One Clove Away From a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians

Joyce Antler

“Let the fat girl do her stuff!” yelled the audience one night as a young Sophie Tucker came on stage. Even then, Tucker knew that size didn’t matter “if you could sing and make people laugh.” Tucker is one of six veteran comedians profiled in the Jewish Women’s Archive’s documentary film, Making Trouble, who used not only her body but her subversive Jewish wit to make people laugh. Of the group, only writer Wendy Wasserstein didn’t go on stage herself, but joins the other funny women in this film by dint of her legacy of thought-provoking, trouble-making female characters. Like the others, Wasserstein doesn’t so much laugh at women but at the things that women find strange and funny. She wanted to give them their dignity rather than render them as caricatures. “Women who shopped at S. Klein’s and Orbachs,” Wasserstein comments. “Women who knew their moisturizer,” like Gorgeous Teitelbaum, the bloozy matron of The Sisters Rosensweig.

Fanny Brice, Molly Picon, and Gilda Radner mugging it up may not seem dignified, and certainly Joan Rivers clowning about fallen vaginas looking like bunny slippers is anything but. But these comedians’ performances show that Jewish women can be proud of the comic tradition in which they have been trailblazers. While the predominance of Jews in American comedy is well known (one frequently cited statistic is that the minute proportion of Jews in the United States made up eighty percent of the comedy industry), Jewish women’s comedy has largely gone unnoticed.

Prominent exceptions to this critical failure include Sarah Blacher Cohen, author of the 1987 article, “The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers,” and June Sochen, whose essay “Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker: Blending the Particular with the Universal,” appears in Cohen’s 1983 collection on Jewish theater and film. Cohen’s piece on “unkosher comediennes” featured such “brazen offenders of the faith” as Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Totie Fields, and Joan Rivers, all of whom gleefully violated the Torah’s conception of feminine modesty. “As creatures of unclean lips,” Cohen wrote, “they make dirty, they sully, they corrupt,” but they also shattered taboos and liberated their audiences. Focusing on Brice as well as Tucker, Sochen portrayed the theme of the female “victim” in addition to the “aggressive” type
created by Tucker and later *vilde chayes*, the “wild women” that Cohen writes about in her “unkosher” article.\textsuperscript{7}

Some two decades later, the Jewish Women’s Archive film, *Making Trouble*, showcases a trajectory of three generations of funny Jewish women, including Molly Picon, Gilda Radner, and Brice from the gentler side of the comedy spectrum, as well as Tucker and Joan Rivers as representative vulgarians. Additionally, there is playwright Wasserstein, who thought of herself as a comedy writer, highlighting the significant role played by Jewish women authors in developing Jewish humor.

Fulfilling the archive’s mission of chronicling and transmitting the hidden story of Jewish women’s contributions to American history and culture, *Making Trouble* proclaims that there has been a veritable tradition of Jewish women’s humor.\textsuperscript{8} From Yiddish theater and film, to vaudeville and burlesque, to nightclubs, improv and stand-up clubs, radio, television, the Broadway stage, and Hollywood cinema, Jewish women have made us laugh in a myriad of performance venues. In each of these arenas, they challenged conventional modes of joking. When they speak up, stand up, or even sit down (like the four younger comedians in *Making Trouble*—Judy Gold, Jackie Hoffman, Corey Kahaney, and Jessica Kirson—who guide us through the film as they chat in New York’s famed Katz’ delicatessen), these women create humor by speaking through their female sensibilities. Writer Ann Beatts, interviewed in the Gilda Radner segment in *Making Trouble*, joked that none of the writers on *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) saw the humor in a line that a character was a few cloves away from finishing a pomander ball.\textsuperscript{9} None of the *SNL* men knew what a clove was (although executive producer Lorne Michaels guessed that it was a spice), much less a pomander ball, but the two women on the show found humor in this obscure term and a way to joke about women’s things in a male world.

It is not that Jewish women’s appreciation of humor has gone unnoticed—think of Sarah, who laughs when God informs her of the imminent birth of her son despite her advanced age. (And Sarah names this son, “Itzhak” or “Isaac,” meaning “He who laughed.”)\textsuperscript{10} But the role of Jewish woman as professional comic has been largely overlooked. This was brought home to me some years ago, when I dedicated my book on Jewish women’s history, *The Journey Home*, to my two daughters, calling them “badkhntes of the next generation.”\textsuperscript{11} At the time, Yiddish language experts discouraged my use of the word, telling me that there was no feminine form for *badkhen*, the Yiddish word meaning jester or clown. The *badkhen*, who had amused Jews in Europe for hundreds of years with his witty rhymes, composed on the spot at wed-
dings, was a formative influence on the creators of Yiddish theater and may be seen as the forerunner of today’s stand-up comedian. However, this important Jewish icon, as well as the important tradition he started, has been considered wholly male.

Coming to America meant breaking the Old World pattern whereby men usually performed comedy, as Making Trouble makes clear. Jewish women became prominent comic artists in the immigrant generation, with such comedic talents as Tucker, Brice, and Picon. Their comic routines expressed the experiences and desires of many second-generation Jews while making the transition to mainstream audiences. Gertrude Berg, who began her long broadcast career on NBC radio in 1929, is another example of a Jewish woman who entertained audiences with a peculiarly ethnic humor.  

