

EXHIBITION REVIEW

IN PLAIN SIGHT: ENTERTAINMENT AND ITS MALCONTENTS

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Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting, an exhibition exploring “connections between American Jews and the nation’s entertainment media,” was on view at The Jewish Museum in New York from

February 2003 to September 14. It will travel to The Jewish

Museum of Maryland in October 2003. The accompanying catalogue was published in association with Princeton University Press. As befits its topic, the whole enterprise is enthusiastically diverse in themes and resources; its ambition benefits from the strengths of J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, the co-guest curators, editors, and authors. Shandler teaches at Rutgers University; his books include *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*. Hoberman, senior film critic for *The Village Voice*, teaches at New York University and Cooper Union; his books include *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds*.

The catalogue and exhibition complement one another. Exhibition text panels draw on written material common to the book. Many photographs are

shared. The book includes pictures of objects shown in the exhibition, such as handbills, cartoons, posters, and celebrity items, as well as extra frame and publicity stills, stand-ins for video clips shown in the exhibition. The exhibition features

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artist projects (such as the “Star Shrine,” an homage, send-up, fantasy, commentary) by Ben Katchor, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Rhonda Lieberman, and Mark Rappaport, while the book highlights primary source materials: excerpts from Henry Ford’s *Dearborn Independent*; Samuel Raphaelson on the genesis of *The Jazz Singer*; a tutorial on Yiddish dialect for actors, directors, and writers; Father Coughlin’s response to *Kristallnacht*, a primer on the politics of “tolerance”; and, from the November 1956 *Modern Screen*, “Marilyn [Monroe] Enters a Jewish Family.” Time lines are used to good effect. One runs under the endnotes. Another documents the extraordinarily enduring popularity of *The Jazz Singer*. This book has range; it is literate, beautifully illustrated and designed, ready for coffee table and classroom.

The exhibition entrance evokes the lobby of an old movie emporium. Inside, recorded scraps of conversation fade and blend as if overheard. Overall, the museum floor is organized to let visitors explore a semi-structured arcade-like progression of spaces. “Nickelodeon Nation” features movie pioneer Sigmund Lublin’s sympathetic portrayal, *Yiddisher Boy* (1909). On the way out one passes material on the distinctly unsympathetic movie *Cohen’s Fire Sale* (1907). Next, an appropriately large space is devoted to *The Jazz Singer*. Between slow motion projections of scenes from the original 1927 production, clips from remakes and spoofs are shown in narrative sequence, connected with intertitles from the original movie. The exhibition includes material on Al Jolson’s use of blackface.

Smaller areas are devoted to Yiddish film and radio.

There are kiosks featuring Star Shrines for Jews both “real” and “virtual,” including Fanny Brice, Groucho Marx, Betty Boop, Marilyn Monroe, Sammy Davis Jr., and my favorite, Marc Rappaport’s montage of John Garfield clips. The blacklist is memorialized as litany, naming names once again.

The legacy of *Your Show of Shows* includes Mel Brooks’s Y’Indian chief clip from *Blazing Saddles*, hard to hear and curiously cut; but isn’t it always. In a separate bare room, media treatments of the Holocaust are sequenced from newsreels, movies, and television shows. In one excruciating television sequence, a camp survivor’s ordeal was featured on *This is Your Life* (1953). On the occasion of Spielberg’s Academy Award for *Schindler’s List*, he seemed to lament that six million victims could

not be present to share his award. The final display recalls the restaurant set of the *Seinfeld* sitcom; show clips alternate with commentaries. *Seinfeld* updated us on the syntax of our neo-converso culture, where passing is not quite assimilating. American Jewish performances are frequently twice reflexive; characters from Al Jolson as Jack Robin to Paul Newman as

without motion video, handles this big story better than the exhibition does. And so it is with the larger themes that interest Hoberman and Shandler.

“Moguldom,” the second of the book’s five sections, contains a long essay co-authored by Shandler and Hoberman: “‘Hollywood’s Jewish Question,’” which as “the central

essay includes a backhanded defense of Neil Gabler’s book, *An Empire of Their Own*, against charges that it legitimates “anti-Semitic accusations of a Jewish conspiracy of international control.” (74)

Shandler and Hoberman note that Gabler sees the “pathos” of Jewish executives victimized by “their own embrace of the false god of assimilation.” But anti-Jewish critics

who portray Hollywood as a “mogul” controlled industry tend to see Jewish assimilationism as “rootless” social climbing and point to Gabler’s text for support. “Tastefulness, after all, was the object,” writes Gabler, “even if it became inflated in a contest of being more tasteful than anyone else.” (240) By 1996 the ultimate rejoinder would appear on the cover of *Moment* magazine. “Jews Run Hollywood. So What?” Yet inside, Hoberman and Shandler note, Michael Medved replayed stock demands for “more responsible filmmaking.” (75)

Anyone who dares to discuss a sprawling topic like this has to gerrymander like mad. I would probably carve things up much as Shandler and Hoberman

have. Nevertheless, let’s look at some tradeoffs. “Moguldom” follows the section called “Nickelodian Nation.” This is consistent in the sense that many Hollywood studio heads entered the new industry as exhibitors. But perhaps the essay that discusses the “invasion” of the nascent industry by “alien ex-buttonhole makers,” as Jewish entrepreneurs were stereotyped, should have been called “Moguldom,” and the larger section called “Hollywood’s Jewish Question.” As it is, the subsequent essays on *The Jazz Singer* fit uneasily under the umbrella of “Moguldom.”

