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Tragicomedy and Zikkaron in Mel Brooks’s To Be or Not To Be

Joan Latchaw and David Peterson

Much has been made of Mel Brooks’s The Producers (both film and Broadway musical), yet little critical attention has been paid to To Be or Not To Be (1983), which Brooks produced and in which he played the leading role of Frederick Bronski. It has most often been (mis)understood as a mere remake of the Ernst Lubitsch 1942 classic of the same title. Wes D. Gehring comments, for example, that Brooks’s version “followed Lubitsch’s original nearly scene for scene,” and he quotes film critic Pauline Kael’s assessment that the remake “has nothing to take the place of that . . . anti-Nazi rambunctiousness” exhibited by Lubitsch’s version. Other critics have further dismissed Brooks’s technique. David A. Brenner asserts that Brooks’s film merely “raised an important question about the generic status of parody: What happens when film parody becomes banal or even habitual.”

Yet Brooks’s film does more than simply rehash Lubitsch. Indeed, it substantially revises and redirects the original in terms of character, plot, form, style, themes, and, ultimately, purpose. Jewish characters, for example, are more prevalent. In addition to Lupinski, we have Gruba, the Bronski Theatre’s Jewish housekeeper, and her extended family and friends. The 1983 version significantly adds an out and proud gay character, Anna’s dresser Sasha. Pauline Kael’s dismissive protestations notwithstanding, Brooks’s film brings Jewish humor to the fore more forcefully than Lubitsch’s. The 1983 To Be contains more one-liners and jokes, many of which are much more clearly based on Jewish in-group knowledge than the 1942 version. For example, when Sobinski, Anna’s admirer, asks after her cat, Moska, and her bird, Kishka, Anna, after a silence spawned by her momentary ignorance as to whom Sobinski refers (revealing that she has deceived her fans regarding her dedication to her pets), says, “Oh, Moska ate Kishka.” Another classic one-liner is given by Gruba, a stereotypical Eastern European Jew with babushka, while talking with Bronski about Shakespeare: “Shakespeare wasn’t Jewish?” she queries incredulously, “Go figure.”

Many of these revisions, then, make salient what Lubitsch’s version did not—the Jewishness of the story. Although Melchior Lengyl (the original story’s author), Edward Justus Mayer (the screenwriter), Lubitsch, the studio owners, and Jack Benny were Jewish, as numerous film historians have noted,
nobody in 1941-1942 Hollywood was going to make a Jewish-focused film, regardless of what was happening to Jews in World War II Europe. Thus Lubitsch’s film generally limits itself to the invasion of Poland and Polish resistance. While Brooks’s version similarly focuses on a broadly construed, post-invasion “Poland,” Brooks knows that in remaking the film the Holocaust will be present in his audience’s mind. Thus the historical events form an important, however muted, theme in the film, portrayed by the hiding of Jewish families, transfers to concentration camps, and acts of Jewish resistance. More significantly, Brooks’s film depicts how the Shoah’s penumbra encompassed numerous ethnic, political, and sexual minorities, arguing that the Holocaust literally and metaphorically affected all “Poles,” a national identity that includes the audience.

The film’s engagement with the Holocaust could be construed as a form of *zikkaron* [remembrance], the basis for many Jewish festivals (Sukkot, Hanukkah, Passover), fast days (Tisha B’av, Fast of Esther), holy days (Shabbat, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah), and communal events (Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron). Sometimes translated as “reminder,” *zikkaron* can refer to the covenant between God and the Jewish people or invite commemoration of a historical event. The Jewish people are, in fact, commanded to recall and reflect upon moments of tragedy, of triumph, of survival, or of disaster averted. As Harold Fisch notes, eating matzoh during Passover, for example, serves as a *zikkaron* for both the “‘bread of affliction’ eaten by the Israelite slaves in Egypt” and for “the suddenness of their redemption from that same slavery.” Similarly, the *Megillat Esther* entails that all Jews commemorate the defeat of Haman through “feasting and merrymaking, and . . . sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor” (Esth 9:22).

Appropriately, Brooks harnesses one traditional form of Jewish remembrance, Purim, in order to produce his own *zikkaron*. Brooks adapts Purim’s themes and theatricality, drawing from both the Megillah and *Purimspielen* [humorous plays staged on Purim], to remember the events of the war. As Harold Fisch argues, *zikkaron* “operates in two directions, backwards and forwards . . . having reference to the future as much as to the past.” Such bidirectional memory is an important component of Brooks’s revision of Lubitsch’s film. Brooks’s film looks backward to remember the tragic history of World War II while celebrating survival, and it looks forward to envision a process for resisting future holocausts for all peoples.