In every successive generation, Jewish female comedians helped shape the contours of American comedy. These comic pioneers were followed by a new cohort, schooled in the academy of improv clubs and liberated by feminism, which led them to invent new forms of comedy, more satirical and openly rebellious than their predecessors. Elaine May, Joan Rivers, Gilda Radner, Roseanne Barr, and Elayne Boosler were among these innovators.

A third generation of Jewish female comics came to prominence in the 1990s and fills mainstream and alternative comic venues today. These women, who came up through stand-up clubs and often appear on late-night television, HBO, Comedy Central, and in films and theater, are more diverse than previous cohorts of female comics, including such talents as Susie Essman, Wendy Leibman, Rita Rudner, Sarah Bernhard, Rain Pryor, Carol Leifer, Lisa Kron, Amy Borkowsky, Page Hurwitz, Cathy Ladman, Sherry Davey, Julie Goldman, Betsy Salkind, Susannah Perlman, Cate Lazarus, Jesse Klein, and Sarah Silverman. These comics can be as aggressive and bawdy as their male peers, but they emphasize women’s strengths in ways that set them apart from many earlier women comedians.

When we look at the historical trajectory of Jewish women comics, we find them in every generation in every corner of American culture. Like male Jewish comedians, they have demonstrated superb verbal skills and the masterful use of irony, satire, and mockery, including self-mockery. Their heritage as Jews—especially, the diasporic experience of living between two worlds—gave them a sharp critical edge and the ability to express the anxieties and foibles of contemporary culture. Yet there is something unique about female Jewish comics that distinguishes them from male peers.

As the “pomander ball” exchange reveals, many of these comedienne center their humor in a specifically female—and often feminist—point of view that
showcases issues of particular relevance to women. Whether they have been explicitly bawdy in sexually frank and often unladylike routines in the manner of a Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, Patsy Abbot, Bette Midler, or Joan Rivers or whether they presented more innocent challenges—think Molly Picon, Fanny Brice, Gilda Radner, and Goldie Hawn—these comedians have stretched the boundaries of conventional thinking about comedy and about gender roles. The laughter they engender is powerful and subversive.

Perhaps this is because women’s humor often deals with the incongruities and inequities of a world based on gender distinctions. When women use humor to express and laugh at their visions of the world, they cannot help but challenge the social structures that keep women from positions of power. Some do this explicitly, others turn the spotlight inward, and the gender issues are expressed in self-deprecating ways. But because expectations are that men do the joking and women receive (or are targets of) humor, for women merely to take the microphone as comic performers upsets role norms. Their humor challenges the structures that keep women from power by turning our attention to things that matter to women. Comedian Kate Clinton has called feminist humorists “fumerists,” a term that captures the idea of simultaneously being funny and wanting to burn the house down. In her influential 1976 work, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the French (Jewish) theorist Hélène Cixous talked about the revolutionary potential of women’s humor, urging them “to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter . . . in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law.”

Jewish female comedians have successfully stretched the boundaries of conventional comedy and gender roles—even when they didn’t intend to burn the house down. “A performing Jewish woman is a force to be reckoned with,” says June Sochen, “and possibly feared.” They have been not merely funny, but transformative.

MOLLY PICON: “YONKELE”

Molly Picon, born Margaret Pyekoon on the Lower East Side of New York City in 1898, began her theatrical career performing with a Yiddish repertory troupe in Philadelphia, where her mother moved after her father abandoned the family. Picon went on to become the first great international star of the Yiddish theater. When she presented humorous interpretations of the plight of first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants, audiences recognized “in her highly magnified or distorted humor the stuff which makes up their own lives.” Tiny (4’ 11”) but sprightly (at age eighty, she was still performing
somersaults), Picon starred in a variety of venues as well as Yiddish theater—radio, television, Broadway, and Yiddish and American film.

Most often Picon played young girls who dressed or behaved like young boys, parts written for her by her Polish immigrant husband, director, and producer Jacob (“Yonkel”) Kalich, whom she married in 1919. Kalich convinced her to pursue a career in the Yiddish theater rather than the Broadway stage, to which she aspired, and took her to the great Yiddish theaters of Europe, “to perfect my Yiddish, to get my star legs.” Performing across the continent in original works by Kalich, Picon was launched to stardom in her role as the thirteen-year-old boy Yonkele, in the play of the same name produced by Kalich in Vienna in 1921. Between 1922-1925, she played similar characters in such Yiddish plays as “Tzipke,” “Shmendrik” [Loser], “Gypsy Girl,” “Molly Dolly,” “Little Devil,” “Mamale” [Mommy], “Raizele,” “Oy is Dus A Madel” [What a Girl], and “The Circus Girl.”

Even in middle age, Picon continued to reinvent her transgressive, tomboy character, which audiences loved. Her most famous film was the 1936 Yidl Mitn Fidl [Yidl with his fiddle], in which the thirty-eight-year-old actress played a girl disguised as a teenage boy so she and her father can earn a living as traveling musicians. In fact, said Picon, she played the “Yonkele” role at least “3,000 times”: “Deep down within me, I was Yankele [sic]. I still am.”

