Peter Scott Lederer

Mel Brooks' Subversive Cabaret

The Producers (1968)

Despite the growing attendance of the cabaret by a general public, its personnel and creators continued to be drawn from peripheral groups whose viewpoint remained ironic. The proliferation of cabarets allowed minority concerns to infiltrate popular entertainment. Throughout central and eastern Europe, a large percentage of performers, composers, authors, and impresarios were Jews; and although there were only a few exclusively Jewish cabarets, comedy and political commentary were permeated with Yiddish rhythms, attitudes, and words.[1]

Introduction: Holocaust Humor

Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1968) is a film in which a desperate producer, Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel), convinces his bookkeeper, Leo Bloom (Gene Wilder), to take part in a fabulous scheme: receive investments for a play, produce a flop, and then rake in the money.[2] The plot is simple enough, which Brooks' films have often been criticized for being. As Beth E. Bonnstetter suggests, scholars have not paid due respect to Brooks' lowbrow humor. Although *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *Young Frankenstein* (1974), and *The Producers* are listed on the American Film Institute's top one hundred comedies, a small amount of scholarly work has been committed to Brooks' feature films.[3] Despite this, Maurice Yacowar argues that reassessing Brooks' "vulgarity" is needed.[4] After all, if intellectuals and young viewers "can figure out" what Brooks is "getting at," as the filmmaker suggests, then others doing so seems necessary.[5] As Alex Symons notes, "by assessment of the film's varied reviews in 1968, it can be illustrated that a comic reading of *The Producers* constitutes the deliberate appreciation of bad

1 Laurence Senelick, *Cabaret Performance: Volume II: Europe 1920–1940: Sketches, Songs, Monologues, Memoirs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), xiii.
2 *The Producers*, dir. by Mel Brooks (1968; Burbank, CA: Optimum, 2008), DVD.
3 Beth E. Bonnstetter, "Mel Brooks Meets Kenneth Burke (and Mikhail Bakhtin): Comedy and Burlesque in Satiric Film," *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 1 (2011): 19.
4 Maurice Yacowar, *Method in Madness: The Comic Art of Mel Brooks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), vii.
5 Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, vii-viii.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110545753-013

taste."[6] Furthermore, Jamie Moshin argues that Brooks leaves out "any cues of Jewish identity from his filmic protagonists," altering "the genre in *The Producers* into a Jewish 'quotidian' humor, a humor that is used for everyday purposes but without the depth of irony or empowerment."[7] This claim seems doubtful, however, since Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder clearly play characters representing distinct Jewish types. If this were not enough, plenty of other elements of the film left Jews "horrified," leading many to write "resentful letters of protest."[8] What disheartened them was not that Hitler was used comically, which American filmmakers had already done,[9] but that Jews were not treating the Shoa seriously, once again propagating self-hatred. Paul McDonald suggests that Brooks' characters personify "corrupting values": Bialystock "is an unscrupulous gigolo," while Leo Bloom is "a criminal and a purveyor of tasteless and distorted narratives; worse, they have turned him from an unassuming Jewish accountant into someone willing to collaborate with a Nazi."[10] Moreover, Andrew Sarris emphasizes that "Jewish producers" connecting themselves with "such a project" is far-fetched.[11] Jews teaming up with a former Nazi, argues Stanley Kauffmann, "seems odd"; furthermore, that "the Nazi is oblivious to the Jewishness of his producers" does not make the scenario any more believable.[12] Also revealing is Pauline Kael's criticism that *The Producers* is "amateurishly crude"; "show-business Jewish humor," she argues, took advantage of stereotypes.[13] Even more telling is Gregg Rickman's assertion that, as a television comedy writer, and "a showman capable of amazing spectacle," Brooks may simply be memorialized as someone

6 Alex Symons, "An Audience for Mel Brooks's *The Producers:* The Avant-Garde of the Masses," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 3, no. 1 (2006): 24, accessed November 17 2016, http://www.tandfonline.com.

7 Jamie Moshin, "On the Big Screen, but Stuck in the Closet: What Mel Brooks' *The Producers* Says about Modern American Jewish Identity and Communicating the Holocaust," *Journal of the Northwest Communication Association* 35 (2006): 33.

8 Mel Brooks, "With Comedy, We Can Rob Hitler of His Posthumous Power," Interview with Mel Brooks, *Spiegel*, 16 March 2006, accessed September 20 2016, http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-mel-brooks-with-comedy-we-can-rob-hitler-of-his-posthumous-power-a-406268.html.

9 Hitler is satirized in many comedies: The Three Stooges' *You Natzy Spy!* (1940), Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), Disney's *Der Führer's Face* (1943), and Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940).

10 Paul McDonald, "'They're Trying to Kill Me': Jewish American Humor and the War against Pop Culture," *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 3 (April 2006): 25.

11 Andrew Sarris, "Films," *Village Voice*, March 28 1968, 47.

12 Stanley Kauffmann, "Zero and Others," *New Republic*, April 13 1968, 24.

13 Pauline Kael, "O, Pioneer!" *The New Yorker*, March 23 1968, 140.

"'putting on a show' [...] rather than as a satirist or performer."[14] His argument that the film is filled with "irrelevant gags,"[15] however, falls short of appreciating Brooks' larger social commentary. If Brooks is concerned with how historical events exist "in modern memory, in how people and events are remembered,"[16] then he probably has a more important point to make. How Brooks uses Jewishness in his humor to achieve this becomes necessary to explore. Unlike Rickman, I do not recognize Brooks as a "Busby Berkeley of comedy."[17] Instead, I identify his humor as a Jewish form of subversive cabaret. Distinct from a musical like *Fiddler on the Roof* (play, 1964; film, 1971), *The Producers* propagates a different message. This distinction is important, since "the notion of 'Jewish humor' immediately evokes the name of Shalom Aleichem," as Ruth Adler suggests, and Aleichem's gift "to find a jest amongst the tears and make tragic situations tolerable."[18]

Brooks once remarked that "by using the medium of comedy, we can try to rob Hitler of his posthumous power and myths."[19] While *The Producers* does not reference the Holocaust directly, it accomplishes the feat of disintegrating "the holy seriousness that always surrounded [Hitler] and protected him like a cordon."[20] Brooks' gallows humor, then, certainly has its advantages. Gallows humor is recognized by Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild: "Nothing is so sacred, so taboo, or so disgusting that it cannot be the subject of humour."[21] Properly, "gallows humour generally refers to jokes made about and by the *victims* of oppression. They are jokes told by those supposedly about to be hanged, not by the hangmen."[22] As Dundes and Hauschild note, "there are some anti-Semitic jokes which would rarely if ever be told by Jews,"[23] with such an example including the infamous and vulgar "Auschwitz joke": "How many Jews will fit in a Volkswagen? 506 – six in the seats and 500 in the ashtrays."[24] Such a joke would not go down well if told by a Jew, and certainly not by a Gentile. A better