“An American at Home, A Jew on the Air,” the title of the third



Cantor Rabinowitz (Warner Oland) walks in on Jack Robin (Al Jolson) serenading his mother (Eugenie Besserer), *The Jazz Singer*, 1927. Photo courtesy of the American Museum of the Moving Image.

Ari Ben Canaan (“there’s something in my eye”) make a show of hiding in plain sight. A converso act works when punch lines hit Jews from somewhere else.

The large living room set devoted to Molly Goldberg seems to suffer from the perfectly logical decision to show broadcast clips on an old home television set. The private scale feels at odds with the public space. Unfortunately the extraordinary story of Goldberg’s multifaceted, long-term success cannot be manifested through a display of promotional photographs and mementos. The book, even

essay in this volume—chronicles shifting notions of Jewish distinctiveness and visibility in America and, more generally, of identity politics in the public sphere.” (13) In their analysis of Hollywood’s reputation as the “empire” of Jewish “moguls,” the authors clarify the contextual importance of nativism and anti-Bolshevism as manifested in conflicts over the production code and anti-Nazism, and ultimately in the postwar blacklist. The arc of their analytical narrative parallels the standard industrial history model of Hollywood as the town built by “moguls.” Unsurprisingly, then, the

section, implicitly frames one of the book's larger issues: Does the performative relationship of American Jews to mass media represent an inversion of assimilationist responses to Emancipation as promoted among nineteenth-century Jews? Shandler and Hoberman mount an interesting response to the challenge of their title. An essay and chronology on the Goldbergs sit between essays on American Yiddish radio and film and the *Eternal Light*. Hoberman and Shandler's essay on "Our Show of Shows" concludes the section. "The program's creator, Max Liebman, found inspiration for *Your Show of Shows* in theatrical revues that he and other producers had presented both on Broadway and at resort hotels on the outskirts of New York." (144) This essay's frustrating brevity may, in effect, reflect the need to steer the book past even relevant temptations. Because *Entertaining America* cannot also cover Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Catskill shows, unavoidably we lose threads that would give us a more thorough portrayal of issues germane to both the movie and broadcast media.

It's difficult to track Yiddish culture through a book focused on mainstream media. In any case, following the lineage of Yiddish performance culture is a "reconstructionist" activity, even if one is of the decline-and-fall school. Long before the Klezmer "revival," in fact even as American Yiddish culture seems to have flourished, attitudes toward *Yiddishkeit* influenced American Jews' ongoing struggle to fashion a usable heritage from shtetl and ghetto remnants. When they cast the character Jack Robin for *The Jazz Singer*, the

Warners ended up with the more assimilated Al Jolson rather than George Jessel, who they may have considered "too Jewish." (Gabler, 141) Forty years later it was widely assumed that Zero Mostel, the reigning Broadway star of *Fiddler on the Roof*, would reprise his performance on film. But Norman

renegotiated their identity through the process of re-imagining Israel and pre-Holocaust Europe.

To the extent that American *Yiddishkeit* lives as a performative tradition, it may remain fantastic, even in the appearance of rootedness. I encountered the mediated

relocations and re-locutions of American Yiddish culture in 1965 during my first visit to Boiberik, a Yiddishist camp near Rhinebeck, New York. On my way to find the guest bungalows, I noticed a wiry little man sitting astride the "tea room" ridgepole. While hammering, he whistled the theme from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Works Cited:

Hoberman, J., and Jeffrey Shandler. *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*. Princeton, NJ and New York, NY: Princeton University Press and The Jewish Museum, New York, 2003. Gabler, Neal. *An Empire of Their Own: How Jews Invented Hollywood*. New York: Crown, 1988.

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One of the most durable icons of the 1930s, Betty Boop was the star of the Fleischer Brothers animation studio. Their cartoons are replete with references to Jewish culture, ethnic humor, and in the case of the 1931 *Minnie the Moocher*, a plot involving a conflict between Betty's East European parents and Betty herself, a thoroughly American flapper.

Betty Boop. Created in New York City by Max Fleischer, 1930. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

Jewison chose the "realism" of Israeli actor Topol over Mostel, who was "too Seventh Avenue." Jewison wanted *Anatevka* to feel rooted, not fantastic. Having included in *Entertaining America* an essay on the movie *Exodus* as an American western, it could have been useful to look at these two movies as vehicles through which American Jews a generation removed from World War II