker. He clearly was a step up from the gritty Jewish types shown in Fights of Nations. The intertitle says he is “rigidly orthodox,” but Crosland shows him as a man willing to enjoy an afternoon drink in a local saloon. Adept at rolling his eyes and using sweeping gestures, his presence on camera was pure silent-film styling. He is a useful character covering several motifs: a combination of local political ward boss, a snitch [yente], and finally, by the film’s close, a Jake Robin fan.
Yudelson is absorbed with his drink when he observes young Jake Rabinowitz performing in the saloon. Stunned by the sight, he hurriedly departs for the cantor’s apartment. Once there, he anxiously knocks on the door, enters, and says, “In a saloon, who do you think I saw singing raggy [sic] time songs?” This unflattering tattle tale is at once amusing and believable. But he alternates between the role of exaggerated comic relief and storyline promoter. Seen in 1927, he was the vaudeville ethnic type later projected into countless screen musicals and westerns. Lastly, his posing a question will be a screenwriting device used in Jewish film humor—essentially, mimicking the immigrant answering a question with a question. In many films, the very asking of a question can be seen as a classical stereotype differentiating a Jewish character from a gentile one.

As subsequent films following The Jazz Singer demonstrated, Hollywood was quite careful about depicting Jewish humor for decades. To be sure, Jewish comics such as Eddie Cantor, Ed Wynn, The Three Stooges, The Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, and Jerry Lewis were spotlighted in many films of the 1930-50s. But it was difficult for any of these comics to appear overtly Jewish, deploy Yiddish idioms, or much less make even oblique ethnic references. Groucho Marx clearly understood these limits, but could not avoid his own ad-libs. In A Day at the Races (Wood, 1937), he sings “My Old Kentucky Home” and quips that it has been brought to you “By the House of David.” Groucho also intoned in Animal Crackers (Heerman, 1930), “Hurray for Capt. Spaulding. Did anyone call me shnorrer?” An almost word-for-word repetition of the line was later spoken by Red Skelton in the Burt Kalmar and Harry Ruby biopic, Words and Music (Taurog, 1948).

For over forty years, filmgoers have been amused by parodies and spoofs from Mel Brooks. His fond nostalgia for old genre films might be matched only by his infusing vulgarity and unsophisticated Jewish humor in his catalogue. Among his many send-ups, the most memorable might be the wagon trail scene in Blazing Saddles (Brooks, 1974). Posing as an Indian chief, he bestowed greetings on a solitary pioneer wagon with an African American family. Brooks alternated his dialogue between Yiddish and English, proclaiming at the end, “Haz they gesehn in deinen leben? They’re darker than us!” This exclamation shows how it was acceptable in Jolson’s time for a Jew to use burnt cork as a make-up or for Brooks to use black-white-and-red war paint in 1974. At once, Jolson is concealing Jewishness, but Brooks delights in revealing it. But he also betrays a deeper insight many of his generation knew—Jews were not always regarded by their fellow Americans as “white.”

Scene: Three Indians on horseback approach a wagon with a black
family of a man, wife, and young son. The chief wearing paint and war bonnet peers carefully in at the family.

Chief: *Shvartzes!* [One brave holds up his tomahawk, but the chief motions him to be still] No, no, *seit ist meshugah.* [Chief shouts to the sky] *Laz im gehn!* [Chief speaks to the family] Cop a walk. It’s alright.

Father: Thank you.

Young Son: Thank you.

Chief: *Abi gezint.* Take off. [The wagon leaves and he turns to one brave] *Haz they gesehn in deinen leben?* They’re darker than us! Whoof.20

Use of the word “*shvartzes*” [blacks] leaps out from the dialogue. Carrying what some might argue is pejorative Yiddish slang, it had been heard before and in an unobtrusive way. In 1932, Warner Brothers was still addressing “insider’s” Jewish humor. They had a series of two-reel shorts called “Broadway Brevities.” Several older films from the first years of talkies were to be withdrawn under the soon-to-be-issued Production Code (or Hays Code). Among them was the popular stage operetta, *The Desert Song* (Del Ruth, 1929).21 The comic relief in the film was “Benny Kidd,” a flamboyantly gay character.22 Anticipating the code’s restrictions, all such controversial figures vanished or were closeted with other personas in Hollywood. Anxious for a remake, Warner cut the original two-hour script to just twenty minutes. This included changing the story somewhat, a deletion of dialogue/scenes, and keeping just enough of the show’s hit songs by Sigmund Romberg, Otto Harbach, and Oscar Hammerstein II. Curiously, Warner recycled some stock footage from the 1929 film and used it for between-scenes filler in the shorter version that was renamed *The Red Shadow* (Mack, 1932).23

