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**IN THEIR OWN IMAGE: NEW YORK JEWS  
IN JAZZ AGE AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE**

**by**

**EDWARD (TED) MERWIN**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy, The City University of New York**

**2002**

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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**Abstract**

**IN THEIR OWN IMAGE: NEW YORK JEWS IN JAZZ AGE AMERICAN  
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**by**

**Edward (Ted) Merwin**

**Adviser: Professor Alisa Solomon**

**This interdisciplinary dissertation focuses on the ways in which second generation American Jews--the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants--acculturated into American society in the 1920s both in and through popular culture. They did so, I argue, by producing and consuming representations and images of Jews in vaudeville, Broadway theater and silent film. Second generation American Jews made a home for themselves as Jews had done for millennia--not by discarding immigrant Jewish culture but by adapting it to the culture in which they found themselves. How Jewishness was represented in popular culture played a large role**

both in defining and sustaining Jewish identity and also in softening attitudes toward Jews in American society.

My subject is the interplay between changing cultural representations of “the Jew” and the changing social and economic position of Jews in New York as they moved en masse from the Lower East Side “ghetto” to the lower middle class Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Despite continuing ambivalence about their Jewish identity rooted in the internalization of negative societal attitudes toward Jews and other immigrants, Jazz Age Jewish performers gradually transcended their historical representations in Western culture as fundamental outsiders and aliens. Images and representations of Jews became staples of interwar American popular culture. Nevertheless, most of these routines, stage comedies and films have received scant attention from scholars of Jewish history and culture.

These Jewish-themed cultural products capitalized on the spirit of tolerance that followed the First World War, and that co-existed with rising discrimination in some quarters against Jews and other minorities. Despite the rabid Nativism and anti-Semitism of the period that led to the federal immigration restrictions of 1921

and 1924, Jews began to join the mainstream of American society. I argue that the Jewish-themed films of the 1920s were particularly influential in fostering acceptance of Jews through their sympathetic treatment of the immigrant families they depicted. This is the first effort to combine a sociological and performance studies approach to the study of the acculturation process of American Jews.

## **FOREWORD**

This project began as a seminar paper for a course with Egon Mayer called "Continuities and Discontinuities in Modern Jewish Life." That paper eventually germinated into an article, the article sprouted into a chapter, and the chapter flowered into a dissertation. In like manner, I have grown and developed my scholarly abilities a great deal in the six years that I have worked on this project. But I have had a great deal of help along the way, beginning with my advisor Alisa Solomon, who patiently read draft after draft; she always had time to meet in a coffee bar on Tenth Avenue to shmooze in Yiddish, give me encouragement, and help me refine my ideas. Egon has been equally generous and helpful; he has been an invaluable guide and mentor. It is no exaggeration to say that his ideas about Jewish identity, history and culture have shaped every page of the manuscript. I am proud to call both Egon and Alisa not just advisors and colleagues but true friends.

I am also greatly in debt both to Daniel Gerould, who has taught me most of what I know about drama, theatrical history and theory and to David Nasaw, who helped the dissertation get off the

ground and take wing. Both have been extremely giving of their time and energy in reading drafts and moving this project forward.

Deborah Dash Moore, whose book on the second generation is the foundation of this study, also read extensive sections and gave me very helpful and insightful comments that have tremendously enhanced the final result. I was also fortunate to discuss my work with Hasia Diner and Jenna Weissman Joselit, both of whom are trailblazers in the field of American Jewish popular culture. Rick Altabef was also a constant source of help and support; his wit, wisdom and sense of humor sustained me through the difficult process of fleshing out my ideas. I also thank my analyst, Judith Katz, for taking every step with me along the often perilous path to self-knowledge.

I also would like to thank my students in the “Jewish American Literature” and “American Ethnic Drama” classes at Dickinson College, whose ideas stimulated and extended my own. My colleagues at Dickinson, especially Mara Donaldson and Sharon O’Brien, have helped me to find ways to bring my research into the classroom in ways that have enhanced both my teaching and my writing. I am also extremely grateful to Neil Weissman, Provost and

Dean of the Faculty, for a generous contract that has enabled me to have time to finish the dissertation while still teaching and doing administrative work at the college. Tina Maresco of the Interlibrary Loan Service at Dickinson never complained about my almost daily torrent of requests for materials; I am very thankful to her for her help. I also thank Robert Goldblum, my editor at *The Jewish Week*, for giving me the opportunity to see and write about so many contemporary plays of Jewish interest. The experience of being a theater critic has immeasurably enhanced my abilities to understand and appreciate the performing arts.

My research would not have been possible without the help of librarians and archivists across the country. I am especially indebted to the marvelous staff at the Billy Rose Theater Collection at Lincoln Center, including Christopher Frith, Christine Karatnytsky, Jeremy Megraw, Brian O'Connell, Dan Patri and Louis Paul. It was Dr. Roderick Bladel, a senior archivist there, who first told me about *Kosher Kitty Kelly*, a musical that became very important in my research. I would also like to thank Lorin Sklamberg, music archivist at the YIVO Institute, for helping me locate forgotten music recordings for the chapter on vaudeville.



Rosemary Haines, reference librarian at the Motion Picture Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress was also extremely helpful in arranging for me to view silent films. I would also like to thank Murray Glass, of Em-Gee Film Library in Reseda, California for putting his impressive collection at my disposal. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my cousins, Peter and Regi Merwin and their children Amelia and Linus, for hosting me for a week while I did research in the various film archives in the Los Angeles area, including at the UCLA Film Archive and the Academy of Motion Pictures. I am also grateful to the staff at the National Center for Jewish Film, on the campus of Brandeis University, for renting rare films to me.

Although she is no longer alive, my grandmother Jean C. Kaplan played a crucial role, in multiple senses, in the creation of this project. It was her volunteer job on Friday afternoons in the Student Activities office at the New York University School of Medicine that made it possible for my family to attend the theater as often as we did when I was growing up. It is only fitting that this dissertation is an attempt to connect to the generational experience that she and my grandfather, Louis Kaplan (who passed away

shortly after my dissertation defense), had as the children of Jewish immigrants.

Finally, in addition to my parents and sister, my greatest overarching debt is to my wife Andrea, whose love is constant and pure, and who always helps me to understand and challenge myself in new ways. And to Hannah Shira, a fifth generation American Jew, who came into the world less than two weeks before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and who represents the best evidence there can be that the world is still, as Anne Frank wrote, “a beautiful place.” Looking into my daughter’s eyes, I cannot help but have confidence in a brighter future, in which, as Jews pray when we announce the coming of the New Month, “all of the yearnings of our heart will be fulfilled for the good.”

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## INTRODUCTION

At the last Passover seder she attended before her death, my maternal grandmother, already suffering from senile dementia, took up a different book from the one the rest of us were all reading. Instead of following along in the Haggadah, which tells the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Grandma kept flipping the pages of a catalog from a company called The Source for Everything Jewish, which sells merchandise like Chanukah menorahs, Passover plates and Jewish-themed jewelry, toys and clothing. Grandma interrupted the seder from time to time with loud exclamations as she saw things in the catalog that caught her fancy. We laughed, but it was hard not to feel sad that in a sense she was already no longer with us.

For I traced my own Jewish identity in many ways to my grandparents—they were, in my imagination, truly the source. And yet my grandparents, kept few religious customs, almost never went to synagogue and had no Jewish friends. What was Jewish about them other than the few Yiddish expressions my grandmother used (always bemoaning the fact that I could not understand them), the traditional Eastern European—although often not kosher, in any strict sense—foods they ate, the summer vacations they took in the

Catskill mountains, and the winter vacations they took in Miami Beach?

Born in America, children of immigrants who spoke only Yiddish, my grandparents were both proud and patriotic Americans. Yet something about them remained Jewish to the core, and it permeated all of their feelings, attitudes and perceptions of the world. It was their culture, and it mixed somehow with American culture in complicated ways that I could not fully comprehend. This project is an attempt to begin to make sense of their Jewish identity and that of the members of their generation. For they were the first generation of Jews born in America, the descendants of the great wave of almost two million Eastern European Jews who came to these shores in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth.

I will focus on this second generation of American Jews,<sup>1</sup> as they grappled to reconcile their Jewish and American identities. I will also focus on the time period of the 1920s, when new forms of Jewish representation emerged and flowered in American popular culture. This was also the period in which Jews began to be viewed,

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<sup>1</sup> The usual terminology is to refer to the immigrant generation as the "first" generation, and the first American-born generation as the "second" generation.

by sociologists at least, as a cultural group rather than a race.<sup>2</sup> In 1921, the scholar Thaddeus Sleszynski pointed out that although the second generation was considered “thoroughly American” by many, and their “assimilation...taken for granted,” the situation was actually much more complex in terms of the attitudes that immigrants’ children retained toward their ethnic culture.

Sleszynski divided these children into four categories, based on their relationship to the “foreign colony” or ethnic group: those in the first “conformed to the standards” of the group, those in the second were entirely separated from it, those in the third (composed of musicians, writers, and other artists) were “claimed” by it even though they “belong entirely to the larger community,” and the those in the fourth were actually leaders both in their own ethnic group and in American society as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Seth Korelitz, “From Religion to Culture, From Race to Ethnicity,” *American Jewish History* 85 (March 1997), 75-100. For a good overview of the subject, see Arthur A. Goren, “American Identity and Americanization,” *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 571-598.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Sleszynski, “The Second Generation of Immigrants in the Assimilative Process,” in John J. Appel, ed., *The New Immigration* (New York: Pitman Publishing, 1971), 102-108.

Sleszynski's categories are interesting in that, despite their gross oversimplifications, they argue against the adoption of easy conclusions about the abandonment of ethnic identity by the second generation. But I find his categories of use only when they are permitted to overlap; I will argue that most second generation Jews often maintained an ambivalent relationship to the ethnic group, and were thus neither wholly attached to, nor wholly detached from, group affiliation.

In line with contemporary scholarly writing on the subject, I will also use the concept of "acculturation" rather than "assimilation" to suggest that Jews in this period did not jettison their ethnic identity in joining the mainstream of American life. Instead, they exteriorized their ethnic identities in important ways, acculturating into American society through a circle (or spiral) of producing and consuming images of themselves in popular culture. As Henry Feingold has written of American popular culture, it "increasingly acted as the cultural cement for all segments of American Jewry."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945* Volume IV in Feingold, ed., *The Jewish People in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 60.

Although Jews were living in different areas of the country by the 1920s, I will focus on New York because it remained the home for almost half of America's Jewish population. As Deborah Dash Moore has persuasively argued, "the pulse of New York Jewish life decisively influenced all New York Jews....New York Jews devised the grammar of American Jewish life."<sup>5</sup> Jews represented 29 percent of the city's population in 1920, falling only to 26 percent by 1940.<sup>6</sup> As Robert Warshaw suggested in his famous essay on the Jewish playwright Clifford Odets, "The elements that make up for most American Jews the image of their group are to be found in the Jewish culture of New York City; more specifically in the culture of the Jewish lower middle class, in the apartment houses and two-family houses of the Bronx and Brooklyn..."<sup>7</sup>

Most Jewish immigrants had come to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which had become identified as the Jewish "ghetto" in America. But Jews actually escaped the overcrowded, crime and disease-ridden Lower East Side tenements as rapidly as they could. The opening of the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridges in the first decade of the twentieth century, as well as the inauguration of

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<sup>5</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Moore 21.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Warshaw, "Clifford Odets: Poet of the Jewish Middle Class," in *The Immediate Experience* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 56.



subway service to Brooklyn during the same period, led to a flood of Jews out of Manhattan for the fresh air and wide open spaces of the “suburbs” in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Jewish immigrants kept arriving to replace those who had left. Nevertheless, by 1916, according to Moses Rischin, only 23 percent of Jews in New York lived on the Lower East Side, compared to 50 percent in 1903 and 75 percent in 1892.<sup>8</sup>

This exodus continued throughout 1920s, during which, according to Moore, 160,000 New York Jews left the Lower East Side.<sup>9</sup> By 1930 the population of the Bronx was 49 percent Jewish, and the neighborhoods south of Tremont Avenue boasted a Jewish population of more than 80 percent.<sup>10</sup> From the Grand Concourse to the East Bronx, and from Brownsville to Flatbush in Brooklyn, these newer Jewish neighborhoods thrived with synagogues, Jewish schools, kosher butchers and bakeries, and delicatessens.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Moore 19.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd Ultan and Barbara Unger, *Bronx Accent: A Literary and Pictorial History of the Borough* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>11</sup> A similar dynamic was underway during this period in London, where second generation Jews moved out of the immigrant neighborhood of the East End into the suburbs in the northern and northwestern parts of the city. See David Cesarani, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Suburbs: Social Change in Anglo-Jewry Between the Wars, 1914-1945,” *Jewish Culture and History* 1, 1 (1998): 5-26.

As Jews moved to the outer boroughs, the influence of Jewish life on the surrounding non-Jewish culture increased. As Zalmen Yoffeh wrote in *The Menorah Journal*, "The Ghetto is spreading out, is taking in more territory, and becoming, in the process diluted....It has given the very Gentiles a Jewish tinge."<sup>12</sup> During the 1920s in Bensonhurst (a section of Brooklyn), Jews quickly became 62 percent of the population, while in neighboring Brownsville they became 95 percent of the population. Bernard Postal wrote in the English-language section of the Yiddish daily *Der Tog* that the schools of Bensonhurst might just as well shut down from now on during Jewish holidays for "even the non-Jewish children become Mosaic on such occasions."<sup>13</sup>

The Jazz Age was the age of Prohibition, the flapper, the New Woman, the skyscraper. It brought to New York a dizzying set of cultural shifts and Jews were at the center of many of these transformations as builders, brokers and Broadway producers. Everywhere was movement and activity, re-creation and readjustment. Mobility became a feature of Jewish life in multiple

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<sup>12</sup> Zalmen Yoffeh, "The Passing of the East Side," *The Menorah Journal* (December 1929), 275.

<sup>13</sup> Some Yiddish newspapers published English-language sections for the benefit of their readers who knew the language. Bernard Postal, "Over the Bridge to Bensonhurst," *Der Tog (The Day)*, English Section (June 10, 1928). Postal opined that Bensonhurst, "the heir of Brownsville, the East Side, and the Bronx, is becoming all Jewish, in fact another Brownsville."

senses--physical, economic and social. As Robert Park and Ernest Burgess wrote in 1925, in their seminal study *The City*,

“Mobility...involves change, new experience, stimulation....Mobility is perhaps the best index of the state of metabolism of the city.”<sup>14</sup>

Second generation New York Jews moved quickly into the lower middle class. For the most part, they eschewed the manual labor of the immigrant generation;<sup>15</sup> they became active and successful in business, politics and finance. According to Lloyd Ultan and Barbara Unger, “The Bronx was *the* place for people who saw themselves and their children taking a step up the socioeconomic ladder.”<sup>16</sup> Part of this mobility was made possible by education; by 1919, according to Sherry Gorelick, 78 percent of students at the City College of New York (CCNY) were Eastern European Jews.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Park and Burgess, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925) 58-9.

<sup>15</sup> Sherry Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981), 115. See also Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 77-99.

<sup>16</sup> Ultan and Unger 78.

<sup>17</sup> Gorelick 123. Gorelick emphasizes, however, that although increasing numbers of Jews were attending college, their numbers were still quite low, and the dropout rate was extremely high; Gorelick calculates that fewer than two dozen Jewish men actually graduated from CCNY in 1913, at a time when there were almost a million Jews living in New York!

Despite their upward mobility, most Jews remained connected to their ethnic heritage. As Moore has put it, "Participation in the myriad aspects of New York culture did not mark the decline of Jewish group life—as some had feared and others had hoped. Rather, as they became middle-class New Yorkers, second generation Jews created the framework for their persistence as an ethnic group."<sup>18</sup>

Despite their upward mobility, most Jews remained connected to their ethnic heritage. Michael Alexander has written that "Social acceptance and success in America threatened the status of Jews as outsiders; therefore, Jewish identity was also threatened."<sup>19</sup> This leads him to argue that Jews identified with marginalized members of the society, such as gamblers, anarchists and African-Americans, in order to preserve their own ethnic distinctiveness. But this ignores the fact that Jews also openly celebrated their own success in American society—and saw no conflict between being American and being Jewish. As Moore has put it, "Participation in the myriad aspects of New York culture did not mark the decline of Jewish group life—as some had feared and others had hoped. Rather, as

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<sup>18</sup> Moore 4.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

they became middle-class New Yorkers, second generation Jews created the framework for their persistence as an ethnic group.”<sup>20</sup>

The maintenance of Jewish identity did not, however, necessarily translate into religious observance. Between 1914 and 1924, according to Feingold, consumption of kosher meat, which he calls “usually the last thing to be abandoned by secularizing Jews,” dropped by 30 percent.<sup>21</sup> Historians have also emphasized that despite a large number of synagogues in the new Jewish neighborhoods, relatively few Jews attended them except on the High Holidays. Jewish identity began to be defined partly as a simple matter of association with other Jews. As Jeffrey Gurock has noted, “while 1920s-1930s Jews at home on the Bronx’s Grand Concourse might never set foot in their local synagogues...they could still spend their lives among Jews.”<sup>22</sup>

The redefinition of Jewishness occurred partly through a transformation of the meaning of leisure. David Nasaw has noted that recreational activities were “not luxuries but necessities in the modern city.”<sup>23</sup> As Kate Simon wrote in her memoir, *Bronx Primitive*,

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<sup>20</sup> Moore 4.

<sup>21</sup> Feingold 93.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Jewish Commitment and Continuity in Interwar Brooklyn,” in Ilana Abramovitch and Seán Galvin, eds., *Jews of Brooklyn* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 232.

<sup>23</sup> David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 4.

about her childhood in the interwar Bronx, Saturday became a day for many Jews to go not to synagogue but to the cinema. The Sabbath thus became associated with "recreation" in a non-religious sense, but it still retained the aura of a day set apart for a particular kind of pleasure. As we will see, this sanctification of secular forms of relaxation had parallels in the ways in which Jews reconstituted their Jewishness through the production and consumption of images of themselves in popular culture.

Despite their confidence in the promises of American society, second generation Jews remained in many ways haunted by their childhood memories of the ghetto. As the second generation moved away from the Lower East Side both economically and socially, it read back into the ghetto the external qualities of Jewishness that it was attempting to reproduce in the pushcart-filled outer borough neighborhoods. Much more than, as Mark Slobin has called it, "a kind of Old World to be recalled in a rosy haze,"<sup>24</sup> the Lower East Side was reconstructed in Jewish popular culture as a place of both conflict with, and accommodation to, American values. As Beth Wenger has written, "The neighborhood helped to frame their collective experiences as American Jews, helped them to make sense

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<sup>24</sup> Slobin 199.

of change, and to create a narrative history and a physical context for locating Jewish communal origins.”<sup>25</sup>

The Lower East Side became a tourist destination and locale for religious school field trips, a place for dining, shopping, and entertainment where middle-class Jews could go “slumming;” and a tangible reminder of their ethnic “roots.” The Lower East Side thus functioned as a kind of theatre for the temporary reliving of the poor immigrant experience in New York. In Wenger’s words, the development of nostalgia for immigrant life fed by the ghetto “was no retreat from the modernization and acculturation of Jews but rather an integral part of the ongoing reconstruction of Jewish consciousness in an American context.”<sup>26</sup>

Second-generation American Jews thus made a home for themselves, as Jews had done for millennia, not by discarding immigrant Jewish culture but by adapting it to the culture in which they found themselves. Jenna Weissman Joselit has argued that they “generated an independent sense of what was culturally meaningful and enduring, deriving it as much from American notions of

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<sup>25</sup> Beth Wenger, in Introduction: Remembering the Lower East Side—A Conversation in Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler and Beth Wenger, eds., *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Beth Wenger, “The Invention of the Lower East Side,” *American Jewish History* 85 (March 1997), 4. See also Jenna Weissman Joselit, “Telling Tales: Or, How a Slum Became a Shrine,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 54-61.

consumerism, gender, privacy and personal happiness as from Jewish notions of tradition, ritual, memory and continuity."<sup>27</sup>

In other words, these "American" and "Jewish" ideas transformed and redefined each other in a dynamic process. The differences between what was "American" and what was "Jewish" began in many ways to be elided. Seeing America with a Jewish lens, but also adopting American values that altered--in both subtle and dramatic ways--the nature of their Jewish beliefs and practices, second generation Jews changed American culture in their own image. This is seen especially clearly in the performing arts, where Jewish-themed vaudeville routines, plays and films displayed the tensions that living in an open and capitalist society caused in Jewish families, and the ways in which Jewish families creatively dealt with these tensions while still preserving Jewish traditions and culture.

In addition, because Jewish producers, actors, comics and composers dominated the field of entertainment, New York Jewish culture had a disproportionate effect on American culture. To continue Moore's analogy, New York Jews structured not just the

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<sup>27</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 4. See also Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).



language of American Jewish life, but the patterns of its visual representation. These representations diverged in important ways from the ways in which Jews were depicted in American popular culture prior to the First World War, as I will discuss in Chapter 1. However, Jewish-themed entertainment remained extraordinarily popular with non-Jews as well as with Jews. In fact, as Michael G. Corenthal has noted, Jewish comedians whose routines sold millions of records effected a kind of metaphorical intermarriage with Christian America, so that, as he puts it, through the use of the Victrola “a Jewish personage became a permanent fixture in a majority of non-Jewish homes.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Michael G. Corenthal, *Cohen on the Telephone: A History of Jewish Recorded Humor and Popular Music, 1892-1942* (Milwaukee: Yesterday's Memories, 1984) 7.

I am primarily interested in how Jews rehabilitated their cultural representations and mobilized their newfound cultural capital to accelerate their integration into American life. I will thus focus on the interplay between the ways in which Jews performed their ethnic identities on stage and screen and the changing social and economic position of Jews in New York. As Harley Erdman and others have noted, performances determine economic and cultural reality as much as they reflect it.

How New York Jews lived, how they consolidated their class position, how they expressed their sense of having joined the mainstream--all these were both mirrored on the stage and screen. In turn, the representations and images of themselves that second generation Jews viewed in popular culture affected the ways in which they conceived of themselves both as Jews and as Americans. This study is thus a kind of reversal of Erving Goffman's theories about the ways in which Americans establish their social identities through daily "performances" intended to impress others.<sup>29</sup> Rather, it is the popular culture images that we consume that, in important ways, affect how we conduct ourselves in our daily lives.

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<sup>29</sup> See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

Assimilation had performance-like qualities as well. Andrea Most has argued that "Jewish assimilation into mainstream American culture in the early part of the twentieth century was largely a theatrical venture."<sup>30</sup> Assimilation entailed altering one's appearance, language, vocal inflections and other mannerisms at a time when, as Moses Rischin has suggested, to be "identified as a Jew became more and more irksome."<sup>31</sup> Many Jews sought various forms of protective coloration in order to blend into American society. But others, like the entertainers I will discuss in the next chapter, not only did not disguise their Jewish heritage; they used their performances to wrestle with what it meant.

Almost all vaudeville entertainers, including Jewish ones, started their careers by using blackface. The blackface minstrel show was the most popular form of entertainment in mid and late nineteenth century America. Blackface continued to be popular into the twentieth century even as other ethnic caricatures, which grew out of hostility to European immigrants, also became the staples of the vaudeville stage. But by the 1920s, many of the Jewish comics had either abandoned blackface or made it much less central to

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<sup>30</sup> Andrea Most, "'We Know We Belong to the Land': The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*" *PMLA* 113 (January 1998), 77-89.

<sup>31</sup> Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962), 95.

their work. Al Jolson's use of blackface has attracted an extraordinary amount of critical attention in the last few years, spurred by Michael Rogin's book on Jewish involvement in Hollywood and the politics of blackface. Rogin's controversial thesis was that Jews shed their own racial otherness and "whitened" themselves by performing in blackface.

In contrast to Rogin and other historians who have emphasized these blackface performances in Jewish American culture, I see a much more pervasive phenomenon of Jews performing Jewishness—creating openly Jewish-themed entertainment that reflected the changing nature of Jewish life in New York. From the vaudeville entertainers Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor, to the playwrights Aaron Hoffman and Montague Glass, to the film actors Jean Hersholt and Rosa Rosanova, Jewish artists helped create a burgeoning Jewish popular culture in the 1920s that has gone largely unexamined by serious scholars—a veritable golden age of Jewish entertainment. By the late 1930s, representations and images of Jews were already much less visible, as Henry Popkin wrote in a famous article in *Commentary* entitled "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Popkin, "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture," *Commentary* (July 1952), 46.

Of course, many—if not most—American Jewish writers, performers, directors and producers did not work with Jewish themes. Indeed, Stephen Whitfield's recent book, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, restricts itself for the most part to the study of works by American Jews that have little or no explicit Jewish content. He writes that "to expel from consideration [of American Jewish culture] whatever omits Jewish subject matter unnecessarily diminishes the effort to understand the Jews who created such works...."<sup>33</sup> But my interest is in understanding how representations of Jews function in American culture and in the lives of Jews; this study is thus shaped by both sociology and history.

And even the entertainers discussed in this study did not do exclusively Jewish material; it was simply a part of their overall repertoire. However, it is not true, as Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr. have argued, that "as each immigrant minority prospered during the boom years before World War I, it achieved a new economic and social dignity. It no longer cared to laugh at itself or have other nationalities laugh at it."<sup>34</sup> The ethnic stereotypes may have

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<sup>33</sup> Steven J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 19.

<sup>34</sup> Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Showbiz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951), 7.

changed, but they did not disappear; in fact, they became a part of American middle class culture. And they served a unifying purpose for Jewish immigrants and their children.

Many Yiddish vaudeville routines, plays and films dealt with issues of assimilation and adjustment to American life, from Leon Kobrin's *Sonya of East Broadway*, *East Side Ghetto* and *Riverside Drive* to H. Leivick's *Rags* and *Shop*. Furthermore, as Mario Maffi has put it, in discussing the Yiddish dramas that were written in America, "Tenements, sweatshops, roofs, stoops, [and] streets were the usual settings of plots which repeatedly dealt with the relationship of greenhorns and settlement workers, Jews and America, Jews and other ethnic groups, and old and young generations facing the New World."<sup>35</sup> And as J. Hoberman has found in his authoritative study of Yiddish film, many of these themes were also present in early talkies like *Uncle Moses* (1930) and *Mayn Yidishe Mame* (1930) films that were set in America and that likewise showed the challenges of living in a new culture.<sup>36</sup>

In the 1920s, the Yiddish theatre was reaching many have called its "second golden age," dominated by the masterful work of

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<sup>35</sup> Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures on New York's Lower East Side* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 237.

<sup>36</sup> J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 151-167.

actor/director Maurice Schwartz. Invigorated by many of the same avant-garde impulses revolutionizing European theatre--Futurism, Constructivism, Expressionism, and the like--the Yiddish stage reached its final flowering in America. But its audience was declining precipitously as the second generation was turning increasingly to English-language venues like American vaudeville and Broadway.

What the critic A. Mukdoni wrote in 1940 was thus true by the 1920s, although more of the second generation than the first: "[T]he large mass of Jewish immigrants have learned the English language, developed cosmopolitan attitudes, and acquired a taste for the entertainment offered by the American theaters and movies."<sup>37</sup> Since this study will focus on the performance of Jewish ethnicity by the second generation, I will be more interested in Broadway than the Second Avenue Yiddish theatre, and more interested in English-language films (mostly silent films with English subtitles) about Jewish identity than their Yiddish-language counterparts.

These distinctions are not, however, hard and fast. There was a great deal of cross-over of performers between the Yiddish stage and Broadway; actors like Celia Adler (daughter of pre-eminent Yiddish stage actor Jacob P. Adler), Paul Muni (né Muni

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<sup>37</sup> A. Mukdoni, "Trouble in the Yiddish Theater," *The Jewish Digest* (November, 1940), 65.

Weisenfreund) and others were well-known to patrons of the Second Avenue Yiddish theaters before they achieved fame on Broadway. Similarly, the 1926 film *His People* starred Yiddish-theatre great Rudolph Schildkraut. But as time went on, fewer performers were able to make a living on just the Yiddish stage, and many stopped performing in Yiddish altogether.

Such entertainment attracted both first and second generation audiences, but since many first-generation Jews never became comfortable speaking English, the bulk of the Jewish audience was second generation. In the words of historian Henry Feingold, this new English-speaking Jewish culture was “multifaceted and amorphous.”<sup>38</sup> But I see the new Jewish-themed entertainment as not “amorphous” at all, and I will attempt to trace the contours of it in the study that follows. I disagree with Feingold’s conclusion that second generation Jews were “becoming Americans who happened to be Jewish,”<sup>39</sup> because it seems to downplay the ways in which Jewishness continued to inform the entertainment that they both produced and consumed.

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<sup>38</sup> Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 75.

<sup>39</sup> Feingold 89.



American culture placed constraints on how Jews could be represented. Erdman rightly emphasizes the way that pervasive anti-Semitism in American society reinforced highly specific ethnic stereotypes. He describes these stereotypical depictions of Jews on stage, and concludes that performing Jewishness was a matter of simply learning and reproducing a catalogue of ethnic traits--Yiddish accent, gesticulations, swarthy skin, long hair (for women) or long beard (for men), long nose, etc. Erdman explores how the repeated performance of these ethnic caricatures served the interests of the majority in reinforcing its hegemony. But when, in the 1920s, these stereotypes finally began to change, anti-Semitism was even more widespread and virulent than it had been in the preceding decades. Why did these stereotypical depictions give way to more acculturated representations of Jews?

To a large extent, Jews engineered the transformation of their own representations in popular culture. Once Jews had moved out of the ghetto, moved into the lower middle class, and begun to achieve financial success, they formed a larger part of the audience for mainstream culture. They wanted to see themselves, including their ambivalence toward both modernity *and* tradition, mirrored on stage and screen.

Minority groups undergo constant shifts in their relationship to the dominant culture. As Adina Cimet has argued, ethnic minorities acculturate by “straddling” the divide between their own culture and that of the majority, and they participate in a process of exchange in which they renounce parts of their culture in order to establish themselves. In her thinking, the ethnic culture in constant negotiation with the majority culture, adapting itself (or pretending to adapt itself) to the priorities and policies of the majority, while retaining as much as it can of its difference and distinctiveness.<sup>40</sup> But, if I understand Cimet correctly, the minority culture is always being transformed in the act of undergoing this process, and members of the minority culture are caught in the middle, never fully advancing or retreating.

In viewing second generation Jews as ambivalent about their ethnic identity, it is important to recall that anti-Semitism was a pervasive feature of American life in the 1920s. The Ku Klux Klan was at its height in 1922, and Jewish newspapers throughout the country anxiously chronicled its activities. In fact, fear and distaste of immigrants of all nationalities--spurred by eugenicist thinkers

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<sup>40</sup> See Adina Cimet, “Ambivalence Acknowledged: Jewish Identities and Language Strategies in Contemporary Mexico,” in Luis Roniger and Tamar Herzog, ed., *The Collective and the Public in Latin America: Cultural Identities and Political Order* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2000): 273-284.

like Madison Grant--led to the passage of the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 that practically ended immigration from exactly those European countries from which most American Jewish families had come. John Higham has noted that in 1920, both an economic depression (and the mounting radicalism which accompanied it) and a fresh wave of immigration (with five thousand new immigrants a day passing through Ellis Island)<sup>41</sup> provoked predictions of national economic and social collapse.<sup>42</sup>

Immigrants personified many Americans' fears of the unknown at a time of rapid technological change and economic uncertainty. As Joan Hoff Wilson has written, in the 1920s the "degree of tolerance exhibited toward change and innovation was highly selective. People were usually less inclined to oppose technological developments than they were political and social ones."<sup>43</sup> According to the powerful Henry Ford, who demonized Jews in his newspaper

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<sup>41</sup> Higham 267.

<sup>42</sup> As Ann Douglas has written, the "drastic fluctuations, the sudden shifts from boom periods into sometimes tenacious depressions, downturns accompanied by massive layoffs and sometimes violent agitation, ever more visible in America's full-fledged, more or less unregulated capitalist economy, erased the traditional image of the immigrant as part of an unending supply of docile, industrious, cheap, and quickly Americanized labor and raised in its place the alarming specter of an unemployed, ill-educated and angry mob of foreigners with no real stake in the American enterprise, with no knowledge of its Anglo-Saxon values and traditions..." *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1995) 305.

<sup>43</sup> Joan Hoff Wilson, "Introduction: How Normal Was Normalcy?" to *The Twenties: The Critical Issues*, ed. by Joan Hoff Wilson (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1972), xxiii.

*The Dearborn Independent*, Jews corrupted not just agriculture, journalism and finance but the popular entertainment as well. His idea was that Jewish involvement in the arts, particularly in theatre, would “Judaize” them in an evil way, spreading the influence of “Jewish values” throughout the country.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, quite the opposite took place. Popular culture played a large role in encouraging tolerance among Americans of different ethnicities. Many of the vaudeville acts, plays and films I will analyze focused not just on Jews but on the relationships between second generation Jews and Irish. One reason for this may be that both groups lived in close proximity in outer borough neighborhoods (as they had to some extent on the Lower East Side) and both suffered discrimination in American society.

My analysis of Jewish ethnicity in popular entertainment is inspired by contemporary theoretical understandings of ethnicity as a historically-conditioned social construct rather than an essentialized quality. David Hollinger, for example, proposes a new model of ethnic self-identification, which he calls “postethnic,” in

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<sup>44</sup> See Albert Lee, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980).

which voluntary, often temporary affiliations replace hereditary, deeply rooted commitments.<sup>45</sup>

Hollinger and other postmodernists (influenced heavily by Werner Sollors' influential distinction between consent and descent in American history and literature)<sup>46</sup> disagree with Edward Shils' concept of the "primordial affinities" that sustain loyalty to an ethnic group. Instead, they point to the ways in which modern identities are multiple, flexible, and shifting rather than unitary, rigid and unchanging over time. Semioticians like William Boelhower see ethnic identity as a kind of force field, which emerges only out of the process (or flux) generated by ethnic groups coming into contact and reciprocal relationship with one another--out of, in other words, a process of looking and being looked at.<sup>47</sup>

This study examines how this process took place in three different realms of the performing arts: vaudeville, Broadway theater and film. The first chapter of this study begins with a

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<sup>45</sup> David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (Venezia: Edizioni Helvetica, 1984).

rehearsal of Jewish stereotypes on stage and then discusses a number of important second-generation Jewish vaudeville stars, with a particular focus on Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel and Sophie Tucker. I argue that the Jewish routines performed by these entertainers expressed a highly conflicted attitude toward their Jewish identity. That at least part of the audience was expected to be Jewish as well is indicated by the popularity of routines that incorporated Yiddish expressions, that showed the comedians acting out familiar immigrant Jewish personas in stereotypical Jewish occupations or family roles, and that depended for their humor on a basic knowledge of Jewish religion and culture.

The second chapter analyzes the 1920s Broadway comedies that showed Jewish families coping with peculiarly “American” problems—conflict between the generations, intermarriage (especially with the Irish) and assimilation. Most of these plays were written by Jews, including Aaron Hoffman’s *Two Blocks Away*, Montague Glass’s *Partners Again* (1922), Leon De Costa’s *Kosher Kitty Kelly* (1925), Bella and Samuel Spewack’s *Poppa* (1928), and David Freedman’s *Mendel Inc.* (1928). Many were produced by Jewish producers, from Sam and J.J. Shubert to David Belasco and Sam Harris.

Interestingly, it was the comic strips of the period, particularly Harry Hershfield's *Abie the Agent*, which reviewers most often mentioned in searching for the roots of the new Jewish characters. I thus trace the way in which Americans' familiarity with ethnic humor in the comic strips increased their receptivity to Jewish characters on Broadway. But I am also interested in the transformation of the Broadway audience, as these plays attracted tremendous numbers of Jews to Broadway for the first time, helping to democratize the face of Broadway. As second generation Jews saw their lives mirrored on the Broadway stage, they celebrated a sense of having arrived in American culture.

My third and final chapter looks at silent films from the period that, since they are almost all set on the Lower East Side at a time when Jews were beginning to leave the immigrant neighborhood, are both highly nostalgic and strikingly forward-looking. I argue in this chapter that as images of Jews began to be widely disseminated in American culture, tolerance for Jews gradually increased. The emphasis in this chapter is on the ways in which perceptions of Jews changed in the majority culture.

Despite the mostly negative attitudes toward Jewishness on the part of the highly assimilated Jewish film producers, there was a significant body of films that showed Jews in highly sympathetic

ways. These films showed Jews as sharing the same kinds of family relationships, economic struggles, nostalgia for the past, and fantasies of a better life that all Americans did in the turbulent twenties. I will demonstrate this by analyzing not just the films themselves but the marketing campaigns undertaken by the studios, and the reactions to the films in both the mainstream and Jewish press.

The conclusion compares representations of Jews in popular culture in the 1920s with contemporary representations, mostly on television. It shows how thin these representations have become and asks if it is still possible for Jews to construct their identities in any way on the basis of images of themselves in popular culture. Steven Whitfield has argued that there is “no longer a serious way of being Jewish—and of living within Jewish culture—without Judaism.”<sup>48</sup> Were my grandparents members of the last generation to be able to ground a transmissible Jewish identity in a non-religious way?

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<sup>48</sup> Whitfield 237.



## **CHAPTER ONE—JEWS ON THE VAUDEVILLE STAGE**

A midwestern Jewish newspaper published a front-page article in June of 1926 entitled "Jewishness--and the Box Office" with the subhead "Why Broadway Stars are More Jewish Than Ever." The article, by Henry Montor, talks about a group of "distinguished Paris businessmen" who came to New York seeking a "typical New York evening." Their host, the author of the article, recommended one Jewish entertainer after another, from Fanny Brice to Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor to Ed Wynn, telling them that these entertainers "represent the Broadway age at its best, and the Yankee art in its most original form."<sup>1</sup>

Jewish comedy as authentic "Yankee art"? Montor's article went on to attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction. Unlike refugee Jewish artists from Russia who concealed their Jewish origins, American Jewish artists openly proclaimed their Jewishness to their audiences. Montor saw their calling attention to their Jewishness primarily as an effort to combat anti-Semitism in American society. But, whatever its efficacy in this regard, the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Montor, "Jewishness--and the Box Office: Why Broadway Stars are More Jewish Than Ever." *American Jewish World* [St. Paul and Minneapolis] (June 25, 1926), 1.

effects of an overtly Jewish style of entertainment dominating the theatre had effects far beyond this. For it was the Jewish entertainers, Montor concluded, who were beginning to "express, and to a certain extent, mold, American humor, wit, music, and life in general."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the source of the Jewish entertainers' humor remained a mystery to Montor. Although he said it would "make a very interesting study if once were to analyze and dissect the art of a Jolson or Cantor," he wondered if such an examination would yield a racial trait that accounted for their pre-eminence in entertainment. There seemed no other way to explain the tremendous success of Jewish artists.

This chapter will take up Montor's challenge, and agree that Jewish entertainers had a profound effect on American culture. But rather than seeking an explanation for Jewish entertainers' success in racial terms, I will argue that the success of their routines can be explained in terms of the way they satisfied the emotional needs of their audiences--audiences that were increasingly composed not of French businessman, but of second generation American Jews. These Jews were, as Deborah Dash Moore has written, "at home in

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

America,"<sup>3</sup> in terms of their material success and level of comfort in American society. What they needed to work out was the meaning of their Jewish identity, and they did so in large part through the representations of Jews that they produced and consumed in American popular culture.

My work builds partly on that of scholars such as Harley Erdman, Paul Distler and Esther Romeyn,<sup>4</sup> who have analyzed late nineteenth and early twentieth century Jewish vaudeville in terms of the presentation of "types," or characteristics that performers used in order to signify stereotypically Jewish attributes. Variety sketches, like contemporary Saturday Night Live skits, are based on obvious, often non-realistic markers of identity--switching hats, sticking on a mustache, adopting an exaggerated accent or a funny walk or an extravagant gesture. To impersonate an immigrant Jewish man (Jewish immigrant women were much less often the butt of humor), this meant gluing on a long beard and a big nose, pulling a derby hat over the ears, and speaking with a grotesque Yiddish

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<sup>3</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), Paul Antonie Distler, "The Rise and Fall of the Racial Comics in American Vaudeville," (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1963), Esther Romeyn, "My Other/My Self: Impersonation, Masquerade and the Theater of Identity in Turn-of-the-Century New York City" (Ph.D. diss, University of Minnesota, 1998).

accent. Although they usually had names (this added to the humor), they were caricatures rather than fully developed characters.

As we will see, most of these performances in the early twentieth century were the product of “Hebrew comics”—non-Jews who portrayed Jews in order to ridicule them. At a time when making fun of ethnic minorities assuaged America’s anxieties about immigrants, these “Hebrew comics” were second in popularity only to minstrel show performers—white entertainers who donned blackface to make fun of black people. I will thus begin with a rehearsal of some of these anti-Semitic vaudeville performances, and then explore how Jews began to take over their own representations and begin to try to work out what it meant to them to be Jewish. For as the second generation Jewish comics worked within the tradition of Jewish “racial” comedy, they began to reinvent Jewish ethnicity in America.

In creating Jewish self-representations, I will argue, they changed the ways in which non-Jews viewed Jews, and in which Jews viewed themselves.

Not all Jewish American entertainers were known for their Jewish comedy routines; Al Jolson, perhaps the most successful of all second generation Jewish entertainers, did almost no Jewish comedy after he became famous. The Marx Brothers also had no

Jewish routines; Groucho Marx told his son that although the Marx Brothers were Jewish, “the world thinks we’re Italian.”<sup>5</sup> Even those who were famous for their Jewish comedy and/or son--including Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker and George Jessel--tended to perform explicitly-Jewish themed material only as a part of a larger repertoire. Nevertheless, I will argue that their Jewish-themed material is worthy of study for the complex feelings about Jewishness that they encapsulated.