14 Greg Rickman, ed., *The Film Comedy Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2001), 302.
15 Ibid., 298.
16 Ibid., 298.
17 Ibid., 302.
18 Ruth Adler, "Shalom Aleichem's 'On Account of a Hat': Universal and Jewish Applications," in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 19.
19 Brooks, "With Comedy, We Can Rob Hitler of His Posthumous Power," no pagination.
20 Ibid.
21 Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild, "Auschwitz Jokes," in *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*, eds. Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton (London: Macmillan, 1988), 56.
22 Ibid., 56 (emphasis in original).
23 Ibid., 56.
24 Ibid., 56–57.

example of an acceptable joke in the gallows humor style would be one often credited to Weiss-Ferdl, which Hillenbrand identifies: "Good evening! I'm sorry I'm so late. I've just come back from a little excursion to – Dachau! Well, you ought to see the place! Barbed-wire fence, electrified, machine-guns; another barbed-wire fence, more machine guns – but I can tell you, I managed to get in all the same!"[25] The joke, told from the perspective of a prisoner "often imprisoned" at Dachau,[26] is definitely in the Brooksian tradition. In other words, it demands certain conditions: "the situation must be absurd. [...] The more serious the situation, the funnier the comedy can be. The greatest comedy plays against the greatest tragedy."[27] Brooks can be seen perfecting the style in one of his earlier works, *The Twelve Chairs* (1970), where the dark chorus of "Hope for the Best (Expect the Worst)" is heard with a Yiddish inflection: "Live while you're alive. / No one will survive. / Life is funny. / Save your worries, spend your money. / Live while you're alive. / No one will survive. / There's no guarantee."[28]

With this in mind, then, *The Producers* can be considered to be a comedy developed in the style of the cabaret, which Brooks adored. The comparison between Brooks' humor and the performers from the Nazi era is indeed strong. Cabaret performers used satire, sexuality, and political comedy set around musical numbers. In the Weimar Republic, German nightclub entertainment was revived: "[T]he end of censorship after the fall of the monarchy in 1918 promised to pave the way to a new openness on the stage, as performers would finally be able to take a stand on contemporary issues and address the daily concerns of the audience."[29] The possibilities of sexuality became more prominent as entertainers satirized mainstream conservative themes.[30] The freedom to explore topics, however, often created "a flood of obscenity and nudity" instead of more insightful satire; the "smut" being offered to audiences was less challenging.[31] Successful, left-wing cabaret, however, could both satirically ridicule authoritarianism and

25 F. K. M. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933 – 1945* (London: Routledge, 1995), 112. Weiss-Ferdl was a compère from Munich who used anti-Nazi humor. Weiss-Ferdl was once given a signed photo of Hitler, and his humorous response contained a clever double entendre: "What shall I do with it? Shall I put him in the corner or shall I hang him?" (18).
26 Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany*, 112.
27 Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, viii.
28 *The Twelve Chairs*, dir. Mel Brooks (1970; Burbank, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006), DVD, 7:53 – 7:58.
29 Alan Lareau, *The Wild Stage: Literary Cabarets of the Weimar Republic* (Columbia, SC: Camden, 1995), 13.
30 Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.
31 Ibid., 13 – 14.

offer entertaining song and dance.[32] The entertainers providing such unique sketches and songs were mostly Jewish.[33] Understanding this creative and subversive decadence, I examine Brooks' film. My analysis will also compare Kurt Gerron's life and the Nazi propaganda documentary he made under pressure from the SS while a prisoner at Theresienstadt.

Melvin Kaminsky

Mel Brooks (Melvin James Kaminsky) was born in 1926. The anger in his comedy, Brooks realizes, in part arises from an "inability to deal with the realities of the world."[34] Brooks once worked on Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* (1950 – 1954) with other notable writers Neil Simon and Carl Reiner.[35] While appearing sophomoric, Brooks' "nice, dirty fun," as he likes to call it,[36] shares aspects of the cabaret, particularly subversiveness. A product of New Hollywood, such Jewish comedy was given the opportunity to fully realize itself. As Brooks suggests, "every contemporary movie has its antecedents in films of the twenties and thirties."[37] Even though his films, he admits, have been influenced by the Marx Brothers, Continental Europe is where one can find the origins of Brooks' comedic style. As a World War II soldier, and a member of a family of immigrants from some of the most devastated areas, Brooks is quite aware of the history and traditions of countries in Eastern Europe: his mother had many relatives suffer the Pogroms in Ukraine[38] and his father escaped Danzig,[39] while other family members did not survive the Holocaust.[40]

While stationed in Germany, Brooks experienced life in Berlin: "When you come to Germany as a Jew you have an uneasy feeling, but I've always felt

32 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance*, xii.

33 Ibid., xiii.

34 Jerry Bauer, "Interview with Mel Brooks," *Adelina*, February 1980, accessed September 20 2016, http://www.brookslyn.com.

35 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2000), 232.

36 Bauer, "Interview with Mel Brooks," no pagination.

37 Ibid.

38 Philip Fleishman, "Interview with Mel Brooks," *Maclean's*, April 17 1979, accessed November 24 2016, http://www.brookslyn.com.

39 Alex Belth, "Mel Brooks is Always Funny and Often Wise in this 1975 Playboy Interview," *Daily Beast*, February 16 2014, accessed December 7 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com.

40 "The Making of *The Producers*" in *The Producers*, directed by Mel Brooks (1970; Burbank, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006), DVD, 45:10.

okay in Berlin."[41] For many years preceding the Nazi era, Berlin was "a city of enlightenment" where there was "a policy of religious tolerance which brought exceptional numbers of immigrants," including Jews.[42] In Berlin, Brooks saw *The Threepenny Opera*, the play that caused him to become infatuated with musicals, "totally crazy."[43] The "anarchic spirit" of the production results in the play's appearing as "a characteristic expression of 1920s' dissidence";[44] this black comedy is appropriately imitated by Brooks, and in *The Producers* the dark humor becomes dark 'Jewish' humor. In the hands of Brooks, however, black comedy has been misinterpreted as self-hatred despite its obvious criticisms of anti-Semitism. One example of this is Alex Symons' insistence that the film is distasteful.[45] Another comes from Moira Walsh, who states that her "mind boggled at the psychological implications in the premise that any audience would laugh at the play within the movie."[46] While these criticisms are reasonable, the knowledge that Jews have always relied on black comedy and that this does necessarily entail Jewish anti-Semitism is missing from such positions.

Out of a long history of Jewish struggle, *The Producers* eventually emerged, "an angry work, a Jewish expression of fury with the Nazi murder of European Jewry."[47] Although enlisted in the US Army, Brooks' lack of full participation in the fight against the Nazis more than likely caused "some subconscious frustration as a result of this."[48] It has been suggested that Brooks' "failure to engage the hated Huns directly apparently left him with a permanently thwarted sense of duty."[49] With this in mind, it is rather important that Brooks' protagonist, Max Bialystock, shares the name of a Polish city with historical significance. Białystok, in Poland, was home to one of largest struggles against Nazi occupation.[50] *The Producers*, though, despite its rage against Hitlerism, encoun-

41 Brooks, "With Comedy, We Can Rob Hitler of His Posthumous Power," no pagination.

42 George Colerick, *From the Italian Girl to Cabaret: Musical Humour, Parody and Burlesque* (London: Juventus, 1998), 67.

