Mel Brooks As Jewish Comedian Essay, Research Paper

Mel Brooks’s membership in the elite club of Jewish comedians is essentially

impossible to dispute. The question is whether or not his comedy is atypical.

Satirizing Jewish history and klutzy old Jewish men is normal for Jewish comedy.

However, "Don’t be stupid, be a smarty, come and join the Nazi party,"

is something that you would not expect to hear in typical Jewish comedy (The

Producers). Defined broadly, there are two forms which Mel Brooks’s Jewish humor

takes. The first form is to discuss specifically Jewish topics in a funny way.

This is evident in The Producers and in the Inquisition scene from History of

the World, Part I. The other form is to use certain aspects of Judaism for

comedic value. This form, is typically used by Brooks’ as a means for a quick

laugh as opposed to a major source of plot definition, and is most apparent in

such scenes as that with the Yiddish-speaking Indian in Blazing Saddles. While

exploring Brooks’s types of Jewish humor, this paper will limit its scope. Only

four of Brooks’s films will be discussed in this paper-The Producers, Blazing

Saddles, History of the World, Part I, and To Be or Not To Be. These films were

chosen because the quantity of Jewish content in all of them is considerably

more than in his other films such as Young Frankenstein or Silent Movie. The

four films chosen do an excellent job of portraying the complete range of the

types of Jewish-related humor, which Brooks uses. To understand Mel Brooks

identity as a specifically Jewish comedian it is important to understand how

Jewish he actually was. Melvin Kaminsky was born as the youngest of four

brothers in a crowded New York City apartment to Kitty and Max Kaminsky. He grew

up in a very Jewish area were on "Saturdays, the shops were closed, the

pushcarts parked, and Yiddish replaced with Hebrew in over seventy orthodox

synagogues." However, Brooks himself spent his Saturdays enjoying matinees

at the Marcy Theater. He married a non-Jewish woman and allowed his son, Max, to

be baptized only as long as he was allowed to have a bar-mitzvah. When asked by

the media if he wanted his wife to convert he replied "She don’t have to

convert. She a star!" (Yacowar 10-14). Before discussing the films, it is

crucial to identify a recurring theme in Brooks’s work-Germans and, more

specifically, Nazis. He had a brief military career in World War II with very

little combat experience, and he actually ended up being the entertainment

coordinator for the army. Yacowar analyzes Brooks’ later feelings towards

Germans as "subconscious frustration" because of his inability to

actually fight the Nazis (Yacowar 17). In an interview he was asked about his

obsession with Germans, and he replied: Me not like Germans? Why should I not

like Germans? Just because they’re arrogant and have fat necks and do anything

they’re told as long as it is cruel, and killed millions of Jews in

concentration camps and made soap out of their bodies and lamp shades out of

their skins? Is that any reason to hate their f-king guts? (Yacowar 32) Brooks

has mocked Germans in various works such as in Your Show of Shows and on the

Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks at the Cannes film festival audio recording.

Regardless, of the origin of his interest with Nazis, if one looks at enough of

his work, one cannot help but notice that this theme is an obsession for Brooks

(Yacowar 34-35, 48). Mel Brooks made his first feature film, The Producers, in

1967. It is about a Jewish Broadway producer (Max Bialystock) who convinces his

Jewish accountant (Leo Bloom) to finance a guaranteed to fail play with the idea

that they would take the profits and run to South America. The guaranteed to

fail play, "Springtime for Hitler" turned out to be a huge success.

The two main characters both represent completely different Jewish stereotypes

and the third area of Jewish interest in the film is the role of Germans both in

the play and the ex-Nazi author, Frank Liebkind (Altman 39). Max Bialystock

(played by Zero Mostel) is obviously not a first generation American because of

his name and his accent. Although he never does anything specifically Jewish, he

is still Jewish so it is relevant to look at his relationship to Jewish

stereotypes. In his book, Telushkin discusses the tradition of having big and

lavish bar mitzvahs, he say’s "that the Jewish tradition has few curbs to

halt such excesses"(74). It is interesting to see how Bialystock chooses to

live in almost poverty. Although he is so poor that he say’s "Look at me

now-I’m wearing a cardboard belt," he also wears a reasonably nice jacket,

has a leather coach, and keeps every old lady’s picture in a decent frame. Later

in the film, when he gets a lot of money, he spends it on a chauffeured car, a

sexy secretary, lavish offices and new clothes, rather then spending it on new

office equipment or investing it for future financial security (Telushkin 83).

