

# Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: Tracing American Jewish Culture Through Comedy, 1967–2007

Kirsten Fermaglich

In its first year on Broadway, Mel Brooks' 2001 musical, *The Producers*, wowed critics, charmed audiences and shattered records with its 12 Tony awards, and its \$100 tickets. Brooks' story of two producers who fail in their scheme to get rich by producing a sure-fire flop, "Springtime for Hitler," became the toast of New York, even in the wake of the attacks of September 11. The extraordinary success of *The Producers* in the new millennium is particularly surprising for those aware of the extremely mixed reactions audiences had to Brooks' original movie, *The Producers*, first released in 1967. Some film critics panned the film, while others loved it; the film sold out in some cities and barely attracted an audience in others. *The Producers* won an Academy Award for Best Screenplay, but rather than becoming a classic, it became a underground cult film for many years.

Given this history, contemporary theater critics, newspaper columnists, and religious leaders offered a number of different interpretations for the wild and unexpected success of Brooks' 2001 musical. One rabbi argued that *The Producers* was a healthy "coping mechanism" for victims of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> The editor of the *Forward* argued that audiences had gained enough distance from the Holocaust to be able to laugh about it.<sup>2</sup> And novelist Thane Rosenbaum expressed concern that contemporary American culture had "eventually grow[n] weary of the pieties surrounding the Holocaust."<sup>3</sup>

Although all of these explanations can help us to understand the phenomenon of the 2001 musical, *The Producers*, I would like to offer a different explanation for Brooks' success. This explanation hinges on an historical understanding of both the original 1967 movie, *The Producers*, and the musical play version of 2001: although they were substantially similar, each reflected the era in which it was produced, and their ability to speak to different audiences in separate eras helps to explain their very different critical responses. The film version reflected the upheaval of the 1960s in the United States, and particularly in American Jewish life: generational and political divisions, as well as the changing social status and cultural preoccupations of Jews during this era reshaped the American Jewish community, and Brooks' wild film reflected this moment of very loud and visible change. The tamer Broadway musical version of *The Producers* in 2001, on the other hand, reflected a very different country, and a changed Jewish American experience in the 1990s. While issues like abortion and homosexuality moved to the center of public discourse in virulent culture wars during this decade, Jews moved more decisively, if quietly and unobtrusively, into the white mainstream. These changing dynamics in American Jewish life can help us to understand why "Springtime for Hitler" could be viewed as an outrage by many in 1967 and a triumph by most in 2001. Jews in 1967 were still anxious about anti-semitism, fearful of fascism, and just beginning to express rage publicly about the murder of millions of Jews during World War II. In this context, many Jews believed that the idea of a play produced by Jews glorifying Nazis was not only tasteless but also despicable and even dangerous. In 2001, however, many American Jews, comfortably ensconced in the American middle class, embraced the outrageous premise of the play as a signal of their triumph over Nazism, their success in the United States, and as a nostalgic reminder of their youth.

A brief summary of *The Producers'* film plot is necessary for understanding these different responses to the film and the musical. The film is set in New York in the 1960s. Flamboyant, egomaniacal Broadway producer Max Bialystock (played by Zero Mostel) teams up with neurotic, timid accountant Leo Bloom (played by Gene Wilder) in a fraudulent scheme to oversell shares in a flop. Since investors do not expect to receive returns on failed plays, the men plan to produce the worst play ever, and pocket investors' money when the play folds. Bialystock seduces little old ladies into buying shares of *Springtime for Hitler*, "a gay romp with Adolf and Eva," written by an escaped Nazi, Franz Liebkind. In order to ensure that *Springtime for Hitler* fails, the men hire Roger de Bris, an abysmal, flamboyantly gay director, and cast an addle-brained hippie named L.S.D. as Hitler. Although the audience is initially disgusted by the opening musical number, "Springtime for Hitler," they find the spacey Hitler's dialogue hilarious, and the play becomes a huge success. Bialystock and Bloom, after failing at blowing up the theater, are put in prison, where they are last seen overselling shares for their new musical, *Prisoners of Love*.

### ***The Producers* in 1967**

The 1967 film production of *The Producers* reflected the generational and political divisions that affected American, and American Jewish, life during the 1960s. Like other young Americans, but perhaps even more intensely and disproportionately, young Jewish people in the United States in the 1960s joined the growing youth movement of the era. They participated in civil rights sit-ins, travelled to Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964, joined the Berkeley Free Speech movement, and helped to organize and attend countless protests against the escalating war in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Even more young Jewish men and women were a part of an emerging youth culture that shaped both political activism and cultural life in the 1960s: iconic Jewish figures such as Bob Dylan and Abbie Hoffman symbolized the ways that many young American Jews identified themselves with an alternative youth culture that rejected the bourgeois culture of their parents.<sup>5</sup> Many older Jewish men and women, meanwhile, embraced their newfound middle-class status, and even though their children's politics might have sprung out of their own liberal or radical backgrounds, still found their children's rejection of many American middle-class values troubling and puzzling.

Alongside and interwoven with these generational differences, Jews also experienced political division during this era. Although the Jewish community overwhelmingly voted Democratic throughout the 1960s, Jews nonetheless divided significantly over such issues as the Cold War, civil rights, and the Vietnam War. While some Jews held fast to more progressive and liberal politics, others criticized these liberals for their naivete or their lack of concern for the Jewish people. These communal battles became only more intense as the decade's contentious politics wore on.<sup>6</sup>

*The Producers* reflected these generational and political divisions in the 1960s in a number of ways. For example, the film was part of the 1960s wave of "black" or "sick" humor that infused general American culture. Comedians like Elaine May and Mike Nichols, Mort Sahl, and Lenny Bruce became nationally known for developing hard-edged humor with subjects like racism, mental illness, and nuclear war.<sup>7</sup> Authors like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut evinced the same sensibility in fiction during the same era, leading literary critic Morris Dickstein to label the early 1960s as an era of black humor, "a mixture of comedy and terror."<sup>8</sup> Black humor was particularly appropriate to a generationally divided era in which existentialism made inroads on college campuses, and civil rights and antiwar activism consistently made headlines. As young activists began to protest openly the absurdities of their parents' Cold War politics, hip humorists similarly delighted in breaking taboos, gently and ironically jolting the bourgeoisie.