43 Brooks, n. pag. The part of Jackie "Tiger" Brown was originally played by Kurt Gerron in 1928.

44 Colerick, *From the Italian Girl to Cabaret*, 81.

45 Symons, "An Audience for Mel Brooks's *The Producers*," 27.

46 Moira Walsh, "The Producers," *America*, April 6 1968, 51.

47 Kirsten Fermaglich, "Mel Brooks' *The Producers:* Tracing American Jewish Culture through Comedy, 1967–2007," *American Studies* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 67.

48 Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 17.

49 David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 118.

50 Sara Bender, *The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust*, trans. Yaffa Murciano (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 8–9. Sara Bender notes that the city of Białystok, still two-thirds Jewish, was not as assimilated as other Polish cities in the nineteenth

ters problems because of its Jewish stereotypes. According to Michael Epp, stereotypes present "dangers," for "satire can be used as a suspicious excuse for promoting racist ideology."[51] In addition, it may "further oppress marginalized peoples,"[52] even if its intentions are the opposite. This is when the Jewish stereotypes perpetuated by Brooks become problematic. Rickman has argued that other stereotypes used by Brooks, such as the "mock hippie" and the "flamboyant gay stereotype," interfere with his comedy.[53] These images, however, match the "American-Jewish sense of always being out of place" that is crucial to Brooks' humor, which is also integral to all comedy in general.[54] It is my opinion that Bialystock and Bloom's *Springtime for Hitler* is proof enough that *The Producers* is neither anti-Semitic nor homophobic but instead propagates the opposite. To quote Fermaglich, Bailystock and Bloom are "lovable Jewish losers more aware of the dangers of Nazism than the members of the American middle class who flocked to their fascist play."[55] Therefore, I propose Brooks' cabaret humor is the film's own defense against critical attacks.

The Cabaret

The Nazis were determined to shut down the cabaret because of its subversiveness. Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945) believed that the cabaret was entertainment that opposed "the demands of good public taste."[56] More than "cheap and frivolous" entertainment, the cabaret was a danger since it attempted to undermine the "leadership" of the National Socialists.[57] Understanding that laughter is a difficult thing for any totalitarian regime to keep in check, the cabaret used comedy as an important part of resistance. Jewish performers had "artists' license to be

century. Anti-Zionist Jewish businesses, however, promoted assimilation, while Orthodox Jews considered the city "heretical" (8–9). The city was affected in 1906 with the Pogrom (14), and again in 1941 when it was turned into a ghetto (103).

51 Michael Epp, "Raising Mistrelsy: Humor, Satire and the Stereotype in *Birth of a Nation* and *Bamboozled*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 33 (2003): 33.

52 Fermaglich, "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*," 28.

53 Rickman, *The Film Comedy Reader*, 299.

54 Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 153.

55 Fermaglich, "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*," 66.

56 Joseph Goebbels, "Order Prohibiting Masters of Ceremonies and Commentary from the Stage," in *Cabaret Performance: Volume II: Europe 1920–1940: Sketches, Songs, Monologues, Memoirs*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 281.

57 Goebbels, "Order Prohibiting Masters of Ceremonies and Commentary from the Stage," 281.

fools" and successfully ridiculed their oppressors when possible.[58] Hitler, Gentiles in general, and even other Jews became objects of humor for Jews who performed "to audiences that were primarily Gentile."[59] These comedians, though, were targeted not only for their Jewishness but for promoting what was considered Communist propaganda.[60] They were eventually forced to immigrate to Canada, the United States, and Great Britain in 1933, after Jews found their businesses destroyed and their livelihoods threatened.[61]

There are several reasons that I consider Brooks' comedy to be inspired by the cabaret. Cabaret, as James Gavin notes, provided an environment "nearly devoid of prejudice,"[62] even facing it head-on. In Berlin, the cabaret was a show with songs, dancing, clever dialog, and humorous monologs; often, "topical issues" were dealt with in a "satirical or parodistic manner."[63] Jelavich suggests that the entertainment also included "vaudeville, nude dancing, revue, and agitprop."[64] These devices, as well as the drag show, are also used by Brooks to critique Nazism and other oppressive hegemonies (Figure 1). While Yacowar suggests that Brooks propagates "the grotesque images of heterosexuality" and "kinky instances of homosexuality,"[65] I disagree. Brooks' use of the "flamboyant gay stereotype," to which Rickman also objects,[66] requires dissection in its proper context.

Desser and Friedman call homosexuality in Brooks' films "unfortunate."[67] What they fail to note, however, is exactly how in doing so Brooks is able to critique the "cultural hegemony dominated by a white, middle-class, masculine, and decidedly gentile worldview," the very "background," they recognize, in which Brooks works.[68] The cabaret also fought this. The cabaret provided an environment for homosexuals where they could present caricatures of themselves in order to counter oppression.[69] Similar to Jews' use of self-deprecating humor, drag shows were used as much by homosexuals to expose bigotry as they were

58 Senelick, *Cabaret Performance*, 280.
59 Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 6.
60 Ibid., 3.
61 Ibid., 9.
62 James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret* (New York: Backstage Books, 2006), 2.
63 Ibid., 2.
64 Ibid., 3.
65 Maurice Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 76.
66 Rickman, *The Film Comedy Reader*, 299.
67 Desser and Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers*, 154.
68 Ibid., 112.
69 Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 44.

Fig. 1: Bialystock and Bloom solicit Roger De Bris to direct *Springtime for Hitler.*

for folly. To take *Springtime for Hitler* to the stage, Max Bialystock seeks the expertise of Roger De Bris (Christopher Hewett), a cross-dressing director whose colorful assistant, Carmen Giya (Andreas Voutsinas), flaunts himself in his own unconventional attire (Fig. 1).[70] Although Hatch argues that Brooks mistreats homosexuals in a "mean" manner,[71] I suggest that Brooks uses the same humor as the cabaret entertainer in order to subvert conventionality. One should recall that African Americans and homosexuals, like Jews were part of the cabaret in several nightclubs that neither practiced nor endorsed discrimination.[72] I conclude, then, that Brooks identifies "with the outsiders in history rather than the ruling classes," bringing "a marginalized mentality to all his films";[73] by doing so, Brooks does not exclude any member of the marginalized. This may be why Brooks' film audience is among the most diverse, as nightclub crowds in Germany were; there, "cabaret survived longer than other art forms in providing a platform which vocal opposition to the régime could reach an eager public; its several forms varied from subtle innuendoes, addressed to a sophisticated audience in the capital, to more down-to-earth and often crude jokes to listeners in a Bavarian beer-cellar-cum-stage."[74] Lampooning Hitler, when possible, received

70 *The Producers*, 47:06.
71 Robert Hatch, "Films," *The Nation*, April 8 1968, 486.
72 Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 69.
73 Desser and Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers*, 134.
74 Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany*, 112.

strong reactions from audiences, as it also did in publications.[75] *The Producers* achieves the same effectiveness.