The operetta set in French Morocco had a dual-personalities storyline similar to *The Mark of Zorro* (Niblo, 1920), *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Stanton, 1917), and later seen with DC Comics’ *Superman* and *Batman*. The plot involves the French Foreign Legion trying to suppress the native Riff revolt in the 1920s. Aside from the chopped script, the clearest difference between *The Desert Song* and *The Red Shadow* involves the comic relief: instead of the overtly fey “Benny,” Warner created an entirely different personage. An unnamed character played by mustachioed Max Stamm appears, à la “Capt. Spaulding,” overdressed in a suit and flowing African hunter’s hat. His very appearance and his obvious German accent are amusing—harking back to the vaudeville German comic tradition. With quacking safari music in the background, this scene was set apart from any other in the film—it had no bearing whatsoever on the story except for brief comedy. With the studio cutting the
1929 original film to the bone, they nevertheless felt it necessary to include a modicum of irreverent humor.\footnote{24}

Following the opening sequences, the camera shows French Foreign Legionnaires marching and leaving the fortress compound. The use of black actors as guards at the gate is a marked departure from the Broadway and 1929 film versions. These earlier incarnations repeatedly emphasized the Europeans and depicted the warring Riff tribes as the racial “other.” But in *The Red Shadow*, the black legionnaires are indispensable for the scene. So in replicating the original comic character, they make him out as a short man walking in with a mule and a young bespectacled woman.

Scene: Entrance to fortress interior. French Foreign Legionnaires complete their departure leaving two guards. A short man walking a mule and accompanied by a young woman enters.

*Man:* Hold it there Suzy while I ask the *shvartses* here where we is. [Turns to Guard 1] We want to see the general who is in charge of this oasis.

*Guard 1:* [Replies in French]

*Man:* Is that so? [Speaking to the woman] Don’t know what he said and don’t like the accent in which he said it with, neither.

*Suzy:* Why you dumbbell, that’s French. All the natives here speak French.

*Man:* Is that French? Why didn’t you say so? [He opens up a phrase book and attempts to speak French to Guard 1.]

*Guard 2* [changing to American-accented English]: You’re sure having a hard time saying it. Just what is it you all want?

*Man:* Suzy! He speaks good English like we Americans! [To Guard 2]

You know what we want? We want to have a little adventure. We’d like to see the Red Shadow.

*Guard 2:* So would the general.

*Man:* Ah! [A downward motion of his hand shows disgust]

The scene ends with the man, Suzy, and mule entering the fortress compound.\footnote{25}

The coding in the film requires two levels of audience consciousness. Like the dual personalities of the lead character (“The Red Shadow” and Pierre), the comic relief presents overt and covert signals. Overtly, the man’s German accent is quickly betrayed when he misspeaks English and French. He says, “vee Americans” and “Anglish” with a clear wink-and-nod to his own foreignness. These words aside, traversing the Moroccan desert in a buttoned suit and necktie is ludicrously comical. Covertly, Hollywood insiders along with first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants could readily identify with the type. Such newcomers also were anxious to appear as “American.” As discussed
in *Fights of Nations*, immigrant men were often overdressed—or at least they are depicted as such. The word “shvartzes” substitutes for what should have been a reference to the black legionnaires as “guards.” Clearly this was “insider speak,” something common enough for urban audiences—presumably, some theatergoers might have thought “shvartzes” actually meant “guards.”

The black legionnaires stand in stark contrast to the times. Moreover, the English dialogue and that of one legionnaire speaking fluent French turn the tables on the usual servile or “Steppin’ Fetchit” role played by blacks in mainstream Hollywood films during the Golden Age. Indeed, this brief scene in *The Red Shadow* might appear with hindsight as a near apology for the late minstrelsy exploitation of *The Jazz Singer* and other early Jolson films. Future Warner Brothers releases in the 1930s showed their predilection for making social commentary. As a minor film on a double-feature bill, *The Red Shadow* was not going to attract much critical attention. But for all of its multicultural tension, the film does allow for a rare celluloid moment: the smartly uniformed blacks in the movie were bilingual, clean-shaven, and sharp. The use of the word “shvartzes” in both *The Red Shadow* and *Blazing Saddles* is a path to a wider racial and ethnic understanding. This certainly was true given segregated conditions in the 1930s and well past the Civil Rights era flanked by *Blazing Saddles*. But the word itself is spoken in an unthreatening, humorous context. Further use of the word in film today would be highly unlikely except in a period piece about American Jewish life. Lastly, the mule, while popularly used in the Middle East, can be seen as a humorous conveyance opposite the horse-riding Berber Riffs.