Leo Bloom, the accountant (played by Gene Wilder), represents the opposite

stereotype from Bialystock. He represents the meek Jew, the Jew-as-doormat. In

the beginning of the movie, he walks in on Max trying to get some money from an

investor (he catches them lying on top of each other) and is so surprised and in

shock that he has to be told to say "oops" (The Producers). This fits

right into the stereotype of Jews as "remorseful and ashamed of their

sexual desires" (The Poducers). Bialystock fulfills the other stereotype of

Jewish men who have been portrayed as "sex-hungry animals" in many

jokes. Blooms choice of career is also known as a Jewish career. In the end, he,

like Bialystock, ends up fulfilling one of the most basic stereotypes of Jews-he

gives in to his greed (Telushkin 93). There are also many small Jewish

references in the film. There is an ignorant, and very gay, director named Roger

DeBris, who directs "Springtime for Hitler" and has a familiar Yiddish

term in his name (Telushkin 86-87). Also, in the beginning of the movie

Bialystock has a funny dialogue with his landlord and it is the only part of the

movie in which religion is involved. Bialystock: Murderer, thief, how can you

take the last penny out of a poor man’s pocket? Landlord: I have to, I’m a

landlord. Bialystock: Oh lord, hear my plea: Destroy him, he maketh a blight on

the land. Landlord: Don’t listen to him-he’s crazy (The Producers). When one

hears the conversation, with the Landlord speaking in a Jewish accent and

Bialystock calling out at the heavens, sounding like an abused Jewish mother, it

is a lot funnier and the Jewish element is a lot clearer as well. Brooks’

message in this movie has been largely debated. Lester D. Freidman thinks,

"Bialystock and Bloom fail to find their flop because they underestimate

their audience’s deadened sensibilities" (173). Brooks is trying to point

out that the shock and horror that everyone should view the holocaust in, is

mainly a Jewish mindset. In the movie, he made two perfect Jews, and their

perfection caused them two have a mindset that was different from the rest of

the American public. Therefore, the movie is about more than a pair of corrupt

showmen. It is about the segregation of Jews. Bailystock and Bloom are not yet

Americans, they still carry a separate identity. In 1974, Brooks came out with

Blazing Saddles which is much less Jewish than The Producers. The movie is about

a town with a corrupt Attorney General who wants take over the town. The

townspeople get the governor to send a new sheriff to restore order. He sends

Sheriff Bart who is a black man with Gucci saddlebags on his horse. The

townspeople end up working with the new Sheriff to defeat Hedley Lamarr (the

attorney general) and his band of hooligans. Jewish topics are in the film as

occasional funny parts and not as major parts of the plot. The funniest and most

recognizable part of the movie where Judaism is involved is Sheriff Bart’s

recollection of how his family got to the west. According to the Sheriff,

strange Indians attacked their wagon. Brooks, who plays the Indian chief, allows

Bart and his family to go, he tells his tribe, "Zeit nishe meshugge. Loz em

gaien?Abee gezint. Which basically means, "take off." Some feel this

is Brooks trying to get some cheap laughs by using Yiddish, but Friedman points

out that it is "comically appropriate that the West’s most conspicuous

outsider, the Indian, should speak in the tongue of history’s traditional

outsider, the Jew" (77). Other than this reference, Blazing Saddles use of

Judaism is really little more than an occasional punch line. When Hedley Lamarr

is looking for a way to get the citizens of Rock Ridge to leave, his associate

recommends killing the first-born male child in every family, to which Lamarr

replies-"too Jewish" (Blazing Saddles). When Mongo (a gigantic

ruffian) comes into the saloon, someone in the background says "Gottenew"