### **The “Hebrew” Comics**

Vaudeville grew out of the entertainment format known as the variety show, in which different types of performers (including singers, dancers, jugglers, magicians, animal trainers, etc.) were all presented on the same bill. According to Douglas Gilbert, a producer named John W. Ransome first used the word “vaudeville” to describe the group he formed in the 1880s. The word comes from the French “Val de Vire” (or “Vau de Vire”), meaning the valley of the Vire River in Normandy, a region where lively ballads were

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<sup>5</sup> Stephan Kanfer, *Groucho: The Life and Times of Julius Henry Marx* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 375.

sung.<sup>6</sup> Ransome himself played a "Dutch" comic (a caricature of a German-speaking immigrant) with this group, and vaudeville quickly became known for its "racial" comedy, its presentation of stereotypes of immigrants. The Irish were most often the butts of humor, especially in the early days of vaudeville, followed by Blacks (who were impersonated by white people wearing blackface) and then German-speaking immigrants.<sup>7</sup>

But there were many "Hebrew" comics as well, performers whose name came not from their own ethnicity, since most of the actors were not Jewish themselves,<sup>8</sup> but from the Jewish stereotypes they performed on stage. As James Madison, who published books of vaudeville gags put it in 1900, "The time is ripe for Hebrew dialect comedians. Good stories illustrative of the traits and

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (New York: Dover Publications, 1940), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert 62.

<sup>8</sup> Some were Jewish, however. As Al Jolson's brother, Harry Jolson, recalled of an act that the two brothers did together in 1900 called "The Hebrew and the Cadet":

I was the Hebrew with a big hat and a beard. Al, who was only fifteen, was the straight man dressed in a cadet uniform....

At one point in the act Al called me a monkey...."Vell!" I replied with a huge smile. "Sure I am a monkey. Vot is more I want to tell you that my brothers and sisters is monkeys, my father and mother is monkeys, and all of my ancestors was monkeys."

This got a huge laugh, and it will today, if you try it on an audience of tender years.

Harry Jolson, as told to Alban Emley, *Mistah Jolson* (Hollywood, CA: House-Warven, 1952) 45.

peculiarities of the Jewish race always create a laugh.”<sup>9</sup> These entertainers created caricatures that exploited the anti-Semitic attitudes of the time; their acts simply recapitulated negative stereotypes of Jews including their supposed unkempt appearance, unattractive faces, and pervasive dishonesty.

Wearing crepe hair, exaggerated noses made from putty, and long dark clothes, these actors were able, with a few distinguishing features, to give audiences, many of whom had never seen actual Jews, the pleasure of indulging anti-Semitic feelings. Whether starting a fire to collect from their insurance company, overcharging their customers, or demonstrating their ignorance of both the English language and of American culture, Jews remained in the Shylock and Fagin tradition, albeit with a comic twist.

Audiences were able to laugh at these stereotypes because they seemed comic rather than threatening. In her study of images of the Jew in nineteenth century American culture, Louise A. Mayo has found that the most pervasive stereotype was of the greedy, money-hungry Jew. However, she points out that these depictions

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in James H. Dormon, “American Popular Culture and the New Immigration Ethnics: The Vaudeville Stage and the Process of Ethnic Ascription,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (Heidelberg, Germany) 36, 2 (1991), 183.

"did not demonstrate any real rancor or fear."<sup>10</sup> In contrast to European representations of the Jew as the devil incarnate who sucked the lifeblood out of the economic system, Americans saw Jews as more ridiculous than dangerous—a rational being whose pursuit of wealth summed up the ambivalence of Protestant Americans toward their own (more socially acceptable) acquisitiveness.

They also fell into familiar styles. When actors like Frank Bush and Julian Rose performed Jewish roles, they fell into two basic categories, according to Distler: "the fast-talking, aggressive winner and the pathetic, world-weary loser."<sup>11</sup> For example, Ben Welch exemplified the latter type, while his brother, Joe Welch, represented the former. According to Joe Laurie, Jr., Joe Welch was a widely-imitated comic who entered the stage to almost "funeral music" clad in "misfit coat and pants, hands in his sleeves, derby hat over his ears and beard brushed to a point. He stood center stage, faced the audience for half a minute, and with the saddest look ever

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<sup>10</sup> Louise A. Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth Century America's Perception of the Jew* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), 90.

<sup>11</sup> Erdman 102. It is interesting that two important later American Jewish playwrights, Arthur Miller and David Mamet, both created characters of salesmen who have presumably turned from the former into the latter. In both *Death of a Salesman* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the gift of gab has deserted the main characters, leading in each case to a dramatic and painful end to their careers.



on a human pan, said, 'Maybe you tink I'm heppy?'"<sup>12</sup> Vaudeville stars who played Jewish characters in the succeeding decades continued in many ways to play the "loser." One exception was Jess Dandy, who played a "stout, genial, business Jew," who according to Gilbert, "never whined or deplored but stressed good humor and pleasantries to win his audience."<sup>13</sup> Gilbert sees him as a forerunner of the Potash and Perlmutter plays of Montague Glass, an enormously popular series featuring two Jewish businessmen that I will examine in greater depth in the next chapter.

Almost all comics, of whatever ethnic stripe, started by doing blackface comedy, and then branched out into impersonating other ethnic minorities. In fact, vaudeville comics often changed vaudeville "identities" in rapid-fire succession; the most salient feature of ethnic identities on stage was their seeming interchangeability. As Robert Snyder has pointed out, "anyone could play any nationality. All that was needed was a convincing presentation of stock traits (down to skin color: sallow greasepaint for Jews, red for Irishmen, and olive for Sicilians.)"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953).

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert 291.

<sup>14</sup> Snyder 111.

Jewish and Irish caricatures were often performed in tandem. Snyder quotes a theatre manager, R.E. Irwin, about a vaudeville team called Morris Allen, who appeared in 1911 at Keith and Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theatre; Irwin trumpets, "Two Jews singing Irish songs with a little talk and some bag pipe singing. This act is a find for any house and is as good an act of the Hebrew brand as has been around in many a day."<sup>15</sup> Only black comedians were limited in the repertoire of ethnic identities that they were permitted to perform.<sup>16</sup>

Even in performing other ethnic identities, however, Jewish performers often slipped back into what they were most familiar with. Even two prominent Jewish performers from the Lower East Side, Weber and Fields, who never did explicitly Jewish routines, wittily covered their noses with their hands when they sang about being Irish, a gesture that brought down the house.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> According to David Nasaw, black vaudevillians "could only parody 'darkies,' and occasionally the Chinese." Only in black theatres could they don whiteface. Nasaw 57.

<sup>17</sup> Felix Isman, *Weber and Fields* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924) 51. See also Edmond and L. Marc Fields, *From the Bowery to Broadway: Lew Fields and the Roots of American Popular Theatre*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

According to Harry Jolson, brother of Al Jolson, "There were few specialists who played only one type of character. A comedian was expected to do anything. He would be a Dutchman in one act, a Jew in another, and an Irishman in a third, with a perfect rendition of the dialect of each. You were either versatile or out of a job."

Harry usually played in a Jewish dialect. In one show, he recounts:

I was unexpectedly assigned the part of Emperor of Ireland. When the "Wearing of the Green" sounded, I strutted on the stage in a supposed Hibernian costume. Habit was too strong for me. Instead of speaking my lines with an Irish brogue, I made a speech in approved Eastside Yiddish-American gumbo.

When called on the carpet, I defended myself with the skill of a park-bench lawyer.

"There are Jews in Ireland," I said. "Have you ever been in Ireland?"

"No, I haven't," was the reply.

"Well, I have, and I gave a perfect impersonation of an Irish-Jew. What do you expect for what you are paying me? The real Emperor of Ireland?"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Harry Jolson 83-84.

There is somewhat of a scholarly consensus that these representations disappeared from American culture in the 1920s. Distler refers to the "reformation" of the stage Jew, which he attributes to the work of protest groups like the Anti-Stage Ridicule Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith. He argues that ethnic stereotypes declined both because immigrants and their children were assimilating and because the Immigration Acts of the early 1920s prevented new immigrants from arriving--providing fewer examples of unassimilated Jews for American culture to parody. Erdman states baldly that the 1910s was the "last decade (until recent times) in which markedly Jewish characters were commonplace in American popular performance."<sup>19</sup>

Distler and Erdman both seem to refer to highly stereotypical performances of Jewish characters, without taking into account the later, more complex portrayals of Jewishness that are the subject of this chapter. But even the stereotypes they mention did not die out anywhere near as quickly as they suggest. In fact, Edward Coleman's *The Jew in English Drama*, compiled by him in the 1930s, lists hundreds of vaudeville monologues and two-person sketches from the 1920s (many of which were published by T.S. Denison & Company in Chicago) incorporating stereotypical Jewish

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<sup>19</sup> Erdman 159.

"characters." From Arthur Leroy Kaser's "Vait a minute" and "Vell! Vell! Vell!" to E.L. Gamble's "Oi, vhat a bargain" and "Oi, vot a business" to William McNally's "Avernsky by the Seasky" and "Irving Lipshits the Salesman," to Frederick Green Johnson's "Abie's Confessions" and "Mrs. Goldblitz on Matrimony," the stage Jew was a durable type throughout the United States during the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

Many of these routines, which were heavy on physical, slapstick comedy as well as the liberal use of foreign accents, featured a kind of combination approach to ethnic humor, with members of different ethnic groups finding themselves in the same army platoon, schoolroom or restaurant. A typical routine was "Abie Eats," in which an oyster-eating Jew<sup>21</sup> is dissatisfied with everything on the restaurant menu--especially the prices! His dishonesty is shown by his feigning illness when the bill comes.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most famous Jewish routine was "Cohen on the Telephone," first performed in England in 1912 by Joe Hayman, in which a heavily-accented immigrant Jew, unfamiliar with using the

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<sup>20</sup> Edward D. Coleman, *The Jew in English Drama* (New York: The New York Public Library and Ktav Publishing House, 1968). Based on his own collection of recordings, Michael G. Corenthal says that the stereotype died out by the mid 1930s. He attributes this partly to the nature of the radio medium, which, he says, "required a more sustaining situation comedy type format not as agreeable to the gimmick comedians of vaudeville." Corenthal 7.

<sup>21</sup> Oysters are, of course, prohibited by Jewish dietary laws. Abie is clearly not a religious Jew, even though he is given stereotypical Jewish traits.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Byers, "Abie Eats," (Franklin, OH: Eldridge Entertainment House, 1927).

telephone, calls his landlord to complain about a broken window. This recording sold hundreds of thousands of copies and led to a series of further sketches with Cohen in other difficult situations, including being at a real estate office, sailing on a houseboat, attending a prizefight, and having problems with his automobile. (He even gave "lectures" on telephone etiquette and deportment.)<sup>23</sup> Cohen sketches were also recorded by a number of American comedians; Monroe Silver, the best-known "Cohen" actor in the United States, performed them for thirty years, on two dozen different record labels. As we will see in the next chapter, this basic routine was reprised in different ways in a number of the Broadway comedies about Jewish life in New York.

### **The Stage Jew Rehabilitated?**

When the new generation of American Jewish performers began to take over these representations, the old stereotypes thus retained a certain amount of influence. Rather than jettisoning them entirely, this new breed of entertainers transformed the stereotypes in their own image, updating them to reflect their own

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<sup>23</sup> For a listing of these, and other Jewish comedy recordings from the period, see Corenthal 49-52.

experience of being Jewish in America. But acting out these modified stereotypes, for Jewish performers, was an extraordinarily complex activity; it was a way of simultaneously validating their Jewishness and denigrating it, of expressing both pride and a need for self-abasement. Performing Jewishness meant parading before the world a highly conflicted sense of self.

As one observer, Eli Levi, wrote in an English-language Jewish newspaper in 1922, a new type of Jewish vaudeville comedian had appeared in the last few years. He calls them the "English-speaking Jewish comedians...working without facial make-up and grotesque costume. They mimic the 'heavy' broken English of their immigrant elders, make cryptic remarks in Jewish, and exemplify the peculiarities of the 'kike.'" Levi concludes that "Vaudeville is not an elevating form of entertainment, and the characterization of the Jew has no place there."<sup>24</sup>

But few second generation Jews expected vaudeville to be "elevating." They simply wanted to be entertained. Perhaps the best example of the changing methods of the new breed of Jewish comics is the work of Joe Smith (Joe Sultzer) and Charlie Dale (Charlie

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<sup>24</sup> Eli Levi, "The Jew and Vaudeville," *B'nai Brith News* (May 1922), 9.

Marks), two Jewish boys from the Lower East Side who formed one of the best-loved vaudeville teams. (Their stage names were the result of a theater manager's using left-over cards from another act to advertise their first big-time performance.) In their trademark act, "Dr. Kronkhite," (taken from the Yiddish word for sickness, *krankayt*), a patient with a heavy Yiddish accent is examined by an unsympathetic and impatient physician. (This routine was later incorporated into Neil Simon's play about a retired vaudevillian team, *The Sunshine Boys*.) The sarcasm-laden humor is based on verbal mix-ups, such as when the patient says he's "dubious" that the doctor is really a doctor, leading the doctor to address the patient as "Mr. Dubious." A typical example of the Yiddish accent and word order causing misunderstanding is when the patient says "Veal I eat," and the doctor says "Look, I don't ask you *vill* you eat, I ask you *what* you eat."<sup>25</sup>

These routines had an important place in the reconstruction of Jewish identity in America. In fact, the more the audience

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<sup>25</sup> Joe Smith, "Dr. Kronkhite Revisited," in Matlaw, *American Popular Entertainment Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the History of American Popular Entertainment* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 121-131. They also maintained connections to Jewish religion in their personal lives. When Joe Smith's father passed away in 1923 while the team were touring the West, Smith worked hard to assemble a minyan (quorum of ten men for prayer) both on the train and in each town in which they appeared. See Joe Smith, "Smith and Dale: Kaddish on the Road on the Orpheum Circuit, 1923-1924," *Western States Jewish History* XXXIII, 3 (Spring 2001): 237-247.



acculturated, the funnier these stereotypes became to second generation Jewish audiences; they marked the distance the children had traveled from the world of their parents. Still, ethnic markers were a source of profound ambivalence; the Yiddish accent symbolized both the greenhorn status second generation Jews were anxious to disassociate themselves from and the positive aspects of parental love and Jewish culture.

Unlike Tin Pan Alley composers like George Gershwin and Irving Berlin, who incorporated few Jewish themes in their work, these vaudeville performers thus retain close connections to Jewish culture. Mark Slobin, the foremost historian of American Jewish music, has argued that "Jewish popular culture in the 1920s became increasingly defined in terms of its relationship to the mainstream of American life. To rely on the continuity of internal traditions became ever more risky, as the ethnic thread was stretched thinner and thinner."<sup>26</sup> But Slobin's focus on music leads him to underestimate the Jewish content of other forms of popular culture with which he is less familiar and to make a generalization that is false. Jewishness continued to permeate American popular culture; the "ethnic thread" was not stretched so thin after all.

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 199.

## **Reprising the Ghetto**

One direction in which the “thread” often led, at least in symbolic terms, was back to the immigrant ghetto. A recurrent theme in this vaudeville material is the relationship of the second generation to the Lower East Side, the immigrant neighborhood in which they had all grown up. In fact, the Jewish “ghetto” came for the second generation to symbolize their Jewish heritage itself; in moving away from the ghetto they were detaching themselves from Jewish tradition. This tension informed much of their work. For their careers seemed to take shape, at least metaphorically, in the shadow of the ghetto, with which they and their audiences remained emotionally connected.

The mystique of the ghetto was a large part of their appeal, even among non-Jews; one critic reviewing a vaudeville performance by the entertainer Belle Baker noted that she sang a Jewish comedy song called “Atlas Is It-less” and calling Baker a “raven-haired, big-eyed, Jewish ‘Momma,’ who used to sell lemonade at a penny a drink in New York’s Delancey Street.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Unidentified clipping. Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Belle Baker Scrapbooks.

By far the most successful dialect comedian was Fanny Brice. Brice, born Fanny Borach in 1891 on the Lower East Side, made a career of Yiddish dialect comedy, despite the fact that she said she never learned Yiddish. At a time when second generation American Jews viewed the Yiddish accent as a mark of the uneducated and unacculturated, Brice's use of it enabled her to mock her origins in ways that pleased both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Her gleeful performances of "characters" from the ghetto were particularly popular, especially among Jews for whom they stirred nostalgia for the Lower East Side.

One of Brice's three biographers, Barbara Grossman, quotes an interview Brice gave in the 1930s in which she exclaimed "The Ghetto! It is so old and strong; it is still carrying on all over the earth. It gave us a spirit I can tell you."<sup>28</sup> Although Brice did not explain this remark, the idea that the ghetto would be "carrying on all over the earth" is an interesting one; Brice herself, through her performances, brought the ghetto all across America and to London. The ghetto traveled with her.

Her first big success came in 1909 when she performed a song about a Bronx girl who became a hula dancer. It was written by

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<sup>28</sup> Barbara Grossman, *Funny Woman: The Life and Times of Fanny Brice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 7.

Irving Berlin and was called "Sadie Salome, Go Home!" Her singing it in a Yiddish accent came about, she later recalled, because Berlin sang it for her with what she later called his "little naive inflection."<sup>29</sup> Brice said she "never had any idea of doing a song with a Yiddish accent. I didn't even understand Jewish, couldn't talk a word of it. But, I thought, if that's the way Irving sings it, that's the way I'll sing it."<sup>30</sup>

Berlin's Salome song parodied the late nineteenth and early twentieth century craze for Salome dancing (sparked, according to Grossman, both by Oscar Wilde's 1893 one-act play and by Florenz Ziegfeld's 1907 spoof of the Richard Straus opera in the first edition of his celebrated *Follies*<sup>31</sup>) by portraying a Jewish girl who leaves home and leaves her disapproving fiancé, Mose, in order to seek stardom as a Salome dancer--a kind of glorified stripper. Singing this song, Brice recalled, brought back, for her, the sights and smells of the immigrant neighborhood:

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<sup>29</sup> Unidentified clipping, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>30</sup> In her autobiography, Sophie Tucker confirms that Brice did not speak Yiddish. She says that Brice learned the accent from Harry Delf, "a grand Jewish comedian who used to play the joints in Brooklyn and Coney Island." Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days* (New York: Doubleday, 1945), 57.

<sup>31</sup> Grossman 31. See also Andrew Erdman, "Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York Graduate Center, 2001).

I saw Loscha of the Coney Island popcorn counter and Marta of the cheeses at Brodsky's Delicatessen, and the Sadie's and the Rachels and the Birdies with the turnover heels at the Second Avenue dance halls. They all welded together and came out staggeringly true to type in one big authentic outline.<sup>32</sup>

In Brice's mind, the personalities of the ghetto merged; "they all welded together," as if they were different parts of a single person. Singing her Salome song, Brice brought back the sensory experience of the ghetto for herself--and, presumably for her audience. The poor working women of the ghetto--Loscha, Marta, Sadie, Rachel, Birdie--shared certain common characteristics that Brice saw herself as embodying in her performance. Similarly, in an interview with a Detroit newspaper two years later, the vaudeville star Belle Baker (known as the the "Bernhardt of Ragtime" in her day for having introduced Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" in 1917) seemed almost to repeat Fanny Brice's words in claiming that she took her Jewish characters from people she had known on the Lower East Side:

A comic song to be truly comic ought to have a true-to-nature touch. If you don't understand the people you are characterizing, your impersonation is just a burlesque and not

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<sup>32</sup> Grossman 31.

real at all. Well, I don't have to make a sightseeing tour to get my types. I was born in New York right among them....All my impersonations are real. When I sing an Italian or Irish or Yiddish song, I have a definite character in mind that I've known for years. I present the character from that point of view--not the outsiders."<sup>33</sup>

In defending her characterizations of Jews, Baker never mentions her own Jewishness. Her claim to being able to represent Jews is based on knowing them--not on being one herself. This enables her to claim that she can represent different ethnic characters with equal skill. However, another article from the same newspaper, while calling Baker a "neat and capable Jewish girl who can give the audience the distilled quintessence of any ballad, or can wring the uttermost drop of pep out of any rag" also pointed out that she "isn't above commercializing some of the characteristics of her own kin."<sup>34</sup> Brice's use of the Yiddish accent was equally calculating. A newspaper article about her in 1912 says she "lives in daily terror that some day she will speak the way everyone else does, and that she will forget her accent." In order to avoid this, she returns to the ghetto for two or three weeks every summer

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<sup>33</sup> "Why Belle Succeeds" *Detroit Journal* (October 24, 1919),. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

"listening, imitating, bargaining, quarrelling--using every opportunity for a new trick."<sup>35</sup> Still, Brice continued to distance herself from those she supposedly studied. As she told a Cincinnati newspaper, "I go to their dances and outings, and eat in their restaurants. I do not bother with the Jewish types who have been in this country long enough to be Americanized."<sup>36</sup>

She did not "bother" in other words, with people like herself, who had shed many of the immigrant mannerisms and gestures. The irony is that her second generation audience was also more "Americanized," and thus she was conspiring in a sense with her audience to present a picture of Jewishness that both she and they knew was outdated, and yet which they could take pleasure in having grown out of.

Yet Brice, even as she became very successful continued to demonstrate, at least in her work, an obsession with Jewish immigrants and the neighborhood in which they had settled. One profile of Brice in 1932, in a Jewish journal, is worth quoting at length:

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<sup>34</sup> Undated clipping, *Detroit Journal*. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>35</sup> *New York Tribune* (September 15, 1912), 12. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>36</sup> Undated clipping, *Cincinnati Commercial*. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

From the Ghetto to Park Avenue--that is the triumphal march of Fannie Brice, America's most famous and most popular Jewish comedienne. Her journey was begun almost forty years ago on New York's crowded East Side, that colorful habitat of 'Jews Without Money,' and a far cry from the refinement, spaciousness, quiet elegance, and glamorous doormen of the world's wealthiest street....

But Fannie Brice (that's how she signs her checks) did not leave the Ghetto behind. She has not entirely escaped it. A bank account, a hand-wrought, grilled door, a mosaic lobby, a soft-spoken, well-bred elevator man, a French governess for her two children stand between her and the sordidness and ugliness of her early environment; but the vibrant tragedy of all the Ghettoes of the world cries out in her voice. Her eyes broadcast the haunting pathos of Clinton Streets, Suffolk Streets, and Delancey Streets the world over. And right under the noses of the ritzy attendants of 1111 Park Avenue, this colorful character, Fannie Brice, lugged up to her quarters a large parcel of the Ghetto including the courage, the wit, the



stamina, the honesty and the real values of the Jewish slums....<sup>37</sup>

The article describes Brice as bringing the ghetto with her in an almost surreptitious way, "right under the noses" of the servants of the rich. The reader is put in cahoots with Brice, who is preserving the "real values" of the ghetto. Ironically, given the conspiratorial tone, it is the ghetto's "honesty" that Brice is especially lauded for preserving. The honesty seems presented less in moral terms than in fidelity to one's roots. The "parcel" that Brice "lugs," almost as if she still had to carry home her own shopping from the Lower East Side markets, is identified with the ghetto itself. It is characterized as a burden, but also as a source of both physical strength and strength of character. Her success has come from her ability to "broadcast the haunting pathos" of the ghetto streets to the world; the paradox of her career is that she has made a great deal of money by reproducing for the world the experience of poverty.

The ghetto also remained important as both setting and theme in the work of Eddie Cantor. Cantor, one of Brice's co-stars in the Ziegfeld Follies, was born Isidore Iskowitz; on Rosh Hashanah, the

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<sup>37</sup> Ethel E. Sanders, "Semitic Silhouettes—Ghetto Comedienne," *Opinion: A Journal of Jewish Life and Letters* (October 1932), 24.

Jewish New Year, in September, 1892. According to Cantor's biographer, Herbert Goldman, Cantor's immigrant mother died of a lung disease when he was an infant and his father abandoned him.

Cantor was raised on the Lower East Side by his maternal grandmother, Esther Kantrowitz; when she registered him for public school, she mistakenly gave her name rather than his, and the school shortened it to "Kanter." Cantor's memories of his stern but self-sacrificing grandmother and his impoverished upbringing on the Lower East Side remained vivid and important to him throughout his life. In both his autobiographies, *My Life is in Your Hands* and *Take My Life*, Cantor fondly remembered his early job as a delivery boy for the Isaac Gellis Wurst Works (a kosher meat factory). The job gave Cantor his first taste of abundance; he later said he ate so many sandwiches he turned into a "sausage with eyes"<sup>38</sup>--an interesting

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<sup>38</sup> In later life, Cantor proclaimed himself to be the "world's supreme delicatessen eater." Eddie Cantor, with David Freedman, *My Life is in Your Hands* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 21. In many of his films, Cantor's Jewishness was made explicit because of the food he eats. For example, one scene of *Kid Millions* (1935) has Cantor, dressed as a sheik, keeping an eye on another sheik's harem. Holding a picture of his Brooklyn sweetheart, he sings "Okay, Toots," as he tries to decide whether or not to remain faithful to her. One of the lines of the song is "If you do cooking, I do cooking, if you won't bake, I won't eat cake....If you say cold cuts, I eat cold cuts. Cold or hot, or just from Dover." (Later in the film, he impersonates the spirit of the sheik's Uncle Benny and then leads the other characters in singing the Moses-inspired Negro hymn "Let My People Go.") And in *Roman Scandals*, Eddie goes back in time to Ancient Rome, where he is dubbed Oedipus and becomes official food-taster to the emperor, whom everyone is trying to poison. But instead of eating the poisoned food, Eddie has brought his own lunch--a hot dog and pickle! He then calls for cheese blintzes to be served to the emperor.

choice of words given the importance of Cantor's eye movements to his comedy work.

Cantor broke into vaudeville in 1908, when he won first prize at an amateur night contest at Miner's Bowery. Cantor stuck on a beard and told jokes he remembered from vaudeville routines of stage Hebrews like Joe and Ben Welch. As the comedian recalled in his autobiography, "Joe Welsh's [*sic*] line always served as a handy opening. It appeared funny for a young boy with a beard to shake his head gravely and say, "If I had my life to live over again I wouldn't be born."<sup>39</sup> It was extremely ironic, Cantor recalled, that he and his partner, Dan Lipsky once appeared in a Yiddish theater without knowing it; they found themselves speaking in English to an audience that only knew Yiddish. In George Jessel's autobiography, *So Help Me*, he recalls Cantor doing a Yiddish monologue as well at the Imperial Theatre in Manhattan, but Cantor never mentions this in his books.<sup>40</sup>

Cantor's first starring vehicle on Broadway was called *The Midnight Rounders*, which opened on November 29, 1920. Although

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<sup>39</sup> Cantor, *My Life is In Your Hands* 75. This joke expresses a nihilistic sentiment which one finds very seldom in Jewish humor, which characteristically expresses a kind of verbal shrug--a resigned attitude to the vicissitudes of life. Like the endless jokes of the period about Jews setting fires to collect insurance money, the material itself was clearly designed for a non-Jewish audience.

<sup>40</sup> George Jessel, *So Help Me* (New York: Random House, 1943), 124.

Cantor had acquired a reputation as a blackface comedian (albeit one who wore glasses as part of his costume, which was a departure from stereotype). Cantor performed in whiteface, and played a number of characters. One of his best was that of a tailor's assistant in a second-hand clothing store on the Lower East Side. The sketch was called "Joe's Blue Front," or "Belt in the Back." The tailor and his apprentice give a squeaky, rather timid customer the hard-sell, trying to get him to purchase a succession of ill-fitting, ridiculous-looking outfits. Each time, he balks, demanding a suit "with a belt in the back," Cantor lifts his arm as if to slug him in the rear. It is full of humor, such as when the two tailors lay the customer on the ground, as if measuring him for a coffin, or when they chant the numbers off the tape in the same melody as that used to explicate the Talmud. (The customer chimes in with "Sweet Adeline.")

After performing this routine again in his next Broadway show, *Make it Snappy*, Cantor also performed it in two films: the silent *Kid Boots* (1926) and the musical *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929). He brought it back yet again in his television show in the early 1950s. Writing of the original version, Gilbert Seldes said that the comedian's

terrific rushes from the wings, his appeals to God to strike him dead 'on the spot' if the suit now being tried on wasn't the best suit in the world, his helplessness and his 'Well, kill me, so kill me,' as apology when his partner revealed the damning fact that that happened to be the man's own suit--all of this was worth the whole of the Potash-Perlmutter cycle.<sup>41</sup>

Although Brice and Cantor were perhaps the most successful Jewish entertainers of their day, with the possible exception of Al Jolson, other well-known Jewish vaudeville performers also performed Jewish routines that reminded their audiences of their own childhoods in the ghetto. George Jessel, who starred in *The Jazz Singer* both on Broadway and on its national tour, had become famous for his vaudeville monologues in which he talked on the telephone with "mama," reassuring her that he did not take money from her dresser, or steal a cake from her cupboard. (Three decades later, Mike Nichols became famous with a similar routine, in which he placed a telephone call to his guilt-inducing mother, played by Elaine May.)

In his show *Troubles of 1919*, Jessel also did imitations of comedians who sang like Harry Cooper, an actor who appeared on stage as an old Jewish man, wearing a long beard and a derby hat (a

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<sup>41</sup> Seldes 180.

là Frank Bush). But instead of talking in pseudo-Yiddish dialect, when he opened his mouth he would sing in a beautiful tenor. According to one of Jessel's autobiographies, a typical song would begin: "In the green fields of Virginia, in the vale of Shenandoah..."<sup>42</sup> Jessel was expressing a common fantasy for Jews; the Jewish immigrant was really a true-blue American.

In the summer of 1920, Jessel produced his own revue; he hired chorus girls and a vaudeville team called Holmes and Wells. With a partner, Andy Lewis, he wrote the script; he also included songs that he had written himself, such as "Oh How I Laugh When I Think How I Cried About You" and "I'm Satisfied to Be My Mother's Baby." Jessel then appeared in the Shuberts' *Passing Show of 1923* with an expanded version of the "conversation with mama" routine called "Mama in the Box."

In this famous sketch, he entered an upper box in the theatre with his stage mother, who wore a shawl and ridiculous hat. He told her that they were going to see a famous French play. When she expresses anxiety about understanding the language, he tells her that no one in the audience will understand it either; it is his job to

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<sup>42</sup> George Jessel, *This Way, Miss* (New York: Holt, 1955), 59-60. According to Jessel, Al Jolson found this routine particularly hilarious; Jolson's manager, Louis Epstein, would call Jessel wherever in the country he was playing, and ask Jessel to "sing a few bars of Harry Cooper." *This Way, Miss*, 60.

translate it into English for them. "But," she reminds him, "English I don't understand much either." When the "play" begins, Jessel mistranslates the French into English and also gives a funny translation in Yiddish for his mother. "Mama" does not know how to behave in the theatre; she crunches on fruit, argues with the other people sitting in the box, and talks back to the actors on stage, with Jessel translating furiously back and forth. (At some point the leading actor returns her insult in Yiddish.) Ultimately, the play is totally disrupted, with the actors all taking part in the battle.

The second generation son is thus caught in the middle, between his immigrant parent and the "high" culture of American society. The sketch makes fun of both, but it is mostly his Yiddish-speaking mother who does not know the rules of etiquette in a Broadway theatre; she behaves as if she is in a Yiddish theatre, where there are fewer rules of decorum and audience members are expected to participate more freely in the action.

In her book on Yiddish theater, *Vagabond Stars*, Nahma Sandrow reprints a wonderful cartoon from *The Big Stick*, a humorous Yiddish newspaper from the turn of the century which shows the same people as they behave at a Broadway theatre and at their own neighborhood Yiddish theatre. At the uptown theatre, they sit quietly and attentively; at the Lower East Side theatre, they argue

with one another, eat, hiss the actors, and generally act as if they are in their own living rooms.<sup>43</sup> Jessel's stage mother "forgets" that she is not in her usual milieu; she acts as if there is no other theatre than the Yiddish theatre. When the leading actor returns her insult in Yiddish, this fantasy seems to be borne out; perhaps everyone (both in the cast and in the audience)*does* really speak Yiddish.

Jessel's character has one foot in both worlds; he can translate into Yiddish for his mother, but he also understands both English and French; his primary "responsibility" is to make sure that the English-speaking audience understands the play. But his mother humiliates him by forcing him both to expose himself as a Yiddish speaker and by forcing him to choose sides, so he has to defend her against the actor she has picked a fight with. Jessel is trying to please his mother by taking her to the theatre; he is ultimately overwhelmed and dominated by her. The tide of Yiddish culture has pulled him back in.

## **Second Generation Jewish Masculinity**

Even as Jews were becoming more accepted in American society, the masculinity of male Jews remained questionable, at least

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<sup>43</sup> Sandrow 93.



in popular culture. The New York critics agreed that one of the hits of the 1918 edition of the Ziegfeld Follies was Cantor's routine as an aspiring aviator, Percival Johnson, undergoing a physical examination by an Air Force doctor. Cantor was set upon by the doctor, played by Frank Carter, who slapped his face, pummeled his body, and twisted his limbs.

As the entertainer described it, "He whacked and banged me, clapped me together and pulled me apart like an accordion, and did everything but twine me around a spool." Hebrew comedians had not been known for their use of slapstick; such an approach was identified more with "Dutch" routines, such as those of Weber and Fields, who chased each other around the stage, hitting one another with canes, pool cues and other implements. In fact, one newspaper reviewer called Cantor's routine "Good, rollicking, belly-shaking slapstick this, that recalled the palmy days of Weber & Fields."<sup>44</sup>

In many of his routines, Cantor's Jewishness became explicit. He played what the *New York Telegraph* called a "meek and timid" character who is hilariously ill-suited for the bravery and heroism required of military service. (In a Paramount short from 1929, entitled "Insurance," Cantor undergoes a similar medical

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<sup>44</sup> "The Play: Ziegfeld Follies With Us Again," *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser* (June 20, 1918), 17. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

examination; he plays a Jewish-Irish man named "Sidney B. Sweeback." When asked on what side he is Jewish, Cantor replies, "The East Side.") Just as Jews were continually reminded that they did not belong in America, Cantor's masochistic character learned that his personality and disposition disqualified him from battle, especially from the glamour of the air force. The irony was that Cantor, whom the *New York Sun* called the "favorite of the Midnight Frolic and the Bronx,"<sup>45</sup> was beginning his rise to stardom. He did so by allowing himself to be shamed and humiliated on stage, but in a way in which he seemed always to be in control, or at any rate to be complicit in his own victimization.

Cantor's character possessed a kind of serene self-confidence coupled with a physical invulnerability that permitted him, like a cartoon character, to undergo endless abuse. According to Cantor, "audiences love to see somebody knocked and battered about to the point of insensibility so long as they feel he isn't really getting hurt. But if they suspect the punishment has passed the point of fun, they suddenly stop laughing and even show resentment."<sup>46</sup>

One critic who did seem to resent the routine was Gilbert Seldes; he complained that the osteopath scene was an "exploitation

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<sup>45</sup>*New York Sun* (June 19, 1918), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Cantor, *My Life is In Your Hands* 187-188.

of meaningless brutality," although he said that other sketches starring Cantor were "excellent pieces of construction, holding sympathy all the way through and keeping on the safe side of nausea."<sup>47</sup> Rather than attempt to copy Jolson's success at blackface, Seldes believed, Cantor should stick with his stock character, the "timid, Ghetto-bred, pale-faced Jewish lad, seduced by glory or the prospects of pay into competing with athletes and bruisers."<sup>48</sup>

Cantor's character did not really get hurt, but I would argue that his "punishment" was, in an important sense, directed toward his being Jewish. The self-abasing performance of Jewishness (itself, one could argue, derived from millennia of persecution) suggested that Jews deserved to get hurt; they were asking for it. In other words, their (largely unconscious) masochistic behavior provoked society's deepest sadistic urges.

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<sup>47</sup> Seldes, *Seven Lively Arts* 179. Cantor reprised a version of the osteopath routine in the silent film *Kid Boots* (1926); it takes place in the infirmary of a golf club where he is working as a caddy, and it follows an attempt by his enemy (who is trying to prevent Cantor's testimony in a divorce case) to kill him by turning up the voltage in some kind of medical "electric chair." (Cantor turns the tables not by tying his opponent into knots, but by getting him to sit in the chair.)

<sup>48</sup> Seldes 179.

Cantor's stage and screen persona remained childlike in many ways; along with a total confidence in his ability to entertain, it embodied a level of insecurity demonstrated by the persona of a needy, precocious child, dependent on the laughter and applause of others to maintain a stable sense of self. Cantor's portrayals of wise-cracking Jewish tailors, cab drivers and aviators were fraught both with anxiety and an almost infantile inability to take themselves seriously.

In addition, Cantor's performances played on old stereotypes of Jewish men as undersized, weak and unable to defend themselves from Gentile aggression--stereotypes that fed into the eugenicist thinking that was at its height of popular acceptance in the late 1910s and early 1920s. His "characters" were oddly effeminate and suggestive of homosexuality--a projection of what Sander Gilman calls the stereotypically de-masculinized Jewish body.<sup>49</sup>

Harley Erdman has found a similar strain of effeminacy in the characteristic portrayal of the "sheeny" in nineteenth century drama; he writes about the "feminized sheeny villain"<sup>50</sup> who is easily frightened, weak and sexually deviant. Although he never played an evil or hostile character, Cantor's performance of Jewishness still

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<sup>49</sup> See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> Erdman 37.

suggested that Jewish men were lacking in essential components of masculinity.

However, unlike the "Hebrew" comics whom Cantor copied in his early career, Jewishness was no longer principally a matter of wearing certain clothes, speaking with a certain accent and inflection, and using definably "racial" mannerisms which suggested overt anti-Semitism. However, He seemed both supremely self-confident and strangely naive, pugnacious but puny, highly energetic yet unable to accomplish anything.

Interestingly, Cantor referred more and more frequently to his wife and children as his career progressed. One of his most famous songs was about his wife: "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider." Herbert Goldman argues that Cantor's references to his family helped transform the acting profession in America by humanizing stars, making them not just entertainers but *celebrities* --in both their private and public lives.

But Goldman misses the fact that Cantor's repeated references to his family served generally to deprecate himself and to emphasize his purported shortcomings in the masculinity department. The father of four daughters, he joked throughout his career about his inability to have a son. When asked after the birth of his second daughter, Natalie, if he was disappointed that she wasn't a boy, he

replied, "With a fellow like me, I'm lucky it wasn't a rabbit."<sup>51</sup> And on one of Cantor's radio shows on which Al Jolson appeared as a guest, Jolson gave the story of Cantor's life. According to Jolson, rather than Eddie carrying Ida across the threshold in their Bronx apartment, she carried *him*.<sup>52</sup>

Part of what made Cantor's act endearing was the naivete, the vulnerability, which Cantor so assiduously cultivated. (His trademark little hand-clap suggested a child's excitement and pleasure.) Goldman describes this as an element of what he calls a "presexual youth's sexual awakening--a young man uncertain of his sexual orientation but with a definite susceptibility to the charms of beautiful women."<sup>53</sup> Goldman suggests that Cantor played a powerless character with such a knowing and self-conscious air that it should be seen merely as a way of pleasing audiences. But Cantor stuck with this persona as he became more popular with Jewish audiences, and despite the fact that he reinforced stereotypes of Jewish men as either sexually impotent or sexually immature.

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<sup>51</sup> Eddie Cantor, *My Life is In Your Hands* 151.

<sup>52</sup> Jolson's performances were also, at least according to Herbert Goldman, tinged with homoeroticism. Goldman writes that Jolson, although married four times in his life, "occasionally kissed other men. Onstage, his work was filled with sly references to homosexuality, suggestive moistening of the lips, [and] risqué use of the behind and hips....Audiences thought that it was daring humor; people in the business sometimes wondered." Herbert G. Goldman, *Jolson: The Legend Comes to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 66.

<sup>53</sup> Herbert G. Goldman, *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57-58.

Goldman calls this character a "white Jew" who was "acceptable to Ziegfeld's 'uptown' audience, a little man with banjo eyes whom they could take to heart and, perhaps, home, to treat to the finer things in life he would appreciate, if only for a brief and fleeting instant."<sup>54</sup>

The film version of *Kid Boots*, based on the Ziegfeld musical of the same name, begins with a drawing of Cantor, a caricature with gigantic ears. The titles give a few lines of doggerel about his character: "You look a sight. You've got no class. Don't look in a mirror. You'll break the glass" and a title "signed" by Cantor himself calling his character, Samuel, "an example of Nature's wasteful ways" and asking "Why put house detective ears on a tailor?" Of course, one of the first things Cantor does is look in a mirror, shattering it instantly. The anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew's oversized nose has been changed to outsized ears. The Jew's ugliness is a mark of his exclusion from society.

Cantor's stage persona was thus a mass of contradictions. Goldman calls it "unmistakably Jewish--pushy, slightly nebishy, but without the intellectual neuroses that would distinguish Woody Allen in the 1960s."<sup>55</sup> But the idea of the "pushy" Jew and of the "nebbish" also seem a reflection of later stereotypes of the Jew in American

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<sup>54</sup> Goldman, *Banjo Eyes* 57.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

culture, after Jews had achieved unprecedented post-war economic success and full-fledged entry into the academy. Goldman is closer to the truth when he says that Cantor played the "weakling" and points out that he often did so as an "extremely effeminate character" who could almost be read as homosexual. It was Cantor's lack of virility which, as much as anything, made him the object of ridicule.