Hitler as Humor

In Germany, subversive humorists retreated to the underground where they created "contemporaneous satire about Hitler" focusing on "his background, appearance, path to power, personal traits, 'universal genius' and his decline."[76] Hitler's "egocentricity" and "megalomania" were satirized by cartoonists, as were the Führer's "play-acting" and "lack of humour."[77] Even after the war, Hitler continued to be lampooned by comedians, inevitably giving Brooks more material for his satire. Will Jordan's bit "about show-biz moguls casting a replacement for Hitler" possibly inspired *The Producers*.[78] Lenny Bruce's routine about "Hitler and the MCA," Yacowar notes, is possibly another.[79] I believe the latter explanation is more likely. The bit is one of Bruce's earliest.[80] In the routine, two producers are auditioning actors to play a dictator; suddenly they notice a painter working in the corner:

> First Agent: Oh ya . . . Zis is really veirdo! Look at dot fink mit dot mustache! Hey, you! Frenchy! Put down dot painting. You, ya, mit da hair jazz there. Put down dot painting und step around in front. Yes, you! Ve vonna look at you. Right? Ya. Alright . . . Look at zis face! Is zis an album cover? Hey, vat is your name, my friend?
>
> Painter: Adolf Schicklgruber.
>
> First Agent: You're putting us on.
>
> Painter: Hey, come on, don jerk me around, you guys. I got tree garages to paint in Prague today. I gotta finish dem up.
>
> First Agent: No von is jerking you around, dere. You ever did any show business bits?
>
> Painter: Vell, I did a Chaplin impression at a party once.[81]

75 Ibid., 8–12.
76 Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945*, 8.
77 Ibid., 7, 16.
78 Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 83.
79 Ibid.
80 Kitty Bruce, ed., *The Almost Unpublished Lenny Bruce* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1984), 40. A 1949 review in *Variety* mentions this early routine (40).
81 John Cohen, *The Essential Lenny Bruce: His Original Unexpurgated Satirical Routines* (St. Albans, Hertfordshire: 1975, Panther), 222.

Further support for the argument that Bruce's material is the source of Brooks' story comes from Ioan Davies: "Bruce's point is not to turn Hitler into a hero, but to show how the media industry can use even the most horrendous stories purely for the sake of making money."[82] Brooks' Bialystock and Bloom decide on offering the role of Hitler to LSD (Dick Shawn). LSD (Lorenzo Saint DuBois) is a bratty, self-centered hippie with the tendency to throw childish tantrums.[83] LSD, however, like Hitler, does not recognize his own childishness and megalomania. During *Springtime for Hitler*, the audience sees LSD as a laughing stock, the object of ridicule in much the same way Hitler was for the subversive cabaret, even though LSD considers himself to be cool.

Considering this, Brooks' comedic style finds its origins not in the musicals of the US but in the cabarets of Germany. Even though Busby Berkeley's pre-war musicals can be considered influential – for instance, *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Figure 2) – their impact is perhaps overstated.[84] Berkeley's numbers are harmless, while Brooks' off-color choreographed bits can be seen as offensive and subversive (Fig. 3).[85] His number, although seeming to imitate the Berkeley musical, ridicules the spectacle the National Socialists relied on: for example, the Nuremberg torchlight rallies (Figure 4).[86] The small rotating swastika the dancers make satirizes Nazi theatrics. Instead of Berkeley's or Brooks' musical looking "camp," it is the Nazis' parade that seems to achieve such a feat.

Brooks' style has been called "camp."[87] Camp "has long been a central component of American musical theater," Knapp suggests; it is a tradition where "race and ethnicity [...] matter tremendously."[88] Brooks' take on "camp" turns it into a subversive form, as dangerous as the African American jazz found in the cabaret that the Nazis eventually banned. His perfection of the style was learned by performing in the Catskill Mountains.[89] With this in mind, *The Producers* becomes a complex Jewish film indeed, and *Springtime for Hitler* can be understood as critical of discrimination, no matter what it happens to look

82 Ioan Davies, "Lenny Bruce and the Death of Jewish Tragic Humor," *Social Text* 22 (Spring 1989): 101.

83 *The Producers*, 1:02:02.

84 *Gold Diggers of 1933*, dir. Melvyn Leroy (1933; Warner Brothers, 2003), DVD, 1:26:05.

85 *The Producers*, 1:00:27.

86 "Nazi Torch Parade," *YouTube*, 0:24, accessed June 25 2017. The Nazis preferred the "dance and spectacle" of the musical over other forms of popular entertainment (Colerick, 74).

87 Sanford Pinsker, "Mel Brooks and the Cinema of Exhaustion," in *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 249.

88 Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

89 Desser and Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers*, 113.

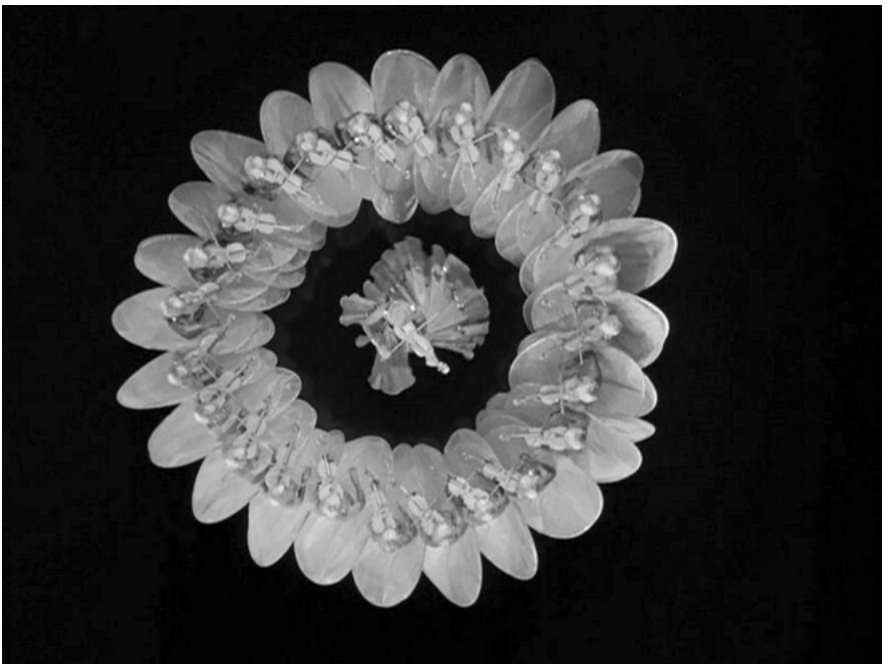

Fig. 2: Busby Berkeley's choreographed number "The Shadow Waltz."