This need to mourn loss, celebrate survival, and envision a better future accounts for the film’s tragicomic structuring at least in part. Tragicomedy wields comedic structural elements such as romance, farce, burlesque, satire,
Tragicomedy and Zikkaron in Mel Brooks’s *To Be or Not To Be*—to confront tragic experiences such as moral struggle, the dissolution of the self, or the destruction of a society. Brooks’s film demonstrates how tragicomedy blends, using Lee Bliss’s definition, “tragic potential” with “comedy’s final reconciliations.”\(^\text{12}\) As Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope argue in their introduction to *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, the tragicomic form also has important, though frequently ignored, political implications: “tragicomedy appears conservative in the sense that it is driven by certain forces of reconciliation and regeneration. Yet such regeneration frequently comes in the form of a displacement of the political status quo, the regeneration of a political nation away from tyranny.”\(^\text{13}\)

Applying Bliss’s definition, the *Megillat Esther* can be read as a tragicomic text that blends “tragic potential” with “comedy’s final reconciliations.” For example, the Megillah’s central villain, Haman, is characterized as being so egotistical that he plots the destruction of the Jewish people because of Mordecai’s refusal to bow to him. That threat of destruction has tragic overtones, both for the Jews and for the Persians. Haman’s monomaniacal hatred of all Jews spreads like a cancer through all of Persia. Yet, consistent with the tragicomic impulse, Haman’s plot is undone through a reversal of fortunes that sees Haman’s fall and the Jews’ triumph. Furthermore, Haman’s character, both in the Megillah and in Talmudic tradition, has a comedic component. Recall, for example, when King Ahasuerus, remembering Mordecai’s service to him, asks Haman, “What should be done for a man whom the king desires to honor?” (Esth 6:6); Haman, thinking the king is referring to himself, suggests a present of expensive royal clothing and a horse to be followed up with a parade of honor through the streets of Shushan. What makes this moment so humorous is its delicious irony. We readers know something that Haman does not: Mordecai is the intended honoree. So when the text draws our attention to Haman’s inner thoughts—“Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?” (Esth 6:6)—we have an opportunity to laugh at his egotism. The king decrees that Mordecai should be so honored, foiling Haman’s attempts to glorify himself. The image of Haman as the humiliated villain having to lead Mordecai through the streets simply adds to the humor, which the Talmudic tradition extends with a story of how Haman’s daughter, thinking he is Mordecai leading her father, pours a chamber pot on her father’s head (and then commits suicide).\(^\text{14}\)

The rest of this article explores how Brooks’s tragicomic zikkaron functions. We first explore how Brooks uses Jewish comedic forms, particularly *Purimspieln* and folk traditions related to schlemiels and schlimazels, to reveal
the characters’ foibles, particularly those that prevent successful collaboration and hence prevent successful resistance to tyranny and oppression. We next explore how, as the tragedy of Poland’s fall unfolds, the characters attempt to collaborate against tyranny, by themselves adapting Purimspiel theatricality and techniques. Here we see that their reversals of fortune, a key theme from the Megillah, necessitate reversals of roles, a key theme from Purimspiel, in order to survive. Finally we examine how the characters triumph over the Nazis through collaborative resistance. Here again we see Purimspiel techniques used to overcome impending tragedy.

In the opening scenes of To Be, all the characters reflect what could be described as comedic or parodic variations on Haman’s egotism, frequently fulfilling stereotypical roles. Like Haman and his need for fame and status, Frederick and Anna Bronski are embroiled in their competing desires to be lauded and to receive prominent billing. Anna, like the character from the film’s opening song (“Sweet Georgia Brown”), is desirous of the admiration of men, regardless of the consequences to her marriage. She and Sasha are lost in the fog of romance, plotting Anna’s tryst with Lieutenant Sobinski. Sasha initially appears to be a shallow celebrity- and fashion-obsessed drama queen. He swoons over Anna’s possible affair with the handsome (though laughably innocent) Sobinski, who in turn is a mock-heroic parody of the dashing war hero. Sasha, in shadken [match maker]-like manner, encourages the affair, playing the stereotype of gay men being interested primarily in affairs of the heart.