Nevertheless, one of Cantor's most popular routines was when he played a Jewish aviator from Newark named Gregory Ginsburg being interviewed by an army major for his mental fitness, in a twist on the physical examination that was such a standby of his earlier work. (His plane was dubbed "Mosquito--The Spirit of New Jersey.") Without any physical comedy, but with lots of verbal humor, this routine satirizes the very idea of a Jew becoming a pilot. Unlike the hero Charles Lindberg, Cantor doesn't "look like" a pilot, he has never been up in the air, he was sick during the war when other men were fighting, and he still sleeps at home with his brother. Finally, his dietary requirements preclude his eating what soldiers are supposed to eat; he calls off the flight when he realizes that the sandwiches he has been given are all made with ham!

Furthermore, Ginsburg (which, he explains, was changed from Levy when he heard that they were blowing up the levees in the



South) keeps repeating the name of Charles A. Levine, the navigator who accompanied the pilot Charles Chamberlin on a trans-Atlantic flight in 1927 which broke Lindberg's long-range flying record. (President Calvin Coolidge honored Chamberlin at the White House, but did not invite Levine, leading a Jewish vaudeville star, Charles Cohen, to try to set the record straight by recording a heroic song about Levine called "Levine and His Flying Machine.")<sup>56</sup> Cantor's humor thus both celebrated the visibility of Jews in American society and satirized the ways in which their accomplishments were regarded.

In "Getting a Ticket," a Paramount short from 1929, Cantor is stopped on Long Island for speeding in his sports car. The witless Irish cop confiscates a bottle of Cantor's liquor by drinking it, gets misled by Cantor's long irrelevant stories, and gets taken in by Cantor's ridiculous excuses about why he cannot give out his address. The battle of wits is clearly won by Cantor, despite the fact that it is the cop who is clearly playing the more masculine role. The sketch ends with Cantor playing a song on a phonograph (which he just happens to have in the car) and singing along with it to prove

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Slobin has reprinted the text of the song, which had two stanzas, the first in Yiddish and the second in English. In Yiddish the song is called "Levine mit zayn flaying mashin." The first two lines of the English stanza call Levine "the hero of your race" and "the greatest Hebrew ace." *Tenement Songs* 200-201.

his identity. The song, "My Wife is On a Diet," compares his wife to an automobile; it sums up Cantor's character's ambivalence toward his wife's being overweight. Not only is she herself seemingly starving herself to lose weight, but she serves him the same food she eats; they have only grapefruit for every meal! The routine is so larded with Freudian implications that it belies the fact that, according to Cantor, "on the Lower East Side, we didn't know from Freud."<sup>57</sup>

## **Second Generation Jewish Femininity**

In their performances, Jewish female comedians acted out the ways in which Jewish women were doubly disempowered—both by Jewish men and by American society. As Riv-Ellen Prell has found, one of the most prevalent stereotypes was that of the "Ghetto Girl," the loud, vulgar, garishly dressed and uncultivated Jewish woman. As Prell puts it, "the Ghetto Girl's taste was far too conspicuous; she was betrayed by the cheapness of what she had and wore."<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>57</sup> Eddie Cantor, *The Way I See It* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 12.

<sup>58</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 29.

Ghetto Girl's excessive desires, according to Prell, threatened the precarious masculinity of Jewish men within American culture.

One of Fanny Brice's most famous songs, "Second Hand Rose," (first presented in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1921) expresses the frustrations of a woman who is too poor to own anything that is new. All her possessions are used, from her hats and clothing to her boyfriend (Jakie Cohen, who's been previously married) to her pajamas with their previous owner's initials sewed on them. To the extent that such things help one build and reinforce an identity, she is dominated by other people's identities and seemingly foreclosed by having one of her own.

Moreover, wearing other people's cast-offs is humiliating, especially when they notice her wearing their clothes. As Brice sings, "Once when strolling through a Ritz a girl got my goat, she had nudged her friend and said, 'Oh! look, There's my old fur coat.'" In trying to look like a rich person, Brice has been exposed as what she really is, a poor girl from the Lower East Side. Brice's character's pain is evident as she sings, "It's no wonder that I feel abused. I never have a thing that ain't been used." It is almost as if Brice's character herself feels taken advantage of, or "used."

And I think her character has been. I think the song is about the shame of being Jewish in a Gentile world, a shame that the

second generation of American Jews *did* inherit from their parents. As sung by Brice in a heavy Yiddish accent, the song seems to me to be particularly about the second generation's feelings about Jewishness. After all, Jewish tradition is *handed down* from generation to generation, the more acculturated offspring of Jewish immigrants inherit something which is already "used," in a way and which they are expected to cherish partly *because* it belonged to their parents. (In the song, all of Rose's possessions come from her father's store; they were literally handed down from one generation to the next.)

Second Hand Rose thus cannot develop a healthy sense of self while wearing other people's clothes; she cannot embrace or make sense of her Jewishness when it causes humiliation and shame. As her name suggests, it is Rose herself who is "second hand." She has a kind of existential belatedness. She is defined only in relationship to the past, a past she cannot escape or claim as her own.

In addition, the popularity of "Second Hand Rose" testified to the romanticization of the situation of poverty that most New York Jews no longer lived in, having begun to enter the middle class. Second-Hand Rose is very much a ghetto dweller, although she differs in important respects from the Ghetto Girl stereotype in that she does not seem excessive in her desires. Through satire, Brice

(who in her everyday life dressed in the most expensive clothes she could buy--new or used)<sup>59</sup> expressed both nostalgia and contempt for her Jewish origins at the same time. Her character summed up the profoundly ambivalent feelings her generation experienced toward their Jewishness.

Before World War I, among Brice's most popular acts were her parodies of opera singers and ballet dancers. Whether crashing all over the stage as a Jewish Nijinsky, or losing her voice as a Jewish opera singer, Brice satirized high culture at the same time as she expressed a sense of Jewish exclusion from that high culture. In "Becky is Back in the Ballet," which centers on a Jewish girl who is singularly untalented in dancing, Becky's mother asks her to do an imitation of Pavlova's dying swan. But Becky slips and falls all over the stage, demonstrating an awkwardness and lack of sophistication

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<sup>59</sup> As Brice's daughter, Fran Stark, recalled in an interview with a fashion magazine in 1968, "Mother was the epitome of elegance. Among my fondest childhood memories are the many afternoons I spent with her at couturier fittings...As a child, she made dresses for her neighborhood friends. And as soon as she could afford to buy something she spent her first money at a place where chic women sold their beautiful used French clothes....By 1920 she was wearing new Worth, Poiret and Piguet; by 1930, Chanel, Hattie Carnegie and Adrian...The simple white evening gowns that she often wore in the Follies' finales became the season's fashion highlight." Fran Stark, "My Mother, Fanny Brice." *Bazaar* (July 1968), 17. This was Brice's first child, Frances Brice Arnstein, who Brice described as looking, at her birth, "all wrinkled up and old, like a rabbi who just lost his synagogue." *Ladies Home Journal* (December 1952), 60.

that, as Brice's Yiddish accent reminds the audience, are stereotypically Jewish attributes. In satirizing high culture, Brice helped Jews indulge their fantasies of participation in high culture at the same time as she reassured them that they did not need it anyway since it was not worth having.<sup>60</sup>

Rather than directly express her generation's pain at being rejected in so many ways by the society they desperately wanted to succeed in, by the 1920s Brice's "characters" complained instead about the ill treatment she received from men. A song like "Oy, How I Hate That Fellow Nathan," (re-recorded by Kaye Ballard early in her own career as "Oh, How I Hate That Fellow Nathan," but with the "oys" restored to the lyrics) is a comic lament about a man who refuses to return her affections but with whom she seems unable to end her involvement. Nathan has agreed to marry her, but when he named the month for their nuptials, he refused to say the year! Although he is content to smoke her father's cigars and eat her mother's cooking, he seems to have little desire to support Brice--

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<sup>60</sup>Another female vaudeville performer, Rhoda Bernard, also used a heavy Yiddish accent. She recorded a similar song to "Becky" called "Rosie Rosenblatt," about a Jewish girl who also tries to dance professionally, although not in the ballet. Her boyfriend, Abie, tells her to "stop your turkey trot" and asks her, "ken you stay away, from the cabaret?" George W. Meyer and Sam M. Lewis, "Rosie Rosenblatt" (New York: Pathé, 1916).

"he said he'll lay down and die for me, but he won't get up and work for me!"

Brice has four reasons she "hates" Nathan; she could have married Meyer the Butcher, Jake the Plumber, Hymie the Tailor or Louie the Lawyer. But for some reason she has stuck by Nathan, despite his unreliability. Nathan also has the stereotypically Jewish trait of stinginess; he refuses to put a quarter in the gas meter in her family's living room; he says that if her father finds them sitting there in the dark, *he* will put a quarter in the meter. And, Brice says, when all of "my people" brought her something made of gold to celebrate her engagement, Nathan brought goldfish! Many entertainers recorded this song; Irving Howe quotes a line in Carrie Balaban's memoir that the song was a "sure-fire hit in Jewish neighborhoods."<sup>61</sup>

Parallels have often been drawn between Brice's marriage to a gangster, Nicky Arnstein (who took enormous advantage of her both financially and emotionally) and her famous torch song "My Man," which expressed the singer's resolution to remain in an extremely unhealthy and self-destructive relationship.

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<sup>61</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 562.

The song was sung without accent, leading Gilbert Seldes to write that although it was "amusing to learn that without a Yiddish accent and without those immense rushes of drollery, without the enormous gawkiness of her other impersonations, Miss Brice could put a song over." But he said he preferred her as her immigrant Jewish character, her "Fanny" character, rather than her "Miss Brice" character.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, a song like "Nathan" expressed the same sentiments, although by situating the relationship in a Jewish milieu, the situation becomes inevitably comic. Also, Brice's character's freedom to sing about how much she "hates" her beau seems to testify to the very real difficulties Jewish men and women had in relating to one another in an anti-Semitic culture. As Prell has noted, "New World marriage produced anxiety and uncertainty about whether it could deliver its promises of class mobility and Americanization."<sup>63</sup>

Songs about Jewish women unable to get their boyfriends to make a commitment to marriage were extremely popular; the Yiddish dialect singer Rhoda Bernard also recorded one, "Roll Your Yiddishe Eyes For Me," in which a woman frankly asks for him to "make me heavy pleasure" and "for me make a little mazel tov; I've

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<sup>62</sup> Seldes, *Seven Lively Arts* 191.

<sup>63</sup> Prell 77.



got such an appetite for making love." She tells him that "love ain't business," and that "even though we aren't married," he can "take a piece on credit" anyway, and that she "doesn't want any security." June Sochen has written that Brice "dealt with subject matter that women often hid from public view."<sup>64</sup> But Bernard did so even more explicitly; such an emphasis on women's sexual needs was unusual in Jewish songs; it was more prevalent in the repertoire of black female performers, and in the "red hot mama" songs of Sophie Tucker, which I will explore later in this chapter.

June Sochen calls Brice, Tucker, and later female entertainers like Bette Midler and Barbara Streisand "reformers" in the sense that they "question forbidden subjects in public spaces previously reserved for men. They reverse traditional sex roles, challenge convention, raise doubts and offer new possibilities for women, new ways to live, new issues and new values."<sup>65</sup> But Brice was hardly overturning patriarchy by singing about cooking breakfast for her husband, about overprotecting her children on a seaside holiday, or about the trials and tribulations of getting someone to marry her.

Although Sochen correctly emphasizes that Jewish women were

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<sup>64</sup>June Sochen, "From Sophie Tucker to Barbara Streisand," in Joyce Antler, ed., *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 71.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

outsiders in a dual sense in American culture, she does not analyze the Jewishness of Brice's material. The Jewishness of these characters complicated the picture of femininity portrayed in these songs. Riv- Ellen Prell has argued that marriages between Jews in early twentieth century America were undermined by the gender stereotypes that Jewish males projected onto Jewish females--stereotypes that reflected Jewish male anxieties about assimilating into an anti-Semitic and materialistic culture.<sup>66</sup>

But a song like "Nathan" seems to be about the stereotypes that Jewish women projected onto Jewish men, in which Jewish men were viewed as indecisive, unmanly, and unable to provide for their women. If Jewish men were not "100 percent American" according to the mainstream culture, then to Jewish women they were often less than 100 percent men. As Prell has realized, Anti-Semitism ate away at the heart of Jewish self-confidence and self-esteem, and poisoned relationships between Jewish men and women.

A similar picture of a Jewish man appears in one of Brice's most popular comic monologues, "Mrs. Cohen at the Beach," first performed in 1927, in which the character's Jewishness becomes more complex. Most of the song focuses on Mrs. Cohen's ordeal

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<sup>66</sup> Riv- Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

watching over her three squabbling children on a seaside holiday, with little help from her husband, Abe. In fact, when Mrs. Cohen runs into an acquaintance, a Mrs. Levine, she tells her about Abe's humiliation at the hands of a man who robbed his delicatessen; while the robber held up a pistol, Abe was impotently holding a limp herring. Barbara Grossman writes about this character as a combination of two stereotypes, the *yente* (a pushy, vulgar woman who loves to gossip) and the Jewish Mother (an overbearing woman who dominates her husband and manipulates her children's affections).

The routine reminds Grossman of the "oppressively close Jewish family with its often ineffectual father and domineering, overprotective mother." Mrs. Cohen's "constant carping and complaining, her endless comparisons and criticism, her irrational fears about health and safety, her emphasis on eating, her stinginess and pettiness [and] her skill at creating guilt and playing martyr"<sup>67</sup> are all qualities that Grossman associates with the Jewish Mother. The character became a staple of American Jewish drama, film and literature, as, especially for sons, a kind of castrating monster. But

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<sup>67</sup> Grossman 172.

even for an early twentieth century Jewish woman, the stereotype was a familiar one.

But the Jewish Mother's excessive nurturing was still nurturing. And sometimes the Jewish Mother did not even act particularly Jewishly. When it is time to serve lunch, Mrs. Cohen pulls out the pastrami, salami, and liverwurst and then announces, in a teasing lilt, "And we've got haa-aam." For Brice, the Jewish Mother did not just feed her children; she helped to acculturate them. Like the happy wife singing about "Cooking Breakfast for the One I Love," (a song whose lyrics were written for Brice by her third husband, the Broadway producer Billy Rose), who announces that "He loves bacon, so that's what I'm makin'" the character seems to straddle the immigrant and American worlds.

Sophie Tucker, born Sophie Abuza in Hartford, Connecticut in 1887, came from a Yiddish-speaking family who ran a delicatessen. But she ran away from home shortly after an abortive marriage to a boy named Louis Tucker (abandoning her infant son to her parents' care, without their permission)<sup>68</sup> to pursue a career on the stage. She began by singing in restaurants in New York, as she had done in

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<sup>68</sup> In 1930, a profile of Tucker in a Boston newspaper said that her son, Albert Edward, was then 25 years old, and "has of late years been on the stage, both with and without his mother. That kid is dearer to the 'Last of the Hot Mammies' than anything else in the world." Steve Clow, "How Sophie Tucker, 'Last of Red

her family's deli, and then graduated to the vaudeville stage. Her first vaudeville performances were in blackface; then, when her trunk supposedly failed to arrive in time for a performance, she was obliged to go on stage without her costume and make-up. Doing the same "coon" songs without the blackface, Tucker found that the routines went over just as well. She did not need the blackface to perform a black caricature; she could enact it with mannerism, gesture and vocal style.

Pamela Brown Lavitt has written that Tucker's "novel infractions of the blackface form did more than confirm Tucker's 'bona-fide' whiteness; they laid bare her *white* Jewishness."<sup>69</sup> (emphasis in original). Lavitt seems less interested in the Jewish content of Tucker's routines than in the ways in which she performed a racial identity. Still, she writes of both Tucker and Brice that "[t]heir distinctive, exuberant and unapologetic Yiddish breaches of established and transfigured minstrel forms impressed critics and won the affections of an expanding Jewish audience, who probably felt hailed and validated by popular theatre at last."<sup>70</sup> By placing the emphasis on the audience, Lavitt rightly examines the

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Hot Mammas,' Burned Her Way to Fame" *Boston Sunday Post* (March 16, 1930). 66.

<sup>69</sup> Pamela Brown Lavitt, "'Coon Shouting' and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl," *American Jewish History* (December 2000), 254.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

cultural work that these two performers' routines accomplished in the Jewish community in New York, the ways in which they spurred ethnic pride.

Tucker once told her fellow Jewish performers at a benefit that "We all sprang from the same source, the same origin. We were all swept to the shores of this country on the same tidal wave of immigration, the same flight from prejudice and persecution. Our life stories are pretty much the same."<sup>71</sup> But of course almost all of the Jewish performers, including Tucker herself, were born in America. By referring to her parents' experience rather than to her own, Tucker was implicitly grounding her sense of Jewishness in the first generation experience.

Tucker's repertoire was versatile; she sang ragtime, romantic ballads, comic songs and novelty numbers with equal ease. But Tucker, who was significantly overweight, was best known for her "red-hot mama" songs, in which she played a sexy maternal figure starved for affection.

Like the major black singers of her day such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Billie Holiday, Tucker (who never remarried) connected with her audiences by expressing an aching need for love

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in John E. Dimeglio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), 60.

and sexual fulfillment. But it was this in combination with her Jewishness that created a potent mix. As Nora Ephron once wrote, after her childhood Tucker "hit upon the combination of schmaltz ('My Yiddishe Mama') self-derision ('Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, but Oh, How a Fat Girl Can Love') and broad sex ('When They Start to Ration my Passion It's Gonna be Tough on Me') which made her the darling of the Borscht circuit, English royalty, Ed Sullivan and the general public."<sup>72</sup>

She always sang the Yiddish songs and ragtime numbers first, before doing the "red-hot mama" songs. The Jewish mother was endlessly self-sacrificing, while the black mother cried out for nurturing. But by singing them so closely together, I would argue, the two stereotypes merged; the Jewish/black mother needed love but also needed to dominate through her smothering nature. If the Jewish mother was, in Beverly Gray Bienstock's words, "gossipy, plump, overprotective of her children, obsessed with the healing powers of chicken soup," then she was--and she became in later Jewish-American drama, film and fiction--an object of ridicule and revulsion.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Nora Ephron, "Sophie Tucker Looks Ahead" *New York Post* (September 6, 1964), 23.

<sup>73</sup> Beverly Gray Bienstock, "The Changing Image of the American Jewish Mother," in Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff, eds., *Changing Images of the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979): 173-191.

## **My Yiddishe Mama**

To Jewish audiences, what Ephron calls Tucker's "schmaltz" (literally, "chicken fat") song, "My Yiddishe Mama," was her most popular. Although she sang it mostly in English for non-Jewish audiences, she also had a Yiddish version (with different lyrics) which she sang for heavily Jewish audiences. One of the first cities she sang it in was London, where her performances attracted large Jewish audiences. One reviewer (who, like many other London reviewers, misquoted the title of the song; this one used the masculine form of the adjective and called it "Yiddisher Mama") noted that the "Jewish portion of the audience was very much moved" by her rendition of the song.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Unidentified clipping, "Making a Revue for a Star," (October 14, 1925). Tucker Scrapbooks. Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Another clipping, from a later London appearance, called this song "the deeply impressive 'Yiddisher Mammy,' which Sophie has always dreaded trying to sing since her mother died." Unidentified, undated London clipping, probably from May 9, 1934. Tucker Scrapbooks. Billy Rose Theatre Collection. J.T. Grein, the famous founder of London's Independent Theatre Society (where George Bernard Shaw's plays were first produced) was ecstatic about Tucker. When she appeared again in London in 1930, in "Follow A Star," her first appearance in musical comedy, he wrote: "What a woman! What a dynamic force! What infinite humour, broad, subtle, drastic, insinuating! What understanding of humanity in all its phases. One song about 'If your kisses can't hold the man you love' embraces all the Freudian theories--it literally knocked the natives to a frazzle. But how true it was--as good as a play! And yet she has a round dozen of them, full of the joy of life and knowledge of character. She alone would fill the house for months to come." J. T. Grein, "Criticisms in Cameo" *The Sketch* (October 1, 1930), 3. Tucker Scrapbooks. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.



It is thus simply not true, as Lewis Erenberg claims, that Tucker “represented the possibility of ethnic success and acceptance if one abandoned much of the ethnic content of one’s culture and adapted to the larger world and market of American entertainment and social patterns.”<sup>75</sup> His evidence for her supposedly altered approach includes the fact that she changed her name, wore “luxurious” clothes, and “dramatically interpreted songs rather than belting them out”<sup>76</sup>—none of which prevented her from doing Jewish-themed material.

In fact, although Tucker noted in her autobiography that she “was always careful to use [“My Yiddishe Mama”] only when the majority of the house would understand the Yiddish,” she also said that throughout the United States and Europe, “Gentiles have loved the song and have called for it.”<sup>77</sup> Like the popularity of John McCormack’s performance of “Mother Machree,” she pointed out, people of every ethnic background seem to have been moved by the song.

Non-Jewish critics, it seemed, could not help commenting on the reaction of the Jewish audience to the song. Tucker connected

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<sup>75</sup> Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 201.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., 1945), 260.

to these audiences so viscerally that it was astounding. One London critic, reviewing a 1925 performance at the Holborn Empire, did not particularly care for the song, but was amazed by the fact that Tucker

seemed to have things fairly her own way with the audience there--which, be it said, was almost entirely Jewish. She has an enormous fund of personality, and an extraordinarily expressive face and voice, and her "Yiddishes [*sic*] Momma" song seemed to arouse in her hearers a whole gamut of emotion, from hilarity to tears--particularly that half which she sang in Yiddish. As far as we were concerned, we liked her "Ukele Lady" song best, but this was no doubt a question of race.<sup>78</sup>

Tucker recorded both versions of the song; they were released by Decca on different sides of the same 78 rpm record. Mark Slobin has reprinted the lyrics to the English version, and translated (a little oddly) the Yiddish version. He writes that the two texts are "poles apart expressively, and nearly seem to be for different songs."<sup>79</sup> He

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<sup>78</sup> A. John Danhorn, "Our Friend the Drama" *The Musical Standard* (October 31, 1925). Tucker Scrapbooks. Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Paris audiences were divided on the song's merits; when Tucker tried to sing it there in 1928, she says that the Jews in the audience applauded the song while the Gentiles loudly booed it. Tucker gave up, and switched to her perennial favorite, "Happy Days are Here Again." Tucker 258.

<sup>79</sup> Slobin 205.

sees these differences principally in the greater number of ethnic markers which the Yiddish version contains, and thus in the more specific ethnic milieu conjured up by the Yiddish version.

Although Slobin notes that both versions expressed the second generation's ambivalence about assimilation, he analyzes the two versions only superficially, and is content mostly to suggest that Tucker's guilt over abandoning her parents (he does not mention her son; wasn't she supposed to be a Yiddishe mama too?) could have given her a strong unconscious motivation to sing it.

While the English version of the song begins with the singer sitting in the "comfort of a cozy chair," the Yiddish version begins with the singer standing. (A later stanza, not sung in the extant recordings, begins with the singer sitting.) It then goes on to talk about a mother who was not "made-up" or "well-dressed"--who was not, because of her poverty, pleasant to look at. (The English version just says she "never cared for fashion's styles," as if she could have afforded them if she had wanted to.)<sup>80</sup>

The Yiddish version then presents a picture of an old woman who has seemingly spent her entire old age in a single "little room"

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

where now she "sits and cries and dreams of days long ago" when children's voices filled the house and the kitchen "smelled of kugel and tzimmes (pudding and carrot stew--traditional Eastern European Sabbath dishes)."<sup>81</sup> The English version simply says it "wasn't much like Paradise" but that "'mid the dirt and all" sat the angelic mother. The Yiddish version thus emphasizes the description of the mother's feelings. Through tastes and sights and smells, it also gives a much more powerful evocation of the tenement milieu, including summoning up the presence of the voices of the very audience of second generation Jews who are the target audience for the song. The *yiddishe mama's* self-sacrificing nature is then detailed; "she used to give us bread out of her own mouth and she would have given up her life for us as well."<sup>82</sup> She was the only thing, the Yiddish version continues, which God provides only one of.

Second generation Jews constructed their Jewish identity through songs like "My Yiddishe Mama," through which, as an audience, they could share the experience of nostalgia, of returning to their roots. The paradox of second generation American Jewish

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<sup>81</sup> Slobin translates this line as "roast and dumplings," seemingly to avoid having to explain the Jewish foods. Slobin 204.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

culture is that Jews could celebrate their origins by listening to a song about losing them. The song is almost an apologia for Judaism itself: "You don't know how you'll grieve when she passes away." But what Antler calls the "world of the past that was vanishing even when Tucker herself was growing up" was kept from dying partly through the very songs like "My Yiddishe Mama" that evoked the "lost" world of the immigrant generation.

But perhaps even more important than any of the content of "My Yiddishe Mama" was the very fact that Tucker generally sang it in Yiddish for Jewish audiences. As much as second generation children were native English speakers for whom their parents' Yiddish accents were an embarrassment, the sound of Yiddish must have brought back their parents and their childhood in a way nothing else could. The Yiddish version of "My Yiddishe Mama" is about much more than the mother who has been left behind, causing acute guilt for her children. In her book, *The Journey Home*, Joyce Antler has written that the song "mourned the family closeness that immigrants' children lost as they set off on their own paths."<sup>83</sup> But the song is also about the homesickness the

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<sup>83</sup> Antler, *The Journey Home* 142.

immigrants' children had not just for their parents but for a childhood saturated with Jewishness, for what Antler calls (referring to the Yiddish version), the "bittersweet experience of assimilation."<sup>84</sup>

To some extent, the children of immigrants have left their Jewishness in that Lower East Side tenement; their nostalgia (which means literally the pain of having lost something) gives them *less* guilt--it gets them off the hook in a sense. By celebrating the immigrant Jewish mother in the song, the second generation is finding a way to leave her behind--to pay tribute as a part of the process of moving on. The line in the Yiddish song, "You don't know how you'll grieve when she passes away," suggests that the children do not know the depth of their own feelings. But the song has already buried the mother; the mother is a kind of Jewish unconscious that her children are struggling to keep from rising to the surface of their own awareness. As much as the song testifies to the second generation's desire to re-connect to their childhood in the ghetto, it also represents their having, at least in their own eyes, to a large extent transcended those origins.

Recent feminist scholarship on the *yiddishe mama* has pointed out the mythic aspects of this stereotype. Rather than giving

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

exaggerated credit to the mother as the transmitter of Jewish culture, feminists have attempted to understand the complexities of the mother's role in the traditional Jewish home, both before and after emigration from Europe. As Paula Hyman has pointed out, the Jewish mother was almost always responsible for contributing to the economic upkeep of the family. In the Old World, she writes, women stood in the marketplace, selling roots or home-baked bagels, or clothes they had sewn. (The more prosperous owned stores where they sold food, linen, cooking pots and glassware.) In America, women continued to work, either in the home or outside it--sewing piecework, taking in lodgers, selling from pushcarts, and so forth. The *yiddishe mama* did not necessarily spend her entire life in the kitchen, eternally available to nurture her children. She wasn't even always home.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, some feminists have argued that the stereotype of the *yiddishe mama* is actually a negative one. Male writers, according to Erika Duncan, have portrayed the Jewish mother as the "all-engulfing nurturer who devours the very soul with every spoonful of hot chicken soup she gives, whose every shakerful of

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<sup>85</sup> Paula Hyman, "The Jewish Family: Looking for a Usable Past," in Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being a Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983): 19-26.

salt contains a curse." Duncan reads Jewish women writers, from Anzia Yezierska to Tillie Olsen, as setting the record straight by writing about the self-imposed starvation of the Jewish mother. Duncan sees the stereotypical *yiddishe mama* as so self-sacrificing that she deprives herself of the love and nurturance she provides so unquestioningly to her children.<sup>86</sup> Duncan does not mention Tucker's "Yiddishe Mama" song, which was written by men. However, the fact that it was sung by a woman makes it hard to argue that it was simply a creation of male ambivalence. And the song is more eulogistic than vengeful; its very participation in the process of myth-making is what makes it interesting.

What did second generation Jewish men and women have at stake in the myth of the *yiddishe mama*? By portraying her as the ideal maternal object, they could mourn her passing. By the 1920s, it was no longer either fashionable or even appropriate for American women to sacrifice their needs to their children. Women

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<sup>86</sup> Erika Duncan, "The Hungry Jewish Mother," in Heschel 28. However, Paula Hyman finds a very different picture of the Jewish mother in quoting the section of Michael Gold's autobiographical novel, *Jews Without Money* (1930) in which the communist writer praised his mother for her radical activities, including instigating a rent strike. He called her "that dark little woman with bright eyes, who hobbled about all day in bare feet, cursing in Elizabethan Yiddish, using the forbidden words 'ladies' do not use, smacking us, beating us, fighting with her neighbors, busy from morn to midnight in the tenement struggle for life." Quoted in Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 128-129.



were emancipated from such servitude; the age of the flapper and of women's suffrage brought a new conception of women's roles. The song both constructed a link to the past and helped to provide a sense of closure on that past. It helped them to remember and even honor their past in the act of letting go of it.

Robert Snyder has argued that when Tucker sang it, "Homesick Jews found...a new American ethnic identity."<sup>87</sup> But I think this is too simplistic. I think the song functioned in a broader context of American Jewish popular culture of the 1920s (recall that the *Jazz Singer* also opened on Broadway in the same year, 1925) that helped simultaneously both to reinforce and erode the connections Jews had toward their Jewish past. Vaudeville may have been what Snyder calls a "secular faith for its fans,"<sup>88</sup> but Jewish vaudeville also incorporated a creative tension with Jewish tradition that gave it much of its power.

Tucker seemed to be comfortable with her own Jewishness. Although she observed the High Holy Days and Passover with her family, and refused to work on those days, she makes it clear in her autobiography that she did not follow her own mother's Orthodox

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<sup>87</sup> Robert W. Snyder, *Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xvi.

<sup>88</sup> Snyder paraphrases Sophie Tucker that in New York and Chicago, the same people came every Monday to the matinee performance at particular theatres. Snyder 128.

religious practices. (This makes for interesting juxtapositions, as when she describes eating a memorable oyster dinner immediately before talking about going back to Hartford to attend synagogue for the High Holidays.<sup>89</sup>) As many of her Jewish colleagues in vaudeville and theatre did, she played many benefits for Jewish organizations, such as the Jewish Theatrical Guild in New York.

There were many synagogues in the new neighborhoods to which Jews were moving in the 1920s. But, as Deborah Dash Moore has written, second generation Jews also established "synagogue centers," which sponsored social and recreational activities in addition to religious services and classes. (They tended to include gyms and swimming pools in addition to classrooms and sanctuaries.) The pioneering rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, developed the idea of Judaism as a "civilization" rather than merely a religion, in which the totality of Jewish spiritual, intellectual, moral and cultural life maintained a vibrant existence within the larger fabric of American society.<sup>90</sup>

The "American" component of second generation Jews' identity was thus taken for granted. Seeing the synagogue center as a "physical monument to the completion of the Americanization of

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<sup>89</sup> Tucker 134.

the New York Jew,"<sup>91</sup> its creators envisioned it as preserving Jewish religion and Jewish culture in a manner consonant with American democratic values. Entertainers like Sophie Tucker and Belle Baker, who sang often at synagogue center benefits, paradoxically contributed to this process of "Americanization" by performing a mixed repertoire of religious and secular songs, English-language and Yiddish-language songs.

Such concerts, whether presented on Broadway or in the auditorium of the synagogue center, blurred the boundaries between the world of Broadway and the world of the synagogue. Like the Jewish vaudeville stars, second generation Jewish audience members did not just move easily between the two realms; they occupied both simultaneously. While beginning a trend of Broadway attendance which, along with the large proportion of Jewish creators, would have a significant effect on the offerings of the New York theatre, they also "patronized" the entertainment sponsored by Jewish centers. Bringing their Jewishness into the public sphere, in a way that sometimes made the whole world seem Jewish, they also imported American popular culture into the world of the synagogue.

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<sup>90</sup> Mordechai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Towards a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957).

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Moore, *At Home in America* 134.

The two identities were not just compatible with one another; they became impossible to separate.

It is important to emphasize that these entertainers had a choice of what kind of material to perform. Lewis Erenberg's conclusion that the second generation Jewish entertainers were successful because they were "rootless in a society loosening its traditional boundaries"<sup>92</sup> misrepresents the fact that much of their success derived from their relationship (conflicted as it was) with those self-same Jewish roots. But why would one's Jewishness necessarily enable one to "transcend" or "abandon" Jewishness itself? How is "ethnic success" derived from renouncing "ethnic content"? Successful Jewish-American entertainers were popular with both Jews and Gentiles, but if their very popularity were based on the projection of a Jewish persona, then how could they transcend it without undermining their own success?

Second generation Jews were still in the process of creating their own distinctively Jewish forms of popular culture. Irving Howe has argued that the "distinctiveness" of these entertainers "seldom appeared in their opinions, and not even in their use of Jewish materials; it came through most vividly in the rhythm and tone of

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<sup>92</sup> Erenberg 192.

their work, the pulsation of their nerves, the unfolding of what we call 'personality.'"<sup>93</sup> He characterizes their trademark style as a "hysterical frenzy" that derived somehow from immigrant experience and was intensified by a desperate need to prove themselves equal to non-Jews.<sup>94</sup> But non-Jewish entertainers also had 'personality' and the quality of "frenzy" that Howe has identified is common to many types of comedy. What set these second generation Jewish artists apart was their need to work out the meaning of their Jewish identity.

This did not mean they had a unitary point of view. June Sochen has written that both Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker had a peculiarly Jewish "perspective on life" and "angle of vision" that "enabled them to transcend their particularity and become one with large, diverse audiences."<sup>95</sup> But far from transcending a Jewish outlook, both Brice and Tucker built much of their careers on their ability to connect to Jewish audiences through a shared experience of the world

True, as Sochen puts it, "their public personas spoke to all peoples, while their message often had a particular poignancy for

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<sup>93</sup> Howe 566.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> June Sochen, "Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker: Blending the Particular with the Universal," in Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *From Hester Street to Hollywood:*

their Jewish audiences."<sup>96</sup> But for Jewish entertainers, to some extent their public persona *was* their message. In becoming prominent both as comedians and as Jews, and in doing so much explicitly Jewish material—much of which was especially geared to Jewish audiences—they were both expressing and fomenting ethnic pride. The next chapter, which examines Broadway comedies about Jewish life in New York during the same period, takes this multivalent, ambivalent process to the next level.

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*The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 44.

<sup>96</sup> Sochen 44.

## **CHAPTER TWO—JEWS ON BROADWAY**

What humorist H. L. Mencken in the 1920s called “America’s third-largest industry”<sup>1</sup> was a Broadway play about Jewish-Irish intermarriage called *Abie’s Irish Rose* that ran for 2,327 performances, opening on May 23, 1922 at the Fulton Theatre on West 46th Street and closing on October 22, 1927 at the Republic Theatre on West 42nd Street. The comedy opened to mostly negative--if not downright damning--reviews and struggled for the first two months of its run.<sup>2</sup> But then the play found its audience and it quickly became a sensation. By the time it closed on Broadway in October, 1927 after a record-setting 2,327 performances (a record it held for fourteen years), productions of *Abie’s Irish Rose* had been seen throughout the world;<sup>3</sup> the play had attracted audiences totaling an estimated eleven million people, and

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times* (January 9, 1927), 9.

<sup>2</sup> The actors accepted a salary cut, which Nichols later restored retroactively. *New York Herald Tribune* (July 1, 1923), 23.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Chinese production was performed with an all-Chinese cast. But when the author was questioned in connection with her plagiarism lawsuit against the motion picture company which produced *The Cohens and the Kellys*, a film which capitalized on Jewish and Irish humor, she allegedly “professed ignorance of the fact that in Budapest and other European capitals the Jewish-Irish theme of her play is changed to fit racial conditions wherever it is produced.” In “Real Life Abie Inspired Play, Author Reveals,” unidentified newspaper (April 28, 1926), Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

it had grossed close to five million dollars.<sup>4</sup> The play's success was a watershed in the evolution of regional theatre in America as well; it ran for months in cities across the country that had never supported a single production for more than a few weeks at a time.

Turned into two films (produced in 1928 and 1946) and a weekly radio show that aired in the early 1940s, *Abie's Irish Rose* was also revived twice on Broadway (in 1937 and 1954), both times unsuccessfully. The original production of *Abie's Irish Rose* was perfectly fitted both to its cultural moment and to its era in American Jewish social history. The play that leading theatre critic Heywood Broun had called a "synthetic farce" and the "worst play of the season" and another critic had called a "cheap farce dependent upon stock lines and forced situations" had, according to a Boston newspaper, "not only pleased its public" but "created its public."<sup>5</sup>

I will argue that *Abie's Irish Rose*, as well as other popular comedies of the period such as Montague Glass's *Partners Again*, Osip Dymov's *Bronx Express* and Leon da Costa's *Kosher Kitty Kelly*,

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<sup>4</sup> One critic, Alexander Woolcott, called it "unquestionably the most prosperous theatrical enterprise the world has ever known." *Philadelphia Inquirer* (May 17, 1925), 10. Perhaps the only precedent for such commercial success was the phenomenal popularity, in the nineteenth century, of the many stage versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A 1928 article by Benjamin de Casseres in *Theatre Magazine*, "A Non-Slush Probe into *Abie's Irish Rose*," was subtitled, "From a Joke This Sociological Phenomenon Has Passed Into the Realm of 'Classic Instances' With 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" (May 1928), 7.



indeed “created” an ethnic Jewish public. They did so by reflecting images that both reinforced second generation Jews’ perceptions of themselves as “Americanized” and flattered their continuing attachment to their ethnic roots. Deborah Dash Moore has written of the success of second-generation Jews in creating an American Jewish identity “which was not simply a prelude to assimilation.” I will contend that these comedies about Jewish families (three of which, *Abie’s Irish Rose*, *The Bronx Express* and *Partners Again*—opened in the same month, May of 1922) were an integral part of the construction of this new Jewish identity.

The emergence of Jewish characters out of vaudeville, comic strips and comedy recordings (radio and film were just becoming popular) onto the Broadway stage was problematic for Broadway theatre critics, who saw them as polluting Broadway.<sup>6</sup> Even Gilbert Seldes, surveying plays of Jewish interest in the *Menorah Journal*, a Jewish publication, in 1922,

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<sup>5</sup> “The Wonder of Our Stage Now Fairly Judged,” *Boston Transcript* (May 15, 1924), 15. Billy Rose Theater Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Patterson James, writing in the *New York Billboard*, offered the most extreme criticism of the play:

I once heard the Dino say that one drink of a certain kind of bootleg whiskey would make a good and loving husband and father hurry home to butcher his wife and children. One platter full of *Abie’s Irish Rose* filled me with an almost irresistible impulse to start a pogrom of playwrights, managers, actors and critics. And as a side issue set fire to every show house in Manhattan. Mrs. Nichols’ ‘comedy’ insults second-grade intelligence every second. It outrages truth, plausibility and good taste at every turn, and it makes either a viciously deliberate attack on or exhibits an incredibly abysmal ignorance of the ordinary practices of the great branches of the Christian religion....

Patterson James, *The Billboard* (June 10, 1922), 41. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

wrote that he found Jewish stereotypes on stage "excessively banal and distasteful" to the extent that he refused to attend a performance of *Abie's Irish Rose*. His dismissal of Nichols' play is especially interesting given his belief that "no Jewish theme will be completely treated until it has been done by non-Jewish hands as well as Jewish."<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, these plays appealed to both Jews and non-Jews. My interest, as in the previous chapter, is mostly in their effect on Jews. For as second generation Jews moved out of the Lower East Side and into the outer boroughs, and as they began to join the lower middle class, they increasingly began to patronize Broadway theatres. While the growing black middle class in Harlem sought entertainment mostly in their own neighborhood--racism continued to bar them from Broadway theatre seats--Jews did not restrict their entertainment to the few Yiddish theatres that sprang up in Brooklyn and the Bronx.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Seldes, "Jewish Plays and Jew-Plays in New York," 240. Seldes later published an outline for a proposed preface for a novelized version of the script. Among the points he suggested were: "Creation of a new audience in the theater," "The triumph of the Jews in their 'inferiority complex' submission," "The Jew in Abie, a Slavic immigrant," and "Breakdown of religious observances and tribal customs, especially on the part of the alien." Among the questions Seldes posed were: "Can the value of a critic be judged by the number of times he predicts correctly the popularity of a play?" and "Can a play find its audience in spite of the critics?" Gilbert Seldes, "Outline of a Preface," *New Republic* (May 25, 1927): 18-19.

<sup>8</sup> However, as a newspaper article about famous Jewish actors in America put it, "To write a paper about Jewish actors without saying something about the Yiddish Theatre is like talking about modern America without mentioning the flapper and prohibition." Carolyn Joan Weiss, "The Jew as an Actor," *The Jewish Times* (July 7, 1922), 5.

## **The Decline of the Yiddish Theatre**

They also seldom returned to the Lower East Side to seek entertainment, and the Yiddish theaters inevitably began to decline and even lose talent to Broadway. This was not universally seen as a good thing, even by mainstream observers. As an article in the *New York Evening Post* put it in 1928, "With the slowing up of immigration, the younger generation is drifting away from the language of its parents and prefers to go uptown to American shows for entertainment." But when the Yiddish theater disappeared, the writer pointed out, the city would lose "some very remarkable plays and productions" which have "trained an extremely talented corps of actors, some of which sooner or later make their way to Broadway." The article mentioned in particular the actor Muni Wisenfrend, a Yiddish stage actor who was appearing at the time on Broadway in Milton Gropper and Max Siegels' comedy *We Americans* (1926) and who was later to become famous on stage and screen as Paul Muni.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "In Praise of Muni Wisenfrend," *New York Evening Post* (January 21, 1928), 30.