*The Producers* flouted a significant taboo of American popular culture in the 1960s: humor about the Nazi regime. Both before and during World War II, ridicule of the Nazi state and its leaders had been a familiar feature in American popular culture, as people viewed that humor as a weapon in the war effort. Politi-

cal cartoons by artists like Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), animated cartoons such as Walt Disney's *Der Fuehrer's Face*, and feature-length films such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) and Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* (1942) had all ridiculed the Nazis, poking holes in their pretensions to military grandeur and racial purity, and helping to legitimize American war aims.<sup>9</sup>

After the war, however, humor that ridiculed the Nazi regime moved to the margins of American popular culture; it no longer had immediate use as a weapon in war, and it seemed ill-suited to grapple with the evidence of bestial genocide discovered in Nazi camps at the conclusion of the war. To be sure, Hitler, and other stock Nazi villains, continued to serve as targets in a few comedies in the 1950s and the 1960s, but these films were generic war comedies, not critiques of the Nazi regime.<sup>10</sup> The most prominent example of American popular culture that featured Nazi villains as figures of fun in the 1960s was *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-71), a television situation comedy set in a German prisoner-of-war camp in World War II. But far from the spirit of public propaganda that had mostly welcomed works ridiculing the Nazis in the 1940s, public discourse in the 1960s centered around the tastelessness of *Hogan's Heroes*, suggesting that after World War II, boundaries of taste had been drawn to exclude the ugliness of the Third Reich from mainstream comedic treatment.<sup>11</sup> In this environment, it was primarily "black" comics like Lenny Bruce who were willing to ridicule Nazi evil in their standup comedy. Indeed, some have seen the origins of *The Producers* in a 1958 Lenny Bruce skit entitled "Hitler and the MCA," which featured two talent agents auditioning for a new dictator.<sup>12</sup> *The Producers'* origins thus lay in a burgeoning black humor, which transgressed conventions and unsettled middle class audiences, delighting young rebellious men and women, and reflecting the growing generation gap that shaped both Jewish and non-Jewish Americans alike in the 1960s.

Moreover, in the fantastic musical sequence, "Springtime for Hitler," in *The Producers*, Brooks transgressed another convention of cold-war America by actually equating American society with Nazi Germany. A number of scholars and critics have noted that in his presentation of a Busby Berkeley swastika, jackbooting chorus girls, and elaborate costumes of German kitsch, in which young women wore pretzels and beer steins on their breasts and heads, Brooks made significant and pointed comparisons between Broadway showmanship and fascist pageantry.<sup>13</sup> Brooks' portrait, moreover, of the uptight and tasteless middle-class audience uproariously embracing the play, "Springtime for Hitler," presents the American bourgeoisie as insensitive, tasteless, and so amoral that they might be willing to embrace fascism itself if it were presented in a palatable or funny form, in much the same way that the real Hitler had initially seemed to many a harmless comic nobody in Weimar Germany. With this trenchant criticism of American show business and its middle-class audience, Brooks became one of a number of American Jewish writers in the 1960s who transgressed the conventional cold-war comparison between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union,

and instead used the symbolism of Nazi Germany to critique American society from a liberal perspective.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time that *The Producers* appealed to young Jewish and non-Jewish Americans chafing at the political restraints of the Cold War and eager to needle the cultural hypocrisy of the suburban middle class, the film also reflected older Americans' fears of the growing counterculture in the 1960s. By using a flower child to play Hitler—and to make Hitler palatable to the middle class audience of the film—Mel Brooks was expressing a critique of the counterculture that was common to many liberal, middle-aged men and women of the era: the counterculture was a proto-fascist movement.

Although middle-aged liberals supported aspects of the civil rights and peace movements in the 1960s, they were frequently puzzled and angered by the counterculture that developed in the United States during the same era, because of its outright challenge to all established political, cultural, and social norms. Radicals who took over college buildings and hippies who used acid and dropped out of mainstream society threatened middle-class liberals, and personified for them the frightening emotionalism and mass behavior that had categorized the Nazi regime. For example, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, told reporters that students at University of Chicago who had taken over the president's office reminded him of Hitler's young supporters: "I see exactly the same thing happening here from the so-called left as happened in Germany from the right."<sup>15</sup> Historian Robert Skotheim asked in 1971, "[W]ould the young radicals defend a dictatorial totalitarianism in power?" and answered pessimistically, "the New Left's indifference to civil liberties, impatience with democratic constitutionalism, intolerance toward differences of opinion, and hostility to traditional scholarly inquiry and detachment are not encouraging."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most famously, in her essay on the counterculture, *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion suggested that the romanticism of the counterculture lent itself to authoritarianism, describing the hippies with whom she had drifted for days, "an army of children waiting to be given the words."<sup>17</sup> A good number of liberal intellectuals in the 1960s were convinced that the counterculture's ignorance, intolerance, and romanticism would open the door to fascism.<sup>18</sup> Mel Brooks' decision to make an addle-brained hippie his Hitler reflected this intellectual trend.

General fears of fascism, moreover, suffused the political landscape of the 1960s in the United States. Suggestions that the United States was in a political situation analogous to Weimar Germany ran through liberal and radical discourse in the 1960s. Radical journals like *Studies on the Left* published forums debating whether the contemporary United States was in the same stage as Weimar Germany, while mainstream magazines like *Look* published articles about "America's Concentration Camps" being built to house political dissenters.<sup>19</sup> Fears of the United States becoming fascist also infused popular culture of the 1960s: the Tony award-winning Broadway musical *Cabaret* (1966), which was made into an Oscar award-winning film in 1972, was developed by director and

producer Hal Prince in an effort to compare contemporary American politics to Weimar Germany.<sup>20</sup> Mel Brooks' scarcely veiled fears of hippies and anger at his middle-class audience similarly reflected the era's political polarization and concerns over fascism. Thus the sharp political and generational divisions of the 1960s—the emergence of an alternative youth culture and fearful reactions against that counterculture, the disintegration of a cold-war consensus, and the preoccupation with Weimar and the coming of fascism—all shaped the 1967 version of *The Producers*.

The film version of *The Producers* also reflected the liminal status of both Jewish identity and the Holocaust in American cultural life in the 1960s. On the one hand, Jews had become integral members of American mainstream life by the 1960s. Jews' racial status, which had been uncertain in the United States during the 1930s, became more unequivocally white in the years after World War II. Jews, like other descendants of white European immigrants, had been able to take advantage of the low-cost mortgages and free education provided by the GI Bill of Rights, as well as the booming suburban communities of the 1950s, to establish themselves more firmly as members of the white American middle class. In the wake of the Holocaust, moreover, Jews had decided consciously to reject language that distinguished them as a race apart, preferring to define themselves instead as an ethnicity that would still be understood as "white."<sup>21</sup> Then, too, Jews' status as cultural producers—writers, critics, playwrights, academics—had soared during the 1950s and 1960s, as lionized artists like Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Arthur Miller made Jews into "everymen" for American culture.<sup>22</sup> In many important ways, by 1967, Jews had become insiders in the American mainstream.