The Bronskis and Sasha are depicted as unconcerned by impending war; indeed, while other cast members—led by Lupinski—gather around the radio listening intently to an Adolf Hitler speech, Bronski denounces such concern as mere “politics.” While Lupinski does seem politically aware and hence nobler than the Bronskis, he also obsesses over his desire to play Shylock, constantly undercutting Bronski with cynical—sometimes mean-spirited—witticisms about the latter’s acting abilities. He does not initially get to play Shylock because Bronski always demands the spotlight, and thus Lupinski often appears more like the luckless schlimazel, “the perennial victim of circumstance and gratuitous accident, none of his own making.”

The character with the most foibles is certainly Bronski. He is obsessed with his own importance (much like Haman) and thus cannot perceive the seriousness of Hitler’s threat. He is so absorbed by his own sense of greatness as an actor and so obsessed with his ire at Sobinski walking out during his Hamlet monologue—surely a personal affront—that he does not understand that war has been declared by Germany, hearing instead another iteration of his own ego-centric drama:
Anna: I hate him, too. Everybody hates him. All Europe hates him.
Bronski: Well they should! I mean, two nights in row (sniffles).
Anna: Two nights in a row? What do you mean, what are you talking about?
Bronski: He walked out on me again!
Anna: Oh Bronski! Bronski! Can’t you forget you for one minute?! It’s war!

Even his acknowledgment that the invasion is “bad too” places the tragedy of war on par with the “tragedy” of having someone walking out on his performance. Like the Fools of Chelm, who misunderstand or misrepresent reality, Bronski is “totally unaware of his folly.”

We laugh, then, because Bronski’s tunnel vision is so far removed from the imminent tragedy. Both Haman and Bronski, in their pettiness and egotism, are at times envisioned as witless fools, though ultimately Haman is clearly motivated by evil intent whereas Bronski appears mainly to be a shallow-brained innocent.

Moreover, Bronski’s ineptness—his poor acting skills, his political naïveté, and so forth—align him with the quintessential schlemiel. The schlemiel is typically defined as a naïve simpleton, one who “falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight.” Bronski, like many legendary schlemiels, potentially becomes a cuckold through Anna’s romance with Sobinski. Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool” provides an example of the archetypal schlemiel as cuckold. Gimpel marries the town prostitute, who, though they have not had sex, gives birth seventeen weeks after their wedding. Gimpel questions his wife about this conundrum, and she swears that the child is his: “She said she had had a grandmother who carried just as short a time and she resembled this grandmother of hers as one drop of water does another. . . . To tell the plain truth, I didn’t believe her; but when I talked it over next day with the schoolmaster he told me that the very same thing had happened to Adam and Eve. Two they went up to bed, and four they descended.” Here Gimpel, in typical schlemiel fashion, easily accepts the suspect logic of both his wife and the schoolmaster: their syllogistic reasoning is valid but also untrue.

Gimpel in his innocence, however, cannot pierce the veil and seems easily duped. Bronski, upon uncovering the “other man” when he slips into bed with who he thinks is Anna, becomes angry at first, but like Gimpel, the mood passes quickly. When he later confronts Anna about Sobinski, anger must be pushed aside in order to prepare to meet Erhardt:

Anna: Oh, sugarplum I’m so glad you’re ok!
Bronski: Don’t sugarplum me. Save it for your boyfriend, Lt. Sobinski!
Anna: Alright, we’ll discuss that later. What did you do with Siletski’s body?
Bronski: Never mind Siletski’s body! What did you do with Sobinski’s body?
Anna: How can you ask a question like that at a time like this?! Don’t you realize Capt. Schultz out there is ready to take you to see Col. Erhardt who’s head of the Gestapo?!

Of course, Anna has not done anything “with Sobinski’s body”; though she has flirted with him (and has kissed him), Bronski was never truly a cuckold. The dialogue here argues, moreover, that there are larger, more important problems than a jealous husband’s demands for explanations. Bronski still seems to insist on dwelling on his own sense of misery rather than accepting that the tragedy of war unfolding around him merits his full dedication. This disjunction between Bronski’s self-absorption and the call to serve is the source of our laughter, yet it draws our attention to the need to serve something larger than ourselves in times of tragic need.