The Yiddish theater did not disappear overnight; it actually blossomed artistically in the interwar period, as it incorporated modernist trends of the European avant-garde. Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater was widely acclaimed, by both Jews and non-Jews, for the creativity of its stagings. As the critic Alexander Mukdoni wrote in 1940, "The large mass of Jewish immigrants have learned the English language, developed, cosmopolitan attitudes, and acquired a taste for the entertainment offered by the American theaters and movies." However, he insisted that a "good, well-produced play will still attract a tremendous number of theatergoers, not only from the immigrant Jewish elements, but also from the American-born Jewish population, which has little or no knowledge of the Yiddish language."<sup>10</sup>

But as Broadway shows about Jewish life began to incorporate Yiddish expressions in their dialogue, the differences between the Yiddish and American theater seemed to some extent to collapse. As a writer for the Yiddish daily *Der Tog* remarked about *Abie's Irish Rose* in an attempt to explain its extraordinary success, "The play is very Jewish; the Jewish characters don't just speak Yiddish with an English accent, but they speak Yiddish as well. Many Jews can find a

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<sup>10</sup> A. Mukdoni, "Trouble in the Yiddish Theater," *The Jewish Digest* (November 1940), 63-65.

good substitute [on Broadway] for the Yiddish theater on Second Avenue or in Brownsville, where they also speak both English and Yiddish.”<sup>11</sup>

Still, the Yiddish theater and its audiences essentially moved uptown to Broadway, which became a haven for Jewish artistic and financial talent; many of the Broadway producers, writers, musicians, set and lighting designers, and other theater professionals were Jewish. An article in *The American Hebrew*, the most widely read American Jewish magazine, singled out Jewish theatrical producers David Belasco, Lee Shubert, and Sam Harris in arguing that Jews have “enacted an increasingly important role both in fostering the arts and in...creating art.”<sup>12</sup>

But the rise of the Jewish producers was not just celebrated in Jewish publications. As Thomas H. Dickinson opined in the mainstream magazine *The Nation*, the Jew demonstrated “just that combination of artistic discrimination and initiative in organization

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<sup>11</sup> A. Glantz, “The Great Conundrum From Broadway Called ‘Abie’s Irish Rose’” *Der Tog* (January 28, 1927), 3. It is true that English was being increasingly spoken on the Yiddish stage; as Jews began to learn English, English words increasingly entered the Yiddish language, where they often supplemented, or even substituted for, Yiddish words. The English words were transliterated into the Hebrew characters in which Yiddish is written, in much the same way that many English words that have entered Modern Hebrew are transliterated into Hebrew characters.

<sup>12</sup> David Carb, “A Major Impetus in the American Theatre: The Jew is Enacting Increasingly Important Role as Creator and Sponsor of our Native Drama,” *American Hebrew* (November 22, 1929), 48.

that skill in fusing the diverse elements of an intimate and sensitive art with the touch-and-go, devil-may-care adventure of the curb market that is necessary in creating the modern dramatic production.” In short, Dickinson wrote, the Jew displays “that combination of qualities that make him the master of the tactics and strategy of the commercial theater.”<sup>13</sup> Dickinson attributed this to the “race-imaginativeness” of the Jew that sprang, in his view, from patience, idealism, and a stubborn faith in the ultimate working-out of a grand design.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Turn to Broadway**

Some of the popular Jewish-themed stage productions were really variety shows such as the ones mentioned in the previous chapter that featured well-known Jewish vaudeville performers like Baker, Brice, Jessel and Cantor reprising versions of their routines. Others, like Fanny Brice’s *Fanny*, were attempts to use stars in story formats (like modern-day television shows named after their stars) that banked on their names.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas H. Dickinson, “The Jew in the Theater,” *The Nation* (June 13, 1923), 689-90.

<sup>14</sup> Dickinson 691.

Almost all were comedies; as Dickinson wrote in his article on Jewish actors, playwrights and producers, "there still exists something of a prejudice against the Jewish actor unless he is a comedian, holding up the traits of his tribe to laughter."<sup>15</sup> Jews were remained in many ways the butt of humor on the Broadway stage. Nevertheless, these comedies explored what may seem like strikingly "contemporary" issues nowadays--issues of assimilation, intermarriage, and conflict between the generations.

Rhoda Bernard, a Jewish vaudeville performer in the post-World War I era was never as famous or successful as Fanny Brice, although she clearly tried to imitate her style, including the heavy Yiddish accent and gentle tone of self-mockery. But Bernard recorded one song, "My Yiddish Matinee Girl," which is important for this study, since it poked fun at the way Jewish audiences were beginning to transfer their allegiance from the Yiddish theater to Broadway. Written by Addison Burkhardt and recorded by Bernard in 1916, the song satirized the tastes of the growing (heavily female) matinee audience on Broadway during the period--at the same time making fun of Jewish girls in particular. Bernard sang in a high, quavering pitch about the American actors (both Jewish and

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<sup>15</sup> Dickinson 690.

Gentile) who were beginning to appeal to the English-speaking second generation of Jews:

When Rosie lived in Essex Street, she liked the *Yiddishe* plays  
She was so sweet and gentile, all the actors she would praise  
But since she moved up to the Bron-nex, she has got high tone  
She gave up Thomashevsky and she took to Georgie Cohen  
[sic]. She's now got lots of whims, since father's business pays  
From moving picture flims [sic], she changed to Broadway  
plays....<sup>16</sup>

Rosie, like so many second generation Jews in New York, has moved out of the Lower East Side and to one of the newer Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx. The cover of the song sheet shows a very slender and stylish girl in a hoop dress and high heeled shoes, her hat sporting extravagantly long ribbons that rakishly cover her right eye. The picture seems intended to show a Jewish girl freshly out of the ghetto. The song portrays a Rosie whose personality seems to have changed along with her residence. From being so "sweet and gentile" and enjoying the rough and tumble of the Yiddish theatre (symbolized by the great Yiddish matinee idol Boris Thomashevsky), she has improved her taste by patronizing the plays

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<sup>16</sup> Addison Burkhardt, "My Yiddish Matinee Girl," (New York: Shapiro, Bernstein and Co., 1916).



of the equally dapper George M. Cohan, the leading theatrical figure of the time. Rosie has acquired a kind of independence and energy. Her family's improved class position enables her to have these excursions, although she does mention that she buys a gallery seat for a quarter from a "sidewalk speculator," or tout.

The song goes on to say that Rosie "loves the plays with 'tso-russ,'" (the Yiddish word for trouble). But she also "loves to see 'Abe and Mawruss'"--the first names of the characters in Montague Glass's long-running series of *Potash and Perlmutter* plays, in which the Jewish actors Barney Bernard and Alexander Carr carried on an intense vaudeville-style rivalry. The song's gently satirical lyrics also mention Rosie's admiration for non-Jewish stars from Otis Skinner to Corse Payton to Gaby de Lys. Rosie even attempts to imitate her favorite actors—"She thinks she looks like Billy Burke, and talks like Borr-ow-more," while "She tries to dance and skip, like 'Eva I Don't Care'"--the latter being a reference to the highest-paid vaudeville performer of the time, Eva Tanguay.

Rosie seems to fantasize that even some of the Gentile objects of her admiration are Jewish. "To Carus' [the opera singer Enrico Caruso] she'd like to scribble, because he looks like Abe Kabibble," is a reference to the cartoon character invented by Harry Hershfield who appeared daily in the New York *Evening Standard* for almost two

decades. Jewish and non-Jewish, fictional and real: the characters become mixed up in her mind. But the song illustrates the pleasure that second generation Jews were beginning to take in mainstream English-language theater, a significant part of which they were creating in their own image.

Not all the Jewish-themed plays that appeared on Broadway during the 1920s were plays about second-generation American Jewish life. There were, for example, a number of productions of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, one of which—produced by the Jewish impresario David Belasco--starred the famous Jewish actor David Warfield and attempted to reproduce Jewish customs and rituals on stage. That this strategy was only partly successful may be measured by the words of the critic for the *New York Times* who called Warfield's Shylock "an appealingly human voice pathetically crying in a producer's weird wilderness of misunderstanding."<sup>17</sup> But the announcement of Warfield's appearance in the role had caused great excitement in the Jewish community. As one writer in the *American Hebrew* put it, it was hoped that the actor, as "the most representative Jewish actor on the English-speaking stage," would "strengthen the humanity and the Jewishness of the character as it

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<sup>17</sup> Harris Jay Griston, "The Merchant of Venice," *New York Times* (January 5, 1923), 16.

has never been done before.” This was in the context of a lively debate that raged in the American Jewish press in the 1920s as to whether or not Shylock was even a Jew!<sup>18</sup>

Also well-received by American Jews was the English playwright John Galsworthy’s *Loyalties* (1922). *Loyalties* is about a wealthy young Jew, Ferdinand De Levis, who has a large sum of money stolen by one of his fellow guests while he is staying in the country home of a prominent man of society. When he insists that his money be returned, De Levis is excluded from participation in elite social circles. As one of the other characters complains, “I don’t like...’Ebrews. They work harder; they’re more sober; they’re honest; and they’re everywhere. I’ve nothing against them, but the fact is—they get *on* so.”<sup>19</sup> However, De Levis is ultimately vindicated; as Louis Harap has pointed out, even plays by non-Jewish authors in the 1920s that included Jewish characters did not tend to portray

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<sup>18</sup> For opposing viewpoints, see Freed, “Is Shylock a Jew?” and Harris Jay Griston, “Revolutionizing the Shylock Label,” *Jewish Forum* (February 1925), 9-15. See also A. Rosenthal, “Modern View of Shakespeare’s Shylock,” *B’nai Brith News* (March 1922), 11. These articles rely to some extent on the books by Maurice Packard, *Shylock Not a Jew* (Boston, 1919) and Gerald Friedlander, *Shakespeare and the Jew*. The debate continues to this day; for a modern treatment of the subject, see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*.

<sup>19</sup> John Galsworthy, *Loyalties*, Act III, Scene I in *Representative Plays by John Galsworthy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 447.

them in entirely unflattering ways.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, Jewish characters “getting on” became a staple of the dramatic fare on Broadway during the Jazz Age. A plethora of Jewish-themed Broadway plays reflected the second generation’s need to stake out its own territory within American society and, more particularly, within the polyglot culture of New York City. Rather than assimilating to a single “Yankee” standard, Jews transformed New York culture in their own image, but an image which contained contradictory ideas of what it meant to be a Jewish-American and which furnished little guidance to the next generation. Not until *Fiddler on the Roof* in the 1960s would the Broadway theater be such an important source of Jewish ethnic pride.

Some of these plays were set on the Lower East Side; others were set in the outer-borough neighborhoods to which the majority of second-generation Jews had relocated. Those set on the Lower East Side, like the vaudeville routines that were set in the ghetto, capitalized on the nostalgia of second-generation Jews for the immigrant neighborhood and its atmosphere of Jewish saturation.

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<sup>20</sup> Louis Harap, *Dramatic Encounters: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Drama, Poetry, and Humor and the Black-Jewish Literary Relationship* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 115. Among Harap’s examples are Channing Pollock’s *The Fool* (1920) and Owen Davis’s *The Detour* (1921), both of which portray their Jewish character in relatively favorable terms.

By reprising the ghetto on stage, Jews both memorialized the Lower East Side and marked the distance--in physical, social, cultural and emotional terms--they had traveled to escape it.

### **The Jewish Audience**

In his theatre column in the *American* in 1922, Alan Dale said he found *Abie's Irish Rose* "clever, ingenious and possible" but that he "regretted the dialect." According to Dale, "the public absolutely believes that no one can be Hebrew unless he speak a horrible patois in assorted tones." The vaudeville caricature of the Jew, he believed, survived on Broadway not because Gentiles indulged their own prejudices, but because more assimilated Jews were amused by the immigrant stereotypes. Dale wrote:

The Hebrews themselves are largely to blame for the prevalence of the [Jewish] stage type. They laugh at it and enjoy the knowledge of their own superiority. They are greatly amused at jargon, because they have thrown it into the discard. They have been educated out of it, but they like to see stage characters that haven't been thus educated....You seldom see a non-dialected Hebrew on the stage. He wouldn't be

'funny' if he didn't talk with his hands in dialect....The non-Hebrew public does not appreciate these comedies of race.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, second generation Jews needed these stereotypes as much as (if not more than) Gentiles did; they marked the distance the children had traveled from the world of their fathers. Although Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr. have argued that ethnic humor declined on the vaudeville stage when the audience "achieved a new economic and social dignity,"<sup>22</sup> the popularity of these comedies indicates that the immigrant stereotypes continued to fascinate--and remain funny--even as the second generation began to acculturate. Harley Erdman has suggested that pressure groups who campaigned against Jewish stereotypes on stage led, in the years following World War I, to stage Jews becoming what he calls "cleaned-up,"--less alien and more assimilated.<sup>23</sup> But, as we will see, the immigrant caricatures still survived on stage, along with the more acculturated characters that represented the second generation. And Jewish entertainers like Eddie Cantor, Benny Rubin

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Dale, "Dialectic Decay Destroys Drama," *New York American* (May 28, 1922), 9.

Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>22</sup> Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr. *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt, 1951), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Erdman 152. He admits, however, that it was more in Chicago than New York that the Jewish stereotypes were successfully suppressed. He also concedes that the "worlds of theater before and after 1920 may not fit comfortably into the same larger narrative." Erdman 199, note 36.

and George Jessel continued to use Yiddish dialect humor well into the 1930s.

Of course, the audiences for these plays could not have been exclusively Jewish. But at a time when twenty-five percent of the population in New York was comprised of Jews, plays about Jewish life probably did attract disproportionately Jewish audiences. Furthermore, even when there were non-Jews in the audience, critics from mainstream newspapers tended to view the audience as exclusively composed of Jews. As the critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote in his review of *The Jazz Singer* in 1925:

It is a well-known fact that plays in which the principal characters are Jews, even in the broadest comedies, appeal particularly to Jewish audiences, and we believe that such will be the case with *The Jazz Singer*. We know of no play that

requires so thorough an understanding of and sympathy with the Jew and his faith as does this one. Indeed, many of the lines of the play which were spoken in dialect, while wholly unintelligible to us, were received by an audience almost entirely composed of those of the Jewish race.<sup>24</sup>

The Broadway audience for *The Jazz Singer* could hardly have been entirely Jewish. Nor does the play, despite its grounding in a Jewish milieu, require a deep knowledge of Jewish tradition in order to follow its basic outlines and understand its characters. What comes through in the review is an underlying feeling of resentment; the critic seems to feel excluded. It is interesting that he refers to himself in the plural, which is unusual in reviews from the period, as if to set up an opposition between the Jewish audience that understands and appreciates the play and the rest of society that he claims will be mystified by it.

But it was partly true that second generation Jews were creating a kind of entertainment world of their own, one that mirrored their own experience. In the song quoted above, Rosie is

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Mark Slobin, "Some Intersections of Jews, Music and Theater" in Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 37.



still a “Yiddish Matinee Girl” even though she has given up attending the Yiddish theatre. Her identity is in flux; there remains a sense about her theatre-going that she is either the right person in the wrong place, or the wrong person in the right place. But what is most important is that her identity *is* to some extent defined or determined by her theatre-going. As in the old adage, “You are what you eat,” Rosie (herself a fictional creation) is what she sees on stage; she and her matinee are in some sense interchangeable. This was exactly the second generation’s experience of Broadway. Jews attended Jewish-themed Broadway plays with more than a shock of recognition; they experienced a genuine sense of home-coming.

### **The Influence of the Comic Strips**

The “art form” that the majority of these new Jewish characters seemed to be drawn from, according to critics in both Jewish and mainstream newspapers, was the Sunday comic strip. As the theater critic for the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog* (*The Day*) wrote in his review of *Abie’s Irish Rose* on Broadway, the Jewish characters “are not from life, but are dreamed up, taken from

vaudeville and from the comic supplements of the Sunday papers.”<sup>25</sup> This was no less true at the end of the decade, when the critics had seen many plays featuring American Jews, than at its outset. Perhaps the most frequently invoked strip, already mentioned above, was Hershfield’s *Abie the Agent*. This strip dealt with a short, rotund Jewish automobile salesman who peppered his speech with Yiddish expressions as he repeatedly lost sales to his business rival.

Hershfield’s innovation, which was followed by cartoonists like Milt Gross, was to create a sympathetic Jewish character with whom both Jews and non-Jews could identify, one that departed significantly from vaudeville stereotypes of Jews.<sup>26</sup> As Hershfield reminded the readers of the *American Hebrew*, in his strip “you never see the stereotyped derby hat over the ears, with a big beard, and the movement of the arms, as depicted by so-called Hebrew caricatures on the stage. There is never a mention of the slanderous ‘fire’ stories. No ridicule of religious rites and holidays, as has been shown on the stage.” Instead, noted Hershfield, he depicted what he

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<sup>25</sup> S. Dingol, “A Jewish Comedy on the English Stage: ‘Abie’s Irish Rose’ at the Fulton Theater,” *Der Tog* (June 15, 1922), 10.

<sup>26</sup> The stereotypes did not disappear, however. One type of Jewish character drawing was that of Samuel Cahan, who did studies of immigrant Jews for the *New York Sunday World*. As an article in the *Jewish Forum* described his work, they were “psychological masterpieces,” depictions of “[o]ld, shrivelled, frozen Jewish peddlers; loquacious and stout Jewish women; a tender and pale *yeshivah bachur* [Talmud student]; [and] the shrewd, keen-eyed businessman.” David Ewen, “The Jew as Cartoonist,” *Jewish Forum* (August 1929), 355-56.

called "American humor, as seen through certain types of Jews and to be read by all Americans without regard for religious belief."<sup>27</sup>

There are many similarities between vaudeville and comic strips. Comic strips depended for their humor on the same kind of timing employed by the vaudeville performers, with a punchline at the end of each strip as at the end of each routine. However, in their overall impression they were perhaps more similar to plays; the main character of each strip was embedded in a larger narrative that readers followed from week to week. Like modern day television, there was also a gallery of recurring characters that the reader needed to keep track of as they drifted in and out of the main character's "life."

Nevertheless, it is interesting that Hershfield still mentions that he presents "certain types" of Jews even as he insists on moving away from stereotypical depictions. What were the new types of Jews that the comic strips portrayed? In appearance, Abie was strikingly similar to Barney Bernard. In fact, it seems in retrospect that Bernard was the model for a whole generation of Jewish male stage characters—short and fat, lovable but slightly harebrained, unable to really "make it" in society despite his get-rich-quick

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<sup>27</sup> Harry Hershfield, 'Abie the Agent' Corrective for Jewish Caricatures," *American Hebrew* (June 24, 1921), 147.

schemes. Speaking English, but with a Yiddish accent, his whole personality was a kind of intermediate Jewish stereotype, lacking “manly” qualities and possessed by self-doubt, but still eagerly wanting to succeed by the criteria of American society.

This new breed of characters were thus somewhere in between immigrant Jews and second generation Jews—recognizably Jewish in appearance and speech, and yet more fashionably dressed and with less of a Yiddish accent than the entirely unacculturated immigrant. As a profile of Goldberg in the *American Hebrew* put it, “The men with bulbous noses and spinach whiskers who romp joyously through his strips might, with a few sobering touches, be transformed into our fellow citizens from the Bronx, Canarsie or Central Park West.”<sup>28</sup>

Goldberg’s characters were thus on the verge of upward mobility, without being quite “ready” for true integration into American culture. As John Appel has written of Goldberg’s strip, it “kidded rather than satirized aspects of American Jewish middle class life: Abe’s all-Jewish circle of friends, Cohen, Mandelbaum, Jake and Meyer; his eagerness to purchase at discount; his tortuous attempts to make a better living and be a responsible family man.”

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<sup>28</sup> Elias Lieberman, “He Makes a Nation Laugh—and Think,” *American Hebrew* (October 7, 1921), 555.

However, Appel points out that Abie's accent and use of Yiddish expressions "placed him squarely into an American-Jewish first generation immigrant, bourgeois, urban, and commercial milieu."<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Appel argues that the strip had "only a faint Jewish coloration," because Jews were keeping a low profile in American society and because non-Jewish readers would not understand the Jewish references.<sup>30</sup> I disagree; I see the strips as heavily Jewish, and connected in terms of audience appeal to the Broadway plays of Jewish life that are the subject of this chapter. Which came first? Although the Jewish characters on stage were viewed as the descendants of the comic strip Jews, the Potash and Perlmutter series actually inspired a comic strip after its success on Broadway.

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<sup>29</sup> John Appel, "Abie the Agent, Gimpl the Matchmaker, Bert Schliemazel, et al." In *Ethnic Images in the Comics*:

<http://www.balchinstitute.org/museum/comics/comics.html>

Appel also points out that there were comic strips in the Yiddish press, such as the work of Samuel Zagat for *Die Wahrheit* (Truth): these featured characters such as Gimpl Beinisch, the matchmaker; Berl Bedroom, the boarder; Moshe, the Real Estatenik; and Mrs. Pisl from Uptown.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

## **The New Jew on Stage**

Ironically, second generation Jews could embrace their own representations on Broadway precisely because those representations were changing. As we saw in the first chapter, the stereotypes of Jews familiar from early twentieth century vaudeville were giving way to more acculturated portrayals--Jewish characters who looked and sounded more like real human beings (which, in a Gentile culture, meant more like Gentiles.) The "stage Jew" was no longer the exclusive property of "Hebrew" comics, but could accommodate himself or herself to a wide range of portrayals.

Even immigrant Jews could be "Americanized," according to the Broadway theater of the day. A case in point is the heavy-handed but patriotic *We Americans*, the play starring Paul Muni that was later made into a (now lost) silent film. Muni played Morris Levine, an immigrant Jewish presser with a heavy Yiddish accent, who is persuaded by his daughter's boyfriend, Samuel Korn (a second generation Jew) to attend Korn's night school classes in English. The comic centerpiece of the play is the second act, in which the Levine and his wife, along with representatives of other immigrant groups, struggle to master the English language. (The schoolroom scene with the various immigrants is reminiscent of many vaudeville acts of the

time that poked fun at immigrants' accents and malapropisms.) In doing so, they acquire a new-found self-respect and appreciation for American values.<sup>31</sup>

In much the same way, *Abie's Irish Rose* parades a series of progressively more acculturated Jewish stereotypes before the audience. Solomon Levy is a prosperous businessman, but he speaks as if he just stepped off a vaudeville stage. In the first Broadway production of *Abie's Irish Rose*, Levy (created by vaudeville and Yiddish stage veteran Alfred Weisman), appears in cast photographs as wearing an ill-fitting suit, striped vest, baggy pants, a shirt with its collar up around his ears and a battered beret. By contrast, Abie (played, in the original Broadway cast, by the Gentile actor Robert B. Williams) wears a tuxedo and the goatee-sporting rabbi is clad in a stylish dark suit with starched white-collar shirt. These latter characters are Jewish, the play suggests, not because society imposes it upon them but because they identify as such. The play shows a clear progression from the immigrant stereotypes (represented by the Jewish father and both Jewish next door

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<sup>31</sup> The stage directions to Act II instruct the director to make clear that the immigrants have lost their "eye-sore" qualities when they begin to attend school, but that their "improved appearance is attributable to an altered viewpoint and not to the acquisition of money...[T]here is apparent in them a consciousness of themselves not, as heretofore, merely as members of a race, but a consciousness of themselves as individuals." Milton Herbert Gropper and Max Siegel, *We Americans* (New York: Samuel French, 1928), Act II, p. 60.

neighbors) to the more acculturated rabbi, to the extremely acculturated Abie.

Characters like Abie were what the social worker Konrad Bercovici, writing in 1923 of the "generation of Bronx Jews quite distinct from the East Side" called "the second-generation Jew with all the outward characteristics minus beard and mustache, playing baseball, great fight fans, commercial travelers, clean-shirted, white-collared, derby-hatted, creased-trousers." Since religious Jews were not supposed to shave, the trimming of the beard and mustache was itself significant; it symbolized a more secular lifestyle. Interestingly, however, the derby hat had also been *de rigeur* for the "Hebrew" comics; the derby could seemingly intensify either an unkempt appearance or a fashionable one. (The next-door-neighbor in Abie's Irish Rose, the Mr. Cohen, wears a top hat, which makes him look like a cross between a comedian and a magician. Played in the original cast by the diminutive Milton Wallace, the top hat accentuates his short stature, making him look utterly ridiculous.)

The change in stereotype, at least for males, is highly significant. The old immigrant costume was viewed as feminizing its



wearer, rendering him truly unsuited for the life of American commerce. By contrast, the more fashionable apparel worn by the second generation Jew marked him as eligible to participate in the new economy. But it was not just his dress that handicapped the immigrant Jew. Even if he did not remain attached to religious rituals (as we will see in many of the immigrant fathers in the films discussed in the next chapter), immigrant men still often seemed to lack masculinity. But they made up in brains what they lacked in brawn.

For example, the character of Mendel Marantz in David Freedman's *Mendel, Inc.* (1929), is so dreamy and averse to earning a living that his wife goes out to work and leaves him home to do the household chores. But Mendel resists the redefinition of his gender identity; he promptly invents a machine to do the housework that ultimately makes him rich.<sup>32</sup> Smith and Dale were also on hand;

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<sup>32</sup> According to an article in the *American Hebrew* by Aben Kandel, the play's "underlying philosophy is of such a universal nature that it could be distilled from the portrait of any family, regardless of race or creed....Instead of the usual, one-dimensioned cartoon, the money-loving egocentric Jew, Mendel is a lazy philosopher and dreamer, who scorns money and the social glitter, discovering beauty and an enviable ease of living in humble surroundings....[Freedman] has added an unforgettably commendable portrait to the gallery of sympathetic American Jews." Aben Kandel, "An American Dramatist Whose Humor is Universal," *American Hebrew* (January 17, 1930), 383.

Smith played Bernard Schaaps, Mendel's brother-in-law and Dale played Sam Shtrudel, Bernard's business partner.<sup>33</sup>

Robert Benchley the critic for *The New Yorker*, said he was "very susceptible to any lines read in good Jewish dialect. It really makes very little difference what they are....Thus, when Mr. Smith describes himself as a surprising fellow who always has something on his sleeve, I am made very, very happy."<sup>34</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch was less complimentary, calling *Mendel, Inc.* a "primitive farce about East Side plumbers, smart young Jewish salesmen and energetic marriage brokers" that is "intended for that very special audience which finds even the usual Broadway drama over its head."<sup>35</sup>

One of the first playwrights to present this new breed of engaging Jewish heroes on stage was Aaron Hoffman. One of Hoffman's first plays, *The Son of Solomon* (1912), depicted the conflict between Orthodox Jewish parents and their children who

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<sup>33</sup> Bide Dudley of the *New York Evening World* wrote that the character of Mendel was "the same, loveable, shiftless east side Jewish father" who was so prevalent in Jewish-themed drama, "doing the same thing—inventing." Bide Dudley, *New York Evening World* (November 26, 1919), 17. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Benchley, "The Theatre," *New Yorker* (December 7, 1929), 42.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Current Season," *The Nation* (December 18, 1929), 758.

stray from religious observance. According to Ellen Schiff, the play "turned its back on the prevailing burlesque and caricatured stage Jews."<sup>36</sup> But by the early 1920s, Hoffman's work presented even more complex Jewish characters. His ironically titled *Welcome Stranger* (1920) focuses on the character of Isidor Solomon, a Jewish visitor to a small New England town, who faces prejudice at every turn as he seeks to win acceptance from the anti-Semitic mayor and townspeople. Ironically, it is only when he exposes the mayor's own concealed Jewishness that Solomon replaces him as the leader of the community.

Solomon was played by George Sidney, a short and pudgy actor who was known for his work in vaudeville; he was later to star in the film series, *The Cohens and the Kellys*. As Carol Bird wrote in *Theater Magazine* about the Sidney's performance in *Welcome Stranger*:

No one ever dreamed that a day would come when a stage comedian would be cast as anything but a comedian—a grotesque, a burlesque of his race, a magnifier of racial characteristics...But the miracle happened. Today theatergoers are given the opportunity to see on the stage a Jew as he

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<sup>36</sup> Ellen Schiff, ed., *Awake & Singing: 7 Classic Plays from the American Jewish Repertoire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 4.

really is—say at home—kindly, lovable, childish, affectionate, droll, humorous, extraordinarily fond of his family and all the things connected with his home.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this encomium is the rush to replace one set of stereotypes with another, to overcompensate for the negative stereotypes by inventing positive ones. But even Bird seems to presuppose some of these stereotypes herself; she says that “rarely nowadays is [the Jew] shown as he most assuredly is not, nine cases out of ten—a vulgarian, crudely unfamiliar with the English language, raving constantly about money.” She seems to need to concede that there *are* some Jews who do fit the stereotype, which undermines her own argument. Still, Sidney, “without realizing it, or striving for it, has become a sort of propagandist for his race.”<sup>38</sup> As Sidney himself said, as quoted by Bird, “I never could go back to the beard and dialect plays. I enjoy too much depicting the average Jew as he actually is,” meaning the Jew as “kindly, loveable, sympathetic, eager to help the underdog, and, generally, an all-round regular human being.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Carol Bird, “The Jew as a Human Being,” *Theatre Magazine* (September 1921), 6 and reprinted in *B’nai Brith News* (June-July 1923), 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

## Potash and Perlmutter

The most popular “stage Jews” of the period were, without doubt, the fictional characters of Abe Potash and “Mawruss” Perlmutter. The first play, *Potash and Perlmutter*, grew out of a series of short stories written by Montague Glass, an Anglo-Jewish author, about two Jewish immigrants who run a clothing business; by 1923 a total of five Potash and Perlmutter plays had appeared on Broadway. Played by Barney Bernard and Alexander Carr, two Eastern European Jewish immigrants, the plays marked significant departures from the ways in which Jews had been portrayed by the early twentieth century “Hebrew” comics. Although an article about the play in the *Sioux Falls Press* noted that Bernard and Carr were “two of the best Hebrew low comedians on the stage,”<sup>40</sup> the Potash and Perlmutter series moved Jewish character comedy beyond the early immigrant stereotypes. Clean-shaven, dressed in suits and vests, and speaking with only slight Yiddish accents, the comic duo clashed incessantly but good-naturedly with one another.

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<sup>40</sup> “Broad Comedy on Broadway,” *Sioux Falls (South Dakota) Press* (May 14, 1922), 9. Billy Rose Theatre Collection. Newspapers throughout the United States frequently ran short articles on the latest Broadway offerings. Since “Hebrew” comics had toured the country for decades beginning in the late nineteenth century, it is perhaps understandable that the lead actors in *Partners Again* be described in such terms for a readership less knowledgeable about Broadway than about vaudeville.

Jewish comedy was changing. Harley Erdman sees *Potash and Perlmutter* as a kind of bridge between the slapstick, rollicking humor of Weber and Fields on the one hand, and the essentially verbal humor of Groucho Marx. According to Erdman, Glass's plays marked the end of an era of explicitly "ethnic" Jewish characters on stage. In his words, Jewish characters became "less visibly present in mass culture."<sup>41</sup>

I strongly disagree. I see the continuance of Jewish comedy in the *Potash and Perlmutter* series, as well as in the many plays that are the subject of this chapter. Even as Jewish characters shed some of their recognizably ethnic mannerisms, they still continued to perform a Jewish identity and to reflect a Jewish sensibility. Jewish New Yorkers did not "lose" their Jewishness as they began to move into the lower middle class and live in parts of the city and country other than the Lower East Side. Similarly, Jewish characters on Broadway did not become less Jewish because they no longer entirely reflected vaudeville-type stereotypes.

This did not mean that the new breed of Jewish characters were accepted without protest, even by those in the Jewish community. Gilbert Seldes, the critic for the *Menorah Journal*, coined the term "Jew-Play" to express his "sense of weariness and

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<sup>41</sup> Erdman 159.

distaste for the commercial play which exploits the more trivial characteristics of the Jews in order to provide a Roman holiday on Broadway." He called Glass "the most skilful and successful practitioner of the art which I find so excessively banal and distasteful."<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the popularity of the Potash and Perlmutter plays, along with the many other Broadway plays of the late teens and twenties that showcased contemporary Jewish life, derived precisely from the fact that the characters *were* recognizably Jewish. Jewish identity was (and is) more complex than the external trappings of Jewish stereotypes. Erdman's argument that Jews "disappeared" from popular culture when the immigrant caricatures (popularized by Gentiles) fell out of favor is tantamount to saying that representations of blacks vanished from popular culture with the end of the minstrel show.

I will demonstrate this with an analysis of the penultimate Potash and Perlmutter play, *Partners Again*. This play is especially significant because it reunited the two irascible, wise-cracking businessmen not as garment manufacturers but as the owners of an automobile factory. As the play's premise makes clear, Jews were no longer exclusively associated with the clothing industry in New York,

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<sup>42</sup> Seldes, "Jewish Plays and Jew-Plays in New York," 236.

despite the fact that had come to dominate all phases of that business. As Deborah Dash Moore has found, Jews were moving into many different fields for the first time in the 1920s, including building, contracting, importing and publishing. (Quotas at universities and professional schools limited the number of Jews who could join the professions.)

The inherent joke in having Jews in the automobile industry was that the captain of that industry, Henry Ford, was the most influential American anti-Semite.<sup>43</sup> Ford's newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent* accused Jews of exerting nefarious control over almost every realm of American life--from banking to agriculture to the theatrical industry. Ford published attacks on Jews for 91 consecutive weeks beginning with an article in 1920 entitled "The International Jew: The World's Problem," that recapitulated the main points of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—the famous anti-Semitic tract first published in English in London in 1920.<sup>44</sup> Largely on the basis of this series, the circulation of Ford's newspaper grew tenfold from 1920 to 1924.

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<sup>43</sup> See Albert Lee, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 80-81.



At its height, the *Dearborn Independent*'s readership approached that of the *New York Daily News*, which had the largest circulation in America.<sup>45</sup> Thus Ford's success as a newspaper publisher coincided with the most profitable period in his automobile company's history. In fact, when *Partners Again* opened in 1922, Ford's company was at the peak of its success. The historian David Halberstam called that year "the high-water mark of Ford's domination of the market," after which an expanding Chevrolet began to eat into Ford's profits.<sup>46</sup>

*Partners Again* thus challenged the public's preconceptions of Jews, at the same time as it bolstered Jews' pride in their emergence from the ghetto. What could speak better to Jewish mobility, in both its geographic and economic senses, than casting Jews as automobile manufacturers? The play showed that Jews were, quite literally, on the move. And at a time when technology was transforming American life and culture, it seemed natural that Jews (who were viewed as possessing superior intelligence) should be

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<sup>45</sup> Dinnerstein 81. Dinnerstein also points out that Ford's anti-Semitic articles garnered wide support from both educated and uneducated readers (and large numbers of Christian ministers), who wrote him to encourage his efforts to "expose" the Jewish "conspiracy." Dinnerstein 82.

<sup>46</sup> David Halberstam, *The Reckoning* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986), 97.

inventing things and selling their inventions. Or perhaps Jews could be shown as inventors only if those inventions were comic; Ed Wynn's vaudeville acts showcased his newly invented cheese fork with noseguards, typewriter carriage-style corn-on-the-cob eater and overcoat with protruding pieces of steel--this last to give the wearer room on the subway!<sup>47</sup> The hilariously intricate contraptions of Rube Goldberg were also examples of inventing for its own sake, for the sheer pleasure of multiplying complexity. For Wynn and Goldberg, it was the ridiculousness of their contrivances that characterized Jewish genius.

The only problem is that the automobiles that Abe and Mawruss manufacture in *Partners Again* do not actually work. The running joke in the play is that the cars are duds; the first car they

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<sup>47</sup> *New Yorker* (November 12, 1927), 54. Wynn's humor was not as explicitly Jewish as that of Cantor and Jessel, although he claimed that the best joke he ever told on the air was about a "Yiddish tourist," lost in the Alps, who refuses the brandy offered by a St. Bernard who has come to rescue him from a nearby monastery--he tells the dog to go back and get ginger ale! Martin J. Porter, "Funny Reasons Why Wynn Gives Radio the Air," unidentified paper, Billy Rose Theatre Collection. He also said in interviews that he had run away from home as a boy to become a Jewish character comedian, and that his comic style remained less as what he called a "joke comedian" than a "method comedian"--one who makes people laugh less through the jokes he tells than through their delivery, expressions, inflections, etc. Ed Wynn, "Wynn Explains Methods Used by Comedians," *New York Herald Tribune* (October 30, 1927), 4. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

sell, dubbed the "Schenckman Six" is such a clunker that it leads to numerous lawsuits against the firm.<sup>48</sup> They are then fooled by a gang of confidence men into investing in a second car, the "Climax Four," which lands them in trouble for stock fraud. Meanwhile, Abe tries to discourage the budding romance between Hattie, his niece, and Dan, a young non-Jewish mechanic—and, it turns out, a former pickpocket—who has just started working for the firm. Abe's efforts backfire to the extent that the couple promptly become engaged. And of course it is Dan who saves the day by inventing a lucrative substitute for gasoline.

One of the most telling exchanges of dialogue between Abe and Mawruss deals with the fact that they are no longer in the clothing business. They are discussing Dan's criminal record:

ABE: He said the young feller was a pickpocket ten years ago.

You was a garment operator 20 years ago, but you got over it, didn't you?

MAWRUSS: Abe, don't make any wisecracks. You know a garment operator ain't a pickpocket.

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<sup>48</sup> A six-cylinder engine was significantly ahead of its time in 1922; Chevy did not start manufacturing cars with that engine until 1929; Ford waited until 1936 to follow suit. Halberstam, *The Reckoning* 100.

ABE: Sure, I know, but if a garment operator could improve himself, why couldn't a pickpocket?<sup>49</sup>

The point of this exchange is that Abe and Mawruss have "improved themselves" by moving out of the garment industry. They have left the ghetto behind. But the humor of the play depended on their both continuing and transforming (in contemporary critical parlance, "reinventing") the older Jewish stereotypes. The newspaper critics of the day, who almost universally praised the comedy, noted that Glass and Goodman were taking a gamble in changing the setting for his characters' interactions while retaining his successful comic formula.

As the critic for the *New York American*, Alan Dale, wrote, the authors "have removed the dialectic twain from garments to motors--quite a leap for them to make...[since] there is nothing particularly spontaneous or appropriate in the invasion of these characters by automobile interests."<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Dale concluded that the difficulties experienced by the characters in moving into a new field are "general rather than racial. For instance, it is not

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<sup>49</sup> Montague Glass, *Partners Again* (Act I, p. 20). Typescript. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Dale, "'Partners Again' New Offering at Selwyn, *New York American* (May 2, 1922). In his column five days later, Dale opined that automobiles "are not as 'radical' as are garments, nor do they appeal to the strange instinct of commerce as strenuously as do the things we wear." Alan Dale, "Laughter is Open Sesame to Success," *New York American* (May 7, 1922), 19.

Semitic peculiarity to take a long ride with the emergency brake on and to wonder why the car won't move smoothly." In other words, the characters' foibles are not specifically Jewish ones, even though the characters are plainly Jewish. The comedy does not depend on poking fun at Jews, or on specifically "Jewish" humor. (One wonders, though what a genuine "Semitic peculiarity" would be.)

But the appeal of Potash and Perlmutter was precisely their Jewishness, especially for a second generation Jewish audience. As the reviewer for the *New York Herald* pointed out, "The story itself, as usual, does not signify so much--all that is necessary is to set the two partners arguing and struggling for the proper English, wherewith to express their opinions of each other. Here is drama that is sufficient, particularly when the pair are forced to give up, as usual, and take refuge in Yiddish."<sup>51</sup> Speaking English was what was unnatural for Potash and Perlmutter, according to this critic--they could really communicate only in Yiddish. Their ghetto origins betrayed them at every turn; they could only pretend to be acculturated for so long, as if speaking English was itself a kind of act or routine which could only be sustained for a limited amount of time. The comedy sprang from their failed attempts to transcend

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<sup>51</sup> "'Partners Again,' Perlmutter Play, is Hilarious Fun," *The New York Herald* (May 2, 1922). Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

their Jewish background, not from their success at doing so. This was funny for both Jews and Gentiles; as the critic for *Variety* noted, "It's a play of Yiddish people, but anybody can enjoy it."<sup>52</sup>

However, at least according to *The World*, it was the Jewish audiences who most appreciated the comedy. The paper observed that "no one in the audience laughed more than the Jews throughout the performance which presents their foibles and follies in the frankest possible terms." How the critic knew who was Jewish in the audience and who was not is a mystery, but the fact that he thought he could identify them visually (and that this identification would be taken for granted by his readership) is itself worthy of note. But the critic wanted to know why Jews were not offended by these comic portrayals. Weren't they laughing at themselves? "Why don't the Jews resent being ridiculed?" he asked Carr after the performance.

Carr responded that the characters of Abe and Mawruss "are such truthful creations that the Jews in the audience appreciate them perhaps even more than the Gentiles. In them they recognize the weakness as well as the strength of the Hebrew race." He said that audiences are laughing with, rather than at, the main characters. If this were not true, he said, he and Bernard would not portray them. Carr thus fell back on racial stereotypes of Jews and

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<sup>52</sup> *Variety* (April 21, 1922), 40. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

tried to argue that while Jews have racial “weaknesses,” the audience was somehow not laughing at them. What Carr missed was that the characters were in some sense laughing at themselves, and the audience was laughing at their self-deprecation. If Jews were not themselves objects of parody in American society, *Partners Again* would have little comic fuel. But, just as the vaudeville stars discussed in Chapter One, Broadway comedy stars had to deny their own self-humiliation at the same time as they exploited it. They had to pretend that there was something defective about the Jewish “character” at the same time as they professed pride in their depiction of Jewish stereotypes.