FANNY BRICE: “PLSYING THE CLOWN”

Fanny Brice (born Fania Borach) was “one of the great, great clowns of all time,” in the opinion of famed film director George Cukor. Appearing in burlesque, vaudeville, drama, film, musical revues (including nine Ziegfeld Follies between 1910 and 1936), and on radio (she had her own Baby Snooks radio show from 1944 through her death in 1951), Brice had a career that lasted more than four decades. Biographer Barbara Grossman observes that the star built her career on “manic mimicry and exuberant buffoonery,” both rooted in Yiddish parody. When early in her career Brice went to Tin Pan Alley songwriter Irving Berlin, he gave her a new lyric, “Sadie Salome,” with the words, “With your face, you should sing this song,” and urged her to adapt a Yiddish accent. Brice learned the accent especially for the part—the most successful of all her stage appearances—and it became a trademark of her routines in burlesque and musical comedy. Soon after she began appearing on the Ziegfeld stage, and although Brice did not conform to feminine beauty standards, the Follies proved to be a wonderful vehicle for her parodic talents. “If she could not be the prettiest girl on the stage,” says Grossman, “she would be the funniest.”
Brice’s broad physical humor and mimicry differed from the ingenuousness of Molly Picon’s child/woman roles. Brice specialized in representing incongruity: she played the American Indian/Jewish girl Rosie Rosenstein; an evangelist and neophyte nudist, both Yiddish-accented; a Jewish girl, Sascha, who became a Sultan’s wife; and Mrs. Cohen in “Mrs. Cohen at the Beach,” a “consummate yenta” who nagged her children. Whether Indian, Arab, or any ethnic personage, with her Yiddish accent and dialect, Brice constantly stepped out of character, commenting on the absurdities of the action going on. And she announced that she was Jewish.

There was a serious side to Brice’s comedy. With numbers like “Second-Hand Rose,” “My Man,” and “Oy, How I Hate that Fellow Nathan,” she mocked men’s unreliability and also herself. Audiences related to her witty put-downs of men and marriage or to expressions of disappointment and unhappiness because they knew these portrayals sprang from Brice’s life. “In anything Jewish I ever did, I wasn’t standing apart, making fun of the race,” Brice said. “I was the race, and what happened to me on the stage is what could happen to them.”

Combining a “‘traditional’ feminine concern for others, albeit in a funny vein” with a style and persona rooted in her Jewish environment, Brice tapped into current issues relating to all people, despite her pronounced ethnicity. Yet by 1923, she wanted to play more universal roles and underwent a nose job to alter her appearance, an event that made the front page of The New York Times. But the desired parts never materialized–Brice had apparently “cut off her nose to spite her race,” Dorothy Parker quipped, all to no avail. Audiences apparently preferred her as she was—a talented, outrageously funny, good-humored Jewish comic. “If you are a comic,” Brice once said, “you have to be nice. And the audience has to like you. You have to have a softness about you because if you do comedy and you are harsh, there is something offensive about it.”

Brice “immediately connected with her audience,” says June Sochen, in a way that was both woman- and Jewish-centered, offering “a different reading of the known material. . . . she found the humor, the silliness, and the humanity beyond the stereotype.”

SOPHIE TUCKER: “YIDDISH/RED HOT MAMA”

Sophie Tucker (born Sonya Abuza) has a special place in the tradition of Jewish women’s comedy because of the longevity with which she held the limelight—over sixty years in the industry, she was called the “Queen of Show Business”—but also because of her trademark transgressiveness. Using humor and
self-mockery, Tucker sang “hot” torch songs with titles like “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl But How A Fat Girl Can Love,” “That Lovin’ Soul Kiss,” “Everybody Shimmies Now,” “Vamp, Vamp, Vamp,” and “Who Paid the Rent for Mrs. Rip Van Winkle when Rip Van Winkle Was Away.” Her message was that all women, even “big, ugly” ones, needed sex and love.

At the very time when vaudeville and burlesque were becoming increasingly subdued as they reached out to broader family audiences, Tucker managed to elude mass entertainment’s censorship; her supposed “ugliness” and her size permitted her to challenge social norms of femininity and “good girl” behavior. Eddie Cantor quipped that Sophie Tucker “sings the words we used to write on the sidewalks of New York.”

Tucker had not meant to become a comedian. She left home at seventeen, leaving her one-year-old baby with her mother, Jenny, in Hartford, for a show business career as a singer. The neighbors in Hartford were shocked: “they said only a bad woman would do such a thing. I must be a bad woman—a whore, in the unvarnished language of the Scriptures.”

Slowly, Tucker built her career, singing in rathskellers, becoming a well-known blackface “coon singer”—one of the few women to black up among the likes of performers like Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson. But she was uncomfortable in blackface because it masked her true identity. Sometimes Tucker pulled off a glove to show that she was white, and there would be a surprised gasp, “then a howl of laughter.” She would throw in some Yiddish words, too, to “give the audience a kick” and to show that she was white and Jewish.

The idea of becoming a comic performer came to Tucker by accident. One day a theater manager sent her on without blackface, telling her that her trunk was lost. Dressed one night in a tightly laced black princess gown (like a “baloney in mourning,” she cracked), with a long train of red chiffon ruffles, she slipped during her bows and caught her heel in the ruffles of her dress. “Down I went on my fanny like a ton of bricks,” she recalled. The applause was deafening; even the cast shrieked with laughter. Sophie the comedienne was born.