On the other hand, cultural representations of Jews in the 1960s frequently still portrayed them as outsiders: dangerous, challenging, and outside the American mainstream. Comic Lenny Bruce's famous monologue in the 1960s on "Jewish and Goyish" epitomized this vision of Jews. According to Bruce, all Italians, all Negroes and everyone who lived in a city (even if they were Catholic) was Jewish, as was chocolate, black cherry soda, and Duke Ellington. Everyone who lived in Butte, Montana, even if they were Jewish, was Goyish (not Jewish), and so were Drake's Cakes and Kool-Aid.<sup>23</sup> Author Phillip Roth offered a similar portrait of Jews as dark outsiders in his short story, "Goodbye, Columbus" (1959): the story's Jewish working-class protagonist, Neil Klugman, described himself to suburban Jewish princess Brenda Patimkin as "dark": "Are you a Negro?" she asked.<sup>24</sup> And the rise to fame of Jewish celebrities like Barbra Streisand and Dustin Hoffman in the 1960s was accompanied by discussion of the ways that both their looks and their personas broke traditional conventions for Hollywood stars.<sup>25</sup> In the 1960s, then, Jewish identity in the United States skirted the boundaries between insider and outsider. Jews had power, but they also felt themselves, and portrayed themselves, on the margins outside the mainstream.

Similarly, the Holocaust possessed a liminal status in American popular culture in the 1960s. Imagery of Nazi concentration camps played an important

role in American thinking about politics and morality during the 1960s, but the destruction of European Jewry nonetheless remained an unnamed historical event at the margins of popular discourse in the United States throughout most of the decade. Many Americans at the beginning of the 1960s understood Nazi devastation very differently than they did at the end of the decade, and indeed, very differently from the ways that Americans today understand the Holocaust. The phrase, "the Holocaust," did not exist in American life until the late 1960s and early 1970s. The narrative of the persecution and murder of six million Jews with which large numbers of Americans are now familiar would have been alien to most Americans in the years before 1967.<sup>26</sup> Instead, in an intellectual and cultural environment that prized universalism and discouraged displays of ethnic difference, most Americans tended to subsume the Nazis' crimes against Jews into the larger framework of atrocities the regime committed against innocent civilians and against American soldiers in World War II.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the large numbers of films, books, plays, museums, and memorials to the Holocaust that now proliferate in the popular culture of the United States did not flourish to nearly the same extent in the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

That does not mean, however, that Americans were ignorant of Nazi evil, nor does it mean that the Nazi destruction of European Jewry was absent from American popular culture before 1967. Indeed, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Americans, particularly Jewish Americans, were quite aware that the Nazis had murdered millions of civilians and that Jews had been specially hated targets. After World War II, Jewish groups protested the United States performances of German artists who had joined the Nazi party. Jewish religious institutions developed prayer books that memorialized the Jewish victims of Nazism, and Jewish educators taught young children about the heroism of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.<sup>29</sup> And if Jewish Americans were more aware than most other Americans of the murders of millions of their fellow Jews in Europe, all Americans were exposed to Jewish anguish in literature, theater, and film in the two decades after World War II. Popular cultural texts from *The Wall* (1950), to *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1957) to *Exodus* (1958) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1960) made clear to all Americans the devastations that the Nazi regime had wrought on European Jews.<sup>30</sup> Even when they deemphasized the Jewishness of Nazi victims, these cultural representations nonetheless addressed the murder of Jews through the use of veiled language or coded images.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Nazi destruction became a significant component in American political discourse for both Jews and non-Jews in the early 1960s, as liberal American Jewish academics, analysts, and activists brought the imagery of Nazi concentration camps into discussions of feminism, affirmative action, nuclear proliferation, and Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> The phrase, "the Holocaust," with its emphasis on Jewish persecution and annihilation was not in the mainstream of American culture throughout most of the 1960s, but images of Nazi evil, frequently with coded and veiled messages about the destruction of European Jews, echoed powerfully throughout American public discourse.



In 1967, then, when Mel Brooks began production of *The Producers*, both Jewish identity and Holocaust consciousness skirted the boundaries between the American mainstream and the margins. And it was that liminal status between insider and outsider that *The Producers*' manic energy reflected. Like many of the writers, filmmakers, and artists of the 1950s and the early 1960s, Brooks did not openly grapple with Jewish destruction in his film. The screenplay never mentioned Jews, nor did it openly refer to the Holocaust. Brooks instead used the symbols of Nazi Germany in his fantastic Broadway musical to criticize the tastelessness, shallowness, and even immorality of American middle-class life. Like many other American Jews of his generation during this era, Brooks did not explore the destruction of European Jewry per se; instead, he used symbols of that destruction to talk about American society.

At the same time, however, Brooks' work was infused with a Jewish sensibility, both in its sympathetic Jewish characters and in its attack on Nazi Germany. Although the word "Jew" was never spoken in *The Producers*, both the film's humor and its main characters were intended to be, and were understood by many as, Jewish.<sup>33</sup> Like many other works in American Jewish culture, *The Producers* was "double-coded," communicating one message to non-Jewish audiences, while allowing Jewish audiences to interpret characters, scenarios and plots as being Jewish or having distinctive Jewish meaning.<sup>34</sup> To be sure, what coded *The Producers* Jewish for Jewish audiences was that Bialystock and Bloom embodied Jewish stereotypes. Bialystock was a greedy, unethical businessman who sexually preyed on vulnerable women, while Bloom was a neurotic wimp, an accountant with frizzy hair and a security blanket. Indeed, Zero Mostel, who played Bialystock, originally refused to be in the movie because he did not want to perpetuate these stereotypes.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, Bialystock and Bloom were actually far more sympathetic than their stereotypical origins suggest, and the movie clearly urges you to root for them, despite your misgivings.<sup>36</sup> Unlike most other characters in *The Producers*, Bialystock and Bloom understood the depravity of their play and wanted "Hitler" to flop; Bloom, in particular, was repulsed by the need to work with an escaped Nazi. When pushed to wear a swastika by Liebkind, the neo-Nazi, Bloom tore off the armband and spat on it as soon as he and Bialystock were out of Liebkind's view. It was not Bialystock and Bloom, but the bourgeois audience in the film, who demonstrated a frightening abandonment of moral values as they rushed to embrace the hippie Hitler in *Springtime for Hitler*. The ironic telegram that Bialystock and Bloom received upon their success: "Congratulations! Hitler will run forever!" highlighted the audience's blindness and the Jewish producers' plight. Although perhaps not the ideal moral men, Bialystock and Bloom were lovable Jewish losers more aware of the dangers of Nazism than the members of the American middle class who flocked to their fascist play.