The element of caricature was far from gone, however. As Arthur Hornblow wrote in *Theatre Magazine*,

[A]s long as the racial types so cleverly and good naturedly caricatured by Montague Glass form a large part of our heterogeneous population, the amusing adventures and comic mishaps of the ignorant, yet shrewd Jewish clothing-makers, now partners in the automobile business, cannot fail to give theatre audiences unalloyed joy. The comedy makes an irresistible appeal not only to the Gentile, who has to guess at the meaning of many of the Jewish allusions, but also to the Jew who views himself as in a mirror and is intelligent enough

to take no offence in seeing his racial weaknesses and oddities deliciously portrayed..."<sup>53</sup>

Abe and Mawruss were thus no different, in important respects, from the outlandish "Hebrew" characters which preceded them on the American stage. Gentile could laugh at them, and Jews could laugh at themselves--at their "weaknesses and oddities." The Jews, who managed at the same time to be both "ignorant" and "shrewd," in their business dealings, deserved to be laughed at for their inability to win acceptance in Gentile society.

The only major dissenting opinion on both the play's merits and the characters' truthfulness to life came from Heywood Broun. One problem for Broun was the artificiality of the plot--he felt that if the characters were turned loose, they would "suddenly create situations and a story out of the very substance of their nascent humanity. They live little as it is, but the tug of the wires discourages them from anything like 100 per cent existence." Just as importantly, Broun believed that the play's constant stream of laugh-lines detracted from the reality of the characterizations. "After all," he wrote, "the Potashes and Perlmutter of New York are not just funny men. Their successes and failures in the business

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<sup>53</sup> Arthur Hornblow, "Mr. Hornblow Goes to the Theatre," *Theatre Magazine* (July 1922), 30.



game that they play so hard cannot be unrelievedly farcical. The fight 'up stream' can hardly be one of continual hilarity. There is so much of prejudice and meanness upon the conscience of the community that it is only too ready to be told that Abe and Mawruss are just funny little fellows. Mr. Glass should tell some more."<sup>54</sup>

Broun thus perceptively realized that Abe and Mawruss were letting Gentile society off the hook by still essentially showing Jews as clowns. Especially outside of New York, Jews were still handicapped by anti-Semitism in their efforts to succeed. As an ad in a mid-western Ku Klux Klan weekly, *The Fiery Cross*, threatened in referring to the film version of *Potash and Perlmutter* in 1923, "This is your last chance to meet the two best known Jews in America."<sup>55</sup> Given the intolerant climate toward Jews it was not possible, Broun seemed to suggest, that the audience was not laughing *at* the two partners as well as with them.

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<sup>54</sup> Heywood Broun, "Partners Again," *New York World* (May 7, 1922), 10.

<sup>55</sup> Text of ad quoted in "America's Best Known Jews are Given Publicity," *Brooklyn Jewish Chronicle* (October 19, 1923), 1.

## **Performing Jewishness**

And just as with Jewish vaudevillians, they had to maintain that the Jewishness itself was an act, a put-on. While Fanny Brice maintained that she had to travel to the Lower East Side in order to learn the accent and mannerisms of her Yiddish-inflected characters, Alexander Carr said that he got his “types” from Wall Street, learning by imitation how to perform a Jewish identity. “There are hundreds of Mawruss Perlmutterers in Wall Street,” he told the *Sunday News*. “They retain the dialect and mannerisms and I studied several of them carefully before attempting the role.”<sup>56</sup> An immigrant Jewish actor, whose father was a Russian rabbi, thus insisted that he had to “learn” how to be authentically Jewish. Carr’s experience as a circus clown--*The Sun* pointed out sarcastically that Carr, “played true to the traditions of clergymen’s and rabbis’ sons by running away to join a circus--<sup>57</sup> was evidently not sufficient training to make it as a comic on Broadway.

Of the “Wall Street” type, Carr told another interviewer that “You can meet a Mawruss Perlmutter on Wall Street any day. He

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<sup>56</sup> “It’s a Serious Business, Declare Abe and Mawruss,” *Sunday News* (May 21, 1922), 19.

<sup>57</sup> *The Sun* (May 17, 1922), 22.

retains his Jewish heart even though he has attained American aggressiveness. He is a poet turned fighter; a sentimentalist driven into being a soldier in the battle of life." This "Jewish heart"--what Carr called "the greatest heart that beats in any land"--came from a history of oppression: "It is because their inheritance of suffering and pain and privation has given them the capacity for feeling; the ability to understand the pulsations of the human heart."<sup>58</sup>

Performing a "true" Jewish identity was then, at least for Carr, mostly a matter of having a "truly" Jewish character to perform. But since he was plainly unwilling to ground Jewish identity wholly in external manifestations, Carr thus had recourse to an internal basis for Jewishness. In 1914, in an article in *Theater Magazine*, Carr had said of the Jewish comic that "He has only to be himself and he is excruciatingly funny."<sup>59</sup> But what does it mean for the Jew to be "himself"? Carr's statements do not add up.<sup>60</sup> Still, Carr insisted that the Jew in the *Potash and Perlmutter* plays "represent the real Jew as

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<sup>58</sup> Undated clipping, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander Carr, "Perlmutter Speaks," *Theatre* (March 1, 1914), 38.

<sup>60</sup> One critic pointed out that Carr actually plays the "snarling, venomous, hostile contrast to Mr. Bernard's engaging Jew," although he "modifies his previous angry disregard for Potash with an acid forbearance." Percy Hammond, "The Theatre," *New York Tribune* (May 14, 1922), 16. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

he is rather than as he has been caricatured for years in this country.”<sup>61</sup>

### **The Value of Ethnic Names**

The performance-like elements of ethnicity are abundantly present in *Abie's Irish Rose* as well, and they pertain to both the Irish and the Jews. Abie, a young veteran from the First World War, brings home an Irish Catholic nurse, Rose Mary, whom he has already secretly married, but he is afraid to incur his father's displeasure for marrying a non-Jew. The scene in Act I in which Abie introduces Rose Mary to his father makes hay out of the identifying features of ethnicity, especially ethnic names:

SOLOMON: Vell, tell me, where did you learn does Irish expressions? Sure!

ROSE MARY: (*very proudly*) From my father.

SOLOMON: (*now highly suspicious*) Hah! Iss dod so?

ABIE: (*interrupting hastily*) Why yes, Dad. He was once an actor.

SOLOMON: So? Vell vot is *his* name? Is it Mary too?

ROSE MARY: My father's name Mary?

SOLOMON: You just said your name was Rose *Mary*.

ABIE: (*interrupting hastily again*) His name is Solomon!

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

**SOLOMON:** Oh! Your name is Rose Mary Solomon?

**ROSE MARY:** (*very indignant*) Certainly not!

**SOLOMON:** (*quickly*) Oh, your father's *first* name is Solomon?

**ABIE:** (*quickly*) Yes! (ROSE MARY *looks at him--he is too fast for her--she gasps, so quickly has Abie retorted.*)

**SOLOMON:** Oh! Well, Solomon vhot? (Turns to ROSE MARY.)

**ROSE MARY:** Murphy--(SOLOMON *looks at her quickly*; ABIE *interrupts and finishes before ROSE MARY knows exactly what he is doing.*)

**ABIE:** (*quickly*) Miss Murpheski.

**SOLOMON:** Murpheski! say dod's a fine nize name! Now there you are.(ROSE MARY is so taken aback by this interruption of Abie's she is speechless.) At first I tought you vouldn't have a name like dod! You don'd look id.

**ABIE:** No, she doesn't does she?

**SOLOMON:** (*looking at ROSE MARY*) Faces are very deceiving!....<sup>62</sup>

Abie seems to draw Rose Mary into a kind of vaudeville routine in this scene, for which she is hilariously unprepared. Abie both takes pleasure in becoming involved with a forbidden lover, and seeks to domesticate her foreign-ness to gain parental approval. By presenting Rose Murphy as Rose Murpheski, Abie may even, on one level, be

expressing his own preference that she be Jewish, as if changing her name made her so. (On her part, Rose tells her father that she is marrying a man named Michael Magee, making for a scene of utter confusion in Act II when the two fathers meet.) This is especially interesting given that many Jews during the 1920s changed their names in an effort to conceal their ethnic identity. Even the actor playing Solomon in *Abie's Irish Rose*, Alfred Weisman, changed his name during the play's run--to Alfred White. An article by Sidney Kluger in the *Brooklyn Jewish Chronicle* which was published during the play's run carried the amusing headline: "O Tempora! O Mores! And is 'Caine' Better Than 'Cohen' and Why" with the subhead "Voltaire's Comedie Re-Enacted as Cohens and Epsteins Seek Salvation By Changing Names."<sup>63</sup>

This meta-theatrical element of the comedy suggests a major reason that ethnic comedy was unsettling to mainstream observers; at a time of widespread animosity toward ethnic Americans, ethnicity was not a social category that could be as easily assigned as it appeared. A story in *Theatre Magazine* called "The Melting Plot" demonstrated what the magazine anticipated theatre-goers would find funny. Harry Shapiro (who speaks, rather oddly, with an accent that sounds more cockney than Yiddish) visits an upscale

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<sup>62</sup> Nichols, *Abie's Irish Rose*, Act I, pp. 22-23.

<sup>63</sup> *Brooklyn Jewish Chronicle* (February 29, 1924), 12.

lawyer named Mr. Cheyney-Haverlie in order, for both professional and social reasons, to have his name changed to something that sounds less Jewish. After hearing a number of possibilities, including some especially prestigious “hyphenated” ones, Shapiro settles on Talbot Traymore.<sup>64</sup>

### **Can a Non-Jew Play a Jew?**

But the idea still persisted in the minds of critics (and audiences) that Jewish characters had to be played by Jews; the physical appearance and other “racial” qualities of Jewish characters seemed to demand this. This is especially interesting given that the early “Hebrew” comics were mostly non-Jews. But by the 1920s, with so many Jewish actors playing Jewish characters, there had been a complete reversal in these expectations; to portray Jews “realistically” seemed to demand Jewish having Jewish roots. But this was confounded by the stage version of *Humoresque*, a play version of an important Jewish film. (I will discuss the film in the next chapter). Although the film had starred a Jewish actress in the role of the long-suffering Jewish mother who raises her son to be a world-famous violinist only to see him go off to war, a non-Jew,

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<sup>64</sup> *Theatre Magazine* (February, 1928), 97.

Laurette Taylor, was cast in the role for the play. Taylor had recently starred in both the play and film of *Peg Of My Heart*, a drama about a romance between an Irish boy and girl.

The debate in the press quickly centered on whether or not Taylor was playing a Jewish woman convincingly. Most reviewers were favorably impressed, although one complained that Taylor was too thin for the role whereas Vera Gordon in the film was “Yiddish from start to finish. She was stout, she was unmistakably of the race.”<sup>65</sup> A *Yiddishe mameh*, it seemed, had to be overweight in order to be truly nurturing. Accompanying the article was a pencil drawing of Taylor in the role with the caption: “Can you picture the charming Laurette Taylor as a middle-aged and very Yiddish mother?” And another critic quipped that Taylor was at a disadvantage relative to her fellow actors because they “seem decidedly Jewish. Most of them don’t have to create atmosphere. They are Jews.”<sup>66</sup>

Other critics were more complimentary. Charles Darnton of the *Evening World* said that Taylor’s “own delicatessen dealer might easily have failed to recognize her at first glance....Not only did the dialect ring true, but the unwieldy figure, the swaying walk and the racial gestures were all part of Sarah Kantor and had nothing in

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<sup>65</sup> Unidentified clipping, *Humoresque* file, Billy Rose Theater Collection.

<sup>66</sup> Unidentified clipping, *Humoresque* file, Billy Rose Theater Collection.



common with Laurette Taylor.”<sup>67</sup> And the critic for *Variety* pronounced Taylor simply to be “kosher.”

Nevertheless, the play did not prosper, and Heywood Broun of the *New York World* reported that the sentiment was being circulated that “Jews don’t like to see a Gentile playing a Jewish role and that Gentiles don’t like to see a Gentile playing a Jewish role. This makes it practically unanimous in New York except such patronage as may be picked up from out of town Mohammedans.” Broun speculated that stereotypical performances of Jewish characters are received by Jews “a little less kindly when it is played by someone alien to the race depicted....Indeed, the Jews have laughed a little harder at Potash and Perlmutter than anybody else.”<sup>68</sup> Still, Broun felt that Taylor was playing her role so sympathetically that criticism of her ethnic *bona fides* was unwarranted. For Broun, there was no reason that someone had to be Jewish in order to play a Jewish role.

But this was not necessarily the view of American Jews. At the time that *Humoresque* was playing on Broadway, an article appeared

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Darnton, “Humoresque a Personal Triumph for Laurette Taylor,” *New York Evening World* (February 28, 1923), 19. Billy Rose Theater Collection.

<sup>68</sup> Heywood Broun, “Seeing Things at Night,” *New York World* (March 11, 1923), 6.

in the Yiddish daily *Der Tog* that discussed the new breed of Jewish characters in the American Jewish theater:

Plays about Jewish life are no longer new in the American theater. They have become fashionable...But we have never seen such Jews [in real life]. Either they are constantly shrieking about money, or they are sweet as licorice and sticky as syrup. And they constantly joke like wooden statues into which King Solomon has inserted his entire cleverness. A mother must have a headache and yell at her children, and the children must be demons, and the father must be a good-for-nothing, an imbecile, who is constantly slapping his children....But, in general, the Jews in *Humoresque* are real people--and thank God for that. One shouldn't ask for more. The main thing is that Fanny Hurst, or Laurette Taylor, has brought forth a new type of Jewish woman, that our own Jewish mothers must go and see. They will discover the fact, that a Jewish mother can be a woman, who does not wipe her nose on her apron, who does not curse and scream until you are deaf, and speaks in moderation and to the point.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> B. Goldberg, "Fanny Hurst's 'Humoresque' at the Vanderbilt Theater," *Der Tog* (March 9, 1923), 3.

Although he complains that the new breed of Jewish characters on Broadway are often presented unrealistically, in ways that perpetuate stereotypes (the obsession with money, the feckless father, the screaming mother, etc.), this critic thus praises the play and its female star for presenting a new image of femininity. The writer makes the point that Taylor is not just convincing playing a Jewish role, but that she has helped to redefine what a Jewish woman looks like on stage. It is a non-Jewish actress whose characterization is presented as a role model for Jewish women. Art has not been accurately enough reflecting life, so life must imitate art.

### **The Movement into the Middle Class**

But second generation Jews did not just want to see Jewish characters who looked less stereotypical. They wanted to see Jews moving into the middle class as they themselves were doing. It reflected the fact that Jews (who constituted 29% of the New York City population in the early 1920s) were beginning to move from the lower class into the lower middle class. It is noteworthy that *Abie's Irish Rose*, which in an early typescript version was set in a squalid tenement area in "a part of the

Lower East Side of years ago,”<sup>70</sup> opened on Broadway with a very different set: a spacious living room (adjacent to a conservatory) dominated by curving wood staircases and a large crystal chandelier.

Rather than opening (as in the manuscript) with Solomon Levy standing “motionless in the doorway of his little store” with an attitude of “looking back into the past,” the Broadway production is described in the Samuel French edition as set in “the home of a New York business man, a prosperous one.” The chandelier is a reminder of the past only in the sense that it is described as “very ornate of the New York gas and electricity combined period.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus, despite his Yiddish accent, crass comments and occupation as a clothes peddler, Solomon Levy is introduced to Broadway audiences as a resident of a middle-class apartment to which the tenement Jews of that era aspired.<sup>72</sup> In fact, a huge reproduction of the set was used in a billboard advertisement for the production opposite the Concourse Plaza Hotel in the Bronx, in an area where tens of thousands of second generation Jews were relocating in the early 1920s. The production wooed Bronx Jews by symbolically bringing the play to them, and showing

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<sup>70</sup> Anne Nichols, *Abie's Irish Rose*, typescript version (undated), Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>71</sup> Anne Nichols, *Abie's Irish Rose* (New York: Samuel French, 1924), 1.

<sup>72</sup> Moses Rischin has recorded that by 1916 only 23 percent of New York's Jews lived on the Lower East Side, compared to 50 percent in 1903 and 75 percent in 1892. *The Promised City: New York Jews 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 93.

them how much it mirrored their own experience and aspirations. The life-size figures in the huge diorama were shown in the positions of the characters for the Jewish wedding in the second act.<sup>73</sup>

Theatre and reality sometimes became difficult to separate. Were second-generation Jews modeling their lives on what they saw on the stage, or was the stage simply reflecting the reality of Jewish acculturation and social mobility? Deborah Dash Moore has noted how closely the Art Deco-inspired apartment houses on the Grand Concourse, built and inhabited largely by Jews, resembled stage sets for Broadway productions.<sup>74</sup> The lavish designs of these apartment houses, some of which have been preserved,<sup>75</sup> demonstrate the desire of second-generation Jews to flatter their sense of having truly “arrived” in American culture.

Moving out of ghetto tenements into more spacious surroundings in Harlem, Brooklyn or the Grand Concourse, was an important prerequisite

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<sup>73</sup> Newspaper photo of the diorama in an unidentified newspaper, Billy Rose Theatre Collection. The caption calls the diorama “probably the most original out-door bulletin ever used by a theatrical organization” and notes that it was erected “at a point where it is seen by thousands of motorists who daily pass that way.” The sign was illuminated at night.

<sup>74</sup> Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 51.

<sup>75</sup> See Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). The photographer Carl Rosenstein still leads tours of the area, which he is trying to have landmarked as a historic district. See Christopher Gray, “Streetscapes/The Grand Concourse in the Bronx; Will it Be City’s Thinnest, Longest Historic District?” *New York Times* (April 4, 1999), 7.

for enhancing both quality of life and social class. Social historian Jenna Weissman Joselit has found that:

Beginning in the years preceding World War I and accelerating in its aftermath a growing number of upwardly mobile East European Jews and their children, the so-called 'second generation,' exchanged Lower East Side tenements for modern elevator apartments or private homes in the Bronx, Brooklyn or Manhattan. As much a social phenomenon as an individual one, moving away from the Lower East Side characterized an entire generation.<sup>76</sup>

But the second generation acculturated into American society by consuming cultural products in addition to material ones.

Andrew Heinze has argued that the consumption of material goods was an important path to acculturation for American Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. How products were advertised and marketed, he writes, influenced Jewish consumers by playing on their desire to be viewed as, and view themselves as, Americans. According to Heinze, Jews "relied on their awareness of the symbolic potential of special products as they searched for a

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<sup>76</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, "'A Set Table:' Jewish Domestic Culture in the New World, 1880-1950, in Susan L. Braunstein and Joselit, Eds., *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1990), 45-46.

tangible American identity."<sup>77</sup> Although Heinze deals only incidentally with popular culture, the theatre was a sphere that held a great deal of "symbolic potential" to flatter second generation Jews' newfound social standing.

But second generation Jews still felt ambivalent about upward mobility when it seemed to threaten the cohesiveness of the Jewish community. The movement away from the ghetto, as explored in the last chapter, also meant a departure from what seemed, in nostalgic retrospect, the most tightly-knit community second generation Jews had known.

Aaron Hoffman's *Two Blocks Away* , which opened on Broadway on August 30, 1921 at the George M. Cohan Theatre, shows the negative consequences for a kindly shoemaker when he inherits a large sum of money and moves away from his Lower East Side neighborhood. John Corbin of the *New York Times* wrote that the comedy was "frankly and shrewdly designed to met the public taste--to delight the same public that reveled in Mr. Hoffman's *Welcome Stranger*."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 223.

<sup>78</sup> John Corbin, "'Two Blocks Away' Liked," *New York Times* (August 31, 1921), 12. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

The shoemaker, Nate Pommerantz, was played by Barney Bernard, celebrated for his portrayals of Abe Potash in the *Potash and Perlmutter* series. Percy Hammond of the *New York World* wrote that Bernard "can project with unfailing consequences the comic observation, the obvious come-back, the frayed commonplace, and the humorous philosophy usual to his classic Potash role....He was called upon to sit upon his neighbor's hat last evening, and to perform other feats of dubious legitimacy, but he did them so well that a large congregation was pleased thereby."<sup>79</sup>

Bernard's character had formerly given charity to all who were in need, but becomes mean and tight-fisted when he comes into a large inheritance. Although a whole crowd gathers around him when the news of the inheritance is announced, Nate disdains his former friends, moves to a palatial apartment in what the stage directions say is an "aristocratic section" (probably Gramercy Park) and concentrates on accumulating wealth. Nate's addiction to prescription medicines is the sign that he has lost both his bodily vigor and his powers of self-control. When, towards the end of the play he smashes a mirror which shows him his now-intolerable

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<sup>79</sup> Percy Hammond, "Partners Again," *New York Tribune* (August 31, 1921). 7. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.



reflection, he frees himself from materialism, and he can resume his relationship to the beloved daughter he has alienated.

But the physical mirror that reflects the character's moral infirmities (a device reminiscent, of course, of Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) is symbolic of the ways in which the stage itself reflected to the largely Jewish audience--Bernard's "congregation"--its own culture. Pommerantz's daughter, Jane, finally chooses the people of the Lower East Side over her stubborn father who wants to repudiate them. When she does so, the stage direction says—for the sole time in the play--that she "faces the audience." Jane declares that she is "not going to lose them, for money, or anything, or anybody."<sup>80</sup> Pommerantz's decision to move away from the immigrant neighborhood to satisfy his own longings for upward social mobility is intended to register as a kind of betrayal of his people.

Although the friends and neighbors might themselves be seen as interested only in Pommerantz's money, the play does not satirize them in any way; it only pokes holes in Pommerantz's pretensions and self-delusions. The smashing of the mirror marks Pommerantz's being recalled to his senses, but it also paradoxically restores the

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<sup>80</sup> Aaron Hoffman, *Two Blocks Away* (New York: Samuel French, 1925) Act II, p. 82.

ruptured relationship between the character and his community. At the time, by providing a neat climax to the play, it helped the audience *avoid* reflecting on the ways in which it might actually be more loyal to the misguided Pommerantz than to the supposedly clear-thinking Pommerantz. At a time when Jews were acculturating into American society partly by their consumption of material goods, the idea of giving up physical comforts to reidentify with the ethnic group was a problematic one.

On a conscious level, however, the audience seemed to see the smashing of the mirror as a vindication and a triumph. The action was so climactic that it led to an interruption in the play: Hammond wrote that when Bernard smashed the mirror, "he was urged at that point to address the audience," which, according to Hammond, "he did with becoming modesty and eloquence."<sup>81</sup> The on-stage action was so powerful that it somehow seemed to necessitate the actor stepping out of his role and consolidating his bond with the audience.

The other notable aspect of *Two Blocks Away*, which makes it similar to *Abie's Irish Rose*, is the general lack of mothers other than the mother of a boy Pommerantz helps at the beginning of the play. Jane claims to have two fathers, Pommerantz and his oldest friend,

Bill Lewis. Pommerantz turns out to be related to Lewis's wife, with the result that Lewis actually ends up inheriting the money rather than Pommerantz--the loss of the money helps remove the final obstacle between Pommerantz and the members of his community.

Second generation Jews continued to enjoy seeing ghetto-dwelling Jews on the stage, even as many of the new Broadway plays were set in the outer borough Jewish neighborhoods. A final example is a play called *Poppa* (1928) by Bella and Samuel Spewack. Poppa is an immigrant father and insurance salesman who runs for political office on a platform of providing modern conveniences—electric refrigerators, coin telephones (called “nickel slot machines”) and garbage burners—to each of the families in his district.<sup>82</sup> But upon his appointment as alderman by Jake Harris, the corrupt district leader, he is promptly framed on bribery charges, jeopardizing his daughter's marriage to an uptown Jewish suitor. Harris threatens the landlords in the Bronx to get them to stop Pincus from making too many demands: “I says: Pinky's getting the

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> St. John Ervine of the New York *Morning World* made fun of these aspirations in his review, writing, “What the people need is not liberty or equality or fraternity, but patent incinerators, frigidaire machines and nickel-in-the-slot telephones. When the poor man can burn his garbage in the heart of his home and keep his meat nicely frozen and call up all his friends, especially when he has nothing to say to them, then the millennium will be established in the Bronx, and heaven will be on earth on the lower east side.” St. John Ervine, New York *Morning World*, (December 26, 1928), 19.

folks around here all het up. They're learning a lot of things they can get up in the Bronx. Your tenants'll move out on you."<sup>83</sup> For Jewish residents to have the benefits of modern life is costly for the landlords; the idea is that Jews will move back to the Lower East Side if they can have these conveniences, reversing the second generation's out-migration from the ghetto in search of a higher standard of living.

But one of the most interesting aspects of *Poppa* is how acculturated this particular Jewish family is. Part of this is demonstrated by their patriotism; Act II, following Pincus's political appointment, takes place on Abraham Lincoln's Birthday; portraits of Lincoln and Washington hang on the walls, and the fire escapes are decorated with flags and bunting. The stage directions describe the set in terms of an "atmosphere of sudden Second Avenue elegance." The acculturated appearance extends to the characters' dress. The father, Pincus, is initially described as wearing a "sort of shabby overcoat with collar turned up, a soft hat, pencils are stuck in his pockets, and he is carrying a much worn-out brief case, in which he carries his various insurance articles and applications."<sup>84</sup> He is thus the typical American working man. When he is appointed

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<sup>83</sup> Bella and Samuel Spewack, *Poppa* (New York: Samuel French, 1929), Act II, p. 51.

to political office, Pincus wears a “frock coat and silk hat” in addition to his overcoat, showing how much he has come up in the world. His wife impresses the neighbors by boasting that “all day the people come to my husband for advice—like he was a dentist.”<sup>85</sup>

Still, the critics, persisted in seeing the play as an outgrowth of the newspaper comic strips. One reviewer, Howard Barnes, reported that *Poppa* was the “season’s most engaging portrayal of New York’s lower East Side.” He wrote that it “brings the remote, utterly kidding tone of the more satirical comic strips to the stage and by fine direction these elements are conserved and focused to the high moments of burlesque humor.” Although he called the play “distinctly racial in its treatments of a Jewish family’s vicissitudes [sic],” he wrote that the comedy “never descends to sentimentality to create its moments of climax.”<sup>86</sup> And Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* called the play “neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring” saying that it “involves neighbors, local politics, family pride, a carpet sweeper and furniture on the installment plan--all to the sing-song animation of the Jewish-American accent. And

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<sup>84</sup> *Poppa*, Act I, p. 29.

<sup>85</sup> *Poppa*, Act II, p. 66.

<sup>86</sup> Howard Barnes, “*Poppa* Amusing with Clever Story of Lower East Side,” unidentified newspaper, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

whatever it may lack in originality it can readily supply through the sympathies of the authors and their audiences.”<sup>87</sup>

### **Moving Out of the Ghetto: *The Bronx Express***

But moving out of the ghetto became a theme in its own right on Broadway. *The Bronx Express*, a play which took place on a subway train traveling between the two places, was a hit in its original, Yiddish incarnation but a flop on Broadway. Written by Osip Dymov, a Russian Jewish playwright who was best known for a play about the Old Country called *Yoshke Musikant*, *The Bronx Express* focused on the contest between traditional Jewish values and assimilated American “capitalist” values. The play uses many English words (transliterated into Yiddish in the playscript), to show the characters’ attempts to absorb American culture.

The central character in *The Bronx Express* is Khatskl (later Harry) Hungerproud, an immigrant button-maker who has moved his family to the Bronx, but who continues to work at a factory on the Lower East Side. In the play’s prologue, he is traveling home from work one evening when he meets an old friend, Yankl (now rechristened Jake) Flames, on the subway. Flames tells him all about

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<sup>87</sup> J. Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times* (December 25, 1928), 18.

the world of manufacturing and high finance. Poking fun at Hungerproud's loyalty to family and faith, Flames points to the fictional characters who adorn the advertising posters for consumer products--Aunt Jemima (of Aunt Jemima Pancakes), the Nestle Baby (of Nestle Baby Foods), the Smith Brothers (of Smith Brothers Cough Drops) and so on. He tells Hungerproud how many millions of dollars these "people" have earned, and tries to entice Hungerproud to sell himself, his wife, and the Jewish people for money.

In the first act, Flames comes to Hungerproud's home in the outer borough neighborhood of Bronx Park, where he is eating Sabbath dinner. Flames persuades him to abandon his family for the "high windows" of Wall Street and Fifth Avenue. The second act takes place at the mansion of the "Mr. Pluto Corporation," (of Pluto Mineral Water, represented by a devil with a red tail) where Hungerproud meets the characters from the subway advertisements, who have magically come to life. He falls in love with Miss Murad, a dancing harem girl who represents Turkish cigarettes. The third act finds Hungerproud at a beach resort, Atlantic City, where he has married Miss Murad. Murad has given birth to the Nestle Baby, whom he pushes in a carriage. Hungerproud's family shows up; his daughter is romanced by one of the Smith Brothers. But Hungerproud has pangs of conscience and tries to drown himself; he

is saved by Flames. When Hungerproud's wife, Sara, shows up and accuses him of bigamy, he pleads to go back to his former life. As the Pluto Devil prepares to lynch him for his misdeeds, Hungerproud wakes up on the subway and realizes that everything has been a dream.

Dymov's play focuses on how both workers and products circulate in a modern capitalist economy. But by using figures of American commerce as evil spirits, *Bronx Express* contains fully as many demons and devils as the works of Yiddish drama that focused on the superstitions that held sway over the Jews in the old country—plays like Jacob Gordin's *God, Man and Devil* and David Pinski's *The Treasure*. Yet the play broke new ground in realism on the Yiddish stage in its exact reproduction of a car from the old White Plains Road line of the subway, which had a terminus in the Jewish neighborhood of Bronx Park. This realistic framework contrasted with the surrealistic quality of the work to produce a strong impression of a world out of kilter.

This can be seen most clearly in Boris Aronson's set and costume designs for a 1925 revival at the Unser Theatre in the Bronx. The ceiling of the subway train, with its hanging straps for riders to hold, remained on the set even as what surrounded it changed to reflect the places Hungerproud traveled to in his dream.



The demonic figures of American commerce are leering, grinning gargoyles who look like they have stepped out of a German expressionist film like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. In fact, Aronson's costume designs were so powerful that the star actor, Rudolph Schildkraut, complained that he had nothing to do; he was upstaged by his own costume!<sup>88</sup> Still, by emphasizing the importance of packaging, for both people and products, Aronson's designs intensified the play's indictment of capitalism as a system based on surfaces and visual allure.

In Act II, Hungerproud figures out a way to betray the Jews in the most effective way. In the original Yiddish play, retranslated recently by Nahma Sandrow, the text is as follows:

HUNGERPROUD: Make the Jews work on Yom Kippur.

(Thunderclap.) Make an agreement with all the shops, all the factories, downtown, uptown, that day they pay the Jews double, triple, ten times. They'll work Yom Kippur too.

PLUTO: Jews love money.

HUNGERPROUD: Sure, Jews love money. This one has a sick child and has to buy medicine. That one has an old father or mother or just an old rebbe who can't work but wants to eat

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<sup>88</sup> Frank Rich (with Lisa Aronson), *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 36.

anyway, or a wife exhausted in the kitchen from hard work. Or relatives in misery back home. Yes, yes, Jews do love money. They'll work Yom Kippur too.

PLUTO: Go on, go on.

HUNGERPROUD: Yom Kippur breaks down, everything breaks down. No holidays, no religion, no tradition, one big pot of schmaltz. Everyone cooked in the same pot. The iron grinder grinds them all up together, with the Poles, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, Negroes—everything thrown in the iron wheels.

Wheels and people—a machine with no holidays, no language, no traditions—a great mass of workers that works and buys, works and buys, and eats, and chews, and swallows. Two for a quarter, five for a dozen. The nicest, the best, delicious, you need it. Historical process, capital and labor.<sup>89</sup>

Pluto is so enraptured with the idea that he asks Hungerproud to sign over the rights to it; when Hungerproud refuses, he distracts him (by having Miss Murad dance a lustful dance) and “signs” by moving Hungerproud’s hand over the paper. The betrayal of the Jews is complete. The linchpin of Jewish identity is seen as the Day

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<sup>89</sup> Osip Dymov, *Bronx Express*, in Nahma Sandrow, trans., *God, Man and Devil* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 294-295.

of Atonement, when Jews are supposed to seek forgiveness for their sins.

The idea of the melting pot was of course, not new. It was the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill whose play *The Melting Pot* (first performed in 1908 in Washington D.C.; it later ran in Chicago and toured the country before coming to Broadway in 1909) that popularized what became a very influential idea in American culture.<sup>90</sup> The immigrant Jewish hero of that play, the violinist David Quixano, sees the melting pot as the crucible in which the hatreds and antagonisms of the Old World are burned away. (The image is of dross being refined into gold.) In Zangwill's play, the melting pot is an agent for the regeneration of mankind.<sup>91</sup> Dymov's take on the metaphor is obviously quite different; he satirizes the melting pot as a big pot of "schmaltz," the chicken fat in which many traditional Eastern European Jewish foods were cooked. The idea that Yom Kippur, a holiday when Jews fast, is to be a day for a kind of infernal "cooking" only adds to the irony.

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<sup>90</sup> For the legacy of the metaphor of the melting pot in American culture, see Philip Gleason, "The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?" in *American Quarterly* 16 (1964): 20-46. Despite the comprehensiveness of his article, Gleason did not, however, seem to be familiar with *Bronx Express*.

<sup>91</sup> In Zangwill's play, it is not money but love (in the context of intermarriage with a Gentile) which will change the alien immigrant into a true American. See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

His perspective is unabashedly socialistic. Jews will become indistinguishable from other ethnic groups, and all Americans will become animalistic engines for consumption. The loss of religion will remove from Jews what makes them Jewish and detach from all Americans what makes them human. The soul-less machine will destroy the souls of American workers.

As in other (non-Yiddish) American plays of the 1920s that employed expressionistic devices, like Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (featuring the unforgettable character Mr. Zero) and Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. These plays blamed society for depriving the individual of his or her identity partly by detaching him or her from membership in a community. In fact, as Dymov recognized, the American industrial system makes the maintenance of a stable identity contingent on endless consumption, fueled by an insatiable need--instilled by advertisers-- for new products. As Flames puts it, in trying to get Hungerproud to leave home and eat a (non-kosher) meal on Broadway, "When you eat just one meal there, you'll realize that all your life you've been hungry."

Most first and second generation Jews would have agreed; they valorized consumption. As the social historian Andrew Heinze has argued, American Jews acculturated into American society in the early part of the nineteenth century partly by joining the consumer culture. Jews climbed

into the lower middle class partly by buying the clothes, housewares, furnishings, musical instruments and other symbols of middle class life. An emphasis on consumption transformed even Jewish religious observance; ready access to higher quality food throughout the week made Sabbaths and holidays (when families traditionally ate special foods) seem more ordinary. Also, many Jews felt compelled to work on Saturdays in order to be able to support their families. The boundaries between sacred and profane began in critical ways to dissolve.

The play was translated by the author and by Samuel Golding for its Broadway production. It was produced by Charles Coburn, who also starred as Hungerproud. The original version had incorporated English words to show the characters in the process of assimilation; conversely, the English translation preserved a number of Yiddish expressions—mostly for humorous effect. For example, when Hungerproud meets the Wrigley Brothers, he exclaims: "*Gott in himmel! Rabena shelalom! Ich seh eppes bekantes!* I'm glad to meet you boys! How many times I chewed you."<sup>92</sup> The play seems to be poking fun at itself here, pointing to the ridiculousness of the situation.

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<sup>92</sup> Osip Dymov, Samuel R. Golding and Owen Davis, *Bronx Express* (original English translation) Act II, p. 6, typescript, Billy Rose Theater Collection.

In fact, the Broadway version takes itself much more lightly than the Yiddish one. When Hungerproud enters the Pluto Mansion in Act II, the new stage directions show him dressed in “sporty modern clothes slightly exaggerated in the latest fashion, patent leather shoes, purple silk stockings, a gardenia in his buttonhole, and a purple silk handkerchief showing from his coat pocket.” Unlike the Yiddish version, he is asking to be laughed at for his attempt to “Americanize” himself.

But just a few pages later, he is assailed by Flames not for being too American, but for being too Jewish. “You must forget your *kykish* ideas,” Flames says. “They would laugh at you on Broadway.”<sup>93</sup> Perhaps it is no wonder, with such a contradictory image, that the character does not know if he is coming or going throughout so much of the play. Hungerproud continues to insult him: “I have become a real American, a live wire, a regular guy—efficiency! And you are still a Bronx Jew.”<sup>94</sup> Hungerproud may live in an apartment in the Bronx, but it is not the kind of upper middle class apartment that Solomon Levy inhabits in *Abie’s Irish Rose*. It is closer to how the majority of second generation Jews lived at the time, especially in the East Bronx (as opposed to the Art

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, Act. II, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Deco buildings of the Grand Concourse, described above)--a step up from the ghetto tenements but not necessarily a fancy apartment house.

The voice of the past is Hungerproud's old teacher, Reb Kalman Lippe, who lives with him and who warns that he is not considering the true costs of Americanization: "Ah, Chatskel, you have forsaken everything—even Yom Kippur! And once that is forsaken, everything is forsaken! No holidays! No traditions! No memories!" The result, he tells Hungerproud, is that "You will see your son shine shoes in the streets and he will be whistling the Broadway melodies!"<sup>95</sup> To sing American show tunes rather than Yiddish songs is presented as the ultimate form of assimilation.

In general, changes in the Broadway version seem to reflect the requirements of entertaining a broader audience than only the Yiddish-speaking one. For example, Hungerproud's infidelity is dwelled upon at length; he has a long scene with his wife in which she asks him to throw Miss Murad down the stairs. (She is especially incensed by a revelation from Miss Murad that Hungerproud told her he "ruined a lot of women in the subway"<sup>96</sup>—a feat that is difficult to imagine, but perhaps testifies to the associations the

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II, p. 35.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II, p. 26.

express train had with sexuality.) When he refuses, they decide to divorce, with Flames suggesting that he would like to marry Sarah. At this point, Sarah calls Miss Murad a “vampire, a Theda Bara,” reflecting her knowledge of American culture. Later, in the last act, Hungerproud calls the crying Nestle baby a “Caruso” and resists the blandishments of Sarah attempting to regain his affection by showing him how well she has learned to “shee-mee” to jazz music.<sup>97</sup> And in the discussion of the melting pot, Hungerproud resolves to eliminate not just Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, but also Columbus Day, Good Friday and St. Patrick’s Day.

But the production was much less successful on Broadway than it had been in its original version. The mainstream critics were harsh: they found the play to be a bit of a mess. As Arthur Hornblow wrote in *Theatre Magazine*, *The Bronx Express* was an “unconvincing *pot-pourri* of melodrama, symbolism, musical comedy, brogue and vaudeville.” The play was clearly intended to be a comedy of some sort, but it was hardly a vaudeville-style Jewish entertainment. It thus confounded the critical categories used to judge Jewish comedy. Beyond that, Coburn, who was a Gentile, was “badly miscast.” According to Hornblow, “Outwardly, Mr. Coburn gives a genuine impression of a Jew—his beard and clothes are

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, Act III, p. 14.



representative. But here the impression ends. He lacks all the Jewish mannerisms, his movements, voice and accent are all mechanical and superficial.”<sup>98</sup> Someone who looked like a Jew but did not act or sound like one was also bound to unsettle mainstream observers, who wanted Jews to be recognizable as Jews in every way.

However, the critic for the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog* (The Day) recommended the Broadway production, calling it “amusing and well-directed” and writing that the dream sequences in particular were “brought out more vividly on the English stage than on the Yiddish one, with a richer and livelier spirit.” He said that the play deserved to be seen, even by those who had taken great pleasure in the play’s Yiddish version.<sup>99</sup>

### **Intermarriage on Stage**

But true integration into American society in economic and social terms raised the spectre of the loosening of the ties to the Jewish community through marrying non-Jews. This was portrayed as a ridiculous fantasy in *Bronx Express*, but it quickly became more Beginning with Anne Nichols’ *Abie’s Irish Rose*, intermarriage,

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<sup>98</sup> Arthur Hornblow, “The Theatre,” *Theatre Magazine* (July 1922), 31.

<sup>99</sup> “Osip Dymov’s ‘Bronx Express’ on Broadway,” *Der Tog* (May 12, 1922), 11.

particularly between the Jews and the Irish, became a staple of 1920s American Jewish theater and film.

Nichols, who was to write more than twenty plays in her career as a playwright, in addition to vaudeville sketches, was born to a Protestant family in 1892 in Falls River, Georgia. She ran away from home as a teenager to join the chorus of a play in Philadelphia called *The Shepherd King*. But in 1915 she joined the touring company of the Irish producer Fiske O'Hara and ultimately wrote two plays for his company: *Down Limerick Way* (1920) and *Marry in Haste* (1921), which were both in an Irish dialect.

To create the Jewish characters in *Abie's Irish Rose*, Nichols asserted, she drew on her experiences both while playing in vaudeville in the Catskills and on research visits to the Lower East Side, where she would "talk with the pushcart peddlers, play with the children, and visit with their mothers." This was how she "learned their dialect, their accent, their gesture"--the performance-like elements of Jewish ethnicity.