(Oh God!), another Yiddish term (Yacowar 110). Not surprisingly, Mel Brooks

finds a way to squeeze Germans into a movie set in the late 19th Century’s Wild

West. In the finale of the movie, Lamarr recruits an army of lowlifes. In the

army there is a small group of German soldiers who spend much of the fistfight

sitting with a Ms. Lily von Shtupp (a not so talented lounge singer) singing the

same war song heard in The Producers (Blazing Saddles). Finally, the Indian on

many movie promotional materials (including the video cover) has the Hebrew for

"kosher for Passover" inscribed in his headband. Strangely enough,

these relatively small Jewish references got the attention of the Jewish Film

Advisory Committee, whose director, Allen Rivkin, spoke to a writer about the

offensiveness of the Jewish material. The writer’s response was, "Dad, get

with it. This is another century"(Doneson 128) Blazing Saddles is a movie

of the second type identified. It does not deal with specifically Jewish topics.

It does, however, use Jewish topics as a way of forwarding the plot and the

comedy. Whether the critics were right that Brooks was just using Yiddish

because he found it funny, or if he was using it because he wanted to make a

point about racism and exclusion, what is most important is that he actually

used Yiddish, instead of something more expected (Yacowar 110). 1981’s History

of the World, Part I, falls somewhere between The Producers and Blazing Saddles

in its level of Jewish content (Freidman 236). The movie, is basically, a quick

tour through history going from the discovery of fire to the French Revolution.

Within the movie, there are two skits that are specifically of Jewish interest

(Moses on Mount Sinai and the Spanish Inquisition.) In the "Old

Testament," God identifies himself as the Lord, and asks Moses if he can

hear Him. Mel Brooks, in a robe and white beard say’s "Yes. I hear you. I

hear you. A deaf man could hear you." When Moses tells the people of the

new laws, he says, "The Lord, the Lord Jehovah has given onto these 15

[crash] 10, 10 Commandments for all to obey." Although Moses obviously had

to be Jewish, one wonders why he had to be so klutzy a comic. In Rome, Gregory

Hines, playing Josephus, a slave who is not sold in the auction, attempts to get

out of being sent to the Coliseum where he would be lion food. His excuse is

that "the lions only eat Christians, Christians, and I am a Jew-Jewish

person." To prove this, he starts singing "Havah Negilah" and

gets the entire crowd to join him. He even tells the slave trader to call Sammus

Davis Jr. (after calling the temple and the rabbi). Eventually, the trader looks

down his pants, to prove he is not Jewish (History of the World, Part I).

Empress Nympho, Caesar’s wife, is a strange cross between a J.A.P. and a sex

maniac. She has a classic Jewish mother accent and uses Yiddish

occasionally-"We’ll shlep him along," for example. Towards the end of

the movie, Brooks calls a courtier of Louis XVI a "petite putz"

(History of the World, Part I). This is obviously a strange place to hear

Yiddish, unless the intent is comic effect. Finally, though, the "most

outrageous scene, and the one that some Jews have found quite

objectionable" is the one about the Spanish Inquisition. It should be noted

that Brooks’s portrayal of the Inquisition as being directed against Jews is

historically inaccurate. It was really directed against heretical Christians.

Because of this inaccuracy, it is safe to assume that Brooks wanted to put this

scene in as a Jewish note into his film, as he did with the other films

discussed. The Inquisition scene is filmed in a medieval dungeon. It starts by

introducing the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada (Mel Brooks) with "Torquemada-do

not implore him for compassion. Torquemada-do not beg him for

forgiveness?.Let’s face it, you can’t Torquemada [talk him outta]

anything," then the music starts. One of the lines in the song is "A

fact you’re ignoring, it’s better to lose your skullcap with your skull,"

which is emphasized by two old Jewish men in stocks singing "oy oy gevalt."

After a few descriptions of the actual torture which individual Jews suffered,

he points out that "nothing is working, send in the nuns." The nuns

perform a synchronized swimming routine in which Jews are sent down a chute into

a pool to be dragged under by nuns. At the end of the scene, seven nuns are

standing on a menorah with sparklers on their heads, while the chorus, led by

Torquemada, sings, "Come on you Moslems and you Jews. We’ve got big news

for all of youse. You’d better change your points of views today. Cause the

Inquisition’s here, and it’s here to stay." When Brooks was criticized for

this scene he replied: Nothing can burst the balloon of pomposity and

dictatorial splendor better than comedy?.In a sense, my comedy is serious, and

I need a serious background to play against?. Poking fun at the Grand

Inquisitor, Torquemada, is a wonderful counterpart to the horrors he committed

(Friedman 236). This would make History of the World, Part I comparable to The

Producers in its satire of Hitler, and makes Blazing Saddles also comparable

through its satirical treatment of racism. If one still thought that Brooks made

History of the World, Part I with only good intentions, one should also consider

the treatment of Jews and Germans in the ending of the film. The promo for

History of the World, Part II includes scenes such as "Hitler on Ice,"

and "Jews in Space," in which Jews are in a space craft singing "