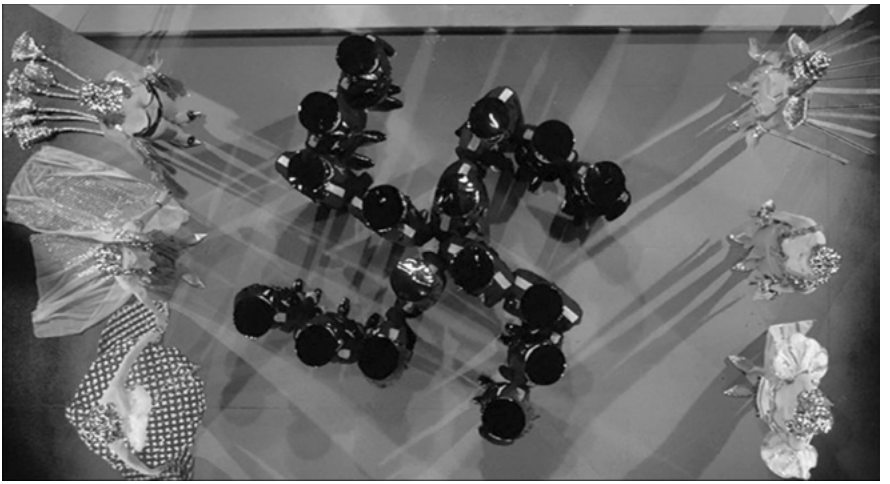

Fig. 3: Brooks parodies both Busby Berkeley and National Socialism.

Fig. 4: Nazis imitate Berkeley's lavish productions.

like. Authoritarianism is the target, even when Germans appear to be the butt of the joke most of the time. "Mainly as a result of two world wars, we were encouraged to think of the Germans as humourless," Colerick reminds us.[90] The humorlessness of the Germans meant that they are often shown by Brooks as militaristic. As Bonnstetter stresses, however, merely "laughing at the Nazis' flaunting of their power misses the point" and itself becomes "potentially anti-Semitic."[91] The humor of *The Producers* should be understood as something more than lowbrow. To accomplish this, I will compare Max Bialystock and Kurt Gerron, the Jewish entertainer and prisoner who betrayed his people. This requires an examination of the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto. Furthermore, I will also analyze Gerron's documentary about life in the ghetto, which the Nazis forced him to make.

The Cabaret in the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto

Jews, even in the harsh setting of the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto, were able to entertain one another.[92] One might call them performances of "resistance."[93]

90 Colerick, *From the Italian Girl to Cabaret*, 67.

91 Beth E. Bonnstetter, "Mel Brooks Meets Kenneth Burke (and Mikhail Bakhtin): Comedy and Burlesque in Satiric Film," *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 1 (2011): 18.

92 Peschel, *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape: Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto* (London: Seagull Books, 2014), 1. As Peschel reminds readers, the Nazi camp where Jews were imprisoned is called both "Theresienstadt" (in German) and "Terezín" (in Czech). It is referred to as a "camp" as well as a "ghetto" by the prisoners who resided there (1).

Lisa Peschel's *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape: Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto* (2014) describes how prisoners did not abandon culture, even in the conditions of the ghetto: "deprivation itself spurred prisoners to perform"; there, through the cabaret, Jews found "ways to manage the feelings of fear," restoring "a sense of power and control."[94] These ghetto performances allowed Jews to escape a "strange, grimly bizarre situation yet, at the same time, portray it."[95] Mel Brooks' cinematic world runs parallel. To borrow Rickman's words, Brooks' "view is at once optimistic, as it posits a cultural memory shared by all, and pessimistic, in that the events remembered are so painfully bleak." In other words, Brooks has been able to show how "hell and entertainment go together very well."[96] With this in mind, Brooks' dark humor should be compared with Kurt Gerron's own ghetto performances as well as Gerron's documentary.

Fig. 5: Gerron's extravagant personality is on display in *Prisoner of Paradise*.

Kurt Gerron (1897–1944) was a German-Jewish actor who had a small part in Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (1930) and performed in the premiere of Bertolt Brecht and Elisabeth Hauptmann's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) (Figure 5). The Nazis singled out Gerron, who was a blacklisted performer like Zero Mos-

93 Ibid., 2.
94 Ibid., 4–6.
95 Ibid., 41.
96 Rickman, *The Film Comedy Reader*, 298.

Fig. 6: Bialystock carries on his showbiz ways inside prison walls.

tel; he "symbolize[d] everything they despised about the Jews."[97] Gerron was eventually sent to the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto, where he created his cabaret, *Karussell*. The Jewish entertainer Camilla Spira (1906 – 1997), who appeared on stage with Gerron, describes the ghetto cabaret: "The people who went to Auschwitz were sitting in a huge theater the night before, killing themselves with laughter at Gerron and me. It was magnificent cabaret."[98] Spira's statement confirms the tragicomedic element of Jewish thinking and performance.

The Nazis set up the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto as a "transit camp" where Jews would stop before transferring to "slave labor and death camps." Upperclass Jews, the elderly, and thousands of political dissidents, however, never reached their final stop.[99] Kurt Gerron was considered part of the upper echelon of Jewish society. He also was a World War I veteran, and so useful to the Nazis. The Nazis purposely imprisoned "veterans [...], artists, musicians, scholars, judges, and other members of the cream of the social and intellectual world of pre-Hitler Germany" at the Terezín/Theresienstadt camp; this "assure[d] some of the more sympathetic Germans" of the safety of their fellow citizens.[100]

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97 *Prisoner of Paradise*, dir. Malcolm Clarke and Stuart Sender (2002; PBS Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD, 38:53 – 38:58.

98 Ibid., 47:16 – 47:29. *Todlachen* ("death-laugh") is the German word for such laughter.

99 Peschel, *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape*, 21.

100 Joel Shatzky, introduction to *Theresienstadt: Hitler's Gift to the Jews* by Norbert Troller (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), xxii.

The Nazis chose Gerron, "a useful Jew," to film a documentary that would prove the pleasant conditions inside the camp.[101] The propaganda film *Terezín: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area* (1944) is today called *The Führer Gives the Jews a City.*[102] Mostel did not want to be in *The Producers* at first;[103] this is understandable, for the characters are stereotypically Jewish. Likewise, the propaganda film the Nazis wanted Gerron to direct was also "unthinkable" from Gerron's perspective.[104] The Nazis had already tricked the Red Cross into thinking the ghetto was up to standards when it was previously evaluated.[105] They wanted to keep opinions of Terezín/Theresienstadt positive and use a film to influence this. In the film, inmates would be dressed nicely and appear happy and comfortable.[106] Gerron – a "vain" person who had an "enormous ego" – was the perfect choice for helping to put on this "hoax."[107] In many ways, he was similar to Mostel.[108] The possibilities of creating a film project all his own was appealing to Gerron, so he filmed the documentary. However, he was seen as a Nazi "puppet" or "traitor," his film making him questionable in the eyes of Jews.[109]

The documentary does not provide an accurate representation of life in the ghetto. Everyone seems to be happily participating in ghetto life; they work, play, and spend their time being productive and sociable.[110] Prisoners have hobbies, such as sculpting and sewing.[111] There is even a game of soccer, which many youngsters watch enthusiastically.[112] Everyone seems excited, as the camera pans across the crowd of onlookers. The ghetto even has its own symphony orchestra if one chooses to listen to some music.[113] For those who choose neither a sporting event nor the symphony, a library offers an additional choice of an af-