*Abie's Irish Rose* begins with a conversation among three visitors--a couple from next door named the Cohens and a rabbi, Rabbi Samuels--to the home of businessman Solomon Levy. Cohen is reading a popular comic strip, "Maggie and Jiggs," out loud, Mrs. Cohen is complaining about a recent operation, and the rabbi is

pleading for quiet. The Cohens, clearly immigrants, both speak with heavy Yiddish accents; the goateed rabbi, better educated and significantly younger, speaks unaccented English. (The Cohens and Solomon Levy were, according to a critic for the *New Republic*, Robert Littell, "thoroughly unmistakably, ridiculously Jewish, with an accent a foot thick, and bits of Yiddish thrown in."<sup>100</sup>) When the owner of the apartment, Solomon Levy, finally makes his appearance, the phone rings and he launches into a monologue which audiences would have immediately recognized as lifted from the recorded comedy routines of the British comic Joe Hayman, such as his immensely popular "Cohen on the Telephone," in which fractured English, a ridiculous Yiddish accent, and multiple misunderstandings are the sources of humor.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Littell, "Abie's Irish Rose," *New Republic* (March 18, 1925), 98-99.

<sup>101</sup> Difficulties encountered in using new technology was also part of the humor. As transcribed by Michael G. Corenthal, the classic routine begins: "Hullo! hullo! Are you dere? Hullo! Vot number do I vant? Vell, vot numbers have you got? Oh, excuse me, my mistook. I vant Central 248, please; yes, dot's right, 248. I say, Miss, am I supposed to keep on saying "Hullo!" and "Are you dere?" until you come back again? Vell, don't be long." *Cohen on the Telephone: A History of Jewish Recorded Humor and Popular Music, 1892-1942* (Milwaukee: Yesterday's Memories, 1984), 53.

SOLOMON: Hello! Who iss it? Yes vot? Me! Yes, it's me! Who amme?  
Say who am you? What number? I don't know the number! I didn't  
get the phone to call myself!<sup>102</sup>

Solomon's son, Abraham Levy, then enters with his new bride, Rose Mary Murphy, an actress whom he met in France during his service in the First World War. Abraham, or Abie, is afraid to incur his father's displeasure, and thus introduces his wife as a friend named Rose Mary Murpheski, a change of name which he knows will cause his father to think her to be Jewish. Although the first thing Solomon wants to know, when he and his son are alone, is how much money Rose Mary has, his next impulse is to exult over his son's choice of a Jewish bride, after a succession of romances with gentile women. "We'll have no 'Schickies' in this family," insists Solomon.<sup>103</sup> When Rose Mary compliments Solomon on his "blarney," Solomon is angered; "I once had dealings with a fellow named Murphy, and what he didn't do to me," he explains. "Every time I hear dot void blarney it reminds me of dot Irisher."<sup>104</sup>

In the second act, Abie and Rose Mary are married by a rabbi,

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<sup>102</sup> Anne Nichols, *Abie's Irish Rose* (New York: Samuel French, 1924), Act I, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> Nichols, *Abie's Irish Rose*, Act I, p. 37.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, Act. I, p. 44.

Dr. Jacob Samuels, as Rose Mary's father, Patrick, and his priest, Father Whalen, arrive by train from California. Patrick's first shock, upon entering the Levy's home, is the sight of the living room decorated with orange trees rather than flowers, the result of an economizing move by Solomon, who prefers edible fruit to perishable blossoms. But Patrick associates oranges with Protestants, and immediately assumes that his daughter is marrying a Protestant. He is quickly disabused of this notion by Solomon, and both men lament their children's deception. However, the rabbi and priest seem to recognize each other from their mutual wartime service, during which both ministered to the dying without regard to the faith of the wounded. Not only that, but, according to Father Whalen, the American soldiers shared an epiphany of religious tolerance: "Shure they all had the same God above them. And what with the shells bursting, and the shrapnel flying, with no one knowing just what moment death would come, Catholics, Hebrews and Protestants alike forgot their prejudice and came to realize that all faiths and creeds have about the same destination after all."<sup>105</sup>

As Patrick threatens legal action, Father Whalen appeases him by suggesting that he himself marry the couple, to legitimate the marriage in the eyes of the Church. Without telling either the rabbi

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<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, Act. II, p. 79.

or Solomon, he performs the ceremony. The already married couple is thus ultimately married twice more<sup>106</sup> (all three nuptials, interestingly, occurring off-stage, as if showing the intermarriage on-stage would be too transgressive for the audience to witness). After a period in which the young couple is estranged from both families, they are finally reconciled over Christmas dinner<sup>107</sup>--the meal consisting of kosher food for Abie's side of the family and ham for Rose's. The couple presents their fathers with twins; the boy to be named for the Irish father, the girl for Abie's deceased mother.

Despite his Gentile appearance, Abie is presented as still very connected to the world of his fathers. Much of this, of course, has to do with his desire to please (or, at any rate, not displease) his father; this is why he cannot bring himself to tell Solomon that Rose Mary is not Jewish. His need to remain close to his father seems to indicate a desire to continue his ties to his father's religion and ethnicity as well. This is true on his wife's side; she has a similar relationship with her own father, and permits herself to be remarried by a priest just as Abie has permitted himself to be

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<sup>106</sup> In fact, the original title of the play was *Marriage in Triplicate*. *Encyclopedia of American Theatre* 12.

<sup>107</sup> A recent off-off-Broadway production, directed by Father Gary Seibert at the Theater at Holy Cross on West 42nd Street, also incorporated a Hanukkah menorah next to the Christmas tree, although none is called for in the stage directions. This production opened on October 15, 1998.

remarried by a rabbi. The couple shows respect for each other's religion, not a desire to abandon their individual religious and cultural identities. This seems most apparent at the end of the play, with one baby named after one grandfather and the second baby named after the other grandfather. Abie's insistence on kosher food, but willingness to have ham served to his wife's guests, is also a statement of balancing continued loyalty to Jewish tradition with respect for the differing customs of his wife's family and friends.

From Shylock's daughter's elopement with a Gentile in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, to the intermarriage between the young violinist and his Gentile girlfriend in Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* (1908), Jews often intermarried on stage. But *Abie's Irish Rose* was the first play to combine vaudeville ethnic routines with an intermarriage plot to manufacture ethnic comedy. Intermarriage became so associated with Jewish comedy that Samuel Kuhn, critic for *The Jewish Forum* noted in his review of Martha Stanley's *My Son* (1925) that although the play was about the Portuguese and New Englanders of Cape Cod, it "has a Jewish theme--intermarriage!"<sup>108</sup>

Comic treatment thus softened even the prickly theme of intermarriage; a review of the Utica, New York production two years later

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<sup>108</sup> Samuel O. Kuhn, "The Drama," *Jewish Forum* (May 1925), 109.

hailed the play for the fact that "You are never asked to become tense and thoughtful over this intermarriage problem, nor to decide whether it is right or wrong."<sup>109</sup> This did not prevent a lively debate in the Jewish community about intermarriage, but many Jews felt intermarriage did not threaten the survival of Judaism; Rabbi Nathan Krass of Temple Emanu-El in New York weighed in with the opinion that Jews could not shed their ethnic identity even if they wished to. In any case, the rate of Jewish out-marriage was extremely low, and remained so until the 1960s. The sociologist Julius Drachsler found in his study of marriage records in 1920, the rate of second generation Jewish out-marriage was only about a tenth of the intermarriage rate for the children of immigrants in general (3.6% compared to 32%).<sup>110</sup>

Ironically, as Riv-Ellen Prell has pointed out in her analysis of the 1928 film version of *Abie's Irish Rose*, intermarriage in popular culture was idealized in a way that images of Jewish marriage never were; Jewish men and women were on a collision course with each other's societally-

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<sup>109</sup> Unidentified Utica newspaper (May 27, 1924), 21. Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>110</sup> Julius Drachsler, "Intermarriage in New York City: A Statistical Study of the Amalgamation of European Peoples," *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law*, vol. 94, no. 2, whole number 213.



produced expectations that compromised the success of their unions.<sup>111</sup> Jews, *qua* Jews, were thus in danger of becoming victims to their own success in the marriage market.

Nevertheless, it was the mainstream culture which Jews ultimately, and paradoxically, wanted to validate their ethnic distinctiveness. *Abie's Irish Rose* is a comedy not about assimilation, but about acculturation--conformity to cultural norms *without* utter loss of ethnic identity. Jenna Weissman Joselit has written that *Abie's Irish Rose* not only "validated the notion of intermarriage" but "dramatized the promise of America" in its suggestion that love conquers ethnic division.<sup>112</sup>

### Mixing Ethnicities

The play spawned a host of imitators, both on stage and in film, which attempted to duplicate its success. One was Leon De Costa's musical comedy *Kosher Kitty Kelly*, which opened in June of 1925. A more

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<sup>111</sup> Prell's thesis is that Jewish men displaced both the anti-Semitism they encountered in American society and the burdensome expectations of material success which the society used as a measure of masculinity onto Jewish women, whom they experienced as domineering, narcissistic and preoccupied with gaining wealth and social status. "As Americans looked upon Jews as marginal, obsessed with money, uncivil, and unworthy of citizenship," she writes, "Jewish men and middle-class Jews projected those very accusations onto Jewish women and the working class." Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>112</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), 5.

interesting, although much less popular work than *Abie's Irish Rose*, it was also later made into a film. The musical centers on an Irish girl, Kitty Kelly, who dates a Jewish boy named Morris Rosen while her friend, Rosie Feinbaum, has an Irish beau by the name of Pat O'Reilly. Rounding out the mix of ethnic characters is a Chinese man, Wang Lee, who speaks dreadful pidgin English. Rather than presenting a clash between immigrant fathers, the musical showed a conflict between the Jewish widow and Irish widow, each of whom disapproves of her daughter's choice. Interestingly, unlike *Abie's Irish Rose* the story did not end in intermarriage; the Irish girl ended up with the Irish boy, and the Jewish girl with the Jewish boy.

Also unlike *Abie's Irish Rose*, none of the characters live in upscale apartment houses. But Morris Rosen is one of the first Jewish doctors in American Jewish drama; he just finished his medical training when the play begins. The décor of both mothers' apartments seems to betray no more than a lower middle class lifestyle; the same set is used for both, and is described in the stage directions as "showing bad taste in everything displayed. Each item seems to have been bought lately and in a different store."<sup>113</sup> But at a time when quotas on law and medical school admissions limited the number of Jews permitted to study for such

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<sup>113</sup> Leon da Costa, *Kosher Kitty Kelly*, typescript, Library of Congress, Act I, p. 4..

professions, Morris seems destined for a higher class position than most second generation Jews.

Despite the proliferation of different ethnic characters in *Kosher Kitty Kelly*, the play seems to take place mostly in a Jewish milieu. This is especially apparent in the second act, which is set in Ginsburg's Delicatessen. The good-natured deli owner, Moses Ginsburg, his speech peppered with Yiddish expressions, doubles as a *shadchan*, or marriage broker. But, as many shop owners evidently did during Prohibition, he also sells bootleg liquor in the guise of milk. Ginsburg's store is a meeting point for the neighborhood; he seems to assume that his customers are Jewish and is surprised to learn that two visiting vaudevillians, Joe and Zella Barnes, are actually Greek. When Ginsburg is asked by Rosie's mother to help her find a Jewish boy for her daughter, Ginsburg tries to convince Rosie to give up her Irish boyfriend:

GINSBURG: It will never work. Perhaps he'll like you and you love him, but his folks won't like you and your folks won't like him, and that's the end.

ROSIE: But I'm not marrying his folks.

GINSBURG: But you must have their respect. You cannot afford to lose your mother's love, and that's what will happen. She is too old fashioned to change her ideas now, she has lived too long among her own to become used to new ideas.

ROSIE: But why shouldn't his folks love me?

GINSBURG: I heard once that some crazy cat nursed dog kittens, but it came out after that she did it only when people watched her. As soon as they turned, she scratched them! What a clever cat!

ROSIE: Mr. Ginsburg, your ideas are as old fashioned as my mother's. I'm not going to listen to you.

GINSBURG: But I could find you such a nice jewish [*sic*] boy who would love you to death.

ROSIE: I'm sure he would be the death of me. Mr. Ginsburg, I'm beginning to dislike our people more every day.

GINSBURG: You should be spanked for that, Rosie. Our people are fine people and can take care of themselves, and if other races don't want to mingle with ours, we can get along without them as well as they get along without us. It's fifty-fifty.<sup>114</sup>

Although Ginsburg pleads for Rosie to marry a Jew based on respect for her parents (with the words "Jew" and "Jewish" printed with lower-case "j"s throughout the script, in what appears to be an attempt by the playwright to democratize the various ethnicities), Rosie reveals the self-hating side of her Jewishness. Ginsburg immediately interprets her negative feelings about Jews to be internalized anti-Semitism, and

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, p. 14.

expresses his own contempt toward anti-Semitic Gentiles. Ironically, Rosie is derogatory about Jewishness but Kitty Kelly “affirms” it; a songwriter hears of Kitty’s sobriquet and writes a song about her, paving the way to a stage career. Kitty can take pride in an ethnic label as long as the label is a joke; everyone knows that she is not really Jewish. The pleasure comes in the performance of the identity, not in the reality of it.

And despite the lack of intermarriage at the end of the play, the contrived conclusion still incorporates a symbolic double mix of ethnic identities. A fire in Rosie’s mother’s apartment, where Kitty’s mother was visiting, badly scars both widows’ faces. Morris volunteers to have some of his skin grafted onto Kitty’s mother’s face, while Pat volunteers to have some his skin grafted onto Rosie’s mother’s face. As grateful as they are, the Irish mother is as concerned about her newfound “Jewishness” as the Jewish mother is about her involuntarily acquired “Irishness.”<sup>115</sup> The grafted skin is viewed a magical mask which changes its wearer’s identity. Unlike the masks Jews wear on Purim, which disguise the wearer only in the context of the observation of the holiday (the wearing of the mask is paradoxically what *identifies* the celebrant, not what excuses him or her from the performance of the ritual), the skin grafts in *Kosher Kitty Kelly* partially but indelibly alter the women’s ethnicities.

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II, p. 25.

When Morris and Kitty come home late at night from a date, Lee leans out the window to complain, “Velly sleepy—Ilish makee noise allee time.”<sup>116</sup> Although the Jewish and Irish characters constantly make fun of each other’s speech, beliefs and customs, they are united in looking down on the Chinese character. In fact, Lee is presented as both unassimilable into American society *and* a misfit in a Jewish neighborhood; he orders tea and “lice” from Ginsburg’s Delicatessen. (He later realizes that gefilte fish is not as different from his native cuisine as he had anticipated.)

Nevertheless, the animosity between ethnic groups in the play goes far beyond *Abie’s Irish Rose* in its virulence. Rosie’s mother, Sarah, announces at one point that she is going to a “patriotic meeting—anti-Greek, anti-Catholic and anti-Irish,” under the banner, “America for the jews.” Wang Lee counters that he will “fool [the] foleign devils” that “makee noisee allee nightie” by lighting “punk” to smoke them out. His meeting is of the “tong,” or Chinese Mafia, that he hopes will kill the foreigners and leave “Amellica” for the Chinese. As Ginsburg asks in exasperation, “Why can’t you fellows be peaceful? The Irish dislike the jews—the jews the catholics—the chinks fight the japs—the protestants fight the Irish—It’s just like a big fighting arena.”<sup>117</sup> The ideal of ethnic tolerance which animated *Abie’s Irish Rose* is ultimately absent from

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, p. 8.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II, p. 11.

*Kosher Kitty Kelly*, even though the play ends with the characters co-existing in harmony.

As Michael Rogin suggests in *Blackface: White Noise*, Jews gained greater acceptance in American society partly by demonstrating their difference from an even lower social category—that which blacks belonged to. But although Jews were seen in nineteenth century America as “Orientals,” (Rogin points out that the first Yiddish theatre in New York was called the Oriental), the “Semitic race” and the “Oriental race” were not viewed identically. Chinese immigrants had come to the United States beginning in the 1840s, where they became quickly identified with the transcontinental railroads that they helped to build.

But in New York, despite the presence of a Chinese community in what was called the “Five Points” section (which is present-day Chinatown), Asian immigrants constituted a much smaller percentage of the population than people of Irish, Jewish and Italian descent. By the mid-1920s, the Chinese were in the benighted social position that these other ethnic groups were just climbing out of. Just as second generation Jews found humor in the accents and Yiddish words which they themselves had eliminated from their speech, the Jewish and Irish characters in *Kosher Kitty Kelly* could forget take pleasure in making fun of a Chinese man who has not been successfully acculturated.

In a sequel to *Kosher Kitty Kelly* entitled *Kitty Kelly's Kids*, DeCosta has the daughter of Kitty and Pat, Nellie O'Reilly, marry a Jewish prizefighter named Toni (he uses an Italian name for what Nellie concedes are "business reasons.") Their wedding, along with a wedding between Nellie's brother, Mike, and an Irish girl, are both celebrated in what has now become Ginsburg's Kosher Night Club. ("Two Irish weddings in a kosher night club," quips the proprietor.) But the ethnic mixing goes beyond even the intermarriage; Mike O'Reilly has started a printing firm with a Jew named Morris Silverstein; they start by publishing a Jewish newspaper but end up with a combined Jewish-Irish paper, reading "Jewish Outlook" on the back and "Irish Freedom" on the front. ("In the printing business you can always look out for your type," puns Ginsburg.)<sup>118</sup> The mixing of ethnicities seems so promiscuous that at one point Ginsburg jokes that he is attempting to become "engaged to a nice Schecho [sic]-Slovakian girl to make things complete. Ha! Melting Pot—Beef stew."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Leon da Costa, *Kosher Kitty's Kids*, typescript, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Act II, p. 3-20.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, Act. I, p. 3-7.



## **Jews in the Wild West**

The contradictions implicit in these expectations doomed the success of Fanny Brice's first foray into "straight" comedy, a vehicle called *Fanny* which was written for her by Willard Mack and David Belasco. The play was set on a ranch in the West, and Brice, playing the character of Fannie Fiebaum from the Lower East Side, played the romantic heroine. Traveling to Arizona as the companion of Leah Mendoza, the elderly sister of the recently deceased Jewish owner of the ranch, Fanny finds herself caught up in a mystery surrounding the disappearance of the deceased man's money. In *Fanny*, Brice did a kind of fish out of water act not dissimilar to the recent television show "Northern Exposure," about a young Jewish doctor in Alaska. As in *Kosher Kitty Kelly*, a Chinese character provides some of the comedy by his accent and ignorance of English. Jewish food is again the subject of humor. In this case, the Chinese character is actually the cook, High Low, who says things like: "You likee noodle soup—me fix good."<sup>120</sup> Fanny later praises High Low's *tzimmis*, or carrot pudding.

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<sup>120</sup> Willard Mack and David Belasco, *Fanny*, typescript, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Act I, Scene I, p. 23.

Fanny quickly realizes that things are not what they seem. Suspecting that one of the cowhands by the name of Joe is Jewish, she speaks Yiddish to him: "*Oi, a cholera soll ihm chappen. A riech in zehm Taten's tatten arein.—Dem Chazer.*" (The cholera should get him. A smoke in his father's father. The pig.) When he fails to respond, Fanny complains to Leah that "It's queer. Something is phoney...or I am *mashuger* [crazy]....I got a hunch that every one of them fellers in something they ain't. A Chinaman cooks kosher, and a Jew says he's a *goy* [non-Jew]..."<sup>121</sup>) Below the surface, Fanny perceives, the seemingly Gentile atmosphere of the ranch is pervaded with *Yiddishkayt* the people she meets are much more Jewish than they seem. Her presence seems to activate the Jewishness of the people around her. When Jose turns out not only to be Jewish, but to be a detective in disguise, the victory for the Jewish characters is complete.

Nonetheless, what the producers called a "melodramatic comedy" was suited to Brice only in so far as it permitted her to reprise her immigrant Jewish vaudeville personas. In Act II, she does a telephone routine similar to "Cohen on the Telephone," in which she places a telephone order, on a party line, with a drug store:

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, Act I, Scene 2, p. 40.

Vot? I won't tell you who is dis until you tell me who is dot.

Will you please get off—you are on a busy wire—hello,

operator—give me seven, two, Party J. Hello, is dis the drug

store? Oh, the drug store is in the grocery store! Well, have

you got camomile tea—cam—not camels, she don't smoke.

Camomile tea for the stummick—sure, send it up, Miss

Menoza, X.Y. ranch—how much will it cost to send it up here?

Vot? Cancel it!"<sup>122</sup>

Despite her surroundings, Brice's character still acted as if she were back on the Lower East Side. Her immigrant mentality and heavily accented English remained intact. As the critic for the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog* wrote, Brice "kept the audience rapt, both with her Jewish-American words, and with her playing." (Later in the review, however, the critic complained that the play "suffered from a surfeit of Yiddish words, which make the Jewish audience laugh hard but whose meanings are lost on the American audience.")<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, Act. II, Scene I, p. 13

<sup>123</sup> "Fanny Brice in 'Fanny' on Broadway," *Der Tog* (October 1, 1926). 11. One especially interesting moment in the production came, according to the critic, when Leah Mendoza finds the *tallis* (prayer shawl) that belonged to her brother and puts it on. The critic said that he had never seen a woman put on *tallis*. Only in the last few decades have Jewish women (except Orthodox Jewish women) begun to wear prayer shawls while praying in synagogue.

But as a romantic heroine, Brice was still being cast against type. Since she was thought of as exclusively a comic, the idea of her playing a more serious role irked the critics. According to the critic for the *New York Times* , "As a sort of animated newspaper comic strip, with a pronounced Jewish flavor, [Brice] has no peer or rival." Thus, he reported that "when word spread around that Miss Brice was to abandon base comedy for the pure gold of emotional histrionics, the prospects for raucous entertainment in the theatre seemed to be growing alarmingly dimmer."<sup>124</sup>

The *Philadelphia Ledger's* critic concurred. "With rich memories of Fannie as an incomparable clown, he wrote, "the anticipation was disturbing. It seemed to be inviting a great loss for a doubtful gain. And well into the second act, the fears persisted." Only in the middle of the second act, the critic wrote, "Fanny becomes herself again, gauche, droll, capering Fanny, with all her old fantastic tomfoolery. The play is saved from that moment on. One sits back contentedly to enjoy the familiar antics, the grimacing and the gorgeous Milt Gross dialect at their best."

Fanny was "herself again" only when she gave up--or the play permitted her to give up--trying to act seriously. She was supposed to be a clown, not a romantic lead with real human emotions. Jews

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<sup>124</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Fanny," *New York Times* (September 22, 1926), 30.

were supposed to be strictly figures of fun. Fanny just wasn't "good" at anything else. As John Anderson wrote of *Fanny* in his theatre column in the *New York Post* on September 22, 1926, Brice

crashes through it all in her well-known five-alarm manner, with her raging gestures and flashing, sure-fire comedy touch which is less a touch than a sock on the head. She does nothing more than she has done in hilarious eight-minute sketches, from her immigrant song in the Music Hall to her own rowdy burlesque of it. What she does she does to certain effect, without muffing her shots at the audience, but she prances all over the hokum-traps with the same unescapable vitality that she and Jolson, for instance, use for battering playgoers into submission."<sup>125</sup>

The play only worked if Fanny did her vaudeville routines, and did not try to convince the audience to take her seriously. She was type-cast as a comic, and critics did not want to see her as anything else. To the critics, it was if a comic strip character had come to life and tried to act a serious role. It was bound to fall flat, at least in the minds of those who saw Jews only as clowns. As Gilbert Gabriel

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<sup>125</sup> John Anderson, *New York Post* (September 22, 1926), 21. He suggested that the play should have titled "Abie's Rose of the Rancho." He also noted that Brice "kissed Mr. Belasco before us all at the end of the second act, and I hope it was on his producing cheek. His tongue probably was in the other one."

wrote in the *Sun*, *Fanny*:

marks Miss Brice's enlistment among active Belasco forces. It is likewise her entry into legitimate drama. So they label it a 'melodramatic comedy,' sprinkle it with gunplay, mystery and Yiddish bywords--and it is none the less a vaudeville....The seams of the plot must allow plenty of room for clowning, cluckling [sic] and Yeedling of Miss Brice's famous Music Box sort. They must give a Zionist tinge to an Arizona ranchland, must have Jewish lullabies crooned, Hester street burlesques strewn all over the great open spaces.

Take it as a hoax, as a travesty, as--oh, anyhow, take it. As another celebrated Jewish comedian under the Belasco sign in days of yore used not to say, "If you want it, I don't want it." For it seemed to the possibly prejudiced ear of the present reviewer a stagnant, highly stupid, sometimes malodorous piece of play-making....

Miss Brice is funny. Now and then awfully funny. Transferring her to the three act play has done nothing to curtail her funniness. What she used to do in two act revues she can do all over again here. She can bow her legs and cross her eyes, stretch her grin and whoop her accent in as hilarious a gale as ever. The play-fitters have seen to that. She can do

card tricks and imitate 'Cohen on the Telephone' as laughably as ever. They have sewn such scenes into it. They have inserted a sob scene or two, also, in the full knowledge of what infinitely sad, Semitic tears are deep in her throat, bashful and a bit homesick for the next out-and-out song and dance show.<sup>126</sup>

The idea that the Wild West would be colonized by Jews was threatening to the critics, despite the fact that Jews had lived in the Western part of the United States for hundreds of years.<sup>127</sup> For "Hester Street burlesques" to be "strewn all over the great open spaces" represented an explosion of *Yiddishkayt* from the confines of the Lower East Side to the rest of America. If critics were hostile to plays that showed Jews living in other parts of New York City, it was even more unsettling to think of Jews spread out through the United States. Vaudeville touring shows were one thing—acts produced by Weber and Fields and other teams were nothing new by the 1920s. But serious plays about Jewish life, other than the notable exception of *Welcome Stranger*, were rarely set in locales

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<sup>126</sup> Gilbert W. Gabriel, "The Cohens and the Cowboys," *New York Sun* (September 22, 1926), 29.

<sup>127</sup> See Moses Rischin and John Livingston, eds., *Jews of the American West* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) and Kenneth Libo, with Irving Howe, *We Lived There Too: In Their Own Words and Pictures, Pioneer Jews and the Westward Movement of America, 1630-1930* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984).

outside New York. Brice is seen as “homesick” because she is viewed as outside her normal territory as a performer, in both physical and cultural terms.

But Jews did begin to move into other parts of the United States; by 1930 fewer than half lived in the New York area. But even faster than the physical movement of Jews into other parts of the country was the proliferation of representations of Jews in popular culture, especially in Hollywood film. Many of the plays discussed in this chapter had touring productions; *Abie's Irish Rose*, as mentioned above, broke box office records throughout the country, with dozens of touring companies. But theater was beginning to decline in popularity as Hollywood came to dominate popular culture. Jewish actors acquired a much wider audience, but one that was mostly composed of non-Jews. As we have seen in the reactions from many of the non-Jewish theater critics to the Jewish-themed Broadway comedies, non-Jews often had negative reactions to Jewish material. How Jews became more accepted in American society, changing the perceptions of non-Jews toward Jews and their culture, is the subject of the next and final chapter.



### **CHAPTER THREE—JEWS IN SILENT FILM**

By presenting Jewish family life on stage in comedies that bolstered the pride of second generation Jews in their heritage and culture, Broadway was a potent force in the acculturation of American Jews. But it was the silent films that appeared during the same period that brought stories of Jewish life in America to audiences throughout the country. When the movies gradually supplanted the stage as the country's main form of entertainment, they gained tremendous cultural power. The screen representations of Jews transformed the image of Jews in American culture.

One film in particular from this period, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a mostly silent film that is considered the first "talkie" because of its brief use of recorded dialogue, has received a tremendous amount of critical attention in recent years. But there were many other silent or almost-silent films from the 1920s that featured realistic Lower East Side Jewish families coping with issues of acculturation, intermarriage (sometimes between different types of Jews, rather than between Jews and non-Jews), and strife between parents and children. *The Jazz Singer* was out of tune with this series of films about Jewish families, none of which glorified assimilation in the way it did. And even *The Jazz Singer* itself only

celebrates assimilation by virtue of its tacked-on ending, which does not appear in the original Broadway play. I will discuss *The Jazz Singer* briefly before moving on to the other, in many ways more realistic, films that are the subject of this chapter.

### **The Jazz Singer's Tune**

*The Jazz Singer* stars the phenomenally successful entertainer Al Jolson as a Lower East Side cantor's son, Jake Rabinowitz, who makes it big on Broadway as a blackface singer. The film is based on a story by Samson Raphaelson in *Everyman's Magazine* called "The Day of Atonement." The character was based, according to Raphaelson on Jolson himself, whom he had seen performing in blackface.

The plot is well known. Jake's Orthodox father disowns him for his choice of career, which his father considers to be a betrayal of his family and people. But Jake's mother still remains loyal to him, especially after he returns as an adult and promises to furnish his parents with an apartment in the Bronx. His opening night in a show occurs on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, which he has presumably stopped observing. Jake's father falls deathly ill on the eve of the great Jewish holiday, and Jake's mother and the

synagogue *shamash*, Mr. Yudelson, come to his dressing room to beg him to assume his father's mantle. Jake is torn between his faith and his career. But the film ends with the protagonist satisfying both his obligations; he leads services on Yom Kippur and then, sometime later, appears on Broadway after all, with both his mother and Mr. Yudelson (his father having died), sitting in the front row.

George Jessel, who starred in *The Jazz Singer* both on Broadway and in its touring versions throughout the country, was originally considered for the role. But Jessel demanded that his salary be doubled for the work involved in using the new Vitaphone technology, and Jolson was ultimately signed for the role. But one comment by Jessel has gone unnoticed by scholars, in which he explained his decision in terms of his responsibility to his fellow Jews. In an article published in *Theatre Magazine* in 1928, Jessel remarked that "since I owe my success in great measure to the Jewish public, and the Jewish public expects me to be loyal to it, I could not sincerely do the picture."<sup>1</sup> It is likely that this is merely a retrospective rationalization of a real blunder in his career (the film became Jolson's greatest role and helped make him one of the

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<sup>1</sup> George Jessel, "Why I Alternate on Stage and Screen: A Player Who Frankly Avows That Only the Big Money Lured Him into Film Acting," *Theatre Magazine* (February 1928), 22.

twentieth century's most beloved entertainers). Still, it is nevertheless interesting that Jessel saw the film as a betrayal of Jews in its message of assimilation. Also interesting is the assumption of such thing as a recognizable "Jewish public" with particular tastes and expectations.

*The Jazz Singer* has long occupied an important place in film history as the first feature to incorporate spoken dialogue. But it has also become the focus of an influential theory by historian Michael Rogin that Jews "whitened" themselves by appearing in blackface. Rogin argues that Jews changed their racial status in American society by distancing themselves from black people through the very act of parodying them on stage and screen. Why else does Jolson sing a song called "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," early in the film, except to suggest the blackface that is to come, and that is viewed as the mark of an unclean race?

It is in some ways unsurprising that *The Jazz Singer* has become the object of such intense theoretical scrutiny. The evolving scholarship on blackface has tried to place its use in historical context to understand how minstrelsy functioned in American culture. In particular, in the wake of what many scholars view as the crumbling of the partnership between Jews and blacks in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, renewed attention has

focused on the ways in which Jews and blacks interrelated throughout twentieth century American history and popular culture. Contemporary cultural pluralism (or multiculturalism, as most scholars call it) prizes the contributions that ethnic groups have made to each other's cultures; it blurs distinctions and thus ultimately deconstructs the very notion of a "pure" ethnic identity that is not a patchwork of different cultural influences. In this reading, Jews and blacks helped to construct each other's culture.

### **Behind Blackface**

Blackface also seems to be a perfect example of what theorists of performance see as a "performance of ethnicity," a popular, if in many ways flawed, way of viewing ethnic identity as essentially improvisatory and impermanent. (The idea of "performativity" derives from the gender theories of Judith Butler, who posited the influential idea that gender--as opposed to sex--is determined by cultural factors rather than physical or biological ones.) No one would argue that performers who donned blackface literally "became" black through the act of wearing the makeup. But many theorists view ethnicity as an aspect of the self that one can choose whether or not to emphasize (rather than a "racial" category to

which one is assigned by society). Thus for a Jewish entertainer to put on blackface is viewed by these scholars as analagous to a black person wearing blackface; it reveals the ways in which all ethnicity is to some extent constructed rather than inherent. Finally, blackface lends itself to theorizing in line with the continuing obsession in the academy with the “body,” its physical shape, its functions and desires, its relationship to structures of power and domination, and so on.

These are issues that have come up many times in this study, in terms of the choices made by particular performers in how to perform Jewish characters on stage. But I have not argued that ethnicity is *only* a matter of performance, even though certain external aspects of it may share similarities with professional performances by actors, nor that ethnicity can be altered at will.

### **Assimilation Blues**

Despite its appeal to historians of American Jewish culture, *The Jazz Singer* is also a problematic text in many ways. The current trend in American Jewish history is to stress tendencies toward acculturation (i.e., the maintenance of ethnic identity despite the adoption of mainstream American values, particularly the

privileging of economic success) above tendencies toward assimilation (i.e., the loss of ethnic identity) *The Jazz Singer* works less well this context since it seems frankly assimilatory; it ends with the cantor's son performing on Broadway as if his career has supplanted the values of the ethnic community.

Critics have done backflips to try to avoid concluding that the ending is a gesture toward assimilation. For example, in the same breath the eminent scholar George Custen has written that "it is still possible for one to read the ending as ambiguous," and that "we are meant to think that Jake embraces show business to the *exclusion* of his former life." Where is the ambiguity in that? Even Michael Rogin seems to seesaw back and forth; he states in one place in his book that the film "was promising that the son could have it all: Jewish past and American future, Jewish mother and gentile wife"<sup>2</sup> and in another place that it "divides America between Old World parents and (so far as outward appearances are concerned) a fully assimilated second generation."<sup>3</sup> These provocative ideas open up more questions than answers. If the second generation was only assimilated in terms of its external appearance, then what does the

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<sup>2</sup> Rogin 86.

<sup>3</sup> Rogin 100.

ending of the film mean? And how does a “Jewish past” actually influence an “American future”? Or does it?

Custen finally seems to give up trying to reconcile the film’s ending with the film’s overall romanticization of Jewish ethnicity; he concludes that the ending is “typical of the “ethnic dry cleaning most products underwent as they were transformed into movies.”<sup>4</sup> His thesis is that films about Jewish life appealed to a wider audience than plays (or works of literature like short stories and novels) and thus had to sacrifice much of their ethnic flavor in order to be successful. Custen argues that “in its original form—full of Jewish ritual, phonetic yiddishisms, and references to the particularities of urban ghetto life—*The Jazz Singer* certainly appeared to be too parochially Jewish and even, perhaps, too city-based to make any faithful film version a hit outside New York.”<sup>5</sup> Custen argues that the studio “attempted to make the film less Jewish so it would be safe for its Christian national audience.”<sup>6</sup>

This exemplifies the danger in taking *The Jazz Singer* as emblematic of Jewish-themed silent films, without a knowledge of

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<sup>4</sup> Custen 102.

<sup>5</sup> Custen 104.

<sup>6</sup> Custen 104. Custen also quotes a speech that Jack Warner planned to give at the film’s expected fourth curtain call on opening night that announced, “The spirit of the play we feel is not the glorification of any one religion, creed, race, but has a universal theme....’HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER.” Custen 105.



the other films of the decade. When we look at other films, a much more nuanced picture emerges. The questions that interest me are: Did Jewish-themed films (many of them based on the vaudeville routines and Broadway plays discussed in the first two chapters of this study) lose much of their ethnic flavor as their creators attempted to broaden their appeal for the wider audience outside New York City? Were non-Jews in particular less interested in seeing material with heavily Jewish subject matter? Was the mere suggestion of Jewishness (as in recent television shows like "Seinfeld") enough to create endearing characters and plots without "overdoing" the ethnic content?

My answer is no. *The Jazz Singer* was unique in its glorification of an assimilated "American" identity, what Ruth Perlmutter has called the "capitulation of ethnic bonds to an adopted culture."<sup>7</sup> If one is truly interested in understanding the Jewish films of the 1920s, then a focus on *The Jazz Singer* is misplaced.

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Perlmutter, "The Melting Plot and the Humoring of America: Hollywood and the Jew," *Film Reader* 5 (1982), 248. Perlmutter sees the film as focused on intermarriage, which is really not at the center of the plot.

## **Jews and Other Americans**

As the film scholar J. Hoberman has pointed out, *The Jazz Singer* shares many similarities to a Yiddish film, *Shtetl Hazzan*, about a cantor's son who abandon's his faith to become a Viennese opera star. Less well-known is that the film's screenwriter, Alfred A. Cohn, scripted a number of other important silent films of the period that dealt with Jewish themes, including the original *Cohens and the Kellys*, one of many film spin-offs of *Abie's Irish Rose* about a Jewish-Irish romance. Another of Cohn's films, *His People* (1925), is strikingly similar to *The Jazz Singer* ; its theme is the rebellion of a son against his father's perceived Old World backwardness, and the son's ultimate acceptance of the importance of family unity. These films did not appeal to a wider audience by soft-pedaling their Jewish content but by showing Jews as sharing the same kinds of family relationships, economic struggles, nostalgia for the past, and fantasies of a better life that all Americans did in the turbulent twenties. Laurence Moore has written that immigrants and other "religious outsiders" actually "invented [their] Americanness"<sup>8</sup> through expressing their sense of marginalization, but I would add

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<sup>8</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xi.

that Jews also “invented their Americanness” in the opposite way, by demonstrating, through popular culture, how similar they were to everyone else.

### **Sympathy for Immigrants**

There were many factors that contributed to greater sympathy for immigrants in the 1920s, despite the rise of Nativism and the government’s constriction of the flow of immigration. There were tremendous changes in American society in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In 1900, two-thirds of the American population lived in rural areas or in small towns. They distrusted strangers, and viewed cities as cesspools of crime, disease, prostitution and the ills of industrialization. They had little experience with immigrants of any kind and almost no contact with Jews.

But by 1930, more than half the American population was living in towns or cities of 2,500 or more. Much of the growth of American cities occurred in the 1920s, as people moved to the cities seeking employment. New York’s population increased by 23 percent during the decade, while Chicago’s jumped by 25 percent, Detroit’s leapt by 57 percent, and Los Angeles’s more than doubled.

Since almost all immigrants and their children still lived in cities, or at least in metropolitan areas, there was probably much more contact in the 1920s between foreigners and "native" Americans than had been true in the past. Films that dealt with the problems of urban life, including the difficulty of relating to people from very different backgrounds, were thus likely to meet with a sympathetic reception from those who were themselves in the process of adjusting to the urban milieu.

Even the immigration restrictions passed by the federal government may have paradoxically improved perceptions of immigrants already living in America. Gilman Ostrander has argued that the National Origins Act of 1924 was "enormously beneficial to the recent immigrant groups against whose former countrymen it was directed."<sup>9</sup> Ostrander speculates that once the doors to new immigrants were closed, many Americans were relieved that the "invasion" had ended and began to cast a more benign eye upon the immigrants already here. Also, the immigrants themselves felt especially entitled to be in America, and perceived themselves as equal to other Americans.

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<sup>9</sup> Gilman M. Ostrander, "The Revolution in Morals," in John Braeman, Robert H. Brenner and David Brody, eds., *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920's* (Ohio State University Press, 1968), 343.

The failures of Prohibition may have also contributed to a warmer attitude toward immigrants. Although many Americans had initially supported the criminalization of the sale of alcohol, the ban proved to be virtually unenforceable and people took great pleasure in subverting it. Bootleggers and owners of speak-easies tended to be immigrants and they, according to Ostrander, "became minor heroes to the people they served."<sup>10</sup> Although Irish immigrants were particularly identified with saloon-keeping, many of the most famous gangsters who ran crime syndicates were Jewish, and their exploits became romanticized in the newspapers as if they were heroes.

The dozens of films produced in the mid and late-1920s about Jewish-Irish intermarriage--with titles like *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* (1926), *For the Love of Mike* (1927) and *Sally In Our Alley* (1927)--were no exception. The success of *Abie's Irish Rose* and its stage progeny like *Kosher Kitty Kelly* (also made into a film in 1925) provided a fertile source for material, and the expectation of tremendous profit. (Ironically, given the much larger potential audience, *Abie's Irish Rose* was much more successful on the stage than in either of its two film incarnations--the mostly silent one in 1928 and the remake in 1946). Jews and Irish were shown in these

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

films as remarkably similar in their process of adjustment to American society.

Patricia Erens sees the films' focus on intermarriage as in fact celebrating the ability of the Jews to "climb ahead" by "taking in a member of another group."<sup>11</sup> But the films also showed the Irish falling in love with the clever, kind-hearted young Jewish heroes and heroines, and thus showed Jews as generally caring rather than calculating—the kind of person one would not mind having as a son-in-law or daughter-in-law.<sup>12</sup>

In a nation of immigrants, Jews came to stand--in these films, at least--for Americans in general. These films promoted the inclusion of Jews within American society by presenting Jews, despite their exotic flavor, as essentially just like everyone else. In other words, these films paradoxically became universal in theme by emphasizing the ethnic particularity of their characters and settings. I see these films as about not about the "capitulation" (to use Perlmutter's term) of Jewish culture to American society, but about the adaptation of Jewish culture to American society.

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<sup>11</sup> Erens 82.

<sup>12</sup> In Leon da Costa's *Kosher Kitty's Kids*, Kitty asks Ginsburg if he has "ever seen the Irish-Jewish moving pictures" because "in them pictures the Irish always win." Ginsburg retorts, "Sure! The Irish always win the fights and the Jewish people the money." *Kosher Kitty's Kids*, typescript, Act I, p. 5-6.