We’re Jews out in space. We’re zooming along protecting the Hebrew race?.When

Goyim attacks us, we’ll give em a slap. We’ll smack em right back in the

face." It definitely seems that History of the World, Part I is a

combination, (just as the others movies discussed are) of exploitation for easy

laughs and of exposing the evils of the tyrants who have tormented the Jews

throughout history. In To Be or Not To Be, Mel Brooks plays Fredrick Bronski,

the head actor in a Polish stage revue, around the time of the Nazi annexation

of Poland. His wife, Anna Bronski (Anna Bancroft) falls in love with an Air

Force lieutenant working in the Polish platoon of the RAF. The main focus of the

movie is how they make fun of, get around, outwit, and ultimately escape the

Nazis. This movie is actually a remake of an older film, but it still has a

distinctively Mel Brooks feel. The main target of Brooks’s satire is the head of

the Gestapo, Colonel Erhardt (Charles Durning) who is a babbling fool. For

example, when on the phone, he say’s "What? Why? Where When? When in doubt,

arrest them, arrest them, arrest them! Then shoot them and interrogate them.

[pause] Oh you are right, just shoot them." Soon after this, he is led to

believe that the shoot first policy led to the deaths of two useful figures and

after asking what idiot formed the policy, he got mad at Shultz, his assistant,

for reminding him that he made the policy. Later on, he has this exchange with

Shultz: Erhardt: What idiot gave the order to close the Bronski’s theater?

Schultz: You did, sir. Erhardt: Open it up immediately. And once and for all

stop blaming everything that goes wrong on me (To Be or Not To Be). After being

warned to stop making jokes about Hitler, Erhardt promises, "No. Never,

never, never again, [emphasis added]" strange words to hear from a nazi.

Although this movie is not about Jews, there are a few Jewish characters and

encounters. Bronski hides a Jewish family in his theater’s cellar and during the

course of the movie, they’re number increases. At one point, the intelligence

agent goes to the theater to find his lover, Bronski’s wife. The Jewish women

hiding there tells him "You know that big house on Posen Street? Well don’t

go there, it’s Gestapo headquarters," before actually telling where she was

staying (To Be or Not To Be). At the end of the movie, they dress up all the

Jews hiding in the cellar (closer to 20 than the 3 who originally hid out in the

cellar) as clowns to have them run through the aisle (in the middle of a

performance for Hitler) to a truck to safety. One old lady panics in the aisle,

surrounded by Nazis. To save the old lady, another clown runs up to them and

pins an oversized yellow star, yelling "Juden!," this causes an

enormous laughter from the Nazi audience. To stall the Gestapo, Brooks dresses

up as Hitler, and listens to a Jewish actor perform the "Hath not a Jew

eyes" speech from Merchant of Venice. To Be or Not To Be appears to be

Brooks’s final way of coping with his lack of combat in WWII. While he has The

Producers make a play in which they portray the Nazis comically, the ultimate

message is that the two Jews in the movie still find them to be patently

offensive, and therefore, worthy of some form of respect. In To Be or Not To Be

he makes the Nazis into purely comical characters, and this is a step further

than Brooks went in The Producers. However, this simply may be because at the

point of To Be or Not To Be, Brooks was well into his career as an established

moviemaker, so he had more freedom to be offensive. Unfortunately, To Be or Not

To Be ended the golden age of Mel Brooks movies, at least from a specifically

Jewish point-of-view. His later films make only small mentions of Jewish topics.