In addition to his sympathetic Jewish characters, Mel Brooks' treatment of Nazi Germany in the movie, *The Producers*, clearly manifested his anger as a Jewish man at the Nazi extermination of European Jewry. For example, Brooks



feminized the Nazis in the film in order to ridicule and disempower them; the SS stormtroopers became smiling chorus girls in Brooks' fantasy, while Hitler himself spoke with an effeminate lisp and carried a flower. Moreover, the neo-Nazi of the film, Liebkind, was a bumbling fool whom Bialystock and Bloom used and outwitted. Even Max Bialystock's name was a symbol of Jewish power and Nazi weakness; Bialystok is the Polish city where one of the major ghetto uprisings of Polish Jews against Nazis took place.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, after the film was released, Brooks told friends and interviewers that *The Producers* was an angry work, a Jewish expression of fury with the Nazi murder of European Jewry. In 1968, in the wake of poor critical reviews for *The Producers*, Brooks told Albert Goldman, "My comedy is based on rage. I'll show those cockamamie *Cahiers* critics. . . . We Jews have upward mobility, you know."<sup>38</sup> To an interviewer, Brooks explained his anger in *The Producers*:

More than anything the great holocaust by the nazis is probably the great outrage of the Twentieth Century. There is nothing to compare with it. And . . . 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. I think you can bring down totalitarian governments faster by using ridicule than you can with invective.<sup>39</sup>

For Brooks, *The Producers* was a proud Jewish response to Nazi Germany, much like the filmmaker's decision while he served in the army during World War II to sing Jewish performer Al Jolson's "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," over loudspeakers to German troops in response to a barrage of Nazi propaganda.<sup>40</sup>

Brooks' open anger with the crimes of Nazism in *The Producers* in 1967 signaled a growing desire among Jews to make transparent and external the Jewish rage that had been expressed internally within the Jewish community, or through veiled imagery in American mainstream popular culture, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Part of that growing desire among Jews was a response to changing events in the United States and throughout the world. Around 1965, many in the African American civil rights movement began to deemphasize the goal of integration and to champion instead black cultural self-sufficiency and nationalism. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for example, began to adopt the slogan of "Black Power," encouraging other minority groups, such as Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans, to look inward for cultural strength, rather than to a larger white mainstream.<sup>41</sup> For Jews, this growing emphasis on ethnic and racial identity in American life was joined by compelling events in the Middle East in 1967. While *The Producers* was being shot in June 1967, Israel fought and won the Six Day War, an event that had a powerful impact on American Jewish identity. As Arab forces massed on Israeli borders, American Jews gathered around radios, volunteered their services to the Israeli army, and gave record amounts of money, fearing, some have noted,

that they were watching another Holocaust. With a swift Israeli victory, large numbers of American Jews celebrated mightily and embraced their background. In reaction to these changing events at home and abroad, many American Jews began to wear their Jewish identity as a badge of pride, and to consider the destruction of European Jewry as a component of that Jewish identity.<sup>42</sup>

Although the Six Day War united American Jews by emphasizing Jewish consciousness, it also exacerbated generational and political divisions within American Jewish culture. Radical young Jews began to refer to older liberal Jews and members of the Jewish establishment as “Uncle Toms” or “Uncle Jakes” for their willingness to “throw off the last vestiges of Jewishness because that is their ticket to acceptance in American society.”<sup>43</sup> Newly formed radical Jewish groups and journals (both Zionist and non-Zionist), such as the Brooklyn Bridge Collective and Jews for Urban Justice, criticized established Jewish organizations and sponsored political actions that highlighted these organizations’ inattention to Jewish ritual and identity.<sup>44</sup> Although not expressly inspired by the Six Day War, films featuring angry “nice Jewish boys” rebelling against their oppressive families and communities, such as *Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*, multiplied at the theaters in the late 1960s after the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict and further divided American Jews along generational lines.<sup>45</sup> In the meanwhile, some older liberal Jews, thrilled by the Six Day War and repelled by the radicalism of young Jewish students, turned to conservatism as the political ideology that would preserve American values and protect the state of Israel.<sup>46</sup>

The strong Jewish sensibility at the heart of *The Producers* appealed to young audiences in the years after the Six Day War, as young Jews vented their anger with Nazism and sought a hip Jewish humor to fit their newfound Jewish pride. Nonetheless, Brooks’ comparison between American middle-class taste and Nazi kitsch reflected the more reticent Holocaust consciousness of the 1950s and early 1960s, as did his coded references to Jewish subjects and Jewish stereotypes. *The Producers* thus offers viewers a window into the liminal status of both Jewish identity and Holocaust consciousness in the 1960s. On the one hand, Jewish artists and audiences saw themselves as comfortable mainstream middle-class Americans, and indeed as proud relatives of the triumphant Israeli army, but on the other, many continued to see themselves as members of a persecuted minority still mourning their community’s annihilation in World War II and fearing the rise of fascism and anti-semitism in the United States.

And indeed, Mel Brooks seems to have wavered between seeing himself as a comfortable show-business insider and an angry, young outsider as he wrote and directed *The Producers* in 1967. A writer for the popular TV show, Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows*, and a comedian who had produced the successful “Thousand Year Old Man” sound recording with Carl Reiner, Brooks had been a part of a show business elite as early as 1950, and indeed many in that elite were themselves Jewish. Nonetheless, as a first-time director on *The Producers*, Brooks appears to have been disastrously insecure. He battled angrily with his star, his editor, his producer, and his crew as he perceived them interfering with

his vision for the film, and as he recognized his dependence on them. He recognized angrily that he had to accept his editor's decision to eliminate components of the neo-Nazi playwright's tribute to Hitler, for example. Brooks also had to accept his Jewish distributor's insistence that the title of the movie be changed from *Springtime for Hitler* to *The Producers*, because the distributor was afraid that Jews would protest the initial title.<sup>47</sup> In 1967, Mel Brooks was a successful comedian and writer married to Oscar-winning actress Anne Bancroft; he was unquestionably an insider in show business. Nonetheless, Brooks was not the famous box-office draw he would become by the 1970s. He still saw himself as an angry outsider to the film world. He could not dictate the terms of his movie completely, and he chafed under the restrictions of an industry that seemed to encourage veiled references to Jewishness and the Holocaust. Mel Brooks himself skirted the line between insider and outsider in the 1960s.

It is important to note that the 1960s was not a simple, discrete or easily categorized era. American popular culture in 1960 looked very different from that in 1969; both historians and laypeople have created a powerful portrait of a discrete decade that did not really exist. The decade witnessed substantial and rapid cultural change, and *The Producers* can help us to understand some of that change. Different sensibilities in the early 1960s, such as the cultural trend towards black humor and the tendency to veil images of the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, shaped aspects of *The Producers*, while the film's political messages directed against the counterculture and displaying Jewish pride were more clearly products of the late 1960s.<sup>48</sup> The filming of *The Producers* in 1967, a year that some have seen as a turning point in the decade, illustrated vividly the rapid historical transformations that took place during the era.