It was not only as a raunchy “Red Hot Mama” that Tucker reached the heights of stardom. Her most famous song was in fact “My Yiddishe Mama,” introduced into her repertoire after the death of her own mother, Jennie Abuza, in 1925. Jennie died when Tucker was crossing the Atlantic, returning from an engagement in London. Her death was deeply traumatic for the singer, who became “paralyzed” while performing at a benefit for the Jewish Theatrical Guild at the Manhattan Opera House. Led off the stage, she stayed in bed for weeks, her self-confidence gone. Soon after, her long-time accom-
panist wrote “My Yiddishe Mama” for her, and the effect was cathartic. Tucker sang “My Yiddishe Mama” thereafter at the Palace Theater and at the Winter Garden in New York, where “there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.” After that, she sang it in the United States and throughout Europe, where it was always a hit.

Sophie Tucker was an effective “Red Hot Mama” precisely because audiences believed she told the truth about her own experiences. Part of this authenticity lay in Sophie’s emotional revelation of her Yiddish/Jewish background and her deep love for her Yiddishe Mama. Of course, this Yiddishe Mama was just as much a construction as was the “Red Hot Mama,” since Jennie Abuza never sat home, quietly mourning the days passing her by, but rather was a dynamic activist who ran the family restaurant and was the leader of Hartford’s Jewish philanthropic community.

A generation of young Americans grew up listening to Tucker’s records, often forbidden them by their parents, in secret; others went to her live nightclub performances. She was a special favorite in England, even among the royals. (“Hi ya, king!” Tucker irreverently quipped to one of her most ardent fans.) The “Last of the ‘Red Hot Mamas’” died in 1966. Although not a “nice Jewish girl” by the standards of her mother’s generation, she was one of America’s first “popular culture” feminists and among its most celebrated Jewish comic voices.

* * *

With Sophie Tucker’s death and the demise of Gertrude Berg’s long-running “Goldberg” situation comedies a decade earlier, the baton passed to a new generation of female comics. A new style of female Jewish comedy—fast-paced, hip, and deeply satirical—emerged to replace the pioneering women comics of the previous generation.

The new style of comedy was ushered in by a group of talented satirists, male and female—Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, and the extraordinary Mike Nichols and Elaine May. Though Nichols and May performed for merely four years, ending their collaboration in 1961, they left their mark on comedy for years to come.

The female Jewish comics that came up through the Second City route—Elaine May, Joan Rivers, and Gilda Radner—hit their stride in the 1960s-1970s. This comic wave was joined midstream by another group of Jewish women comics emboldened by the feminist movement—particularly during the 1980s when the increased confidence of feminism allowed women to laugh at themselves in new ways and to laugh at others.
JOAN RIVERS: RITA and HEIDI ABROMOWITZ

“I am not the ideal Jewish woman,” Joan Rivers admits in a comedy act filmed in *Making Trouble*. “I love to take [my audience] to the edge,” she says. “I love to get them upset and ruin their value system.” Known for her aggressiveness and her “unkosher” bawdy style, in Sarah Cohen’s words, Rivers (née Joan Molinsky), Phi Beta Kappa Barnard College graduate and daughter of a Brooklyn Jewish doctor, has been performing for over forty years. Making her television debut on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show* in 1965, she went on to host a daytime talk show, became the first solo guest host of the *Tonight Show*, and by 1986 had her own late night show on the new Fox Network. In 1990 Rivers won an Emmy for Outstanding Talk Show Host. She also authored two successful books, *Having A Baby Can Be A Scream* (1975) *Life and Times of Heidi Abromowitz* (1984), and she wrote and starred in a well-reviewed Broadway drama based on the life of Lenny Bruce’s mother, *Sally Marr and Her Escorts* (1994).

Rivers struggled for many years to find her comic style. She bombed in the Catskills, feeling she was not “ethnic enough,” and disliked the model followed by pioneer women comedians of the time, like Phyllis Diller, who were “basically doing a woman’s version of men’s acts.” Working with her comic “soul-mate,” writer Treva Silverman, who appears in the Rivers segment of *Making Trouble*, Rivers began to find her comic voice. Elaine May served as role model for both women: “an assertive woman with a marvelous, fast mind and, at the same time, pretty and feminine. We did not know any other women like that.”

Rivers’s breakthrough came at Second City, where she started in 1961–“the best girl since Elaine May.” But Rivers was not the typical “compliant,” “uncompetitive” Second City girl, and she found the troupe’s unwillingness to treat her as an equal deeply troubling. Nonetheless, she feels she was “born as a comedian” at Second City: “No Second City, no Joan Rivers.” Seeing Lenny Bruce perform for the first time in Greenwich Village was another turning point. From Bruce she learned that “personal truth can be the foundation of comedy, that outrageousness can be cleaning and healthy.” “I had found the key,” Rivers recalled. “My comedy could flow from the poor, venerable schlepp Joan Molinsky.”

Rivers created a character named Rita, the “urban ethnic” “loser girl who cannot get married,” who she believed became the secret of her success, allowing Rivers to “turn autobiography into comedy and touch all women.” Rita was Joan Rivers in all her desperation: “I’m not married and life is awful, so what’s wrong with me?” And finally, I’m married: “Why is everything still
wrong?” Rita worked because “people recognize insecurity and respond to it,” said Rivers, because “everybody is like me.”