At times Bronski appears less self-serving and more politically aware. For instance, he plays Hitler in the film’s second song “Little Piece,” part of the theatre’s “Naughty Nazis” routine. Filmed in part in homage to Charlie Chaplin’s *The Little Dictator*, the routine satirizes Hitler’s avowals of peaceful intentions. As we laugh during this spoof, we also begin to feel the pressure of the larger political consequences of der Fuhrer’s desire for just a “little piece”—they will add up to all of Europe. And yet, Bronski’s performance in this routine indicates that he still has not moved beyond taking center stage, has not understood that resisting Hitler and fascism must entail more than simple parody or satire. As much as the company does not understand what it faces, neither does the Polish government: the foreign office drops the curtain on the performance to avoid angering “Chancellor Hitler,” a farcical gesture in itself, as if closing a minor theatre’s act was going to stop the Nazi war machine.

While the film’s opening scenes predominantly rely on Jewish humor and comedic folk types to highlight the characters’ foibles, the second half highlights the tragic potential of what the characters face as a result of the invasion. At this point, the historical tragedy becomes more salient, more threatening, as the Nazis, having entered Warsaw, begin to directly affect various theatre members, depicted by a series of personal tragedies following Poland’s fall. The first tragic moment points to the film’s function as *zikkaron*. We have spent most of the film up to this point laughing at egotistical fools and schlemiels. However, the mood begins to shift as we begin to remember historical trauma: the formation of the ghetto and the struggle to escape Nazi terror through hiding are explicitly addressed, bringing to the fore what was mostly latent.
It is appropriate to zikkaron that the first affected by the fascist takeover is Gruba, the theatre’s stereotypically Yiddish-accented seamstress. She comes to Bronski to ask if her cousin Rifka can stay at the theatre: “She was bombed out,” Gruba explains, “She’s a Jew, she doesn’t have where to go.” Bronski’s rather blithe agreement, and then his surprise when Rifka is joined by two more (“What,” Gruba quips, “you think she’d leave her husband and her son behind?”), keeps the tone light, but from this moment on the audience is never allowed to forget that the Shoah has begun. Thus, for example, when Sobinski later comes to the theatre looking for Anna, Gruba and a more extended version of her family appear fearfully on the stairs, their clothes now bearing prominent yellow stars. These scenes represent one of a number of important moments in the film where the tragicomic form begins to reveal its potential for doing the work of zikkaron. Gruba’s “She doesn’t have where to go,” for example, not only draws the audience’s attention to the fictive family’s potential tragedy (relieved by Bronski’s compassion), but also recalls the plight of millions of real Jews who, unlike Gruba and her family, were not hidden but exterminated.

The Bronskis are also affected, receiving notice that the Gestapo are taking their house. Bronski swears resistance with great bluster: “They cut off my gasoline. They closed my bank account. They took my pearl stickpin; they took my little pinkie ring; they took the top off my gold cane. But they are not, I repeat NOT, taking my house. Never!” His protest resembles that of the henpecked schlemiel, with the Gestapo replacing the shrewish wife who enjoys ordering her husband around while her friends look on:

“Schlemiel,” she ordered. “Get under the table!” Without a word the man crawled under the table.

“Now schlemiel, come out!” she commanded again.

“I won’t I won’t,” he defied her angrily. “I’ll show you I’m still master in this house!”

The Bronskis are evicted in the next scene (with Bronski uttering a defeated “Got everything?”). Yet, though they are victims, Bronski adds a small, but important, act of resistance with a seemingly ineffectual skewing of the Hitler portrait now hanging on their living room wall. Ironically, Brooks, the Jewish actor, gets to do what Jews in the Warsaw ghetto could not—he verbally protests the taking of his house; in so doing, in a sense, he gives them voice. This, too, is a form of zikkaron. We are again reminded of the millions who first lost everything—livelihoods, homes, shoes, eyeglasses, lives.

Zikkaron is extended to acknowledge the Nazi oppression of homosexuals, gay men in particular. Soon Sasha, who has taken in the homeless Bronskis, is affected, and he appears wearing an inverted pink triangle. This detail is
inaccurate; in actuality homosexuals were assigned pink triangles only in the camps. Brooks’s choice, however, a retelling of historical tragedy, argues for a direct connection between the persecution of Jews and of homosexuals.

As the tragedies unfold, the Bronskis, Sasha, and Gruba—like Mordecai, Esther, and the other Jews of Shushan—find that they are no longer masters of their own “house,” and in this respect, they become, like the schlemiel under the table, “a metaphor for European Jewry . . . ineffectual . . . at self-advance- ment and self-preservation . . . emerg[ing] as the archetypal Jew, especially in [their] capacity of potential victim.” Moreover, as their fates are inextricably tied to the fate of Poland, they become not just a metaphor for European Jewry but the Everyman of any nation or people subject to tyranny.