The post-World War II period brought many changes for Hollywood and Jewish subject matter. Hard-hitting films like *Crossfire* (Dymtryk, 1947) and *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (Kazan, 1947) made it impossible to ignore lingering social antisemitism. There were also early Zionist films like *Sword in the Desert* (Sherman, 1949) and *The Juggler* (Dymtryk, 1953). When *The Jazz Singer* (Curtiz, 1952) was remade starring Danny Thomas, the setting was a Philadelphia reform temple. To immediately lighten the film’s tone, a marker on the temple says it was built in 1776. Not only does this create a visual joke, but the assimilationist message was far removed from the original stage play and the later Jolson picture.

From the late 1930s onward, countless Jewish celebrities were honored in biopics. But aside from *The Jolson Story* (Green, 1946), *Jolson Sings Again* (Levin, 1949), and *The Eddie Cantor Story* (Green, 1953), the lives of an array of Broadway composers and celebrities like Lillian Roth were basically devoid of a specifically Jewish angle. By the end of the decade, the de-semitization
cycle broke with the release of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Stevens, 1959). But here again, the very story was not humorous in any sense, though Ed Wynn as “Mr. Dussel” can be viewed as an attempt to resurrect the comic-relief figure.  

Whatever their limitations, biopics did present studios with opportunities to insert some restrained Jewish levity. These appeared in the 1950s, a time when assimilationist strategies for American Jews were in overdrive. Culturally and defensively, this theme was represented by both Will Herberg and mainstream Jewish organizations. Hasia Diner summarized Herberg’s philosophy: “Jews had remade themselves to fit the American ideal that said that people could differ in where and how they worshipped but should be pretty much the same in every other way.” Arguing that Jews were much like Catholics and Protestants would pose challenges for those seeking to inject any kind of Jewish humor into film. Early television was slightly bolder by showcasing Milton Berle and Jerry Lewis on their own shows. Both Mel Brooks and Woody Allen were writing television scripts for Sid Caesar. Seen in this convergence of older media like film and radio, television loomed as a new world for Jewish possibilities.  

With musicals in their last great popular phase, MGM cast Jose Ferrer as Broadway composer Sigmund Romberg in *Deep in My Heart* (Donen, 1954). Basically, Romberg was made representative of all immigrants from the early twentieth century, not specifically Jewish ones. This was evidenced in the book *Deep in My Heart*, published by Elliott Arnold in 1949. Romberg assisted the author with telling his fictional biography. References to Jews are few and often indirect. John Tibbetts argues that both the book and film were determined to “whiten” Romberg’s image for mainstream Americans. This was not untypical for the time when films like *The Jazz Singer* remake emphasized assimilation and Jewish inclusiveness.  

In his study of director Stanley Donen, Stephen Silverman wrote about *Deep in My Heart*, “The film follows the same sketchy biographical formula that comprised Metro’s lavishly dressed but substantively naked composers series.” He notes the studio’s following the well-worn path of applying “whitewash” on biopics. Thus Romberg’s reasons for leaving Austria-Hungary are never mentioned. The antisemitism of pre-World War I Vienna is ignored, and the film’s opening scene shows Romberg entering a Lower East Side café. Obvious Jewishness is totally excised and leaves the composer as purely Hungarian-cum-Viennese. Nor is there any reference to his first marriage and divorce. In fact, his second wife, Lillian Harris, is erroneously presented as the only romantic interest he ever had. Silverman said that, in the MGM films, “the life of the musician at hand was used merely as an atrophied skeleton on
which to hang theatrical musical numbers culled from the composer's formidable war chest.”

The final scene in the film has Romberg conducting a concert at Carnegie Hall. While dressed in a penguin-tails tux, Romberg shed none of his outward Old World, immigrant ways. This was the classic rags-to-riches story. He alternates between “hamming it up” and seriousness. Screenwriter Leonard Spiegelgass carefully avoided giving him too many clichés. The monologue toward the end is pure self-deprecation, a humor form patented by Jack Benny, Woody Allen, and a host of Borscht Belt comics such as Buddy Hackett, Alan King, and Rodney Dangerfield. The scene is amusing and punctuated with laughter. Yet, Romberg easily and earnestly moves from jokes toward the sentimentality long associated with his music and personal appearances.