### Reviewing *The Producers* in 1967-1968

If the black humor, transgressive spirit, and Jewish sensibility of *The Producers* reflected historical changes taking place in the United States in the 1960s, mixed critical reactions to the movie similarly reflected the tremendous changes taking place in the American mainstream, among both viewers and critics. Some critics loved the film, finding its humor refreshing and liberating. Peter Sellers, who was himself Jewish, took out full page ads in *Variety* and *The New York Times*, calling *The Producers* "the ultimate film," and "the essence of all great comedy." "Those of us who have seen this film and understand it have experienced a phenomenon which occurs only once in a lifetime."<sup>49</sup> Many critics found the "Springtime for Hitler" number, moreover, "very funny," even "hilarious" and "the one unqualified success of the film . . . a wonderfully silly production number."<sup>50</sup>

Other critics, however, found the film's evocation of Nazi Germany and Jews utterly distasteful and offensive. For some, simply laughing at Nazi Germany was difficult. Critic Moira Walsh's "mind boggled at the psychological implications in the premise that any audience would laugh at the play within the movie."<sup>51</sup>

And Marion Armstrong insisted in *The Christian Century*, “the subject of Nazi Germany does not lend itself to hilarity; Hitler was and is unspeakable at any remove and from any angle.”<sup>52</sup> Armstrong, however, had no problems appreciating the serious message of Brooks’ parody; she was one of the only critics to notice and relish Brooks’ portrait of “a flower child unconsciously fitting Hitler’s boots through the self-seriousness of a party line.”<sup>53</sup> It was Hitler as comedy that most offended many critics.

For influential film critics Andrew Sarris and Stanley Kauffmann, however, the notion of Jewish producers working with a Nazi to put on a play was most disturbing: “I simply cannot believe that any Jewish producers would involve themselves in such a project,” Sarris charged.<sup>54</sup> “Springtime for Hitler. . . doesn’t even rise to the level of tastelessness,” Kauffmann wrote in the *New Republic*, going on to note that “it seems odd that the Nazi is oblivious to the Jewishness of his producers.”<sup>55</sup> By openly taking on Hitler, Brooks thrilled some young viewers for whom Nazis had been forbidden figures of taboo, but by portraying stereotypical Jews collaborating in his fantastic fascist production on Broadway, Brooks also confused and angered many older Jews and non-Jews alike. John Mahoney of *The Hollywood Reporter* obliquely noted this generation gap, even as he hailed the film as “hilarious”: “Those who will not buy Grundig and Volkswagen will probably pass by ‘The Producers’ as well,” he warned.<sup>56</sup> Many American Jews after World War II conducted an unofficial boycott of German goods, but by the 1960s, Volkswagen had unleashed a legendary advertising campaign intended to make its Beetle a symbol of youth and the counterculture. The campaign, designed by a boutique advertising agency, succeeded in wooing many young Americans; young Jews would certainly have been more likely to have purchased Volkswagens than their parents, and the Mahoney reference seems to suggest this generational division.<sup>57</sup>

Even those reviewers who appreciated Brooks’ black humor regarding Nazis were frequently repelled by his portrayal of the counterculture, homosexuals, women, or by his overtly Jewish heroes. “Dick Shawn as a hip-cat personifying Hitler embodies so many currently antithetical socio-concepts he defeats his own, and even Brooks’, intentions,” wrote Norman Cecil in the elite film journal, *Films in Review*.<sup>58</sup> Robert Hatch in the *Nation* claimed that even “the most permissive taste” would not allow him to elaborate upon “Mostel’s tumbling of ready old ladies,” so the film critic criticized instead *The Producers*’ “mean” treatment of homosexuals, calling it “as compassionate as milking laughs out of a cleft palate or a withered arm.”<sup>59</sup> In *The Village Voice*, Andrew Sarris scored the film as a movie “that completely ignores the existence of women except as props, toys, or old bags.” And the influential film critic Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker* panned Brooks’ film, claiming, “*The Producers* isn’t basically unconventional; it only seems so because it’s so amateurishly crude and because it revels in the kind of show-business Jewish humor that used to be considered too specialized for movies. Screenwriters used to take the Jewish out but now that television comedians exploit themselves as stereotypes, screenwriters are putting the Jewish in.”<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, these critics were all responding to political and cultural changes taking place off the screen. Kael's review was commenting on, and expressing discomfort with, American Jews' transition from a marginal group to one inserting itself into the mainstream. But all the reviews demonstrate the ways that the desirability of ethnic expression, the values and meaning of the counterculture, and the appropriate treatment of groups like gays and women were rapidly emerging as points of contention within American culture during the late 1960s.

Kael's comment also underscored an emerging change in American culture that many other critics noted as well: as the 1960s witnessed more challenges to established norms, artists attempted to become more experimental, audacious, and shocking, and definitions of taste were rapidly changing, to the chagrin of some critics. "The whole movie is based on this one plot premise that is supposed to attest to the New Audacity in movies. Instead, everything in *The Producers* attests to the New Vulgarity," wrote Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice*. Perhaps more than anything else, Brooks' wholehearted enjoyment in pushing the boundaries of taste angered and offended his critics, thus reflecting the serious cultural divisions that were emerging in America at the time.<sup>61</sup>

It is hard to get a sense of precisely what ordinary audiences thought of *The Producers* in 1967. The movie succeeded in New York—Mel Brooks remembered that it played for nearly a full year at one art house there—but it seems to have been less successful in other cities, like Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and in non-urban theaters as well.<sup>62</sup> That the film succeeded so well in New York, a city with a disproportionately youthful and Jewish population, suggests that young people and Jews may have been the primary core of its fan base, helping to explain why the movie became a cult film rather than a broad box office draw.

### ***The Producers* in 2001**

The recent success of the Broadway musical, *The Producers*, might be in part, then, because it played in New York to audiences that are generally believed to be disproportionately Jewish. Attracting a core audience of the Jews who patronize the Broadway stage certainly may have helped *The Producers* become a phenomenon in 2001.

Nonetheless, I believe the newfound success of *The Producers* is more complicated than simply this changed audience and medium. I would argue that the musical's popularity derives in large measure from the year in which it was produced: 2001. For one thing, Mel Brooks purposely shifted the play away from its tangled 1960s roots, in order to avoid the controversies of 1967 and to make his play more palatable for a contemporary audience. Brooks did maintain much of the story in its same format, and he retained, and even expanded, his stereotypical portraits of Jews, gays and women, his Holocaust humor, and his relish in flaunting bad taste. Nonetheless, he also made some crucial changes that moved the story out of the 1960s, and allowed it to find success in its Broadway home. Perhaps even more importantly, however, Brooks' audience—even those

who were New York Jews—had changed dramatically since 1967. By the 1990s, the legacy of the 1960s played itself out in culture wars over subjects such as abortion and homosexuality in the United States, while the divisions and anxiety that had shaped American Jewish life in the 1960s had dissipated, as American Jews found themselves more integrated as members of the white middle class. The 2001 version of *The Producers* responded to the sensibilities of both Jews and non-Jews in the wake of these new developments.