Their reversals of fortune entail a transformation of their characters: as their livelihoods and lives are threatened, they form their own microcosmic version of the Polish Underground. Anna, for example, changes from ingénue to spy, willing to risk her marriage in the rendezvous with Siletski and arrest—possibly even her life—in attempting to prevent the Gestapo from taking Sasha. Sasha, too, is willing to risk arrest by asserting his right to be with “another pink triangle” and, as we discuss below, risk his life in helping the hidden Jews escape from the theatre. It is from Sasha that we learn the meaning of the yellow stars and pink triangles:

Anna: What the hell’s that pink thing?
Sasha: Haven’t you heard? The latest fashion in occupied Poland. Jews wear yellow stars, homosexuals wear pink triangles.

Anna reacts with a stricken “Oh Sasha, how awful for you,” but rather than indulge in self-pity (as Bronski did when he’s walked out on), Sasha stands erect and says with both indignation and dignity, “I hate it.” Anna gets up to comfort him, and Sasha adds with campy demure: “It clashes with everything.” Rather than being a crass stereotype of gay men as some critics claim, Sasha here demonstrates “humorous displacement”—which uses “scorn to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention.” Although Sasha is aware that the triangle represents his subjection by the Nazi machine, he immediately deflects its power through a defense mechanism that draws energy away from the displeasure, “transforming it into pleasure.” As a result, Sasha is able to go off to seek his “triangle” friend in relatively good spirits. More significantly, zikkaron operates here as well: Sasha’s use of camp humor allows him to maintain, as it did for many survivors while in the concentration camps, a sense of “control in a situation where no control was possible.”

In Purimspielesque fashion, Bronski is also transformed, changing from the comedic schlemiel into a heroic, or what Ruth Wisse terms a political,
schlemiel. In the first part of the film, Bronski was—as Wisse argues all schle-
mieles are—“vulnerable [and] ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement,”
thus representing “the archetypal Jew, especially in his capacity of potential
victim.” As we note above, he, like many of the other characters, is certainly
victimized, at least in terms of his loss of material possessions. Yet he also
refuses to be further victimized, choosing to risk his life by first impersonating
Colonel Erhardt and then playing Professor Siletski. In each case, his initial
reaction to the challenge, potentially life-threatening to himself and to the
theatre’s crew and denizens, is doubt and panic, a recognition of his failure as
an actor generally: “I don’t think I can get away with it,” he exclaims when he
must play Erhardt.

But as Wisse notes, schlemiels often have within them a “hard inner
strength,” a strength Bronski, much to his surprise and the audience’s, begins
to demonstrate in the second half of the film. Bronski sheds the ineffectual
and foolish aspects of his schlemiel nature and becomes a powerful political
agent. For example, during the first interview with Erhardt, Bronski disguised
as Siletski discovers he really can act through improvisation, and in that
moment he becomes the heroic schlemiel. He triumphs first by stealing lines
from the real Siletski and then, having quickly and astutely studied Nazi char-
acter, by successfully intimidating the Gestapo, particularly Erhardt himself,
who appears to be an even greater schlemiel (and, as his protestations against
Gestapo failures reveal, a schlimazel).

Bronski continues such masquerading for the rest of the film, his impro-
visational powers growing each time he takes on a new role. When he again
appears as Siletski to secure Sasha’s release and encounters the body of the real
Siletski in the room, Bronski’s quick thinking (shaving off and then attaching
a spare fake beard on the dead Siletski) saves the day. The real Siletski becomes
the “imposter;” Bronski the imposter becomes the “real” Siletski, and Sasha is
freed at his request. The theatre troupe then appears at Gestapo headquarters
posing as members of Hitler’s security detail and claiming to have uncovered a
plot against the Fuhrer. They reveal the “imposter Siletski” as the real Siletski
by pulling off Bronski’s fake beard, and the troupe then “arrests” both Bronski
and Sasha, and together they all make their escape.

Though the theatre troupe’s efforts were unnecessary, it reveals that
they are becoming a collaborative force to be reckoned with. Indeed, Bronski
would have been unable to develop his heroic potential without the entire
troupe’s involvement. Together, they collect props, bolster Bronski’s confi-
dence, and express their belief in his ability. This joint effort reveals, to both
Bronski and the audience, that he and the others have become collaborative
resistance fighters (however in comic fashion), recalling for the audience the historic Polish resistance, as well as all Jewish resisters.