Rivers understood that she was part of a new transitional comedy generation that was leaving the one-line joke litany of traditional comics far behind. Nichols and May had been the pioneers of the new style—a much more “personal comedy” that described “humor behavior by describing our own behavior.” Rivers used this style to talk openly about her emotional travails and also about sex. “I was becoming a nice Jewish girl in stockings and pumps saying on stage what people thought but never said aloud in polite society.” Mentioning the word “tampons,” she has said, was the greatest challenge of her career. But whereas Sophie Tucker (along with the streetwise raunchiness of Pearl Williams, Belle Barth, and Patsy Abbot) performed in the limited space of nightclubs and comedy LP albums, Rivers did her parodies on national TV, testing the medium’s limits. Despite her edgy routines, she never downplayed her Jewishness, even though her agent often warned her that she was “too Jewish” and “too New York” for much of the country.

The self-deprecatory style that became the Rivers trademark coexists with a much more aggressive humor that targets others, often with great cruelty. Sarah Blacher Cohen feels that Rivers resembles the traditional yente, “a woman of low origins or vulgar manners,” a “scandal-spreader and rumor-monger,” although her biting sarcasm is not indiscriminate but directed at celebrities and “people of high degree.” But Rivers offers a contrast to these routines through her Heidi Abromowitz character—her “comically spiteful portrayal of the nice Jewish girl’s direct opposite . . . the sexual transgressor . . . the whore with the heart of gold.” “Devoid of moral constraints,” says Cohen, “she can take the lid off her id and fly away on the wings of an ego. And we, who are grounded by our multiple repressions, are temporarily seduced into flying away with her.” Over her long career, Rivers also introduced feminist characters, with hostile jokes aimed at gynecologists and others in the male power structure who demeaned women.

Whichever the routine, Rivers spits out mocking, nervy jokes that Cohen sees as full of “unkosher” chutzpah. To her critics, however, she is merely “abrasive, tasteless, profane.” Rivers defends herself against such charges. “You have to be abrasive to be a current comic,” she says. “If you don’t offend someone you become pap.” For Rivers, humor serves as a “medium of revenge” by which comedians “deflate and punish” rejection. “Comedy is power,” she says. “The only weapon more formidable than humor is a gun.”
GILDA RADNER: “JEWISH JEANS”

Gilda Radner (the family name was originally Ratkowsky) decided to be funny as a teenager, when she knew she “wasn’t going to make it on her looks.”

Thirteen years younger than Rivers, Radner employed a humor that was very different than that of her predecessor, though Radner, too, got her start at Second City (the Toronto company).

With her fellow Second City players, Radner was a member of the Not Ready for Primetime Players, which became the first cast of *Saturday Night Live*, debuting to rave reviews in 1975. Radner became an audience favorite with her ingenious, loveable female characters—among them, dowdy school-teacher Emily Litella; dorky adolescent Lisa Loopner; lispy newscasters Roseanne Roseannadanna and “Baba Wawa” (Barbara Walters); and Rhonda Reiss, a Long Island Jewish “princess.”

A self-proclaimed “total child of television” who grew up admiring the female comedians of an earlier age, Radner provided a new template for female comics. Described as a “thirty-three-year old who had a band-aid on her knee,” Radner combined the innocence of a little girl with a hip, fresh satirical zaniness that charmed audiences and her fellow players alike. “She was so happy on camera,” Steve Martin observed; she was “the sweetest, kindest, funniest person. . . . You really came to love her.”

The authenticity in Radner’s performances was not that she played herself but that the vulnerability in all of her characters—a true part of the core Gilda Radner—shone through. There was nothing hostile about her. Rather, she excelled in physical comedy in the fashion of a Fanny Brice, and the versatility of her portrayals recalled her own heroine, Lucille Ball.

Radner did not shy away from doing Jewish characters, though some, like her famous “Jewish Jeans” ad parody, created controversy. With lines like “she shops the sales for designer clothes/she got designer nails and a designer nose,” some thought it was “too Jewish,” too “Jappy.” But in *Making Trouble*, writer Marilyn Suzanne Miller notes that it is Radner, the Jewish Jeans girl in the spoof, whom the other multicultural singers aspire to be: she is their goal, the Jewish woman has triumphed. Like the other comics in the film, Radner is not afraid to wink at the audience, proclaiming her Jewishness. She always referred to herself as “this Jewish girl from Detroit.”

Radner hated the idea, however, that “if you were Jewish and a comedian, you had to be unattractive.” She fought her own battle with bulimia for much of her life, but she insisted, as the film makes clear, that she was a “beautiful girl” with “great legs and I am also funny”: “Live with it!”
WENDY WASSERSTEIN: “SISTERS ROSENSWEIG”

Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Wendy Wasserstein, the first woman to win a Tony for a single-authored work, may seem like an unusual choice for inclusion in a film about Jewish comedians. But Wasserstein always thought of herself as a comedy writer, understanding comedy to be a “broader category than just fun and jokes.” Her comic voice is loud and strong in her dramas, and she enjoyed writing for television comedy series and humorous essays as well. In Making Trouble, Wasserstein stands for all the Jewish writers who created comedy, including Ann Beatts, Rosie Schuster, Treva Silverman, and Marilyn Suzanne Miller, all of whom appear in the film.