### **From 1967 to 2001: changing *The Producers* as a text**

First, it is important to note the ways that Mel Brooks attempted consciously to bring his play out of the 1960s. For one thing, the 2001 play abandoned its hippie Hitler, Brooks' political commentary on flower children. Instead, the effeminate gay director, Roger De Bris, played Hitler. Brooks thus transferred his anxieties from the emergence of a proto-fascist subculture of hippies and college radicals in the 1960s to the rapidly expanding visibility and power of gay men and women in American culture in the 1990s. Openly gay and lesbian characters on television multiplied exponentially during the 1990s. Ellen DeGeneres's 1997 decision to come out on her television show put her on the cover of *Time* magazine and at the center of a new public discussion of homosexuality in American life, while director Michael Ovitz's widely reported claims in 2002 that a "gay mafia" had targeted him exposed substantial anxiety about gay power in the entertainment world.<sup>63</sup> Mel Brooks was thus not simply abandoning his hippie Hitler because the reference to the counterculture was so dated, as many reviewers suggested, but instead he was reflecting a changed cultural environment in the United States, in which many straight men and women responded to the increased visibility of gay men and lesbians with anxiety and discomfort at the blurring lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality.<sup>64</sup>

However, Brooks' portrait of gay men as a threat was not as fearful nor as angry as his portrait of the counterculture was in the 1960s. For one thing, suggesting that the Nazis were gay simply offered additional criticism of Nazi hypocrisy, given the homoeroticism that National Socialism countenanced and the regime's brutal policy towards homosexual men.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the musical's script is filled with in-jokes for gay men, including an homage to Judy Garland. Brooks' caricatures of Roger De Bris and his assistant Carmen Ghia in the play are more sympathetic than that of L.S.D. in the film, as in the speech Carmen gives Roger before he goes on as Hitler in the 2001 version of *The Producers*: "You're going out there a silly hysterical screaming queen and you're coming back a great big passing-for-straight Broadway star!"<sup>66</sup> Gay men in this play are not an immediately threatening subculture; indeed, they are frequently in on the jokes. The fears of American fascism that haunted *The Producers* in the 1960s were absent in Brooks' portrait of a gay Hitler in 2001.

The new musical was not only more sympathetic towards its "Hitler," and the gay subculture that it parodied; the play also no longer skewered the middle-



class audience or contained the edge of black humor that informed Brooks in the 1960s. The best representation of Brooks' changed humor was in the scenes after the "Springtime for Hitler" production number. In the movie, Brooks' criticism of the audience as proto-fascist was contained mightily within the scene where the fictional audience began to enjoy the play. That audience of overdressed, middle-aged, middle-class men and women, all of whom had been featured open-mouthed and horrified during "Springtime for Hitler," all began to guffaw uproariously at the flower child L.S.D. singing a syncopated "Deutschland Uber Alles" and sieg-heiling; one loud woman said to her husband in a broad, whining New York accent: "Harry, it's funny!" Critics in the 1960s commented on the discomfort and lack of humor in this scene, as well as the way that the film went downhill as soon as that scene had ruined the movie's mood.<sup>67</sup> Because the musical showed no scenes of the obnoxious fictional audience enjoying the play, the real audience in the theater was free to enjoy the fascist spectacle of "Springtime for Hitler" without any discomforting images of the amoral bourgeois audience on screen similarly enjoying the spectacle.

Perhaps most importantly, Mel Brooks set the date of the new musical at "many, many years ago, 1959."<sup>68</sup> With this date, the director hearkened back nostalgically to 1959, right around the time he began to work on "Springtime for Hitler." Brooks' 1959, however, is not the real 1959. The female dancers in *The Producers*, for example, did not wear the crinolined or pencil skirts that were fashionable in 1959; instead, their clothing reflected a generic Broadway style of just-below-the-knee-length flare skirts, tight bodices, and strapped character shoes, suitable for any part and any decade. The posters for Max Bialystock's plays similarly used fonts, colors, and styles that reflected a generic Broadway style of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Mel Brooks thus returned to a nostalgic vision of old Broadway in his play, but he located that vision at a peculiarly specific date: 1959, symbolically the last year before the 1960s began.

Brooks made a conscious decision in selecting 1959 as the date for his nostalgic trip to old Broadway. He and others who worked on the play have stated that they believed that the grand musical comedy tradition on Broadway died around 1960, to be replaced by overly serious "musical tragedy . . . often from London," and that their goal was to revive an old Broadway tradition, to return to musical theater's former glory as an art form dominated by American Jewish artists.<sup>70</sup> Brooks' perception of the decline of musical comedy (although not necessarily his ethnic loyalty) is shared by a number of critics of musical theater, uncomfortable with political and artistic changes that artists like Stephen Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd Webber brought to the contemporary Broadway musical after the 1960s.<sup>71</sup>

I believe that Brooks' desire to return to a nostalgic 1959 reflected not only his love for musical comedy, but also his cultural discomfort with the decade of the 1960s in general. In the late 1980s and 1990s, culture wars raged in the United States over the meanings and legacies of the 1960s. Although some idealized the decade, other Americans came to see the 1960s as a problematic

era, an era that had created division and disharmony, even cultural decay.<sup>72</sup> Controversies over Bill Clinton's evasion of military service and his admission that he had smoked marijuana, for example, recycled the cultural divisions of the 1960s into battles over propriety and patriotism in the 1990s. The Oscar-winning film *Forrest Gump* (1994) popularized many Americans' perceptions of 1960s radicals as hypocrites who dishonored American troops and led the nation into a spiraling cycle of drug use and chaos. And while radicals like Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin published late 1980s memoirs idealizing their activism in the 1960s, conservative commentators in the 1990s, like Robert Bork and William Bennett, identified the 1960s as the source of America's decaying values.<sup>73</sup> The decade of the 1960s had become a locus for cultural anxiety and angry warfare by the turn of the twenty-first century.