This ability to collaborate contrasts with their first efforts, which occur during the film’s third musical number, “Ladies.” Another lighthearted show tune, it starkly contrasts to the tragic events unfolding backstage: Sasha is fleeing from Gestapo officers, who are, he declares to Anna in panic, “rounding up homosexuals and putting them in concentration camps.” The scene and the line are fraught with terror. The film’s previous references to the Shoah in part create an expectation that we might see Jews arrested at some point. We certainly see Jews having to go into hiding; but the film never represents the ghetto, arrests, or the box cars. Sasha’s line and situation substitute for the expected subject (“rounding up Jews”) with an unexpected one (“rounding up homosexuals”). Doing so draws our attention to forgotten history, insisting (as with the pink triangles/yellow stars) that there is an important parallel between the various groups who suffered during the Nazi horror. “Let’s face it,” Bronski quips at one point, “without Jews, fags, and gypsies there is no theatre.” Nor is there full remembrance.

The scene’s tragic charge and ending are actually bolstered by its comedic elements. The “Ladies” sequence entails a form of masquerading common in both gay men’s camp performance and Purimspieln: the theatre crew attempts to save Sasha from the Gestapo by dressing him in full drag and sending him out on stage as a substitute for Anna, where he suddenly must play the “lovely lady,” who is most beloved of all. This action connects him to Esther (the most beautiful); he thus becomes the figure for her, a connection reinforced by Bronski singing, “She’s a princess / No, she’s a queen!” The moment is poignant, especially when we recall that one possible meaning of Esther’s name according to the Talmud is “hidden,” which associates her with the hidden hand of God. As Esther’s ethnic identity was hidden by necessity (Mordecai worrying that she might lose the king’s favor), so, too, in this scene, is Sasha’s sexual identity.

The ruse fails, however, for several reasons. First, it fails because Sasha, a tall man with a solid build, cannot fully become a woman (though his name can be used for either men or women). Ironically, his inability to mask his masculinity comports with some rabbinic rulings that those who masquerade as women during Purim must do something to indicate they are men (and thus avoid breaking the Levitical law against men wearing women’s clothing and vice versa). But it also fails because Bronski, in contrast to his later “performances,” cannot yet improvise well enough to work Sasha into the number in order to better hide him; Bronski drops Sasha on a dip, and the latter’s wig falls off, revealing that which was hidden.
Sasha’s arrest and impending incarceration in a concentration camp galvanize the theatre group. Their collaborative efforts, fraught with comedic tension, succeed. Sasha is now rescued, mainly through Bronski’s brilliant improvisations, and the troupe next plans their escape from Poland, which will happen during a “command performance” that the theatre is ordered to give for Hitler. The plan is complex and daring: cast members and the hidden Jews will exit the theatre through a crowd of Nazis by dressing up as clowns. Meanwhile, Bronski will play Hitler (while the “real” Fuhrer watches the clowns), and Lupinski will finally play Shylock, all of which provides a diversion that will allow them to get to a plane—the very one that has brought Hitler to Warsaw—to fly to safety.

The scene in its entirety demonstrates how the film’s tragic and comic modes work in tandem to facilitate *zikkaron*. While it contains several moments worthy of analysis, including Brooks’s performance of Bronski playing Hitler, we choose to focus on two moments that seem to best encompass the film’s tragicomic act of remembrance: Lupinski’s performance of Shylock’s famous monologue and Sasha’s rescuing of the horror-stricken elderly Jewish couple.

In playing the role he has desired most, Lupinski exhibits hard, inner strength, transforming from the comic luckless schlumazel whose only power previously lay in biting wit to a poignant and passionate hero who effectively silences Hitler and the Nazis by wielding the Bard’s Jew. Here Brooks’s production restores what Lubitsch’s had muted: returning the word “Jew” to the speech. In playing Shylock, Lupinski challenges the fake Hitler and the real Nazis: “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” with the last line being delivered with all the weight that post-Holocaust Jewish actors could desire. These are weightier questions than in the Lubitsch version because they serve as a mnemonic trace; for the audience of 1983 and today, “poison” recalls the memory of Zyklon B and “pricking” the literal loss of blood resulting from the final solution.

Lupinski’s heroism seems especially remarkable in that a “customarily gentle European Jew fling[s] himself in fearless abandon at the symbolic Fuhrer” and the Nazi guards. The Shylock monologue answers Hamlet’s/ Bronski’s earlier queries about whether “to be” in the world. The answer is a resounding “yes!” But it’s an inclusive “yes,” as Lupinski stands metonymically for all Polish-born people, whether they be Jews, Christians, gypsies, or gays. Likewise, as Joel Rosenberg points out, the film’s “Slavic Poles”—and by extension the audience—become “Jews”—sharing momentarily the fate and perspective of Shylock.” That is why diverse members of the troupe must
pull together, collaboratively plan the escape, play their roles flawlessly, and support each other unconditionally.