Born in Brooklyn, Wasserstein briefly attended the Yeshivah of Flatbush before switching to an exclusive Manhattan private school for girls. She graduated from Mt. Holyoke College, drawing on the incongruities of her experience at this all-female, upper-crust WASP school in her first play, Uncommon Women and Others, produced off-Broadway in 1978. Isn’t It Romantic? followed in 1981; The Heidi Chronicles, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award, and a host of other prizes, in 1988; and The Sisters Rosensweig in 1992.

The Sisters Rosensweig, Wasserstein’s most explicitly Jewish play, worried colleagues who thought that it might not play well in middle America. “Believe it or not, I’ve heard there are sisters beyond the Mississippi,” the author replied, and kept the play’s title and focus. The Sisters Rosensweig tells the story of three sisters, who greatly resemble Wasserstein and her own two sisters, who spend a weekend in London to celebrate the birthday of the eldest. Sara, cool and self-controlled, an expatriate and atheist, is a high-powered international banker who has renounced all possibility of romance as she moves into her fifty-fourth year. The “funsy,” clothes-conscious, garrulous Gorgeous, slightly younger, is a housewife, mother, and temple member from suburban Boston, where she is a talk-show personality. Pfeni, single and forty, is the “wandering Jew” of the family—an itinerant journalist who roams the world in search of causes and stories.

By the time the play has ended, the identities the playwright establishes for the sisters evaporate, and they are revealed in surprising ways. Wasserstein takes us inside Gorgeous’s seemingly superficial materialism, showing as much compassion for her struggles as for those of her more intellectual and achievement-driven sisters. “I grew up with the Dr. Gorgeous’ of the world,” says Wasserstein. “I loved them.” She and Madeline Kahn, the talented Jewish comedian who played the role on Broadway, believed that audiences would identify with the character—many of them were Gorgeous, Wasserstein
thought. (The character actually drew on her mother, Lola, and her own sister, nicknamed “Gorgeous.”) Gorgeous would not be “a joke,” not the extreme JAP rendered by so many other comic writers, but a character with familiar Jewish traits, at last rendered sympathetically.52

Wasserstein should be seen as a true social “reformer,” as June Sochen argues was the case with comedians like Tucker and Brice. Through their comedy, these women offered audiences “unpopular views in a popular mode,” aspiring to “change their audience’s . . . values.”53 And although Sarah Blacher Cohen worried that feminism and comedy might be mutually exclusive—feminism could lead to a “rigid sense of political correctness that has a dampening spirit on humor,” she thought—Wasserstein’s plays show the compatibility of comedy and feminist thought.54

THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF HUMOR: CONTEMPORARY JEWISH WOMEN COMEDIANS

Jewish female humorists are more widely accepted today than ever before. The documentary The Aristocrats, in which 100 comedians are asked to give their renditions of the same obscene joke, is dominated by Jews. Although there are relatively few women comedians in the film, many of them are Jewish—Wendy Leibman, Susie Essman, Rita Rudner, Judy Gold, Cathy Ladman, and the sexy, sly, and sardonic Sarah Silverman. In addition to these comics, Jewish women comedians performing today include Jackie Hoffman, Cory Kahaney, Sarah Bernhard, Rain Pryor, Carol Leifer, Lisa Kron, Amy Borkowsky, Jessica Kirson, Sherry Davey, Julie Goldman, Betsy Salkind, Cate Lazarus, Susannah Perlman, and Jesse Klein.

Why are Jewish women comics so prominent today? Why do there seem to be so many of them, and why are they everywhere?55

One factor is the tremendous growth in comedy clubs that took place after the late 1980s. Comedy clubs have been joined by a wide network of small theaters and underground, alternative, “hipster” comedy rooms, and clubs—spaces where stand-up comedians, sketch comedy, and improv groups can perform. In addition, there is the festival route for stand-up, improv, sketch comedy, and short films.

This interactive world allows many younger comics to gain a foothold in the world of comedy. Opportunities in the television world, especially in cable television, where young comedians are recruited for stand-up, sketch comedy, and improv shows as performers and writers, have enlarged the possibilities for comedians. Working in multiple genres, lucky comedians today can be experimental and commercially successful.
A second factor is that women have so many more role models today than ever before. In the postfeminist era, women have become prominent in all the professions—in business, law, and medicine; as directors, theater producers, and actors; and in all capacities in television, especially cable television, and in performance art. Young comics see before them a plethora of female comic role models. A quarter century of Saturday Night Live comediennes and highly visible female comics of all ethnicities have broadened the theatrical types that women play. This contrasts with the experience of the early improv comics, for whom the only role models were women who played “angels in the house,” “mothers,” and “whores” or were zany screwballs à la Lucille Ball, stern spinsters like Eve Arden, or, in Joan Rivers’s view, women comics acting too much like men.

The flourishing of gay culture has also stimulated female comedy—there are many lesbian comics performing today, including Jewish lesbian comics, and these women have innovated fresh, forceful material. According to Susie Essman, who plays the foul-mouthed Suzy Green in Curb Your Enthusiasm, “really good lesbian stand-ups . . . are happier with power, not like straight [comedians] trying to be nice young ladies.”

Finally, there is the prominence of comedy itself in today’s world. The great success of Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and the Comedy Central channel point to the central role that comedy now plays—many people believe that these shows are the only place where they can get their news and the truth.

All of these factors have empowered contemporary women comedians, including many Jewish comics, and have helped to catapult them into comic success.