## **The Power of Film**

But much of the transformation of attitudes toward Jews in particular occurred through the power of the film medium itself. Through its ability to create an entirely self-contained fictional world, film promoted a level of identification with Jews beyond that which the theater and vaudeville could achieve. Movie audiences empathized with the travails of Jewish immigrants depicted on the screen, in which they saw aspects of their own experience. That the characters were Jewish may even have been beside the point; the audiences may not have focused on the characters' Jewishness at all. In her dissertation on the reception of 1920s silent film, Kathryn Fuller found one woman who remembered seeing the film *Humoresque* and aspired to become a violinist like the boy in the film. (Fuller takes this, oddly, as evidence of "contradictory messages about gender roles, with whose ambiguities even young girls were forced to wrestle."<sup>13</sup>) The character's Jewishness seems to have been irrelevant for this particular viewer.

Besides Fuller's unpublished dissertation on the making of a

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<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Fuller, "Shadowland: American Audiences and the Movie-Going Experience in the Silent Film Era," (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1993), 273.

national film audience, which includes a chapter on the rise of the motion picture “fan”, there has been little scholarly work on the reception of silent films, and almost none on silent films about immigrants. Lester Friedman and Patricia Erens have both written books on the depictions of Jews in film; both books contain chapters on the silent era, but they are mostly concerned with cataloguing the films and describing their plots. And Kevin Brownlow, in his fine work on early American film that contains a section on Jewish silent film, focuses primarily on the making of the films, not about the ways in which they functioned in American culture.

Friedman and Erens have both emphasized the similarity between a typical Jewish character in a 1920s film comedy and a “Hebrew” performer from the vaudeville stage (both were costumed in rumpled clothes and bowler hats; both gesticulated wildly and were obsessed with money, etc.) But the comparisons with the vaudeville stage are misplaced; the silent films went far beyond the vaudeville routines in their humanization of Jewish immigrants. In their focus on the Jewish characters’ conflicts with their children, desire for a better life for their families, and difficulties fitting into American society, Jewish-themed silent films--like their precursors



on the Broadway stage--portrayed Jews in much more realistic ways than the vaudeville stage had ever done.

Contemporary theories of ethnicity have collapsed the distinction between ethnic and "non-ethnic," and see everyone (including white Protestants) as belonging to one or more ethnic groups. Although this was hardly the prevailing view in the 1920s, when both immigrants and native blacks were still demonized in many ways in American society, there were also subtle, more positive shifts in attitudes towards foreigners and their children. Hollywood films may have, in Ruth Perlmutter's words, "validated the dominant culture," but the mainstream culture was itself in the process of change, moving toward greater reflection of diversity.

The ways in which Jews were presented in popular culture provided a kind of counter-narrative to the demonization of Jews and other immigrants during the same period; they reveal that attitudes toward ethnic groups were more complex than the historical record seems to show. In truth, slightly over half (58.5 percent) of the American population in 1920 was both white and born of American-born parents. Immigrants and children of immigrants together comprised about 30 percent of the

population.<sup>14</sup> Historians have emphasized the prejudices that Americans held against immigrants; in the words of Geoffrey Perrett, they were viewed by “true” Americans as lacking in the “quick wits, the self-reliance, the energy and mechanical aptitude of the native born.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, films about Jews showed them as possessing pluck and courage and drive—the virtues that all Americans were supposed to have in a rapidly expanding industrial economy with seemingly unlimited economic opportunities.

Thus, despite the vigor of the Nativist movement and the continuing presence of widespread anti-Semitism, Jews appeared as complex and sympathetic people with real human problems and with, for the most part, a rich, attractive and viable culture. Although Lester Friedman has described these films as promoting the “cherished vision of America as a vast melting pot of ethnic groups who discard their individual heritages to form one people,”<sup>16</sup> the melting pot concept was already outdated by the 1920s. Friedman is right that the films “attempt to make Americans less

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<sup>14</sup> Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 45. Cashman uses a figure of about 106 million for the entire United States population, plus about 12 million for America's overseas possessions, for a total population of 118 million.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Perrett, *America in the Twenties: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 79.

<sup>16</sup> Lester Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982), 52.

nervous about Jews and Jews more conscious of themselves as Americans," but this is not incompatible in any way with the communication of pride about Jewish ethnicity. Rather than, as, Thomas Cripps would have it, an "icon of the ritual of Americanization,"<sup>17</sup> the silent-movie Jew was an icon of the maintenance of Jewish ethnicity.<sup>18</sup>

According to Friedman, the films appealed especially to immigrants who "recognized screen versions of familiar aspects of [their] own experience."<sup>19</sup> But it was not just immigrants, but Americans in general, who could identify with the Jewish characters in the silent films. In fact, films needed to appeal to a national audience in order to be profitable, whether or not they dealt with specific ethnic minorities.

### **Marketing Jewish Film**

The only scholarly work on how the studios marketed films with Jewish content is in Henry Jenkins' book on early talkies, *What*

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Cripps, "The Movie Jew as an Image of Assimilation, 1903-1927," *Journal of Popular Film* 4 (1975), 197.

<sup>18</sup> Friedman is correct that these films were "[n]ot made as pseudodocumentaries to enlighten audiences about the beautiful ceremonies of Jewish religion or the more esoteric aspects of Jewish life." But in their focus on Jewish family life, and on the difficulties of being Jewish in a non-Jewish world, they obviously celebrate Jewish ethnicity. Friedman 53.

*Made Pistachio Nuts?* In analyzing how the vaudeville aesthetic was transferred to film, Jenkins examines the stage and film career of Eddie Cantor. He writes that in live performance Cantor had “relied heavily upon his Jewishness as an appeal to the city’s ethnically diverse audience.” But when Cantor began to appear in talking films, like *Palmy Days* (1931), *Kid Millions* (1934), and *Strike Me Pink*, Jenkins argues, the studios decided to “deny or shift attention from the question of Cantor’s ethnicity.”<sup>20</sup>

The reason for this, according to Jenkins, is the intolerant climate of the 1920s; he paraphrases Irving Howe about the ways in which Jewish performers dropped their ethnic personas in order to become successful outside New York. But Jenkins begins his chapter by analyzing earlier films of Cantor’s like *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929) and *Whoopee* (1930), both of which did contain heavily Jewish material. *Glorifying the American Girl*, for example, incorporates Cantor’s famous “Moe the Tailor” sketch from his vaudeville performances—perhaps his most explicitly Jewish routine.

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<sup>19</sup> Friedman 53.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 179.

It also makes little sense for Jenkins to refer to a “chilling climate”<sup>21</sup> when discussing the ways in which Jewish-themed films were marketed. Cantor’s films of the 1920s were not denatured of their Jewish content; by contrast, they revel in it. And despite Jenkins’ conclusions, Mark Winokur sees this as a constituent element of Cantor’s style that continues into his 1930s talking films. He writes that Cantor’s films “tend to call attention to Cantor’s ethnicity and, more interestingly, to conflate the ethnic with the national identity.” In fact, Winokur suggests, “the ethnic character Cantor plays tends to affirm not just the possibility of ethnic durability, but the defining of the American as ethnic.”<sup>22</sup>

This is akin to what Oscar Handlin noted in his introduction to the seminal work of American history, *The Uprooted*, when he said that he had set out to write about the place of immigrants in American history and realized that immigrants *were* American history.<sup>23</sup> We live in an era in which we are often reminded that, except perhaps for American Indians, we are all relatively recent arrivals on this continent. This redefines the “American” not as the antithesis of the ethnic but as its equivalent; it eliminates the

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<sup>21</sup> Jenkins 175.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Winokur, *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Film Comedy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 153-4.

<sup>23</sup> Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951).

difference between insider and outsider.

The studios actively encouraged this shifting of conceptual boundaries. They marketed their Jewish-themed films in ways that not just piqued the curiosity of non-Jews about aspects of Jewish language and culture, but suggested that non-Jews could participate in that culture on equal terms. They also emphasized the extent to which both Jews and non-Jews shared a common consumer culture. This is apparent in the publicity campaigns created by the studios for the early talkie *The Kibitzer* and for the first silent version of *Abie's Irish Rose*.

*The Kibitzer* was a Broadway play written by Jo Swerling and Edward G. Robinson that premiered on February 18, 1929. Robinson starred as Lazarus, the owner of a cigar store on Amsterdam Avenue who gives unwelcome advice to the card players who gather nightly in his store to play pinochle. Although his daughter is engaged to a soda clerk in a drug store, she is also being pursued by the son of a wealthy industrialist, James Livingston. Lazarus pays Livingston a visit to tell him that their respective offspring are planning to elope; he uncovers the fact that the millionaire's butler is masquerading as his son, and planning to steal valuable bonds. As a reward, Livingston gives Lazarus half the profits from any future rise in 10,000 shares of steel company stock. (In other words, Lazarus will

only make a profit if the stock price goes up.) Lazarus sells part of his shares to his creditors, installs a stock ticker machine in his store, and exults as the stock price rises. Then the stock plummets, and Lazarus is wiped out. However, he turns out not to have lost the money after all; his half-wit brother Yankel, who speaks no English other than “Yes—sure—certainly,” happens to have answered the phone at the crucial moment and unwittingly given the broker the order to sell. All ends happily.

When the film version was made, the leading role was cast not with Robinson but with a Jewish comedy actor named Harry Green, who had made three other talking films. Other well-known performers appeared in the film, including the Yiddish stage actor Tenen Holtz and the vaudeville star Eddie Kane. But Paramount’s ad campaign focused not just on the actors, but on the film’s Yiddish title, which means an annoying and intrusive person or meddler. As the studio’s “Press Sheet,” a circular designed to give movie theaters ideas about how to promote Paramount films, suggested, “To millions of persons this word as yet means nothing. That’s why it is a wow title, for a full meaning of the term is only realized after the public has seen the picture.” In this quote, “the public” is assumed to be a non-Jewish public; there is no reference to the Jewish audience.

Nevertheless, the studio's publicity experts predicted that the film "will make the American people kibitzer-conscious." They advised theater owners to arouse the public's curiosity about the meaning of the term. The sample press releases, newspaper advertisements, lobby posters and window cards depicted in the "Press Sheet" all make fun of the kibitzer's pretense to knowledge and expertise.<sup>24</sup> The studio advised that theaters run contests for the best definitions of the term and then publish selected definitions—especially those from famous people.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the studio suggested that the theaters give out "Kibitzer Union membership cards." These cards would "certify" that the bearer is entitled to "butt-in on any conversation," correct the mistakes of card, golf and billiard players, "help losers to cry," and perform other unnecessary and irritating services.

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<sup>24</sup> Although it might seem inappropriate to play up the stock market angle of the film, given that the stock market had just crashed the year before, the press sheet reported that, according to the Department of Commerce, only four percent of Americans were affected by the crash. And "even during the time of the smash the Broadway stage musical comedies inserted jokes about Wall Street and they got big laughs, many of them from the unfortunate victims." Thus, the studio concluded, "The Wall Street angle is good advertising." *Kibitzer File*, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

<sup>25</sup> Among the wacky celebrity definitions printed in the press sheet are those of Zeppo Marx ("A kibitzer is every one of my uncles,"), Groucho Marx ("A kibitzer is a fellow who eats canned corn,"), Fredric March ("A kibitzer is the helpful person who offers to hold your coat while you whip that truck driver who cut in ahead of you,"), and Fay Wray ("A kibitzer is the man who dodges taking you to the night clubs because he says he doesn't dance.") Billy Rose Theatre Collection.



By soliciting humorous definitions of the term, and permitting practically any definition of the Yiddish word that anyone suggested, the studio's publicity department was playfully demystifying Jewish culture. Rather than making non-Jews feel excluded, Jewish culture could embrace them. By contrast, the 1927 program for *The Jazz Singer* at the Strand Movie Theater in New York contained a glossary that defined the Yiddish and Hebrew terms used in the film, thus implicitly pointing to the distance between the world of the film and the world of the audience.

The ethnic element could also be simply a foil for commercialism, as in the promotion of *Abie's Irish Rose* by Paramount's "Special Exploitation Service." Unlike *The Kibitzer*, for which the studio traded on the title's unfamiliarity, the title *Abie's Irish Rose* was expected to be instantly recognizable to most Americans, given the extraordinary popularity of Anne Nichols' play—both on Broadway and in the many touring productions. In fact, the mock newspaper advertisements and posters reproduced in the circular invariably pointed out that eighteen million people (a wildly inflated number) had seen the play, and even called it "The Most Perfect Play Ever Written." In fact, the film was "perfect" only in terms of the way it lent itself to money-making movie tie-ins. The "exploitation suggestions" included putting large displays of roses in

the theater windows, sponsoring essay contests on the reasons for the play's popularity, and selling copies of the music used in the film score (including a song called "Rosemary") in the theater lobbies.

Publicity was tailored to each city the film traveled to. In addition to radio and newspaper coverage (with ads and stories placed both in Jewish newspapers and general papers—the Jewish newspapers were furnished an ad in Yiddish), heralds (advertising flyers with photographs) were placed in taxicabs.

In Pittsburgh, for example, a boy and girl "playing" Abie and Rosemary—clad in their wedding attire--went on a newlyweds' "shopping tour," and were photographed buying appliances, furniture and other products for their "home." (Mock wedding announcement cards were distributed, stating that the couple would "be at home," on particular dates, and giving the movie theater's address as their "home.") In Cincinnati, the couple's names were used to hawk everything from lamps to porcelain gas ranges to shoes—all by having the happy couple appear at the different stores. Although the bride and groom were Irish and Jewish, respectively, they became a model "American" couple in their consumption of household goods.

Publicity campaigns for other films emphasized Jewish food. Since many of the Jewish-themed films were at least partially set in

Jewish delicatessens, the studios could exploit the fact that some traditional Jewish foods were popular among non-Jews. *Film Daily* suggested to the exhibitors of *Private Izzy Murphy* (a film about a young Jewish delicatessen owner, played by George Jessel, who sets up shop in an Irish neighborhood), "Here's your chance to give local delicatessen stores a chance to benefit by a tie up with 'Private Izzy Murphy.' Get the stores to display prominent announcements of the picture mentioning that 'Murphy's' delicatessen serves laughs as well as cold cuts."<sup>26</sup>

How well did these publicity techniques work? Unfortunately, measuring the actual size of the audience that viewed a specific film is difficult, if not impossible. As Donald Crafton has found in his research on the reception of *The Jazz Singer*, producers had many ways of inflating the numbers of tickets "sold," including distributing both free tickets and discount passes. In the case of *The Jazz Singer*, Crafton concludes that these practices helped made the film seem like a bigger "hit" than it actually was in box office terms.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Film Daily* (November 14, 1926), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Crafton, "The Jazz Singer's Reception in the Media and At the Box Office, in David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 468-478.

However, gauging a film's reception in terms of the warmth of the audience's response is even trickier than measuring that film's success in financial terms. Even a film review, as relatively knowledgeable and experienced the critic may be (or pretends to be) as compared to the average viewer, represents only the perspective of the reviewer. As Janet Staiger has pointed out, "Such an unspoken mass of [audience members] deserves as much attention as does the popular press--if not more."<sup>28</sup> How the audience greeted these films is notoriously difficult to discern. Even reviews in the ethnic press are not reliable evidence of an entire ethnic group's response to a cultural product. As Crafton points out, the audience for the reviewer's periodical and the film's audience may overlap but are not identical; the review becomes a kind of secondary cultural product that speaks to an audience of its own.

## **Audience Response**

But the film reviews do tell us something. They show us how particular viewers both responded to films and influenced others to

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 206-208.

respond. They capture attitudes and feelings that we can assume were not limited to the people who wrote them. As a critic for the *New York Times* wrote of *Hungry Hearts*, "the people of the story, their customs, habits, ways of living and variety of character and appearance, are brought to the screen, definitely, genuinely, memorably....[T]he spectator feels himself carried into the life of which the persons in the play are an integral part."<sup>29</sup> Film has the power to make its viewers feel swept away by the film-going experience; this was no less true of the silent films about Jewish life on the Lower East Side.

Film, much more than theater, fosters fantasies that the viewer is actually involved in the action and situations depicted. Lary May has argued that "Going to a movie meant more than merely watching the screen. It was a total experience that immersed the fans directly in the life they saw in celluloid."<sup>30</sup> Much more than in the theater, this "immersion" created tremendous empathy for the ethnic characters; as the reviewer of *Hungry Hearts* for *Picture Play* exulted, "The life of the Jewish family is your life as you sit and watch the screen. You are as much a part of it as your teeth are part

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<sup>29</sup> *New York Times* (November 27, 1922)., 18.

<sup>30</sup> May, *Screening Out the Past* 147.

of you.”<sup>31</sup> And another critic, writing about *His People*, called it the story of “one of the most poignantly pitiful phases of our modern American city life,” which was a “compelling realistic picture of [the Jews’] huddled quarters, where, instead of flaming liberty and the horn of plenty, these ‘chosen people’ are harassed by customs they do not understand and their spirits broken by privation and want.”<sup>32</sup>

Although Kevin Brownlow has speculated that *His People*, produced by Universal Pictures, was “aimed, as were virtually all their films, at the audience of small-town America,” it seems obvious that the urban Jewish audiences were also a prime target. Of course, the response to the film by Jews may have been largely based on the way they perceived their own culture being portrayed for the Gentile audience. As Sam B. Jacobson, a film critic for a Los Angeles Jewish newspaper wrote, “This is the first time that a film has so vividly portrayed the lives and environment of the Jewry in a metropolis....Edward Sloman is responsible for one of the finest pictures ever made. He has done, with *His People*, more to eradicate

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Brownlow 391.

<sup>32</sup> Unidentified newspaper, Chamberlin Scrapbooks, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. The same review mentions that at the end, the characters “buoy themselves with new dreams and ambition as they turn their faces towards a new land of promise--California.” This seems to point to a different version of the film, with a different ending than the one we have.

with one blow prejudice and racial hatred than any other agency has accomplished.”<sup>33</sup>

After all, Americans liked to congratulate themselves on the civilizing influence life in America had on immigrants. As another review of *Hungry Hearts* put it, “The advantages which immigrants derive from this Land of the Free are always popular with our patriotic audiences. Even though we vote for restrictions at Ellis Island, we like to think of ourselves as big-hearted hospitable folk, who welcome oppressed aliens with open arms and teach them how to wear Kollege Kut Klothes.” If immigrants remained in poverty even after they arrived in America, this myth would be eroded. The review pretends to mock the film for “dar[ing] to insinuate that some of the immigrants are just as badly off as they were at home...[which] is rank heresy.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Jewish Audience**

Silent films about Jewish life did, it is likely, afford particular pleasure to those who were familiar with their cultural context.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Brownlow, pp. 411-12.

<sup>34</sup> Unidentified review, *Hungry Hearts* File, Chamberlin Scrapbooks, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

Harry Sabath Bodin, writing in the *American Hebrew* about *Hungry Hearts*, called the titles done by Montague Glass (author of *Potash and Perlmutter*) “reservoirs of risibility” in the literacy of their translation from Yiddish to English. But the titles could only “afford amusement with their quaint humor,”<sup>35</sup> as Bodin puts it, to an audience that could understand Yiddish. The Jewish audience presumably wanted the titles to be in English but also enjoyed seeing how the Yiddish was translated.

It is only in *His People*, however, that religious rituals play a central role. (There are Jewish wedding scenes in *April Fools* and *None So Blind*, but neither film is permeated with Jewish ritual.) The family enjoys a traditional Sabbath dinner, the mother stops her husband from beating his younger son because it is the Sabbath eve, and so on. In fact, it was precisely these rituals that Sam B. Jacobson, a film critic for a Los Angeles Jewish newspaper exulted over in his review. Writing that *His People* is “the first time that a film has so vividly portrayed the lives and environment of the Jewry of a metropolis,” he went on to ask, “Can’t you see the little Cominsky family as the old father pronounces “kiddush” with his “brosha” over the wine and the final “moitze” over the bread? Not once does he omit to kiss the “mezuzah” as he leaves or enters his

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<sup>35</sup> Bodin 387.



home. And true to his traditions, he blesses his first born when he believes that he is on his dying bed.”<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps for a Gentile audience, the use of these Jewish rituals was powerful partly because they seemed so mysterious. For example, one reviewer gushed that “[n]o truer picture of the Ghetto, and more human, has ever been produced” and that “[n]one of the details of Orthodox Jewish life has been overlooked. The Mazuza, for instance, which is the Ten Commandments, is fastened on the door frame just above a man’s head, is there; whenever the father enters, he put his fingers on the Mazuza and then on his lips.”<sup>37</sup> This is inaccurate; the *mezuzah* contains the first two paragraphs of a passage from the Hebrew Bible called the Sh’ma, which is the Jewish credo of God’s essential unity. But the reviewer was not alone in getting the details of Jewish observance wrong; no one who worked on the picture seemed to have noticed that it hung on the wrong side of the door frame! It was the specificity, if not the accuracy, of

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<sup>36</sup> Undated Jewish newspaper review, quoted in Brownlow 411-412.

<sup>37</sup> *Harrison’s Reports* (November 14, 1925), 182. Harrison was a former critic for *Motion Picture News* who left to form his own independent newspaper; he saw himself as championing the interests of the exhibitors against that of the studios, which, he felt, often took advantage of the movie house owners. He was also an early opponent of product placement in films.

the Jewish rituals that underlay the seeming “authenticity” of the Jewish life presented in *His People*.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever their appeal to non-Jews, films about Jewish life were thus produced at least partly with Jewish audiences in mind. Recall what George Jessel said about the “Jewish public.” Jews had been a prime audience for film since the turn of the century. Judith Thissen has studied the exhibition of Yiddish films on the Lower East Sideshe concludes that these films helped to socialize Jewish immigrants into the manners and mores of American culture.<sup>39</sup> Robert C. Allen and Ben Singer have debated whether or not the nickelodeon audience included a significant number of middle-class

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<sup>38</sup> A more recent, unpublished appraisal of *His People*, by the late film scholar William Everson, disputed the Jewishness of the theme. As Everson told his film classes at New York University:

One is tempted to paraphrase the now-famous Levy's Bread ads and say that one doesn't have to be Jewish in order to appreciate *His People*, but that it most certainly helps. The trouble is that while one can see Carl Laemmle sitting back and happily making sure that every single Jewish The Jewish ghetto is almost a character in its own right in the picture, or an object of worship. detail is there in order to make it a blockbuster for the Jewish trade, what emerges is really no more Jewish than a 10-meter set entirely on British cricket pitch would be essentially British. The British have never been really interested in playing cricket; the real game is in spectating, and murmuring “well-bowled” at appropriate intervals. So it is here; the cast is really playing a game which requires them to perform little rituals every so often, but the overall theme has far less traditional Jewish content than, for example, *The Jazz Singer*. Sweep all this extraneous detail away, and one is left with a staggeringly unsubtle sob-story of the “Stella Dallas” ilk.

*His People* file. Museum of Modern Art Film Archive.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Thissen, “Jewish Immigrant Audiences in New York City, 1905-1914,” in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 15-28.

patrons.<sup>40</sup> However, there has been no research yet published on either the class or ethnic composition of audiences for 1920s feature films—both inside and outside New York.<sup>41</sup>

Jews had been disproportionately represented among early film audiences in America, and they built up a habit of cinema attendance. According to Robert Allen, out of 120 movie houses in Manhattan in 1908, 42 were located on the Bowery on the Lower East Side; there were seven times as many movie theaters in Jewish neighborhoods than in other areas.<sup>42</sup> By the late 1920s, there were 28,000 movie theaters in the United States, more than half of which were in the major cities in New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio and California—the same cities that housed the largest numbers of Jews and other immigrants. As an article in the *Exhibitor's Trade Review* about *Hungry Hearts* predicted, the film “should appeal favorably to all nationalities because of its simplicity and strength. It ought to prove a good box office investment for any exhibitor and in theatres

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<sup>40</sup> See Robert C. Allen, “Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan: Beyond the Nickelodeon,” *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 2-15; Ben Singer, “Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audience and Exhibitors,” *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 5-35; Robert C. Allen, “Manhattan Myopia; or, Oh! Iowa!,” *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 75; Sumiko Higashi, “Dialogue: Manhattan Nickelodeons,” *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 72-74.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Handel's pioneering study of Hollywood audiences focuses only on the 1940s, and even then has almost no discussion of the ethnic composition of the audience. Leo Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience: A Report of Film Audience Research* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1950).

<sup>42</sup> Robert Allen, “Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan,” 4.

catering to Jewish patrons there can be no doubt as to its heavy earning capacity.”<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the Jewish audience was increasingly viewed as merely a segment of the overall American public. According to Miriam Hansen, Jewish-themed films “became a standard sideline for certain producers (Laemmle, for example) through the 1920s, by which time the targeted group was part of a multiethnic mass audience.”<sup>44</sup> This seems borne out by a review of Frank Capra’s *The Younger Generation*. The reviewer for *Variety* concluded that Capra’s film, coming on the heels of so many other films about immigrant Jewish life, was yet “another insincere attempt to sell sympathetic syrup to the Jewish public.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> By the time the film premiered, Yeziarska had seemingly converted to Christianity. In “A Message of Faith” published in *Motion Picture Classics* in 1922, Yeziarska sees the film medium as a bringer of Christian religious transformation, with the potential to reach millions of people who are “more hungry for beauty than they are for bread.” And it is “because of the multitude that the screen is great. I love the masses and that is why I love the screen. When Christ preached He preached to the multitude...[and] lifted them up.” The Jewishness of the characters has been subsumed to the universality of the film’s “message” of Christian redemption. Anzia Yeziarska, “A Message of Faith” transcribed by Faith Service. *Motion Picture Classics* (November 1922), 41 and 86.

<sup>44</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 73. Hansen sees the producers pursuing a dual strategy of attempting to attract both the working-class nickelodeon clientele and the middle-class viewer. But Hansen stops her analysis of what she calls the “Ghetto” films before 1920. And those scholars who have focused on the middle-class audiences, like Lary May and Kathryn Fuller, do not analyze the middle-class reception of films about immigrants. See May, *Screening Out the Past* and Kathryn Helgesen Fuller, “Shadowland: American Audiences and the Movie-Going Experience in the Silent Film Era (Ph.D. diss. Johns Hopkins University, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> “Younger Generation (Dialog),” *Variety* (March 20, 1929), 9.

## **The Jewish "Empire"**

It is significant that Jewish producers were responsible for the majority of these films. Jewish immigrants were drawn to the industry because of its newness and the relatively little capital it required. Unlike other businesses that were dominated by Gentiles, the fledgling movie-making business drew in Jews from the outset. Jewish immigrants like Samuel Goldwyn, Marcus Loew, Louis B. Mayer, Bud Schulberg, Irving Thalberg and the Warner Brothers (Harry, Jack, Albert and Sam) began to rent storefronts on the Lower East Side, in Harlem, and in other neighborhoods that happened to have high concentrations of Jews. When the German Jewish director Carl Laemmle broke the monopoly of the Motion Picture Patents Company (a conglomerate that had been formed in 1908 to control the film industry), these Jewish immigrants formed their own independent film studios in Hollywood along the lines of Laemmle's Universal Pictures.

Some of these producers, like Laemmle, were of German-Jewish extraction; German Jews had come to America in the mid-nineteenth century, before the massive waves of Eastern European Jewish immigration. German Jews had risen quickly to the top of the

financial world in New York, dominating the banking houses. Their attitude toward the Eastern European Jews was typically disdainful; they were afraid of being tarred with the same brush as these unwashed and uneducated immigrants. The tensions between the German Jews and Eastern European Jews are beautifully expressed in *His People* (1925), written by Alfred A. Cohn, who later wrote *The Jazz Singer*. (Robert Carringer has suggested that Cohn was tapped to work on *The Jazz Singer* because of this “Jewish-subject specialty.”<sup>46</sup>) Morris, the son of a poor Jewish immigrant romances the daughter of a German Jewish judge, telling her that he is an orphan. But when Morris’s father reads of the engagement party in the newspaper, he comes to the judge’s brownstone; Morris pretends that his father is a stranger and has him thrown out of the house. The Eastern European immigrant, in his long coat and beard, is a pathetic figure; he is ridiculously out of place in the upscale surroundings on Fifth Avenue.

The film industry did attract a considerable amount of anti-Semitism; Henry Ford attacked the Jewish “control” of Hollywood. But Ford demonized Jews as dominating the theatre as well, along with banking, journalism and many other fields--even agriculture!

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Carringer, ed., *The Jazz Singer* [annotated screenplay](Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 135.

Ford published an article in his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent* (the newspaper that he sent to all his automobile customers) that Jewish “control” of the film industry caused “trivializing and demoralizing influences.” Veronica and Paul King, a husband-and-wife team of British historians who wrote widely about American culture agreed. “From an art and a marvel,” they lamented, the cinema “speedily became a business and an industry.” This was all the fault of the Jewish producers, who had turned their financial wizardry to weakening the moral fiber of the country.<sup>47</sup>

What were the Hollywood producers’ attitude toward their Jewishness? Neil Gabler’s study of the Jewishness of the Hollywood moguls, *Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* argues that these men were eager to distance themselves from Judaism; they disdained their parents’ traditional ways as barriers to success in America. According to Gabler, although “[g]uilt ran too deep for them to disavow Judaism entirely...Jews were to be seen and not heard.”<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, except for *The Jazz Singer* (a film that Gabler takes as emblematic, despite its obvious differences

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in George Harmon Knowles, *The Jazz Age Revisited: British Criticism of American Civilization During the 1920s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), 121.

<sup>48</sup> Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 6.

from the other Jewish-themed films), the films about Jewish life present a remarkably positive picture of Jewishness.

Of *The Younger Generation* (1929), a film whose ending is openly critical of assimilation, Gabler speculates that its theme could not possibly reflect the attitudes of its producer, Harry Cohn. "It is hard to believe," snorts Gabler, "that Harry Cohn endorsed any of this or that he ever felt the slightest stress over assimilation himself." But Gabler wants to have it both ways; he also quotes an unnamed producer as saying that the Jewish moguls were so good at making films because "They *were* the audience. They were the same people. They were not too far removed from those primitive feelings and attitudes."<sup>49</sup> (emphasis in original) It seems only reasonable to conclude that the producers were ambivalent toward their Jewishness, not that they were entirely dismissive of it.

Even if many of the Jewish movie producers in Hollywood were only marginally affiliated with the Jewish community, it was a great source of pride to other American Jews that the studio heads almost

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<sup>49</sup> Gabler 34.. However, not all observers during the 1920s saw the movie moguls' attitudes as in tune with those of their audiences. As a British film journal, complained in 1924, perhaps with an anti-Semitic edge: "The typical American film reflects chiefly the mentality of many of the people who control the film industry, and these, for the most part, are as representative of real America as a Hottentot in gala dress is of Bond Street tailoring. Even the American public, the most insular in the world, is beginning to see that the mentality of many native producers may not be wholly a national asset." *Cinema* (February 21, 1924), reprinted in Harrison's Reports (April 5, 1924), 76.



all had Jewish names. An article in the *American Hebrew* written by the powerful film censor, Will Hays, hailed the brotherhood of those who worked in the industry "without thought of class, race, or creed, under the broader ideals of true service to their country and to their fellow men." Still, he singled out Jews for special mention, noting that "American Jews have made great and lasting contributions to the development and to the conduct of the motion picture—and consequently to the happiness and welfare of the world."<sup>50</sup> And on the appointment of Joseph Levenson, a Jew, to the position of secretary of the New York State Moving Picture Commission, an article in the newspaper declaimed:

Nothing speaks more eloquently for the vitality and enterprising spirit of the American Jews than the commanding role they are playing in the moving picture industry. In this, the youngest of our industries and arts, which daily affects the lives of countless millions whom it entertains and instructs, the position of the Jews is supreme: They lead both as producers and exhibitors, as is shown by such familiar names as Zukor, Selznick, Lasky, Loew, Fox, Cohen, and Lesser, to mention but a few. Nor do they lag behind as artists, for it is

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<sup>50</sup> Will H. Hays, "A Chronicle of Cinema Achievement," *American Hebrew* (November 22, 1929), 44. See also Franklin Gordon, "The Cinema at Its Peak,"

no secret that many of our movie stars, for all their euphonious disguises, belong to the mighty tribe of Cohen, fiercest and most numerous among New York's hosts in the late war.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the Jewish stars in many of their films, the producers did not attempt to hide their Jewish backgrounds. In fact, some of the producers (especially those who remained in New York, in contrast to those who moved to Hollywood), were affiliated with synagogues and remained to some degree active in Jewish life. Gabler concedes, often. Gabler explains that in New York, "Judaism wasn't something exotic and reproachful as it might have seemed in the West."<sup>52</sup> But Gabler then returns immediately to his main theme of cataloguing the Hollywood Jews' disdain for their own religion. Since it tends to undermine his argument, he assumes that the moguls actively suppressed any Jewish content of the films that their studios produced.

This has become a popular scholarly view. Mark Winokur concurs with Gabler, writing that "as ethnics gained greater control over the product, ethnicity disappeared from it."<sup>53</sup> This appears to

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*American Hebrew* (March 7, 1930), 586.

<sup>51</sup> "Joseph Levenson, Movie Censor," *American Hebrew* (July 29, 1921), 261.

<sup>52</sup> Gabler 285.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Winokur, *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 53.

contradict an earlier statement in Winokur's book that "until the 1950s overt representation of ethnicity on the screen was limited, with some notable exceptions, to stock characters and stereotypes."<sup>54</sup> Winokur thus redefines the nature of ethnic characters, disallowing those who are presented in stereotypical ways. The problem with this is that ethnic characters are always presented, at least to some extent, stereotypically. (How would make an ethnic character be recognizable to the audience without some measure of "stereotypical" qualities?) Winokur seems simply unfamiliar with the films that are the object of this study. In contrast to the plays about second generation Jewish life in New York, many of which were set in the areas of secondary settlement (mostly Brooklyn and the Bronx), the feature films are remarkable for their consistent use of the Lower East Side as a primary locale. The films thus served to preserve the memory of that experience, and to reconstruct and reconstitute it, in the most immediate way that the technology of the time afforded.

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<sup>54</sup> Winokur 43.

## **Nostalgia for the Ghetto**

The desire to prolong the association of Jewish life with the Lower East Side reflected, I would argue, a sense that the memories of the immigrant neighborhood were a crucial common denominator of both the immigrant and second generation Jewish experience. In addition to the important "local color" that setting films in the teeming ghetto provided, the films exploited both the fears and fantasies that accompanied increasing acculturation on the part of the second generation. As they moved farther and farther away, in both geographic and cultural terms, from the world of the ghetto, the members of the second generation were pulled back into it, in symbolic terms, through their viewing of these films. In the words of Hasia Diner, the story of the Lower East Side, as preserved in popular culture and memory, "reflected in microcosm the broad outlines of the metanarrative of the Jewish past." The Lower East Side thus came to stand for the Jewish immigrant experience itself; it reflected not just the Jewish immigrant experience in America, but the many periods in which Jews had to begin anew in a strange land.

Nostalgia, as historians have come to recognize, is an active process, in which the past is continuously remade according to the values of the present. The meaning of the Lower East Side in Jewish

culture has changed over time; it was not until the 1970s, with the publication of Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, that the ghetto took on a kind of retrospective golden aura and was hailed as the birthplace of American Jewish culture. But even by the 1920s, as Beth Wenger has written, the ghetto began to figure in the construction of second-generation Jewish identity. "The development of nostalgia for immigrant life was no retreat from the modernization and acculturation of Jews," she argues, "but rather an integral part of the ongoing reconstruction of Jewish consciousness in an American context."<sup>55</sup>

But nostalgia for an idealized past, and the deep-seated ambivalence about the future that it suggested, was not limited to Jews. Lawrence Levine has written that the "central paradox" of American history is a "belief in progress coupled with a dread of change; an urge towards the historical future combined with a longing for the irretrievable past; a deeply ingrained belief in America's unfolding destiny and a haunting conviction that the nation was in a state of decline."<sup>56</sup> The giddiness of Jazz Age life thus masked a kind of panic and desperation.

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<sup>55</sup> Beth S. Wenger, "Memory as Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side," *American Jewish History* 85 (March 1997), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, "Progress and Nostalgia: The Self Image of the Nineteen Twenties," in Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 191.

Levine's fruitful take on the 1920s is that despite the mood of excitement and optimism that characterized the Jazz Age, Americans feared that their values were slipping away. But despite the fact that this emphasis on traditionalism often intensified prejudice toward "aliens" and blacks, non-Jews could empathize with the contradictory attitudes toward the past that the Jewish-themed films encapsulated. The films about Jewish life seemed both forward-looking and backward-looking at the same time, celebrating the future but keeping an eye fixed on the past. The Jewish characters in the films typically shared the same need for reassurance as most Americans who, in Levine's words, "found it far easier to come to terms with the new if it could be surrounded somehow by the aura of the old." The new technologies (including the automobile, radio, and film itself) were both delightful and disorienting in their power to transform modern society.

In hindsight, then, the Lower East Side appears as a kind of staging ground, a place where Jews prepared to launch themselves for their true immigration. As Diner has written, the Lower East Side was "that metaphoric middle ground where Jews dwelled among themselves while waiting for permission to enter the real

America.”<sup>57</sup> And yet, as the films amply demonstrate, the life of the Lower East Side was richly textured in its own right; Mario Maffi has written that “even in Hollywood’s silent era, the multi-faceted life of the quarter, with its texture of lives, dreams and illusions, was a constant feature.”<sup>58</sup> Many of these films were shot, at least in part, on the Lower East Side, where they made ample use of the neighborhood’s local color—the pushcarts, tenements, and “exotically” dressed inhabitants.

Films about Jewish life thus permitted both Jewish producers and Jewish audiences to experience a kind of vicarious homecoming, but one that ultimately justified their movement away from the grinding poverty those homes represented. By honoring in this way their parents’ material sacrifices for the sake of their children, the second generation could assuage its guilt over having essentially left its parents behind in its movement toward acculturation into American society. Romanticizing the ghetto helped the second generation in some measure to transcend it.

The filmmakers elevated the Lower East Side to its mythic status, while at the same time they plumbed the Jewish audience’s

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<sup>57</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20.

<sup>58</sup> Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures on New York’s Lower East Side* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 285.

potent wellsprings of memory and emotion.<sup>59</sup> The films were rich in melodrama: landlords exploiting destitute tenants, children betraying their parents, parents disowning their children, siblings warring among themselves. At a time when, according to Beth Wenger, merchants and government officials on the Lower East Side were creating the image of “a packaged, safe, and colorfully exotic Jewish culture” in order to attract business from second generation Jews, the films depicted the neighborhood as remarkably dirty and dangerous. Although the city and neighborhood association were rehabilitating tenement buildings, reducing the number of pushcart peddlers, and cleaning the streets,<sup>60</sup> the films of the 1920s presented an image of the ghetto as the second generation Jews had experienced it as children. As Bodin wrote in the *American Hebrew* regarding *Hungry Hearts*, the settings “are so judiciously chosen that no one who knows the lower east side of New York could find fault with a single scene.”<sup>61</sup>

The plot in almost all of these films is of an immigrant family striking it rich and moving north from the ghetto to a fashionable

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<sup>59</sup> Of course, not all the people who viewed these films were Jewish. But the audience for them was clearly intended to be mostly Jewish, as evidenced by the films’ focus on Jewish life and use of Yiddish expressions.

<sup>60</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, “Telling Tales: Or, How a Slum Became a Shrine,” *Jewish Social Studies* 2:2 (Winter 1996): 55-57.

<sup>61</sup> Harry Sabbath Bodin, “An Epic of the Immigrant: Screen Version of ‘Hungry Hearts’ on Broadway,” *American Hebrew* (September 8, 1922), 387.



upper-class neighborhood—something that almost never happened in reality. For example, in the Warner Brothers film *Millionaires* (1926), starring George Sidney and Vera Gordon, a Jewish couple moves from Hester Street to a forty-room mansion on Riverside Drive. Only in one, *Hungry Hearts*, does the family make a more realistic move to a house in the suburbs.<sup>62</sup> In some (*The Cohens and the Kellys*, *April Fools*), it is the immigrant fathers who suddenly become rich, either through chance or through dint of hard work and business acumen; in others (*Humoresque*, *The Younger Generation*) it is the son's success that makes possible the family's economic rise. But in film after film, the sudden contrast is shown between tenement life on the Lower East Side and the high life of the upper class.

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<sup>62</sup> An article in the *American Hebrew*, published just a few months before the premiere of *Hungry Hearts*, noted that Jews were beginning to move to the suburbs of Long Island and Westchester. Interestingly, the article speculates that "the first break in the solid city ranks of New York Jewry was made not by born-and-bred New Yorkers, but by men and women who came from the Middle West, the West and the South for business professional reasons to live in the metropolis." Their reason for leaving, the article suggested, was that they "could not accommodate themselves to the conditions of the New York apartments." "Suburbanizing It: The Trend of Home Life is Away from the City to the Country," *American Hebrew* (April 14, 1922), 606-608.

## **That Neighborhood Feeling**

The sense of neighborhood is extremely important in these films, as is the idealized sense of community. When Leon, the world-famous violinist in *Humoresque*, comes back to the Lower East Side to play for an audience of his "own people," he is expressing a sense of pride in his origins. The way that *Humoresque* shows the concert hall audience is especially revealing. The balcony seems to be entirely filled with old immigrant Jews—the women wear wigs and the men wear derby hats and beards. Similarly, the on-stage audience, which sits facing the rest of the audience, seems also mostly composed of immigrant Jews. But the audience in the orchestra is composed of young people, who are fashionably attired and much less ethnically identifiable. Leon's fans belong to a community that is clearly in the process of the change, but a community that nevertheless can unite in its appreciation of a home-grown musical prodigy.