101 *Prisoner of Paradise*, 48:53.
102 *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*, Two Parts, dir. Kurt Gerron (Theresienstadt, 1944), *YouTube*, accessed January 27 2017.
103 "The Making of *The Producers*," 8:08 – 8:10.
104 *Prisoner of Paradise*, 1:15:40 – 1:15:48.
105 Shatzky, introduction, xxiii.
106 Ibid.
107 *Prisoner of Paradise*, 14:36, 16:44.
108 Directing *The Producers* was a "nightmare" for Brooks. According to Yacowar, even though Mostel was "an old friend," his "ego did not fit Brooks's ideal of ensemble," and so the two constantly argued (83).
109 *Prisoner of Paradise*, 1:25:47 – 1:25:53.
110 *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*, Part 1, 1:00 – 3:00.
111 Ibid., 1:30 – 2:18
112 Ibid., 5:48.
113 Ibid., Part 2, 2:41.

ternoon of quiet reading,[114] and there are pleasant gardens in which to spend some time.[115] Life in the barracks, however, is also always nice: women can write letters and knit; children may play with their favorite dolls.[116] Representations of conditions by ghetto artists, though, show quite a different reality.[117] Despite somewhat of a "vigorous cultural life"[118] – prisoners did read, write, and perform in the ghetto cabaret – Gerron's documentary only shows what the Camp Commandant, SS Major Karl Rahm (1907–1947), and Head of Jewish Deportation, SS Major Hans Günther (1910–1945), wanted viewers to see: a productive and joyous ghetto in which prisoners could live their daily lives contently.

Gerron betrayed the people in the ghetto in order to stay alive as long as possible. Bialystock and Bloom also appear to be "sell-outs" in Brooks' film. There is, however, an extraordinary difference: the producers merely want to earn profits. Furthermore, their play undermines Hitler's tyranny by making it look ridiculous, from the viewpoint of the audience at least. Gerron's film, on the other hand, betrays Jews by failing to show the ghetto as it actually was. *The Führer Gives the Jews a City* is the product of a man who seems to have deserted not only his people but also his morals, and for nothing. Gerron never made it out of Terezín/Theresienstadt alive; the Nazis murdered him. The actor, director, and cabaret entertainer would forever be seen as a traitor.

It is not Brooks' intention to use *Springtime for Hitler* to mock Jews to achieve laughs, and certainly Bialystock and Bloom saw the play as tragic and sick, as they incorrectly assumed the audience would also. What Brooks accomplishes is a moral, satiric, tragicomedic cabaret, in some ways similar to the theater in Terezín/Theresienstadt, which "oscillated between attempts to portray reality and the desire to make light of it with a smile."[119] At the end of the film, Bialystock and Bloom also do what ghetto prisoners finally did in their imprisonment, encouraging performance within what seems to be a hopeless situation. Like the entertainers in the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto, who satirized other Jews the best,[120] Bialystock and Bloom know how to poke fun at themselves. This sort of power, to borrow Peschel's description, is "exercised within the symbolic space of performance."[121] Brooks's ending does not differ in this regard; the

114 Ibid., 1:30.
115 Ibid., 4:53–5:50.
116 Ibid., 6:33–7:42.
117 Ibid., 1:14:05.
118 Peschel, *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape*, 2–3.
119 Ibid., 42.
120 Ibid., 42–43.
121 Ibid., 7.

film concludes with the producers and their fellow performers singing "Prisoners of Love" (Figure 6).[122] *The Producers*, then, accomplishes the feat of displaying subversive cabaret humor, through openly mocking Hitler, and performance within captivity, as those in the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto had done.

If comedy is an alternative way of dealing with delicate topics, as Giuliana Sorce suggests,[123] then it may also be a way to memorialize the Holocaust, as Louis Kaplan argues.[124] It is also useful to note that ridiculing Hitler is another way to regain control.[125] As Brooks proposes, ridicule is the best alternative to "invective" to counter totalitarianism.[126] *The Producers* is able to be subversive, whereas Gerron ultimately failed. Gerron died a collaborator, but Bialystock and Bloom continue to subversively entertain while imprisoned. This is the best defense for Brooks' style of Jewish humor, which is sometimes attacked for being anti-Semitic. What needs to be considered is that Brooks' comedy is liberal while still being Jewish. Liberal Jews in Nazi Germany were likely to "reject the traditional notion that Jews still formed a separate nation hoping to return to Israel."[127] Brooks' liberal Jewish humor is not so different. Understanding his New World outlook perhaps can best be understood if his comedy is compared with a quite traditional Jewish story, a popular narrative in which Zero Mostel also once acted.

The Producers Meets *Fiddler on the Roof*

Whereas *The Producers* is merely Jewish with its use of stereotypes and dependence on dark satire, *Fiddler on the Roof* offers a more traditional look at Judaism. *The Producers* was released between the premiere of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) and the film version (1971). Zero Mostel's performance, therefore, is an important element that needs exploration, since he originally played Tevye in *Fiddler* on Broadway and was responsible for its success.[128] An ethnic musical

122 *The Producers*, 1:23:16.

123 Giuliana Sorce, "Hitler and Humor: Coming to Terms with the Past through Parody," *Global Media Journal* 5, no. 2 (2015), accessed November 17 2016.

124 Louis Kaplan, "'It Will Get a Terrific Laugh': On the Problematic Pleasures and Politics of Holocaust Humor," in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 324.

125 Sander L. Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 279.

126 Fleishman, "Interview with Mel Brooks," 6.

127 Peschel, *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape*, 8.

128 Knapp, *The American Musical*, 184.

which seemed to have "limited appeal," *Fiddler* was in the beginning compared to the 1957 musical *West Side Story*, which was adapted for the screen in 1961.[129] *Fiddler*, however, managed to avoid backlash from critics. According to Knapp, "the characters and events of *Fiddler on the Roof* are not drawn from a verifiably inaccurate [...] past; rather, they were drawn from a people and way of life that were systematically erased from existence across the first half of the twentieth century, but which are remembered with nostalgia and deep sorrow."[130] Knapp gives credit for the musical's evading such a problem to the "Jewish presence on the creative team, and to its careful withholding of judgment on Tevye's hard-line anti-assimilationist position."[131] Joseph Stein attributes *Fiddler*'s success to its being "about people who happen to be Jewish" rather than "about Jewish people,"[132] even though Knapp believes that *Fiddler* "first and foremost *is* about Jews, however much its story may resonate with other cultures and peoples."[133] Director Norman Jewison's fear was that Mostel's performance would not transfer to film so nicely, that a good balance would not be achieved because of the actor's big, bold presence.[134] With this in mind, comparing *The Producers* and *Fiddler on the Roof* needs to be considered. Max Bialystock, a character perhaps more like Zero Mostel, is both more liberal and more intense than Tevye.