While Lupinski gives his Shylock, distracting the attention of Hitler's guards, Sasha leads the other theatre members and the hidden Jews out of the theatre via their staging of “Klotski’s Klowns.” Members of the troupe have dressed as various forms of clowns, and they proceed to climb out of a car, reproducing the well-known vaudeville act. All goes well, the clowns prancing on stage, sliding through the Third Reich’s finest with pokes and prods, the officers never realizing they are being duped because they are so caught up in that which appears to be mere theatrical shtick. Until, that is, in perhaps the most moving and tragedy-laden moment in the film, the elderly Jewish couple clamber out of the car only to freeze in abject horror before a sea of Nazis. The wife begins a barely audible moan, “They’ll kill us, they’ll kill us.” All seems lost, yet suddenly Sasha bounds back to the stage apron and produces (from God knows where—or, rather, echoing the Megillah, perhaps from the hand of God Himself) two yellow stars and a gun that shoots out the fascist flag. Pinning the stars on the beleaguered couple, he pronounces them “Ju-den! Ju-den!”—naming them, but thereby keeping their identity hidden in plain sight.

The Nazis laugh at this performance of their racist fantasies: “vile” Jews being caught by superior Aryan prowess, the labeling words seeming to cause a Pavlovian reaction that blinds them to what is really going on. It is the most heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching zikkaron: for the film’s audience, the terrible cry of Juden . . . Juden forever invokes the buchstabe lettering on official decrees and yellow stars and the dripping paint of Kristalnacht.

This moment reveals who the real Hamans are, these Nazis ready, like the Persians of Shushan, to witness the slaughter of the Jews. But, as in the Megillah, ultimately the oppressed triumph; the troupe, Purimspielesque clowns all, pass safely out of the theatre and board the waiting trucks that will take them all to freedom in England. And the Nazis? We know they die, pass from history, become the very watchword and name of Evil, defeated by that which they most reviled, by clowns making fools out of the high and mighty, overturning power structures, righting wrongs. Their subterfuges in outwitting the Nazis and their final escape also are moments of zikkaron, metonymically representing and celebrating all survivors of the Holocaust.

The film’s ending highlights overturnings and transformations, all achieved through collaboration. By witnessing Lupinski’s plea for the recognition of common humanity and the elderly Jewish couple’s horror and then rescue, the audience experiences sympathy and empathy, two key tragicomic emotions that link viewers to collective Holocaust memories, forging a strong,
indelible bond between characters and audience, between Pole and non-Pole, gay and straight, Jew and non-Jew. Common sense tells us that nothing should connect a gay non-Jewish Pole with an elderly Jewish couple. However, in terms of both the film’s plot and actual history, these seemingly unrelated minorities were subject to the same denial of their humanity at the hands of the Nazis, though certainly for different reasons and through different means. Thus it is important to the film’s message of cooperation and collaboration that gays and Jews work together to resist oppression.

This message is addressed by the film’s repeated references to and performances of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be.” While frequently read as a tragic outpouring of existential angst generated by the “slings and arrows of affliction” that Hamlet—and by extension humanity—that must face, Brooks seeks to do what Hamlet did not, to ask the question from another perspective: Shylock’s. Whereas Hamlet questions his will to live, Shylock insists on his right to survive. Such insistence motivates the Bronski Theatre’s collaborative efforts, with all their Purimspielesque overturnings. Purim overturnings are only temporary; like all comedic endeavors, normalcy, at least for the characters, has been re-established. But the tragicomic challenges us to make the choice between Hamlet’s solipsistic paralysis and Shylock’s struggle for social justice. Brooks’s filmic zikkaron ultimately says the future demands the latter choice and suggests it can only be possible through a collective effort that begins with the willingness to set social and cultural divisions aside.