In other films, the Lower East Side was shown rather less appealingly, as a neighborhood in which Jews exploited one another for financial gain. For example, in *April Fools*, an immigrant umbrella maker, played by Alexander Carr (of *Potash and Perlmutter* fame) falls into the clutches of a business and romantic rival, who

ultimately extorts from him all his possessions. However, in the end the umbrella maker wins the hand of the local delicatessen owner. And in *Hungry Hearts*, an immigrant mother played by Rosa Rosanova paints her kitchen a sparkling white only to have the venal Jewish landlord raise the rent. In her rage she attacks the kitchen walls with a meat cleaver (literally “breaking down the ghetto walls,” as Lester Friedman has astutely observed) and is arrested by the police. But when her case comes up in court, the judge frees her and lambastes the landlord for his greed. While these films have happy endings, the neighborhood itself is viewed as a place that one needs to escape from in order to preserve one’s sanity. When the family ultimately moves to the suburbs, thanks to help from their daughter’s husband (a lawyer who used to work for the landlord), they seem to have achieved their middle class dream at last.

The desire to become middle class unites the characters in many of these films, as is especially apparent through their attitudes toward clothing. The Jewish characters tend have a large emotional investment in clothing as a marker of American identity. In *His People*, the elder son, Morris, demands a new suit from his father, saying that he needs it for his job as a lawyer. The penniless father pawns his heavy winter coat (one of his few remaining possessions from Eastern Europe), trading it for a suit for his son. But the son

takes one look at the second-hand suit and tosses it in the garbage can outside his parents' tenement building. The gap between the father's and son's different notions of the clothes that "real Americans" wear is painfully clear.

Similarly, in *Hungry Hearts*, the daughter, Sara, tells her father to earn money so that she can have work clothes for her job in a shirtwaist factory. She is encouraged in this by the factory owner, Mindel, who tells her she can transform herself from a "nobody" to a "somebody" by changing her "greenhorn" clothes for a more "American" outfit. Her father later gets the idea that his wife, Hanneh, should also have some fancier clothes; he buys her a ridiculously inappropriate hat with a feather--"like Mrs. Vanderbilt's, three years ago." Hanneh's expression when she wears it is priceless; she is pleased by his attentions but bewildered by his buying something so useless in the ghetto. But the couple's fantasies about the hat (a potential prop, perhaps, in their sexual activities) marks in a particularly poignant way the gap between their material possessions and the lifestyle to which they aspire.

## **Moving On Up**

However, these films suggest that the price for economic success is often high, in that it entails the loss of the ethnic community. Thus is the basic theme of *The Cohens and the Kellys*, the series of six Jewish-Irish film comedies that starred the Jewish comic George Sidney and Irish comic Charlie Murray. The original film, as mentioned earlier, was clearly inspired by *Abie's Irish Rose*. It was based more explicitly, however, on Aaron Hoffman's play *Two Blocks Away*, a drama that I discussed in the last chapter. In the first installment, a conniving, unkempt Jewish shop-owner suddenly inherits a fortune and moves his family to Park Avenue. But he is not happy, especially because his intermarried daughter remains on the Lower East Side. He moves back when his daughter has a child, and when he finds out that the money belongs to the Irishman rather than to him.

Similarly, *The Younger Generation* is a film about a successful second generation Jew who moves his family to a mansion on Fifth Avenue. But his elderly father, Julius, complaining that he is "cold all the time" and that he "hasn't been warm since we left Delancey Street," ventures back to the old neighborhood for comfort and

solace. (The critic for *Motion Picture News* joked that the character “longs for the old bearded cronies who speak his language.”<sup>63</sup>)

The filmmakers exploited the power of the medium to show the characters’ suddenly transformed circumstances and places of residence; in one frame the characters are living in a hovel, in the next they are living on Park Avenue. At a time when most Americans were enjoying the fruits of the post-World War I economic boom, these films gratified the widespread fantasy that sudden riches could come even to people who seemed least likely to succeed. If immigrants, who were hampered by their unfamiliarity with the English language and with American manners, could make it big, the prospects for “ordinary” Americans seemed almost unlimited.

These fantasies were promoted by the entire film-going experience, not just by what was presented on the screen. Lary May has written about the exotic theater “palaces” that opened throughout the country in the second and third decades of the twentieth century; he notes that theater owners furnished their theaters with opulent decors, including grand staircases, large gilt-framed mirrors (suggesting the movie screen itself), and elaborate facades. May quotes one observer’s impression that these “Million

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<sup>63</sup> Freddie Schader, “The Younger Generation,” *Motion Picture News* (March 23, 1929), 923.

Dollar" cinemas offered patrons "a gilded mansion for the weekly invasion of those who lived in stuffy apartments, a gorgeous canopy to spread over a cramped and limited life."<sup>64</sup> When patrons entered the theater and viewed themselves in the ornate mirrors, May suggests, they could imagine that they were themselves the stars of the films.<sup>65</sup>

As discussed earlier, in the section on marketing the films, movies became a commodity like other American consumer products. And as Douglas Gomery has pointed out, the movie palaces were built in the shopping districts of middle class neighborhoods, making an implicit link between moviegoing and other forms of capitalist consumption.<sup>66</sup> The luxurious cinema interiors promoted fantasies of instant upward mobility, much as

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<sup>64</sup> Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 158. Jews were also prominent in building movie theaters. See, for example, "Jack Shapiro: Builder of Cinema Palaces," *American Hebrew* (March 7, 1930), 612.

<sup>65</sup> Since Jews were associated with the Orient, the more exotic these theaters became, the more they appeared to some observers to manifest "Jewish" qualities. As the British author Eric Linklater described Grauman's Chinese Theater in his popular satire, *Juan in America*, the famous theater was built "with grotesque extravagance. This was the Hebraic conception of a Chinese pagoda. Signs of a Semitic renaissance were frequent indeed, more especially in interior decoration, where there was such a willful splendour of carved flowers and pomegranates, knopfs, palm trees overlaid with gold, pillars of brass and golden hinges, as would have made Solomon's house of Lebanon look bare as a barn. This Jewish exuberance jostled with Spanish and Indian styles...." Eric Linklater, *Juan in America* (London: J. Cape and H. Smith, 1931) 392-3.

<sup>66</sup> Douglas Gomery, "The Movie Palace Comes to America's Cities," in Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 139-40.

the Broadway set for *Abie's Irish Rose* did. According to Richard Butsch, these theaters "recapitulated on a larger scale the palaces of Keith era vaudeville," in which even the working class had been welcome.<sup>67</sup>

### **Conflict Between Parents and Children**

The content of the films about Jewish immigrants discussed in this chapter also spoke to one of the inherent promises of American capitalism, that children could be expected to do better economically than their parents had done. The desire to see their children succeed was not entirely selfless; it derived partly from the parents' need to be taken care of in their old age. Children were expected to have an abundant sense of gratitude for their parents' sacrifices on their behalf. But some of the films showed the opposite: the children acting out their sense of shame about their immigrant parents, even to the point of publicly humiliating and disowning them. Kevin Brownlow has suggested that *Humoresque* was popular among Jewish audiences because it "exploited" the second generation's "suppressed sense of guilt" at having rebelled

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<sup>67</sup> Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 161.



against its parents, while at the same time as it reassured the immigrant parents that their children were not necessarily lost to them.

Both *His People* and *The Younger Generation* show the dangers of sons getting too big for their britches in this way, forgetting the respect they owe their fathers. The most poignant moments in *His People* and *The Younger Generation* occur when sons turn their backs on their fathers, refusing to be associated with them. (The opposite, of course, occurs in *The Jazz Singer*; it is the father who cuts his ties with his son.) In *His People*, Morris pretends not to recognize his father when he comes to his son's engagement party (to which the immigrant parents have not been invited, the son having told his fiancée's family that he is an orphan). In *The Younger Generation* it is the scene in which Morris pretends that his father, laden with packages, is a servant; he lambastes him in front of the guests for not using the servants' entrance.

Furthermore, in *The Younger Generation*, it is the son who believes his parents should be grateful to him, rather than the other way around. "If it wasn't for me," Morris tells them, "you'd still be rotting down on Delancey Street. But I'm going to make real people out of you, whether you like it or not." Julius has become totally emasculated by his own son, who gives orders to the butler that his

father cannot have his clothes until after his bath. "What will Morris say, you staying in bed all day?" asks Mama. "I'm sick from what Morris says," he responds. "I wish I was back on the East Side!" Mama rejoins, "How could Morris get into society—with his father on the East Side?" According to his mother, Morris is measured not by his own accomplishments, but by who his father is, and where his father lives. But the mother is mistaken; the real problem is Morris' own sense of self, which seems compromised by his parents' poverty.

But Morris is unable to see this; he congratulates himself on having done his parents a tremendous favor by rescuing them from the ghetto. He confers upon them meaningless luxury and utter disempowerment. As Birdie accuses her brother, "Who buried [papa] in this cold Italian tomb and make him look like an antique?" Morris, who has risen from junk salesman to art dealer, has turned his own parents into *objets d'art*. They are reduced, metaphorically, to decorations, to frozen statues. By "burying" or imprisoning his parents, Morris is able to wreak a kind of subconscious revenge—showing them what he lacked in his own childhood, he turns them into dependent children whom he can order around. They become just like items in his inventory. When his father still manages to embarrass him by bringing objects from the Lower East

Side back to the mansion, Morris is infuriated. After all, his new home is defined by the object it contains; by infecting one habitat with the artifacts of the other the distinction between the two places collapses.

### **Fathers and Sons**

The son's sense of masculinity, in both cases, seems to depend on his ability to humiliate his own father. In a culture that feminized immigrant Jewish men, the sons appeared to need not to contradict the stereotypes, but to show that they were somehow immune from them. By moving upward in social class, they could detach from themselves the kinds of societal labels that stuck so persistently to their fathers. Interestingly, the younger son in *His People* is less caught up in an Oedipal conflict with his father; he expresses his masculinity by becoming a prizefighter. Nevertheless, his sobriquet, Battling Rooney, suggests that he must pretend to be Irish rather than Jewish in order to project the proper image in the boxing ring.

The son's success thus often threatens to reduce the father to irrelevance. His resentment towards his son is perhaps rooted most powerfully in jealousy of his son's success. In *The Jazz Singer*, Jakie returns to his parents' apartment as an adult and promises his

mother (in one of the few talking sequences in the film) that he will give her the money to move from the Lower East Side to the Bronx. By doing so, however, he would symbolically castrate his own father, whose role it is to make such decisions for the family. The contest is between the two men over control of the family. Still, Jakie ultimately bows to his father's wishes in returning to the synagogue. Similarly, in *His People* the rebellious son ultimately learns that his father is boss, and that he must respect him.

Many historians who have written on the 1920s have emphasized the popularization of Sigmund Freud's theories in America during the decade. The popularity of Freud's ideas has been viewed as contributing to the liberalization of attitudes toward sexuality during the period, and helping to give rise to the image of the flapper in popular culture.<sup>68</sup> But although they have described the ways in which films of the period reflected changing sexual mores, scholars have not emphasized the ways in which the films also presented family conflicts that Americans could understand in Freudian terms. Americans could embrace the representations of

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Patricia Erens, "The Flapper: Hollywood's First Liberated Woman," in Laurence R. Broer and John D. Walther, eds., *Dancing Fools and Weary Blues: The Great Escape of the Twenties* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1990), 130-139.

ethnic characters portrayed in the Jewish-themed films because they depicted family relationships that seemed universal.

### **The Jewish Mother Redux**

For example, the mother in the Jewish-themed films was invariably played by one of two actresses, Rosa Rosanova or Vera Gordon. The mother's influence over her son often dominated the plot, as in *The Jazz Singer* where it seems as if Jake's mother is actually his primary love interest. The son and father battle for the mother's attention. Thus although the mother is often cast as the mediator of the father-son conflict, the mother also often seems to some degree responsible for the conflict in the first place by favoring her son over her husband. When the mother berates her husband for his lack of economic success in contrast to his son, she fans the flame of the Oedipal conflict between the two men.

The Jewish mother in these films is thus not quite the feminist icon that many would like to see. For example, Sharon Pucker Rivo has argued that "[a]fter World War I the image of Jewish women [in film] was transformed to that of capable, strong and independent

mothers and daughters.”<sup>69</sup> But the immigrant mothers in the Jewish-themed films of the 1920s seem actually to be relatively disempowered; they tend to live vicariously through their sons. In both *Humoresque* and *The Younger Generation*, the mother expresses her frustration with the family’s poverty by continually insulting the father’s inability to succeed in business; she holds up to him their son as a model. But by doing so, she has imperiled her son’s sense of self; without a father to provide a kind of bridge to the real world, he has little sense of himself as a man.

The mother is also typically unable to avoid the rupture in the father-son relationship. For example, in *The Jazz Singer*, she tries to make peace between the two men to no avail. (In *His People*, she succeeds in stopping her husband from beating their younger son since it is the eve of the Sabbath, but she can do nothing to prevent their elder son from both taking advantage of and disrespecting his father.) While in some ways the films reinforced the stereotype of the *Yiddishe mameh* (the overbearing, excessively nurturing but also extremely controlling figure), in other ways they showed Jewish mothers as helpless and dependent.

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<sup>69</sup> Sharon Pucker Rivo, “Projected Images: Portraits of Jewish Women in Early American Film,” in Joyce Antler, ed, *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 34.

Unable to take charge of her own fate, the Jewish mother inevitably became an object of pity. In an article on Jewish mothers in the *American Hebrew*, Zelda Popkin pointed to the centrality of the Jewish mother in popular culture; she remarked that the figure appears in “all films and fiction about Jews—recall *Humoresque*.” But Popkin opined that this “loquacious, family-loving, full bosomed maternal type,”<sup>70</sup> paradoxically remains an “alien” while she “rears Americans.” In Popkin’s words, “She must create a new generation in strange surroundings—watch it grow up and away from her—and then, her duty done, melt into the drab background, from which she emerged often as much of an alien as ever.”<sup>71</sup> The immigrant mother, in other words, is heroically self-sacrificing; she is perennially left behind as her children acculturate into American society. She has sacrificed herself to their Americanization. They have outgrown her and her culture.

Nowadays *Humoresque* seems both dated and trite. Kevin Brownlow calls the picture “basically hokum” and remarks that its “style of highly wrought sentimentality became identified with Hollywood for four decades and is common to a hundred other

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<sup>70</sup> Zelda F. Popkin, Mother Love in Mean Streets, *The American Hebrew* (May 5, 1922), 700.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

pictures.” Still, the success of *Humoresque* among both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences is not difficult to understand. After all, almost all parents watch their children grow up and take different paths from the ones the parents would have chosen for them. Most of the film is taken up by Leon living out his mother’s dream (not necessarily his own) in becoming a violinist. (By contrast, as Laurence Reid pointed out in his review of the picture in *Motion Picture News*, the father, “commercial in his viewpoint, prayed for a child who could make ‘moosic’ with a cash register.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, when Leon plays for the Lower East Side audience, the immigrants in the audience all seem to be stand-ins for his parents; Leon wants to please his parents the most. Even after he becomes an adult, his mother still insists that he sit in her lap. Although Leon resists and complains, he still complies. He is unable to refuse his mother’s infantilizing treatment.

Leon detaches himself from his mother in stages. His decision to go off to war, even before being drafted, is her worst nightmare, and does in fact result in his injury. He chooses his duty to “Uncle Sam” above his career and, in a sense, above his loyalty to his mother. And the end of the film (unlike in the short story, which ends with his enlistment) shows that it is not Leon’s mother who can

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<sup>72</sup> Laurence Reid, “Humoresque,” *Motion Picture News* (May 15, 1920), 423.



keep his music alive, but his fiancée. Leon has traded one Jewish woman for another, and although the effect of this on his mother is not really seen, this represents his final independence from her control. Although the film is about an extraordinarily nurturing mother, it is also about an extraordinarily controlling one. But the mother-son relationship still seemed to have elements of universality, at least at the time the film was produced. Reid called *Humoresque* “a picture with a soul” that “will move to the depths all who have imagination, feeling and sympathy no matter how repressed or neglected.”<sup>73</sup>

I'd like to end by recalling *The Jazz Singer*. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Neil Gabler wrote that the film's ending sidesteps the issue of Jake's primary loyalty. He argues that the film “swiftly and painlessly, dissolves the problem altogether.” For Gabler, this is emblematic of the Jewish movie moguls' use of Hollywood to give themselves a kind of symbolic rebirth. He cites Jack Warner's remarriage to a Catholic woman as “a symbol of the same old battle: the young assimilated American Jew defying the authority of the past to establish the supremacy of the

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<sup>73</sup> However, not all have agreed with this assessment over the years; for example, the film critic Harry Potamkin called *Humoresque* “the forerunner to the grimly funny lot born of *Abie's Irish Rose*, those fearful narrations of Irish-Jewish amities and enmities.” Potamkin 368.

future...between obligations and aspirations, between the old and the new, between Judaism and America." Gabler calls this "a kind of paradigm of the tensions of assimilation generally, just as *The Jazz Singer* was its clearest, most paradigmatic artistic expression."<sup>74</sup>

The film was remade twice, in 1952 and in 1980. (It was also done as a radio version in 1936 and 1947, and as a television movie in 1959; the television version starred Jerry Lewis, who sang the Kol Nidrei in blackface!) The 1952 film version, starring Danny Thomas, moved the story to an affluent suburb of Philadelphia, and barely sidestepped the issue of intermarriage by having Jack's love interest, played by Peggy Lee, say that she had not been to a Passover seder since she left home. The 1980 version, starring the pop star Neil Diamond, openly intermarries a woman named Molly Bell, played by Lucie Arnaz. (The cantor is played by Laurence Olivier.) As Steve Whitfield has pointed out, it is she who becomes the voice of Jack's Jewish conscience; by insisting that he not lose his ethnic identity, she "demonstrates how baseless the ancient Jewish anxieties about intermarriage really are."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Neil Gabler, "Sound & Fury: The Making of the First Talkie, 'The Jazz Singer,' is a Story of Hollywood's Jewish Heritage." *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (July 31, 1988), 37.

<sup>75</sup> Steve Whitfield, "Jazz Singers: A Hollywood Bomb—But, Inadvertently, An Accurate Portrayal of the American Jewish Condition," *Moment* (March-April, 1981), 24.

Whitfield views the film as helping to advance the assimilation of Jews into American society. In its distance from Jewish tradition, Whitfield calls the film a “parable of modernization, a sign of the eclipse of the sacred, a testament to what the sociologist Max Weber labelled ‘the disenchantment of the world.’” Whitfield argues that it was Jolson’s very success and the “pride and identification that he fostered” that “helped to erode [the Jewish] community....By proving that they could make it in America, the popular entertainers and the businessmen behind them made the distinctive subculture of the immigrants seem parochial, stunted and doomed.” Whitfield concludes that “By articulating our common dreams and in permeating much of our experience, [popular culture] also homogenized our lives and helped to shatter the context of the particular.”<sup>76</sup>

This argument makes sense if all one knows of the popular culture of the period is *The Jazz Singer*. But, as I hope I have demonstrated in this chapter, there were many films that did not end as *The Jazz Singer* did, and that conveyed quite different messages. These films showed what Whitfield calls the “particular” as viable, vibrant and enduring--not in the final stages of merging with American society. Although the children of Jewish immigrants

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<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

are not shown as clinging to the faith and the folkways of their parents, there are also quite pointedly not shown as entirely rejecting the culture that gave birth to them. Although the changing images of Jews in American film did have an effect on the place of Jews in American culture, it was not simply to collapse the distinctions between Jews and other Americans. As with the vaudeville stage and with the Broadway theater, the very fact that Jews were represented in popular culture became a source of acute ethnic pride for Jews—reinforcing Jewish identity rather than destabilizing it.

## **CONCLUSION**

**This study has attempted to show the role of popular culture in the acculturation process of second generation New York Jews. Jewish-themed entertainment celebrated Jews' movement into the mainstream of American society; at the same time, it mirrored in many ways the ambivalence that Jews felt about being Jewish in an anti-Semitic culture. I have argued that Jewish popular culture both advanced and resisted the movement of Jews into the mainstream of American life.**

**Jewish entertainment was both nostalgic and future-oriented; it referred back to the immigrant life of the ghetto and forward to the diminishing boundaries between Jews and other groups in American groups. In vaudeville, Jewish entertainers were both sympathetic and self-denigrating, self-aggrandizing and self-parodying, exultant and confused—all of which fed gloriously into their riotous comedy. On Broadway, a string of comedies flattered the second generation's upward mobility as they moved to the outer boroughs and into the lower middle class. In silent film, Jews were seen as coping with the same basic struggles, and having the same aspirations, as other Americans. But Jewish popular culture was**

targeted at both Jews and non-Jews; while Jews could feel proud about having truly “arrived” in American culture, non-Jews could feel connected to the universal aspects of the Jewish experience.

The extent to which these representations and images shored up Jewish ethnicity is a difficult question. It may be a central tenet of the growing field of Performance Studies that, as Harley Erdman has pithily put it, performances “shape material and cultural reality,” but it is notoriously difficult to establish the cause and effect relationship. The fact that Jewish stereotypes have changed over time seems clear, and I have tried to trace some of the changes. Nevertheless, one of the most interesting aspects of the older, essentially anti-Semitic Jewish stereotypes is their persistence into the second generation culture rather than their outright disappearance, as Erdman and others had speculated. Second generation Jews needed these caricatures in order to flatter themselves that they had moved beyond them.

But what were the new, second generation Jewish stereotypes that first co-existed with the immigrant stereotypes on stage and screen, and were gradually to replace them? What was left when the immigrant mannerisms, dialect and clothing were replaced with a

more “up-to-date” and “Americanized” appearance? What were the characteristic beliefs, feelings and attitudes that were characteristically “Jewish” for the second generation? And what were the differences between Jewish men and Jewish women in this regard? I have tried to get at this in discussing the differences between the Jewish male and Jewish female stereotypes of the second generation, but the question remains a difficult one. Perhaps it was the very fact of their grappling with issues of Jewish identity and continuity that made Jewish characters Jewish. For the second generation, this process of producing and consuming representations was itself a constituent element in the formation of the new second generation Jewish ethnicity.

How essential are these representations and images for the sustenance of the ethnic community? The second generation Jewish neighborhoods in New York declined, but few would attribute the cause to the lack of Jewish characters on radio, stage, film or television; they fell victim to a series of social changes including the choking off of immigration, Depression-era poverty, poor city

planning, and an eventual rise in crime and drugs<sup>1</sup>. But Jewish-themed entertainment remained strong, even during the Depression; highlights included Gertrude Berg's radio show *The Goldbergs*, and Clifford Odets' play *Awake and Sing!* both of which focus on Jewish families in the Bronx. In the 1940s, the garment workers' union put on Harold Rome's musical *Pins and Needles* and dancers like Anna Sokolow and Helen Tamiris created memorable Jewish-themed dances. After the Second World War there was a clear falling off of Jewish-themed entertainment, at least in film; Lester Friedman calls the period "the low point in terms of Jewish characterization."<sup>2</sup> But by the 1960s, explicitly Jewish characters begin to reappear; the decade spawned the all-time most popular Jewish musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the stories of Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem; the musical was embraced by American Jews both for its nostalgic evocation of the Eastern European *shtetl* and for expressing their own conflicted feelings about being Jewish in the modern world.

Still, partly as a result of the 1967 war in Israel that awakened

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<sup>1</sup> See Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Friedman 135.



many American Jews' dormant Jewish identity, it became fashionable once again to claim a Jewish identity. In the multicultural era in which we live now, Jewish characters are common on our stages and screens, particularly on television, where many of the television producers, directors and writers are Jews. A crucial difference between contemporary Jewish characters and those of the interwar era, however, is that Jewish characters nowadays tend to be marginal Jews, not part of a family and/or community that supports their Jewish identity.

Although male Jewish stereotypes have continued their century-long decline, Jewish female characters continue to be portrayed in particularly stereotypical ways. As Joyce Antler has pointed out, the simultaneous pride and discomfort that Jews typically feel about the unprecedented level of success that Jews have achieved in American society has led to Jewish characters being portrayed in extreme ways; she identifies "erasure" and "exaggeration" as bipolar modes. Antler focuses on *The Nanny* (a show that started in 1993), starring Fran Drescher as Fran Fine, a loud-mouthed Jewish caregiver for the children of an upper-crust non-Jewish British theatrical producer. Fran's nasal inflection, use

of occasional Yiddish words, consuming materialism, fondness for Eastern European Jewish food, and preoccupation with getting married (to her rich employer, if possible) are all, as Antler reminds us, traits associated with the Jewish American Princess. Antler condemns Fran's ethnic identity as an "artificial, exaggerated Jewishness, drawn from anomalous images and negative stereotypes—Jewish women's self-centered and encompassing desires for money, men and food—that are long out of date and mostly fictional in origin."<sup>3</sup>

Jewishness on television, unlike in the popular culture of the Jazz Age, has thus become a kind of designer ethnicity, in which it remains firmly on the surface and is a matter of labelling rather than content. Antler calls it "an attitude, a phrase, even a set of clothes—glitzy, gaudy and ornate."<sup>4</sup> Rather than exotic and different, Jewishness has become stylish and chic.

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for Jewish issues to pop up on TV. In the 1980s an episode of *thirtysomething* explored issues of intermarriage between Jews and Christians, and in the 1990s a

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce Antler, "Jewish Women on Television: Too Jewish or Not Enough?" epilogue to Antler, ed., *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 246.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

subplot of an episode of *Law and Order* featured a lawsuit against an elderly *mohel* (Jewish ritual circumciser) for a botched *bris* (circumcision). *Northern Exposure* presented the character Joel Fleischmann, a young Jewish doctor living in Alaska, the references to his ethnicity were limited to the Eastern European foods he craved and occasional references to Jewish weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Other recent shows were *Brooklyn Bridge*, a 1992 series that showed a 1950s acculturated Jewish family, and *Chicken Soup*, starring the stand-up comic Jackie Mason.

But the show that has received by far the most scholarly attention is *Seinfeld*, a long-running show of the 1990s, now in syndication. This show also featured a stand-up comic, Jerry Seinfeld, who played himself, alongside other actors playing roles that also often seemed to be Jewish, or at least ethnic in some way. Each episode had the characters dealing with some awkward situation related to their general inability to get along with other people. Interestingly, it seemed clear from the dialogue that the character of Jerry's friend Elaine (who happened to be played by a Jewish actress by the name of Julia Louis-Dreyfus) was not Jewish. But since the character of George Constanza, Jerry's best friend, was

given an Italian last name, most viewers assumed that he was Italian. The guessing game about both the actors' and characters' ethnicities actually seemed to be a major part of the show's appeal for Jews; interestingly, many non-Jews, especially those living outside New York, took the show simply to be about New Yorkers.

How "Jewish" the show was remains a matter of debate. The Australian Jewish Studies scholar Jon Stratton has argued in a recent book that "the underlying narrative issue of *Seinfeld* is...intrinsically Yiddish"<sup>5</sup> in that the plots tend to revolve around issues that are not generally discussed in public, such as masturbation and racism.<sup>6</sup> But Stratton, taking off from Carla Johnson's article asserting that George plays the *schlemiel* to Jerry's *schlimazel* (two categories of losers that recur in Jewish literature)<sup>7</sup>, often ties himself into knots in trying to assert that the content of the show is Jewish. At one point he avers that "what is central to *Seinfeld* is not that its characters are, or are not, Jews, by any

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<sup>5</sup> Jon Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000), 282.

<sup>6</sup> This is an odd argument. However, it is true that Yiddish seems to be associated with things that are slightly shameful; the only reason I can think of for this is that one often hears the children of Yiddish-speaking parents recall that their parents used Yiddish when they wanted to discuss something without their children understanding what they were talking about.

<sup>7</sup> Carla Johnson, "Luckless in New York," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22 (3), 1994: 116-124.

conventional definition, but its content, its Jewishness in the sense of the show's utilisation of the Yiddish problem of understanding and learning that definitionally modern, and bourgeois, way of living, civility.”<sup>8</sup>

Stratton's use of the words “Jewish” and “Yiddish” interchangeably is part of the problem; the words mean the same, but their usages are quite different today. In fact, what is missing from *Seinfeld*, and from most of contemporary popular culture, is precisely the *Yiddishkayt*, or grounding in Eastern European Jewish culture, that so underlay a large proportion of urban popular entertainment in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Stratton's real contribution is his notion of “Jewish moments” rather than substantive Jewish content in television sitcoms. But even these “moments” are few and far between, and they reflect only a very loose hold on Jewish religion and culture. For example, viewers learned that the character of Grace Adler on NBC's Emmy-winning comedy *Will and Grace* (a character based on a childhood friend of the show's co-creator/executive producer, Max Mutchnick) was Jewish through a story she told about breaking one Yom Kippur

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<sup>8</sup> Stratton 282.

fast with a cheeseburger. But the episode gave little sense of what the holiday ever meant to her, or why she felt compelled to eat the cheeseburger.

Still, according to Nora Lee Mandel, Grace, played by Brooklyn-born Jewish actress Debra Messing, has an “unusual level of Jewish identity for women on TV,” since she also has mentioned that she had a bat mitzvah and ten years of “Sunday school.” (Interestingly, Grace also insists that if she has children she will raise them as Jews--contrary to Will’s desire, if he ends up as the sperm donor.) But Mandel points out that Grace has “not yet breached that last taboo for Jewish women on TV: dating a Jewish man.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the only couples shown on television in which both husband and wife are Jewish are elderly ones, like Jerry Seinfeld’s parents on *Seinfeld*.

When Jewishness momentarily erupts in these shows, it functions as a fleeting reminder of a cultural context, a way of life, that the characters can only gesture to, as if waving farewell. This is remarkably similar to the attitude that the second generation had

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<sup>9</sup>Nora Lee Mandel, “Set Your VCR’s: Jewish Women and Their Hair Appearing on TV This Season,” *Lilith* (Fall 2001), 5.

toward the Lower East Side during the Jazz Age. The difference is that now Jewishness itself is in the process of being left behind; it can be recalled with affection because it represents the past. But the past is no longer represented on stage and screen in the way the ghetto was in the culture of the Jazz Age; there is little conscious memory of anything specifically Jewish to relate to or grapple with. It is this ignorance about Jewish tradition that poses the greatest problems for Jewish continuity.

Intermarriage is also a continuing source of concern, however, and many have speculated about the effect of pop culture images on the intermarriage rate. The sociologist Egon Mayer has suggested that one way to stem the tide of intermarriage in the United States is to create more frequent and more positive images of Jews in film and television. When intermarriage becomes the norm in popular culture rather than, as in the 1920s, a curiosity and amusing departure from the way most Jews live, the future of the American Jewish community may be in jeopardy. According to a television scriptwriter, Elias Davis, programs that never show Jews dating or marrying other Jews create a "powerful message to teens who are

starting to get involved in relationships.” At a time when the number of American Jews is already dropping, he argued, “This kind of propaganda is going to lead to an even quicker decrease in the number of Jews.”<sup>10</sup>

The routines of Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor were funny because they helped their second-generation audiences both to laugh at themselves, which was pleasurable in a self-deprecating way, but also because they spoke to the second generation’s genuine difficulties in finding a stable, coherent, unified sense of self in American society. Some have described contemporary American Jews as still struggling with the same issues that, I have argued, characterized the second generation’s ambivalence about their Jewishness. As Norman Kleebat, the curator of the 1996 exhibit at New York’s Jewish Museum, *Too Jewish*, argues in the exhibit catalog, these third and fourth generation artists are “the first generation to have grown up watching their American and Jewish reflections on the television screen....[T]hey have reaped the contentious rewards of assimilation and Americanization, while

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Ellen Jaffe McClain, *Embracing the Stranger: Intermarriage and the Future of the American Jewish Community* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 102.



nevertheless experiencing marginalization, alienation and the subtle anti-Semitism that still permeates American culture."<sup>11</sup> Kleebat argues that the confusion that American Jewish artists feel about their Jewishness is itself the constitutive element in their work on Jewish themes.

A larger danger, however, is that many American Jews have little or no knowledge of their heritage, and thus nothing to grapple with or feel confused about. This means that Jewish tradition is occasionally even portrayed in unintentionally negative ways on television. A recent episode of *Friends*, broadcast last Thanksgiving, showed Ross (a Jewish character on the show) in an armadillo costume, trying to explain to his son the meaning of Chanukah while Chandler (a non-Jewish character) was garbed in a Santa Claus suit. Although it is unlikely that the creators of the show intended this, having the Jew marked as alien and ugly (and a target for derision) recapitulated long-standing anti-Semitic stereotypes about the Jew's body. It is thus not surprising that Ross only gives a one-

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<sup>11</sup> Norman Kleebat, curator, *Too Jewish?* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1996.) This exhibit of Jewish self-representation in contemporary art included sketches drawn by Art Spiegelman in the process of his work on the Holocaust-themed comic book, *Maus*, Dennis Kardon's set of plaster casts of Jewish noses, and Cary Liebowitz and Rhonda Lieberman's Hanukah menorah in the shape of lipsticks protruding from a Chanel pocketbook.

sentence explanation of Chanukah (having to do with the Maccabees) and that although the episode ends with the lighting of the Chanukah menorah, Chanukah seemed paltry and poorly-understood in comparison with Christmas.

As Jews have journeyed farther and farther from the Lower East Side, they have thus found themselves with less and less upon which to base a viable ethnic identity. Even the fondness that many American Jews retain for traditional Jewish foods is not sufficient to sustain Jewish identity, despite what has been dubbed the “gastronomic” Jew—the Jew whose Jewish identity is expressed only through the consumption of Jewish food.

The proliferation of “kosher-style” delicatessens in posh urban neighborhoods, like Artie’s on New York’s Upper West Side, points to the oddly half-hearted quality of their patrons’ nostalgic desire for the foods of their childhood. The menus of these restaurants include bacon and ham, and meat sandwiches are made with cheese (a violation of the kosher laws that prohibit the serving of meat and dairy products at the same meal). Furthermore, as traditionally Jewish foods like bagels have entered the mainstream American

diet, it has become increasingly difficult to ground a distinct minority ethnic identity simply on consumption of these foods.

Much of the focus of this study has been on the audience. Studies of audiences are notoriously difficult, even when one tries to study the contemporary audience for a play. (Most audience studies nowadays are focused on trying to determine the class composition of the audience, in order to allow advertisers to target their theater program ads more effectively.)

Still, since they were first attracted to Broadway in the 1920s, Jews (who tend to have higher levels of education and greater affluence than the general population) have been a mainstay of the Broadway theater audience. In fact, one of the reasons often given for the decline of Broadway drama is the decrease in the number of Jewish patrons. As Michael Goldstein has written, “many of Broadway’s problems are sociological, too large for the theater to confront as a business institution” such as “the departure of thousands of suburban Jews, who have traditionally been among

Broadway's biggest audience constituencies, for destinations Floridian..."<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, some plays and musicals still seem to cater to this audience. It has been often said that Broadway drama would decline when the bulk of the Jewish audience inevitably retired to South Florida. But although the number of non-musical plays of any kind has plummeted since the 1920s, the two or three new plays that open each season on Broadway often do contain a play of Jewish interest.

These include comedies like Charles Busch's *Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, (still running after more than a year) about a prosperous Upper West Side Jewish couple that experiments with a *ménage à trois* and Neil Simon's short-lived *45 Seconds from Broadway* (starring Lewis J. Stadlen in the style of Jewish comic Jackie Mason) about the goings-on at the coffee house at the Edison Hotel, a real-life restaurant dubbed the "Polish Tea Room" for its traditional Jewish dishes and heavily Jewish clientele. These plays are interesting for the ways in which they, like the Jewish comedies

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Goldstein, "Reinventing Broadway," *New York Magazine* (May 29, 1995), 28.

from the 1920s, mirror the lives of upper middle-class Jews from New York City and its suburbs. *45 Seconds From Broadway* even includes among its motley assortment of characters two well-heeled Jewish women who have hilarious conversations about the mindless Broadway shows they have seen.

But plays with Jewish content and characters, for all their popularity with Jewish audiences, cannot make a profit by only attracting Jews; witness the runaway success of Mel Brooks' musical *The Producers*, based on his 1960s film of the same name. *The Producers* is the story of a Jewish theatrical producer and his accountant who perpetrate a scam by raising far more money than they need to put on an atrociously bad (and in deliberately bad taste) musical about Hitler. But their plan to keep the extra money after the musical flops are confounded when it becomes a hilarious hit. Interestingly, both leads were originated by non-Jews, Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick.<sup>13</sup> But non-Jewish actors are not always

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<sup>13</sup> Lane has actually made a career of playing Jewish shtick, such as in his roles as Nathan Detroit in the Broadway revival of *Guys and Dolls* and Pseudolus in Larry Gelbart's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Casting non-Jewish actors in Jewish roles is nothing new; as I have pointed out, it happened even in the 1920s, in many of the plays that I have discussed. But there were still many prominent Jewish entertainers around, and they were a crucial part of the entertainment landscape. They are very few today and even those like Mandy Patinkin and Dudu Fisher who do sing Jewish music tend to be much more successful in mainstream Broadway musicals than in their "specialty" shows.

successful playing Jews; the tall, rugged television actor Tom Selleck was not particularly convincing to either critics or audiences when he played the rumpled, unemployed writer Murray Burns in last season's revival of Herb Gardner's comedy *A Thousand Clowns*.

Perhaps the boldest experiment in having non-Jews play Jewish roles was undertaken a few years by the National Asian Theater Company, an off-Broadway Asian-American troupe that generally produces revivals of classic plays. Their choice was William Finn and James Lapine's *Falsettoland*, a dark, slightly cartoonish Broadway musical about a very non-traditional Jewish family planning their son's Bar Mitzvah at a time when the father's non-Jewish homosexual lover, Whizzer, is dying of AIDS. (The parents are divorced; the mother is remarried to her former psychiatrist, who has become the boy's stepfather.)

As unusual as it was to see Asian actors throwing around Yiddish terms and talking about Jewish food (one of the family's next door neighbors is a lesbian kosher caterer), the non-traditional casting underscored the universality of the musical's themes. The climax comes when the son celebrates his Bar Mitzvah in the dying Whizzer's hospital room, and the father learns that he himself is

probably infected as well. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony marks the son's true coming of age as he realizes his debt to Whizzer; it also helps to unite and strengthen the family in the face of their grief. The presence of community is also very strong, unlike in most Jewish-themed entertainment nowadays.

In fact, most contemporary Jewish-themed plays and musicals are generally unconcerned with examining Jewish themes. As the chief theater critic for a New York Jewish newspaper, *The Jewish Week*, I have seen remarkably few plays that focus on issues like intermarriage, the place of women and homosexuals in religious worship, the waning of Jewish identity, and the revival of Jewish mysticism. Perhaps the only truly "hot" topic is the Holocaust; last year there was a spate of plays that reassessed the meaning of the Holocaust in Jewish memory and life.

Most contemporary Jewish artists seem to have little nostalgia for the immigrant Jewish experience in America, and have thus apparently escaped the pull of the ghetto culture so evident in the work of earlier generations of Jewish artists and entertainers. Nostalgic Jewish theater survives, like the new, musicalized adaptation of *The Jazz Singer* at the Jewish Repertory Theatre two

years ago. But the production ended with Jack Robin back on Broadway but without blackface--the production actually eschewed the use of blackface altogether--singing "April Showers" in a sing-along with the audience. The whole conclusion seemed to me, like the ending of the 1927 film, a kind of ritual transcendence of the particularistic claims of Jewish tradition.

Yiddish entertainment nowadays is limited to the annual production by the Folksbiene, the sole remaining Yiddish theater in New York; their most recent production was a bi-lingual Yiddish-English adaptation of the important Yiddish writer Itzik Manger's Bible tales. But this theater has trouble drawing an audience, even though they offer simultaneous translation into both English and Russian, the latter because much of their audience is drawn from recent Russian Jewish immigrants.

Nevertheless, the meaning of the Lower East Side in American Jewish culture has been the subject of remarkably intense interest among scholars in recent years. A recent issue of *American Jewish History* was devoted to reinterpretations of the landmark 1976 study of the American Jewish ghetto, Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, in an effort to understand its success in putting the Lower



East Side back on the map of Jewish Studies; Howe's book was published at the height of both the country's bicentennial celebration and the renewed pride in American sub-cultures promoted by the popularity of *Roots*, the television documentary about the African-American experience. But the spate of conferences and books about the Lower East Side in the last few years testifies to an ongoing interest in the place of the Lower East Side in the collective American Jewish consciousness.

I hope that this study will point the way to future research in the field of ethnic popular culture, and Jewish popular culture in particular. Much more needs to be understood about the relationship between acculturation and popular culture. Does ethnic popular culture resist acculturation or advance it? Can it do both in the same moment? Who produces ethnic popular culture, and how does it function within the economic and political power structure?

Moreover, how does seeing a "real" member of an ethnic group differ from seeing an actor playing a member of that ethnic group on the stage or in film or television? I have argued that this process is different in different media; the directness of live performance creates a bond between actor and audience that is

missing in film. (Vaudeville entertainers tended to exaggerate the characteristics of the ethnic characters they were playing in order to get a laugh; even Jewish comics thus remained somewhat caught in the tradition of the non-Jewish comics who had traded on the audience's anti-Semitism in presenting extremely caricatured portraits of Jews.)

I hope that this study will point the way for other scholars to investigate the role of popular culture in advancing the acculturation of different ethnic groups into American society, and to examine other forms of popular culture than I have studied, from visual art to music to material culture. What are the roots of these popular culture forms and images in ethnic history? What visions of society, and of the particular ethnic group's place in it, are communicated by these pop culture icons? How has ethnic identification been commodified; how do we buy and sell our ethnic identities?

I began this study by recounting a memory of my grandmother reading a catalogue from a company called The Source for Everything Jewish. I end with a question: How is popular culture

not just the reflection of our ethnic identities, but to some extent its  
wellspring as well?

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