The amoral Bialystock and neurotic *schlimazel* ("unlucky person") Bloom have been considered "caricature Jewish figures" by some critics.[135] Geoff King also sees them as a "strategy [...] in comedy of a distinctive racial or ethnic slant."[136] They are part of what he calls "exaggeration to the point of absurdity of negative stereotypes."[137] This is one of the techniques of subversion in comedy. The negativity of the Bialystock character in part initiated Mostel's refusal to participate in the film. The concept of the "greedy Jew" has a long history, and one can understand why the role would have been unappealing. Abraham H. Foxman has identified the stereotype as one of three recognizable anti-Semitic figures, the other two being the Jew as "anti-assimilationist" and Christ "murder-

129 Ibid., 185.
130 Ibid., 216.
131 Ibid., 185.
132 Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002), 247.
133 Knapp, *The American Musical*, 215 (emphasis in original).
134 Norman Jewison, "'Norman Jewison': Filmmaker Documentary," in *Fiddler on the Roof*, dir. Norman Jewison (1971; MGM Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD, disc two, 14:00 – 14:15.
135 King, *Film Comedy*, 153.
136 Ibid., 152.
137 Ibid., 152.

er."[138] These "not so funny" stereotypes, Foxman suggests, may be employed by comedians humorously; however, such usage merely perpetuates the problem, according to him.[139] Reviewing how such types were used in the past for "humorous" purposes, one can better understand Foxman's argument (Figure 7).[140] Depictions of Jews of such an obvious anti-Semitic nature present problems, since these stereotypes have been for so long a part of a discourse of hate. If Max Bialystock is clearly the "boisterous conniver," as Desser and Friedman suggest,[141] then Brooks is merely perpetuating prejudice – or is he? The wolfish Bialystock at first does appear to be just another Jewish stereotype, as the big, bad "B" stitched on his smoking jacket seems to indicate (Figure 8).[142] The sign of caution, the "B", identifies what this conniving man represents. Desser and Friedman tell readers about the type: "the cunning Jew who unscrupulously fleeces others, the money-hungry Jew who sacrifices morality on the altar of immediate riches, the manipulative Jew who trades on the finer emotions of others for his own gain, the garish Jew who flaunts his wealth at the least opportunity."[143] The Jewish protagonist's manipulation of elderly ladies is certainly unethical. One can see why Mostel found the character repulsive.[144] He soon would learn, though, that Brooks' film was a proud comedic display of subversion. Brooks has openly admitted his "open anger with the crimes of Nazism,"[145] and his subversive comedy is a reflection of this: "Why should I not like the Germans? Just because they're arrogant and have fat necks and do anything they're told so long as it's cruel, and killed millions of Jews in concentration camps and made soap out of their bodies and lamp shades out of their skins? Is that any reason to hate their fucking guts?"[146] What Rickman calls the "singing-dancing dystopia" found in Brooks' films also demonstrates the alienation Jews still felt in America.[147] Brooks came to embrace his identity, though. As the angry Jewish comedian, he had an explanation for his craziness: "For every ten Jews beating their

138 Abraham H. Foxman, *Jews and Money: The Story of a Stereotype* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 43.

139 Foxman, *Jews and Money*, 179.

140 "Anti-Semitic Character on the Occasion of the Stock Exchange Crash of 1873," *Kikeriki*, May 18 1873, accessed December 4 2016, http://www.hasburger.net.

141 Desser and Friedman, *America-Jewish Filmmakers*, 147.

142 *The Producers*, 3:34.

143 Desser and Friedman, 147, 149.

144 "The Making of *The Producers*," 8:08 – 8:10.

145 Fermaglich, "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*," 68.

146 Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 17.

147 Rickman, *The Film Comedy Reader*, 298.

breasts, God designated one to be crazy and amuse the breast-beaters."[148] The combination of Brooks and Mostel, therefore, becomes necessary to keep in mind when comparing *Fiddler* and *The Producers*.

Fig. 7: The anti-semitic magazine *Kikeriki* regularly caricatured Jews.

What Chaim Topol, an Israeli actor, brings to Tevye in *Fiddler* is quite different from Zero Mostel's interpretation of the character. The Brooklyn-born Mostel may

148 Paul D. Zimmerman, "The Mad Mad Mel Brooks," *Newsweek*, February 17 1975, accessed November 29 2016, http://www.brookslyn.com.

Fig. 8: Bialystock preys on one of his elderly financiers.

have first given Tevye the qualities with which audiences are familiar, but another missing element was needed for the film. Topol was born in Tel Aviv. As a practicing Israeli Jew, Topol does add some authenticity to the character; this religious genuineness and sincerity is not only lacking in Mostel's portrayal but also in the more liberal Max Bialystock character. The clear differences between the modern, subversive Bialystock and the conservative Tevye can be identified upon analyzing the first scenes of both films.

The opening scene in *Fiddler* confirms the Orthodox Jewish culture upon which the narrative relies. With Tevye speaking directly to the audience, he establishes his conservative religious beliefs: "And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do."[149] He looks skyward and points towards the heavens, confirming the ultimate authority, the God of Judaism. He identifies himself as an Orthodox Jewish man who respects the Law. On the other hand, there is Max Bialystock, a non-observant Jew who does not report to the authority of God. His independence relies on the wealth of elderly spinsters and widows. He stores their portraits in a type of secular altar he has; he is loyal to nothing but the holy dollar. A woman's picture is only worthy to come out when she pays a visit and brings a check.

149 *Fiddler on the Roof*, dir. Norman Jewison (1971; MGM Home Entertainment, 2002), 4:31–4:40.

Tevye clings to his religion as well as the customs attached to them: families arrange marriages, men and woman cannot dance together, etc. Such traditions, however, are not favorable in a modern age. Tevye cannot win, and neither can Bialystock, a scammer who finds himself convicted of his crime. There is one fundamental difference between the two, however: the terror that comes to the Jewish village of Anatevka is a greater problem; it affects every Jewish townsperson. Bialystock's problem, though, is merely his: he is a failed and desperate producer unable to put on a successful play. Tevye's understanding of the tragedy of the Jews is steeped in history and tradition, but he deals with it through laughter that is both joyous and somber. Bilaystock, however, seems to trivialize the Jewish problems of the past to guarantee positive financial results; by doing so he intends his musical to be a successful flop. Despite his apparent lack of sympathy for the Jews, Bialystock's play becomes more than the scheme of a selfish man, however; it turns into a great humanitarian work of satire. Bialystock and Bloom's amoral musical instead appears to be greatly moral and anti-authoritarian, promoting commentary similar to Brooks' own: "The great Holocaust by the Nazis is probably the great outrage of the Twentieth Century. There is nothing to compare with it. So what can I do about it? If I get on the soapbox and wax eloquently, it'll be blown away in the wind, but if I do *Springtime for Hitler* it'll never be forgotten."[150]

Tevye, though, is intentionally moral and traditional with regard to obedience to God. Respect and cultural norms are to be honored. Tevye does not want his daughters to assimilate; he is righteous, and he regrets deeply the break-up of his family and their *shtetl*. For Tevye, Anatevka may be Zion. He yells at the Constable, "Get off my land," underlining that no other place can be his home.[151] Aviv and Shneer suggest that "the ways in which Eastern Europe has become a mythic part of the Jewish past and not an imagined mythic home in the future is central to understanding how American Jews see themselves at home in America."[152] The Old World belongs to Tevye in much the same way the New World belongs to Bialystock. Bialystock is not alone, though. Timothy Parrish argues that many liberal American Jews, especially those living in New York, no longer believe in a "Zion" but think that their homeland may simply be "a New York restaurant where Yiddish is still spoken."[153] Bialystock would

150 Fleishman, "Interview with Mel Brooks," no pagination.

151 *Fiddler on the Roof*, 2:33:30.