The careers of the four “Katz’s deli” comedians in Making Trouble suggest the kind of issues and performance styles that characterize contemporary Jewish women comedians. They also reveal that, despite the many new arenas for female comics, it remains the case that to be Jewish and female in the still “all boys club” of comedy can be daunting. Katz’s deli comic Cory Kahaney was often told to keep her acts “Jew-free,” but she never hid her Jewish identity. “It’s a very big thing among Jews when someone’s Jewish,” Jackie Hoffman notes in the film. “So whatever comic or whoever in the performing world was Jewish, it was a huge deal.” The Making Trouble pioneers helped these women find their voices and comic styles.

**JUDY GOLD: “MOMMY QUEEREST”**

Judy Gold won two Emmy Awards for writing and producing The Rosie
O’Donnell Show, a Cable Ace Award for her HBO special, and was twice nominated as funniest female stand-up by The American Comedy Awards. More recently she has had hit solo shows, “25 Questions for a Jewish Mother” and “Mommy Queerest.”

Often Gold’s performances are little more than a stream of Jewish mother jokes. “My mother is the most annoying person on the face of the earth,” she jokes, “a miserable human being.” “You can say something to her and she cannot only make it negative, she makes it about herself. What are you having for New Year’s, filet mignon? I’ll be eating shit.” (Her mother’s just-published autobiography, she has quipped, is titled I Came, I Saw, I Criticized.) A lesbian who is raising two sons with her one-time partner, Gold often quips that she feels sorry for her kids because they had two Jewish mothers. She jokes that as a child, every time she left the house, her mother feared something was going to happen; when once she came home forty-five minutes late, her mother had already called the police and was serving them her homemade rugaleh in her living room. Gold’s tardiness led her mother to attach an egg timer to her belt to remind her to get home on time. No fun and games in this family: Mrs. Gold’s favorite read-aloud story to the young child was the pop-up version of The Diary of Anne Frank.

As an easily recognizable Jewish shtick, Gold’s routine has an immediate payoff, calling forth a reflex response that allows spectators to laugh at this “insider” humor. Gold believes that her humor challenges rather than reifies stereotypes, illumining the real women behind them. Audiences respond to her Jewish mother jokes because in fact they are stereotypes. Making the stereotypes excessive through insult humor may actually explode them, revealing through exaggeration that despite the kernel of truth that may lurk within, the caricature is anachronistic and incorrect.

“To be a great stand-up,” Gold says, “you have to tell the truth and you have to draw upon your own experience. . . . Otherwise there’s no passion.” And comedienes often must take on aggressive styles of humor that are staples of the comedy-club circuit. Gold explains, “Stand-up comedy is not a feminine profession at all. . . . it’s very aggressively male.” Susie Essman, who stars in the HBO show Curb Your Enthusiasm, argues that stand-up is far more aggressive than doing sit-coms. Joan Rivers “had to be self-deprecating,” she observes, “because you couldn’t be an attractive, funny woman. It was too threatening.” Gold echoes her thought: “There’s nothing more threatening to a man than a female comic.”

But times are changing. Essman believes that comics like Judy Gold are changing them, and maybe, too, “younger guys [audiences and comedians] are
Jews and Humor

nowhere near as sexist, maybe because their moms are out in the workplace.” And women comics are getting more comfortable with the power of comedy. However confrontational, says Gold, “when you’re standing on stage alone with the mike—the phallus symbol . . . it is incredibly powerful.”

JACKIE HOFFMAN: “THE KVETCHING CONTINUES”

Jackie Hoffman is an eight-year veteran of Chicago’s Second City improv group, an Obie Award winner for best actress, and much acclaimed for her performance as the pregnant coworker friend, Joan, in the film *Kissing Jessica Stein*. Hoffman also won awards for her performance in *Hairspray* and is also a regular performer on late-night television and comedy specials. She has done many one-woman shows, often with Jewish themes—for example, ”The Kvetching Continues,” “Jackie Hoffman’s Hanukkah,” “Jackie’s Kosher Xhristmas”—and she also played in *The Sisters Rosensweig* and the rock musical *Xanadu*.

Like Gold, Hoffman uses Jewish mother routines in her shows. Since every word to an older parent might be the last, she says that she frequently ends her calls by telling her mother she loves her. Her mother calls her too, leaving messages frantic with worry whenever Jackie does not immediately answer. Then she calls the police to describe her missing daughter. “She’s not married. She has a filthy mouth. If she took her hair out of her eyes she’d be a beautiful girl.” In another joke, Hoffman describes the language tapes she played to learn Yiddish. Rather than the standard phrases for language instruction, these tapes conveyed key phrases of Jewish life: “Her daughter gives her heartache. I feel sick.” Like Gold’s mother, Hoffman’s mother is supportive, despite the hostile-seeming jokes. “She always says, ‘If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have any material.’ My mom’s mantra is ‘Don’t give up the paycheck!'”

CORY KAHANEY: *JAP: JEWISH PRINCESSES OF COMEDY*

Cory Kahaney is a popular New York comedian who created the hit multimedia show, *JAP: Jewish Princesses of Comedy*, a tribute to Jewish comic “queens”—Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, Betty Walker, Jean Carroll, and Totie Fields—who paved the way for “all females in comedy,” in Kahaney’s view. Clips of the legendary queens are combined with individual sets by contemporary comedians—including *Making Trouble’s* Jessica Kirson and Jackie Hoffman. Kahaney was a grand finalist on NBC’s *Last Comic Standing* and has appeared in many comedy specials on Comedy Central and HBO. Kahaney also conceived and developed *The Radio Ritas*, a nationally syndicated talk radio show for Green-
stone Media, a company created by Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda to provide radio programming for woman.