An example of this is Spaceballs, a parody of Star Wars where the main

characters have to save a princess from Planet Druidia ("Funny, she doesn’t

look Druish") from the evil Dark Helmet (Rick Moranis) (Spaceballs). The

only Jewish reference in the movie were playing off the theme of the Druish

princess and a short scene with Mel Brooks as Yogurt, a reinterpretation of Yoda

as an old, Jewish man. Brooks also renamed "the Force" from Star Wars

to something more ethnic-"the Schwartz." Although these Jewish

references may be equal to the Yiddish-speaking Indian in Blazing Saddles, it is

too big of a stretch to link a deeper meaning to them as can be done in his

earlier films. In the Big Book of Jewish Humor, Jewish humor is defined as

having these five qualities: 1. It is substantive in that it is about some

larger topic. 2. It, in many cases, has a point-"the appropriate response

is not laughter, but rather a bitter nod or a commiserating sign of

recognition." 3. It is "anti-authoritarian," in that "it

ridicules grandiosity and self-indulgence, exposes hypocrisy, and?.is strongly

democratic." 4. It "frequently has a critical edge which creates

discomfort in making its point." 5. It is unsparing-it satirizes anyone and

everyone (Novak and Waldoks xx-xxii). Telushkin’s definition of a Jewish joke is

much simpler. He say’s "it must express a Jewish sensibility" (16). To

Bernard Saper, a "uniquely Jewish joke must contain incongruity, a sudden

twist of unexpected elements" (76). Christie Davies, points out "that

people such as Jews, who belong to a minority or peripheral ethnic groups tell

jokes both about the majority group and about their own group, and they may tell

more ethnic jokes about their own group (and find them funnier) than about the

majority"(29-30). Are the four films discussed within these definitions?

Brooks’ movies definitely fit the Telushkin test of expressing Jewish

sensibility, weather it is through how he attacks the Nazis or the random

Yiddish expressions that he uses. A lot of Brooks’ humor is also incongruous.

For example, having a Nazi say "never again," fulfills Saper’s

requirement. Brooks’ films have a lot of ethnic jokes in them, which deal with

Jews or Jewish topics. Brooks probably put these jokes in his movies because he

found them funny, therefore fulfilling the Davies test. The definition in The

Big Book of Jewish Humor is harder to fit because it is in greater detail.

However, the films that were discussed fit them well. Many of Brooks’s films are

substantive in that he deals with racism and Anti-Semitism in almost all of his

movies. The point of his films may not be so sharp that when people see them

they automatically feel bitterness toward someone, but his movies are definently

not pure slapstick which fulfills the second part of the definition. Brooks

never attacked Jewish leadership but his films are anti-authoritarian because he

clearly attacks government officials such as the Nazis and the Grand Inquisitor.

Since there is constant controversy about Brooks’ films there is always

potential for discomfort to arise. Finally, Brooks leaves out nobody from his

satire-Nazis, cowboys, and 15th century Spanish Jews are all satirized and made

fun of in these films. Even though some of his scenes or individual jokes are

not typical Jewish humor, he is a Jewish comedian who, most importantly, makes

Jewish jokes. Brooks’s movies represent the classical paradox in Jewish humor

and Jewish experience between: first, the legitimate pride that Jews have taken

in their distinctive and learned religious and ethical tradition and in the

remarkable intellectual eminence and entrepreneurial and professional

achievement of individual members of their community, and second, the

anti-Semitic abuse and denigration from hostile outsiders whose malice was

fueled by Jewish autonomy and achievement (Davies 42-43). The greatest lesson

that Brooks has to teach American Jews of today is the expansion of our

boundaries. Through his use of Jewish humor to topics which where previously

considered off-limits, he allows his viewers to cope with painful parts of

history which they may not have been able to cope with in the past. Brooks

describes his role as a comedian by saying, "for every ten Jews beating

their breasts, God designated one to be crazy and amuse the breast beaters. By

the time I was five I knew I was that one" (Friedman 171-172). He explains

that his comedy "derives from the feeling that, as a Jew and as a person,

you don’t fit the mainstream of American society. It comes from the realization

that even though you’re better and smarter, you’ll never belong" (Friedman

172). Mel Brooks’s experience is very similar to that of every American Jew, and

his comedy speaks uniquely to the American Jew. So, even Brooks’s most offensive

work is rooted deeply within both typical Jewish Humor and the modern Jewish

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