Imagining 1959 as a glorious, innocent, "old-fashioned" time before the dangerous divisions of the 1960s allowed Brooks to maintain many of the stereotypes that critics attacked in the 1960s, particularly the portraits of women and gays. The suggestion, of course, is that before the 1960s, it was acceptable to make fun of these groups, and only after the 1960s would people have been offended. Many commentators noted the relish with which the play's audiences abandoned notions of "political correctness" in their willingness to lampoon gays and women when watching *The Producers*.<sup>74</sup> I believe that part of this ease on the part of audiences was derived from Brooks' decision to set the play in 1959, and the attendant spirit of nostalgia, rather than edgy black humor, that marked the production.<sup>75</sup>

Despite these changes, however, which allowed Brooks to evoke nostalgia in his audience, in general the text of the play was remarkably similar to the 1967 film. More exploration is still necessary to understand the great differences between the reception of the film in 1967 and that of the play in 2001. *The Producers'* comic vision of Nazism and Hitler, as well as his stereotypes of Jews, after all, remained in 2001 much the same as they were in 1967, although American Jewish identity had been transformed and understandings of the Holocaust had changed considerably in the intervening 35 years. Understanding the success of the 2001 version of *The Producers* requires an examination of these substantial social and cultural transformations.

### **From 1967 to 2001: American Jews and Holocaust consciousness move to the center**

In the late 1960s, significant changes began to emerge in American mainstream Holocaust consciousness. For one thing, the Holocaust became a named event that moved to the center of mainstream American discourse during these years. At the same time, the Holocaust also became a more substantial component of American Jewish identity. In the wake of the 1967 Six-Day and the 1973 Yom Kippur Wars, American Jews began more and more to view the Holocaust as a Jewish event, and to emphasize the connections between their own Jewish

identities and the Holocaust. Some leaders of lay Jewish organizations began after the 1973 war to encourage Holocaust education in order to shore up what they believed was flagging Jewish identity and support for Israel.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, as Holocaust denial garnered substantial notoriety in academia and in the press during the late 1970s, some Jewish scholars began to criticize any efforts to wrench the Holocaust out of its Jewish context as “stealing the Holocaust”: evidence of ignorance or antisemitism or both.<sup>77</sup> Although American Jews had always felt specially touched and even marked by the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, American Jewish identity became more closely and more publicly intertwined with the Holocaust after the late 1960s.

As American Jews began to focus more intently upon the Holocaust as a specifically Jewish tragedy, they helped to spark an interest among all Americans in the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. Books that focused on the Nazi murder of six million Jews, such as Arthur Morse's *While Six Million Died*, Jean Francois Steiner's *Treblinka*, and Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews* appeared in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the term, “the Holocaust,” was capitalized in popular literature and journalism, without needing explanation.<sup>79</sup> High school and college teachers began to teach courses and units on the Holocaust in the 1970s. NBC broadcast the miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978. That same year, Jimmy Carter's administration established a Presidential Commission on the Holocaust and formed an Office of Special Investigations to bring to justice Nazi war criminals living in the United States.<sup>80</sup> By the early 1990s, the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the release of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* reflected the ways that the Holocaust had become a central, even a sacred, part of American culture.

Within this changed environment, it may seem strange that *The Producers'* humorous treatment of Nazi Germany, its stereotypical portraits of Jews, and its comparison between American show business and Nazi fascist spectacle, none of which were altered for the Broadway production, would be successful in 2001.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, the changes described above in Holocaust consciousness and American Jewish identity were also accompanied by larger changes in American Jewish life between 1967 and 2001.

The tension between Jews' status as insiders and outsiders that marked Mel Brooks' initial film had become less potent in American Jews' daily lives by 2001, as Jews had become integrated more fully into white middle-class mainstream life in the 1980s and 1990s. Characteristics that had made the Jewish community distinctive in American life in the first half of the twentieth century began to change as the 1960s ended. For example, beginning in the late 1960s and spiraling in the 1980s and 1990s, Jews—who had once been the white ethnic group most resistant to intermarriage—began to marry outside their ethnic group at increasing rates approaching 50 percent by the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>82</sup> Then, too, Jews' association with liberal politics, which had seemed both unshakeable and peculiarly distinct in the earlier half of the twentieth century, began to seem less solid after the 1960s. The conversion of some prominent Jewish liberals to

neoconservatism in the 1970s, and the decision of Jewish “Reagan Democrats” to vote Republican in the 1980s shook assumptions about Jewish political distinctiveness.<sup>83</sup> And an emphasis on multiculturalism in American political discourse beginning in the 1980s frequently tended to exclude Jews from its definition, viewing them instead as descendents of white Europeans, and focusing on people of color.<sup>84</sup>

Although American Jews still experienced tension between their status as insiders and outsiders, by 2001, Jews were much more enmeshed in the American white middle class. They tended to be viewed as white more frequently by non-Jews, as they married members of other white ethnic groups in higher rates than before, and they tended to be associated less frequently with disempowered minorities, as the language of multiculturalism frequently excluded Jews from its purview. Cultural representations of Jews in the 1990s reflected the growing perception that Jews were simply middle-class white people who did not challenge mainstream culture, but instead reflected it, or even in some cases, epitomized it. The television show *Brooklyn Bridge* (CBS, 1991-1993), for example, a nostalgic look at a Jewish family in Brooklyn in the 1950s, was deliberately conceived and sold as a show that championed middle-class family values, an alternative to many of the situation comedies of the 1990s that focused on dysfunctional working-class families, such as *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-present), *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-1997), and *Married With Children* (FOX, 1987-1997).<sup>85</sup> Jews thus became the preeminent members of the white middle class, rather than a dangerous alternative. A different example of Jews as representatives of the mainstream in the 1990s was the situation comedy *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990-1998). Many of the jokes on *Seinfeld* derived from Jerry’s inability to empathize with members of racial minorities: his use of Indian stereotypes doomed his relationship with Elaine’s Native American friend, his attraction to the black and white cookie as an instrument of racial healing was portrayed as preposterous, and his annoyance with his dentist for converting to Judaism “for the jokes” led Kramer to call him a “raging anti-dentite.” “Next thing you know, you’re saying they should go to their own schools,” Kramer raged at Jerry. “They do go to their own schools,” Jerry pleaded helplessly.<sup>86</sup> This *Seinfeld* episode—like numerous others—sati- rized “political correctness” gone mad.<sup>87</sup> By 2001, Jews no longer possessed the same edge of danger or promised the same alternative to the mainstream that they had in the 1960s; instead they seemed to reflect the mainstream itself and its bewilderment with “political correctness,” multiculturalism, and a popular culture that seemed to have lost its sense of decency and common sense.