Kahaney allows that she was inspired to do comedy by her own Jewish mother’s humorous impersonations and her family’s regular trips to Grossinger’s, where they loved the comedy acts. One of her signature routines pokes fun at her own parenting of her teenage daughter, whom she raised as a single mother. “The other day, she emptied the dishwasher, which is like an annual act,” Kahaney says. “And she asks, ‘Do I get a cell phone now?’ And I said: ‘What happens when you take out the garbage? Do you get a Mercedes?’”

JESSICA KIRSON: “MY COOKIES’S GONE”

The youngest of the Katz’s deli comics in Making Trouble, Jessica Kirson, a social worker from New Jersey before she turned to comedy, has appeared on Comedy Central, Nickelodeon, the Tonight Show, and the Logo Network. Kirson tours with her one-woman show, My Cookie’s Gone—her answer to a homeless person who asks her for food (“Do I look like I have leftovers?”)—and makes fun of “fat, ugly” girls like herself who complain about getting hit on. Like the others, Kirson also jokes about her mother: “My mother is a therapist. She had clients in the house, so I always had to be quiet. I was like Ann Frank in my own house.” Her jokes come at a frantic pace—she seems “out of control, like a more sarcastic version of early-career Robin Williams,” wrote a Variety reviewer, and she “subverts some of standup’s biggest cliches” about marriage, beauty, sex, ethnicity, and race. “I’m an angry Jew, and you’ll get to hear about it,” she tells her audiences. “But I feel like an angry black woman.”

* * *

Not all of the Making Trouble pioneers or the four younger “deli guides” would label their comedy “feminist.” But in drawing on their own experiences for humor, they reflected and helped to shape perspectives about issues of concern to women. Women have special secrets and shared bonds they tell us, like pomander balls; dieting and purging; the travails and joys of dating, marriage, and sex; being mothers and daughters. Much that defines their authenticity is also related to their experiences as Jews, and the dual emphasis on their Jewish backgrounds and female identities made them distinctive in the comedy world. Their struggles fill the screen in Making Trouble, along with their many triumphs, and always there are the jokes. We learn that laughter provides a way not only to cope with the tensions and conflicts of daily life but also to transcend them.

The gift of comedy that emanates from these Jewish women has been
to make us transcend our own daily lives as well and to see, through humor, alternative visions of who we could be if we, too, had the courage to challenge—and mock—the strictures that hold us back.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A version of this paper was published in *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 29 (2010): 123-38, a special issue in honor of Sarah Blacher Cohen.

NOTES

1 Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days* (New York: Doubleday, 1945), 11.


3 Joan Rivers in *Making Trouble*.


6 Cohen, “The Unkosher Comediennes,” 105-07.


8 See http://jwa.org for information on the Jewish Women’s Archive projects.

9 JWA, *Making Trouble*.

10 Like her namesake, scholar-playwright Sarah Blacher Cohen loved to make people laugh. Even her academic presentations were filled with jokes, some of them surprisingly racy: she enjoyed offering audiences the choice of “the most vulgar or the least


13 As humor theorist Nancy Walker notes, women used humor to connect with one another and to share concerns about their oppression. See, for example, Nancy Walker, “Women’s Humor and Group Identity,” in Sochen, Women’s Comic Visions, 57-81.


16 Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand,” 69.


18 Cited in Romeyn and Kugelmass, Let There Be Laughter!, 27.


26 Ibid., 73.

27 Grossman, Funny Woman, 149.


29 Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand,” 73.

30 This account of Tucker is taken from Antler, The Journey Home, 137-43; Antler, You Never Call! You Never Write!, 17-21; and Antler’s comments in Making Trouble.

31 Rivers, Making Trouble.

32 On Rivers, see Cohen, “The Unkosher Comediennes,” 105-24; Nachman, Seriously Funny, 591-625.

33 Rivers, Enter Talking, 293.

34 Nachman, Seriously Funny, 601.
Ibid., 268-69, 274.
36 Ibid., 608.
37 Ibid., 276-78, 298-99.
38 Rivers, Enter Talking, 341-42.
39 Rivers, Making Trouble.
40 Cohen, “The Unkosher Comediennes,” 118.
41 Ibid., 120-21.
42 Ibid., 122.
43 Ibid., 119.
44 Nachman, Seriously Funny, 600.
47 Radner, Making Trouble.
48 Ibid.
50 Wasserstein, Making Trouble.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand,” 68-84.
54 Cited in Andrew Wallenstein, “From This She Makes A Living?,” Hadassah Magazine (June/July 2006). Accessed online October 1, 2009.
55 Thanks to comedian Lauren Antler for her insights on this question.
57 Ibid.
58 This discussion of Judy Gold is taken from Antler, You Never Call! You Never Write!, 249-52.
60 Ibid.
61 “So Laugh A Little,” Jewish Women’s Archive, Performance at Copacabana, New York City (14 March 2005); Antler, You Never Call! You Never Write!, 248.
63 Antler, You Never Call, You Never Write!, 253-54.