Scene: Stage center at Carnegie Hall.
Romberg [Holding a baton]: Just a minute ladies and gentlemen—Like my friend Al Jolson once said, “Nothing you ain't heard yet.” [Laughter. Romberg walks across the stage.] You know, tonight I learned something about conducting a symphony orchestra. Only three things are important: First, you must give the musicians a downbeat.—So. [Laughter. Romberg motions with baton in his right arm a downbeat.] Second, you must not disturb the musicians while they are playing. Third, you must be very careful to stop conducting at precisely the same instant they stop playing so everything comes out nice and easy. [Laughter] With Bruno Walter is it easy. With Toscanini it is a joy. With me, it is a miracle. [Laughter] Tonight, who should I kid? Tomorrow one critic will say that I'm corny. Another critic will say I that am schmaltzy. The jitterbugs will say that I am high brow—the Wagnerians will say I am low brow. [Cutaway shot to wing shot of Romberg’s wife shaking her head sideways.] High brow, low brow—what I really am is a middle brow. [Laughter. Romberg ends his smiling.] What has come out of my head and my fingers is mostly, I think music to make people love each other. To make them dream of the way it was—to make them hope for the way it will be. So shall we have some more love and dreams and hopes? [Applause]

Whatever else, Romberg amused his audiences in the 1940s and early 1950s with his mocking style. This humility suggested he did not take himself too seriously. Romberg wrote about this himself in Arnold’s book. Ferrer’s lines could be considered stereotypical immigrant banter in many ways. MGM made sure these and other malapropisms or “Romyisms” remained in the script. This included his misspeaking Jolson’s line from The Jazz Singer, “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” Perhaps most noteworthy is the film’s complete
Jews and Humor retention of Romberg’s triumphant success story, while masking his Jewishness with good-humored Hungarian charm.

*The Benny Goodman Story* (Davies, 1956) is another example of assimilation. The first part of the film covers young Goodman’s early life and career. The balance of the plot involves socialite Alice Hamilton’s romance with the famous bandleader. She runs up against an iron wall: Mama Goodman (and that is how she is listed in the film credits). Much as Jolson’s cantor father in *The Jazz Singer* insists that his son continue the family’s cantorial tradition, Benny Goodman’s mother stands firmly against intermarriage. In this scene, a cutting line denotes a shred of ethnic reference; clearly, it suggests cynical humor. Donna Reed (Alice Hammond) and Berta Gersten (Mama Goodman) ploughed their way through this sometimes painful dialogue.

Scene: Interior of a modern living room. Alice and Mrs. Goodman (seen knitting).

Alice: I hoped you could help me. Benny wants to marry me. He’s been on the verge of asking me.

Mrs. Goodman: If he wants to ask you, why doesn’t he?

Alice: I thought you might be able to tell me.

Mrs. Goodman: You’re a nice girl Alice. You’ll make some man a good wife, but not my Benny.

Alice: Why not, Mrs. Goodman?

Mrs. Goodman: Because you don’t mix caviar with bagels, that’s why. [Sighs] Always I was hoping Benny settles down, finds the right girl, but . . .

Alice: How do you know he hasn’t? I love him Mrs. Goodman. What possible motive could I have except to make him happy? Don’t you think I could do that?

Mrs. Goodman: You’re young yet, Alice—so is Benny. Happiness is easy to talk, it’s not so easy to live. You’ll find this out some day. Only when you do, it’s too late. 

Mrs. Goodman with her metaphors might not mix caviar with bagels, but she does make a biting point. With *The Goldbergs* transition from radio-to-TV sitcom by mid-decade, the average American audience could appreciate this moment. The preachy, defensive mother will eventually yield to her son and sit with Alice in his Carnegie Hall audience for the finale. This conclusion was identical to the one seen in *The Jazz Singer*. Both Mrs. Rabinowitz and Mrs. Goodman are accompanied by gentile girlfriends as they watch their sons perform. The message is unmistakable: assimilation overcomes romantic obstacles. Today, Mrs. Goodman’s line would be quaintly out of place—especially when weighed against Woody Allen films where getting a *shiksa* [non-Jewish
woman] is akin to winning a prized trophy. Allen’s obsessive style virtually made interfaith romance into a cinematic social norm.