NOTES
1 See, for example, Susan Gubar, “Racial Camp in The Producers and Bamboozled,” Film Quarterly 60:2 (2006): 26-37.
2 To Be or Not To Be, directed by Alan Johnson (Twentieth Century Fox, 1983).
6 As both Gemunden, “Space out of Joint,” and Joel Rosenberg, “Shylock’s Revenge: The Doubly Vanishing Jew in Ernst Lubitsch’s To Be or Not To Be,” Prooftext 16 (1996): 209-44, argue, Lubitsch’s film is not stripped of Jewish references or perspectives; however, these elements are conveyed predominantly through implicit discourse or allusion,
a strategy Lubitsch chooses both to avoid censorship and also to appeal to America’s non-Jewish majority. Gemunden cogently argues that Lubitsch’s film presents a German Jewish exile’s perspective on the war through both its comedic attack on Nazism and its critique of Hollywood’s self-censorship of Jewish content and themes. In his powerful analysis of Lubitsch’s film and the “Jewish Question,” Rosenberg asserts that Lubitsch’s film is “one of the few . . . that made any sort of allusion to the situation of Jews in Europe, and perhaps the sole film to let an Eastern European Jewish face and voice [the character Greenberg] do the talking at key points in the story,” “Shylock’s Revenge,” 209.

7 Sander R. Gilman, “Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films,” Critical Inquiry, 26:2 (2000): 288, argues that “The strained nature of [Brooks’] remake was to no little degree the result of that oppressive if unspoken presence of the Shoah in the audience’s awareness. That Brooks too is Jewish did not ameliorate this sense of unease. . . . Comedy in this context was only possible with the bracketing of the Final Solution”; he adds that “The comic . . . is invoked as a means of avoiding any representation of the Shoah. Laughter can exist because the Shoah is unmentioned (and unmentionable).”


10 Fisch, “Reading and Carnival,” 57.

11 Lubitsch’s film has also been discussed as tragicomedy. The harsh judgments of Lubitsch’s film by contemporary film critics Bosley Crowther, Eileen Creelman, Archer Winston, and others led the director to declare in defense of his film’s mixed modes, “I was tired of the two established recognized recipes: drama with comedy relief and comedy with dramatic relief. I had made up my mind to make a picture with no attempt to relieve anybody from anything at anytime” (quoted in Rosenberg, “Shylock’s Revenge,” 242, note 26). For a succinct overview of the negative criticism of Lubitsch’s film, see Gehring, American Dark Comedy, 77-81, and Gemunden, “Space out of Joint,” 76. Brenner, “Laughter and Catastrophe,” 266, identifies Lubitsch’s film, along with Charlie Chaplin’s The Great Dictator (1940), as important precursors to post-Cold War Holocaust tragicomedies.

Tragicomedy and Zikkaron in Mel Brooks’s To Be or Not To Be


15 Some film critics complained Sasha was a negative stereotype. Writing for The Washington Post (16 December 1983), F1, Gary Arnold declared, “The only new character is . . . Sasha, an ostentatiously effeminate gawk exploited for gay jokes on one hand and bogus anxiety on the other.” Vince Canby’s review for The New York Times (16 December 1983), C10, admired Sasha as a “swishily courageous homosexual, who wears his pink triangle with pride,” but noted his character is “not among the film’s great inspirations.”


17 Ibid., 19.


19 According to Pinsker, Schlemiel as Metaphor, 4-8, the schlemiel figure first emerges as the consummate cuckold.


21 Both “Little Piece” and “Ladies,” which we discuss below, were written by Brooks and Ronny Graham, one of the film’s writers (who also plays Sondheim).

22 Interestingly, the plight of Jews is generally depicted in this seemingly disjunctive fashion where their tragic situation seems deflected by humorous lines; for example, later in the film, as the characters are preparing to make their escape, a curtain is lifted to reveal Gruba’s entire extended family, for whom she pleads. Bronski, surprised at their seemingly prolific numbers, exclaims “What are they, Jews or rabbits?”

23 The joke is told in full in Pinsker, Schlemiel as Metaphor, 18.


26 Ibid., 12.

27 Gilman, “Is Life Beautiful?,” 284. Deb Filler and Francine Zuckerman’s Punch Me in the Stomach provides one useful example of how humor functioned in this way. Filler plays thirty-six characters, including her father, all of whom are based on interviews with Holocaust survivors. The father recounts that on his first night in the concentration-camp barracks, someone rolled over on him and the bunk mates laughed all night. “What else could we do?” his character quips. We, the audience members, are often uncomfortably baffled by such moments, but clearly humor serves as a psychologically life-giving coping mechanism. See Deb Filler and Francine Zuckerman, Punch Me in the Stomach, directed by Francine Zuckerman (National Center for Jewish Film, 1997).

28 Wisse, The Schlemiel, 4-5.


Ibid., 233.