152 Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, "From Diaspora Jews to New Jews," in *Postzionism: A Reader*, by Laurence J. Silberstein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 351.

153 Timothy Parrish, *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 2007), 135.

be among these. After all, he is not faithful to anything, reliant on only his freedom and individuality, until those are taken away from him. Bloom is no different. Bialystock, as manipulator and father figure, mentors Wilder's character, showing him the path to autonomy. As a result, Bloom is as independent and liberal as Bialystock. After tricking the Nazi Franz Liebkind into handing over the rights to his musical on Hitler, the two of them throw their Nazi armbands into the trash and spit on them, rejecting not only Nazism but any form of authority. Behind Bialystock and Bloom, a flag in a window resembling the LGBT rainbow flag can be seen, giving new meaning to the 1977 film.[154] The producers' individuality is emphasized; they are their own men.

There is no doubt that *Fiddler*, in some ways, defends not only the Jewish faith but anti-assimilationism, at least from Tevye's point of view. Tevye recommends, "Each shall seek his own kind."[155] After one of his daughters decides to marry a Gentile, the belief remains the same: "Some things do not change for us; some things can never change."[156] Knapp suggests that "the taboo against mixed marriages was then [1964] still strong among Jews." During the time of the musical's release "intermarriage meant a denial of something essential to their nature."[157] In Jewish New Hollywood, however, old traditions were challenged by liberal filmmakers.

Bialystock, as written for the screen by Brooks and portrayed by Mostel, connects with modern audiences who may identify with his liberal approach to life. The character reflects the New World intricacies of being Jewish even while perpetuating a stereotype; appearing to be the immoral, avaricious Jew from anti-Semitic caricatures, Bialystock maintains his independence and Americanness. However, he is also aware of the history of Jewish struggle and the tragicomedy that has grown out of it. In one insightful shot, after failing to find a bad script to produce, Bialystock comes across Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. He reads its famous opening line aloud: "'Gregor Samsa awoke one morning to find that he had been transformed into a giant cockroach.' It's too good!"[158] The statement demonstrates the moment Bialystock identifies with the tradition of Jewish writing, acknowledging its occasional darkness and absurdity. Kafka's words and

154 *The Producers*, 32:43. I compare the unidentifiable flag in the shot to the one that represents the LGBT community. Gilbert Baker designed the rainbow flag in 1978 in San Francisco ("Rainbow Flag," 100).

155 *Fiddler on the Roof*, 2:18:22 – 2:18:25.

156 Ibid., 2:18:42 – 2:18:48.

157 Knapp, *The American* Musical, 225.

158 *The Producers*, 25:23 – 25:33.

Gregor's reality ring too true. Bialystock's self-awareness of being a Jew is transferred to his business partner.

Bialystock takes advantage of Bloom; however, he also convinces him that he can achieve being a free individual. In the first scene with the two together, Bialystock addresses the problem: "So, you're an accountant, huh? Then account for yourself!"[159] Bloom is eventually able to overcome his old nebbish ways, demonstrating his individuality as the two sit next to the Revson Fountain in Lincoln Center. After deciding to help Bialystock with his scheme, Bloom sprints around the fountain in celebration as it shoots into the air, confirming his freedom and new identity. Until that point, the neurotic Bloom was, to use Wilder's description of the character, "the perfect victim."[160] Bloom, though, successfully overcomes the stereotype of the Jewish weakling. At that moment, he enters a new world, escaping that Kafkaesque dilemma which Gregor Samsa cannot: "I'm Leo Bloom! I'm me! I can do whatever I want! It doesn't matter! I'm Leo Bloom!"[161]

One finds the opposite situation in *Fiddler*, where tradition, Old World Jewishness, and conventionality suffocate the younger Jews' attempt to find themselves. After the Six-Day War, *Fiddler on the Roof* can arguably be seen as contesting New World Jewry. It propagates the "exaggerated pride" and "national intoxication" that David Alexander insists "strengthened the foundations of the Zionist vision." These "myths," Alexander notes, were satirized by Israeli humorists.[162] One of these satirists was Hanoch Levin, whose cabaret "made harsh proclamations about the war and its moral outcome." In Tel Aviv, however, such criticism was not appreciated; it seemed to promote irreverence.[163] After all, Israel's defeat of her Arab neighbors following the war provided "new opportunities for Israel to pursue the maximalist goals of Zion."[164] Such ambitions, though, seemed unnecessary, superfluous. Israel, having triumphed in Palestine and Sinai, "quadrupled its territory."[165] Considering this, *Springtime for Hitler* is also, in some ways, a critique of Jewishness.

159 Ibid., 10:09 – 10:14.

160 "The Making of *The Producers*," 16:10.

161 *The Producers*, 24:40 – 24:47.

162 David Alexander, "Political Satire in the Israeli Theatre: Another Outlook on Zionism," in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 169.

163 Ibid., 170.

164 M. Shahid. Alam, *Israeli Exceptionalism: The Destabilizing Logic of Zionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 186.

165 Alam, *Israeli Exceptionalism*, 188.

Fermaglich suggests that after the Six-Day War Jews experienced a sense of "pride"; the Holocaust was necessarily "a component of that Jewish identity."[166] Brooks' cabaret, though, is a production with a dominant American Jewishness at its center. His producers do not respect any type of authority. Furthermore, they represent individualism, not monolithic Jewishness. Such proper cabaret subverts all forms of tyranny; it is entertainment "exercised within the symbolic space of performance,"[167] and no one escapes its criticism.

Conclusion

In 1967, *The Producers* was viewed as a "threat to the Jewish community."[168] Some Jews may have showed "outrage" because of their feelings about "fascism," "anti-Semitism," and "the murder of millions of Jews during World War II."[169] However, another problem may have been that Brooks' film approaches Jewishness in general. Brooks modifies Old World stereotypes, contesting not only anti-Semitism but typical notions of Jewishness. After the Six-Day War, Jews may have worn their Jewishness as a "badge of pride";[170] however, American Jewishness as represented in *The Producers* reflects different values. Mostel and Wilder, through their performances, accomplished more than either of them set out to, thanks in part to Brooks' original script and directing. If Brooks' humor is dismissed as "tasteless," "despicable," and "dangerous,"[171] it may well be that critics have overlooked his contribution to Jewish black comedy, which, as I have shown, has a rather complicated and long history, from the German cabaret to the stages of Terezín/Theresienstadt. Such comedy has a special home in US cinema, especially for Jews who appreciate and respect the multiplicity of Jewish identities.

166 Fermaglich, "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*," 68.
167 Peschel, *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape*, 7.
168 Fermaglich, "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*," 77.
169 Ibid., 60.
170 Ibid., 68.
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