Jewish humor can also mask the Jewish social condition. Jose Ferrer as Romberg turned from delivering a few jokes and could then talk from his heart. He speaks of his music conveying dreams about “the way it was and hope for the way it will be.”43 He urged his audiences to keep their loves and dreams and hopes. Musicologist William Everett argues how Romberg recreated nostalgia in his most famous shows. However much Romberg hoped for a world free from antisemitism and war, there were no perfect utopias in the 1950s. By contrast, Donald Weber questions the disabling nature of nostalgia, which clearly is so much a part of Jewish-themed films like Radio Days (Allen, 1987), Avalon (Levinson, 1990), and a more recent film like A Serious Man (Coen and Coen, 2009)—all of these movies play with differing periods of the American Jewish past.

Occasionally, nostalgia and acerbic humor can be welded together as in Fiddler on the Roof (Jewison, 1971). Weber candidly personalizes his study on Jewish popular culture, not as an expression of mourning for what was lost, but as “a way of re-viewing, of feeling the world of my father (and mother, aunts and uncles): to draw near their old (Bronx and Cleveland worlds), in order to negotiate better the complex and (at times) bewildering Jewish American dilemma of my own.”44

The final thoughts in this survey come from David Desser and Lester Friedman on American Jewish filmmakers: “Most American Jews identify with cultural traditions rather than with religious adherence.”45 Some filmmakers draw the line on humorizing Judaism at its religious core, perhaps a lingering reminder of what the old Hays Production Code promulgated about respecting all faiths and clergy. But more than likely, the old humor will die hard. Keeping the Faith (Norton, 2000) paralleled the story of Abie’s Irish Rose, all film versions of The Jazz Singer, and The Benny Goodman Story, except that it makes a complete reversal: the gentile girl assimilates by converting to Judaism so she can marry a rabbi.46 Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and their colleagues have been mining this exploitive trail for over forty years. Reliably, they and others can be expected to conjure up other cinematic ways to make us laugh at ourselves and with ourselves.

NOTES


10 Carringer, *Jazz Singer*, 11.

11 Ibid.


14 Ibid.; Carringer, *Jazz Singer*, 61, 63, 120. In the original scene scripted by Alfred Cohn, this copy appears: “62 Full Shot Room—As the cantor resumes his pacing, Sara hears someone at the door and goes to it, instead of the expected Jakie, an excited Yudelson. The cantor turns around in surprise. Yudelson rushes up to him and starts telling him about seeing Jakie singing nigger songs in Muller’s. The cantor throws his arms up in horror. Yudelson nods grimly but in a satisfied manner.” The fact that Warner Brothers changed the intertitle from the scripted word “nigger” to “raggy-time” certainly downplayed racial connotations. In all likelihood, the word “schvartze” and not “nigger” was initially used but deleted because too many audiences would not have known what it meant. Other changes likewise changed the racial references. In scene 77,
the script read, “The cantor glares down at the boy who stops squirming. He tightens his grip on him as he repeats over and over: ‘Singing nigger songs in a beer garden! You bummer! You no good lowlife!’ As Sara tries to intercede, the cantor silences her almost roughly. As he half pushes her away he says, ‘I’ll teach him he shall never use his voice for such low things.’” Later in the script, scene 326 had a line from Yudelson, “It talks like Jakie, but it looks like a nigger.” Thus in each racial reference, either Yudelson speaks the line or encourages the cantor in such word usage. Whatever else, none of the racial references in the original scripted scenes was humorous.


16 Ibid.


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.


23 Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 93.


25 Ibid.


Arnold, *Deep in My Heart*, 180 and 191 (direct Jewish references) and 412 (indirect Jewish reference to musicians fleeing Hitler’s terror).


Romberg was married to Eugenie Erb from 1912-1924, a fact conveniently left out of the film. Any inclusion of such an earlier relationship would have upset mid-twentieth century notions of marriage and divorce. News of Mrs. Romberg’s filing (1923) and later consent decree (1925) was public. But the actual reasons for it were sealed by the New York State Supreme Court. For scholarly purposes, the author petitioned the court to unseal these documents (*Michael W. Rubinoff against New York County Clerk*, June 27, 2007, Index No. 108905/07). The court sustained the author’s motion on September 18, 2007; thus all documents were subsequently released and copied.


Donen, *Deep in My Heart*.

Crosland, *The Jazz Singer*.


Ibid.

Donen, *Deep in My Heart*.