In this environment of middle-class success, audiences interpreted Mel Brooks’ 2001 play, *The Producers* as a triumphant symbol of a Jewish community that had succeeded so brilliantly in American culture and society that it could afford to laugh at its arch-enemy, Adolf Hitler. Indeed, as the Holocaust became an integral part of American Jewish identity in the 1980s and 1990s, it became easier for American Jews to interpret their own successful comfortable lives as the ultimate victory over Nazism. Although increased cultural attention

to the Holocaust did lead some Jews to criticize *The Producers* as offensive in 2001, many more American Jews seem to have embraced the play as a symbol of their own community's ability to "danc[e] on the Fuehrer's grave."<sup>88</sup>

Part of this triumphal spirit on the part of American Jews is visible in Jewish reactions to the stereotypes of Bialystock and Bloom in the musical. Unlike film audiences in 1967 and 1968, Broadway audiences were notably unfazed by the stereotypical Jews at the center of *The Producers* in 2001.<sup>89</sup> The few Jewish critics and audience members who found the 2001 version of *The Producers* offensive complained about its Holocaust humor, not its Jewish stereotypes.<sup>90</sup> The coarse "Jewishness" of the Bialystock and Bloom stereotypes that had disturbed Zero Mostel, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris seems to have inspired little comment from the play's actors, viewers, or reviewers. Instead, reviewers noted that Jews were only one of many ethnic groups parodied—"Brooks lampoons and insults everyone," noted one reviewer—and a few even saw Bialystock and Bloom as Jewish heroes.<sup>91</sup> The Jewish stereotypes of Bialystock and Bloom might have been less of an issue in 2001 because the practice that Kael had noted as new in 1968, "putting the Jewish in," had become a standard part of Jewish self-representation in American culture by the 1990s. Jewish audiences in the 1990s were far more likely to see Brooks' Jewish humor and Jewish characters as a positive celebration of Jewishness, rather than the threat to the Jewish community they had seemed in 1967.

This positive celebration of Jewishness was itself tinged with nostalgia, since it was in fact Mel Brooks' enormous popularity in the 1970s that had helped to establish a more openly Jewish sensibility in American culture by 2001. Brooks had helped to make Jews insiders through his overt Jewish sensibility and humor in the 1960s and 1970s, and by 2001, many of the young people who had thrilled to Brooks' jokes in 1967 had become middle-aged women and (mostly) men. Far from being disturbed by his Jewish stereotypes, they were nostalgic for their youth, when Brooks' work had first brought a Jewish sensibility into mainstream American culture. The 2001 version of *The Producers* played on this nostalgia by making a number of key references to beloved Brooks movies, reprising, for example, the exhortation to "walk this way" from both *Young Frankenstein* (1974) and the 1967 film version of *The Producers*, and repeating the line "it's good to be the king," from *History of the World, Part One* (1981).<sup>92</sup> The play thus purposely reminded audiences of Mel Brooks' power as a filmmaker and gloried in his past successes in American popular culture. Indeed, some observers reported that the play's initial success was fueled by the nostalgia of Jewish fans of the cult film who came to the musical anxious to see their favorite moments from the film recreated: "it's like the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* for Jews," one scholar's friend claimed.<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, it was not only audiences who were nostalgic for Brooks' film success; Brooks' producers and collaborators similarly adored the 1967 film and thus conceived of the film as a tribute to Brooks' success. During his work on the 2001 stage musical, unlike the 1967 film, Mel Brooks appears to have been very

comfortable collaborating with other artists, most notably writer Tom Meehan and director-choreographer Susan Stroman. Rather than perceiving himself as an angry, young *auteur*, embattled by a code of silent Jewishness, Brooks seems to have viewed himself as a grand old man by 2001, working happily with admiring men and women to recreate his own comic masterpieces. In describing his decision to collaborate with Susan Stroman, her husband, Michael Okrent, and musical supervisor, Glen Kelly, for example, Brooks remembered that “Mike made it known that he, Stro, and Glen were crazy about the movie and had seen it many many times.”<sup>94</sup> One producer of the musical, Richard Frankel, a longtime fan of the film, described himself as being so desperate to produce the play that he wrote Brooks a letter that “outlined my admiration for his work, my love of the musical,” noting that he “quoted a lot from the movie.” The result of this adulation, Frankel reported, was that Brooks “responded right away, and interviewed us, and selected us.”<sup>95</sup> Rather than battling with powerful producers and distributors as he had in 1967, Brooks’ own power as film director and entertainment insider in 2001 allowed him to work productively with admiring and talented fans to create his musical. Nostalgia for Brooks’ films on the part of audiences, producers, and collaborators of the 2001 *Producers* shaped the play’s reception and symbolized the degree to which Brooks—and American Jews—had become insiders in American culture.

*The Producers* not only reminded collaborators and audiences of Mel Brooks’ past successes but also reminded Jews of their own contemporary successes. In the 2001 version of *The Producers*, unlike the 1967 film, Mel Brooks does actually use the word “Jew” once, to striking effect. Bialystock and Bloom lamented, after *Springtime for Hitler*’s success, that they could not understand where they went right: “Half the audience were Jews!”<sup>96</sup> The night I watched *The Producers*, that line got one of the biggest laughs of the evening. In that lyric, Mel Brooks poked fun of the Broadway audience, but he also fairly gloated with them over Jewish cultural power, reminding them that Jews were the ones both creating and consuming these cultural images. By abandoning scenes that were critical of an overdressed and tacky audience that was presumed to be Jewish, and instead flattering the audience with inside jokes about Broadway, a Jewish art form, Brooks included his Jewish audience in his message of triumph over Hitler.

Audiences responded enthusiastically to Brooks’ exuberant message of victory. The dominant refrain among both reviewers and ordinary Jewish audience members who delighted in *The Producers* was that it signaled a Jewish victory over Adolf Hitler. Michael Feingold, for example, suggested this Jewish conquest in his *Village Voice* review: “After all of Hitler’s rantings against the ‘International Jewish conspiracy,’ guess who won?”<sup>97</sup> Other commenters offered less ironic and more heartfelt interpretations of the play as a triumph. “Speaking as someone who 61 years ago was possibly only 22 miles of water and a rather good Air Force away from becoming a bar of soap, I did not find [*The Producers*] offensive. I found it triumphant. After all, we won,” Clive Barnes wrote in



*The New York Post*.<sup>98</sup> And in letters to the editor debating the offensiveness of the musical, Jewish men and women insisted that *The Producers* was a sign of health, not sickness: "Only when we consign Hitler to the role of laughingstock will our victory over him be complete," wrote one of Brooks' fans to the *New York Times*.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, the dominant emotions among audiences in 2001 who delighted in *The Producers* were triumphalism and nostalgia. These emotions reflected Mel Brooks' conscious changes to the musical—his decision to set his musical before the 1960s and his decision not to attack the middle-class audience—as well as the larger historical context of American society and culture during the 1990s. Americans weary of "political correctness" and Jews confident of their integration into the American middle class flocked to *The Producers* in 2001, finding in it validation of both their prejudices and their successes.

### ***The Producers* in 2005**

In 2005, the film version of the 2001 musical *The Producers* appeared. Directed by Broadway choreographer Susan Stroman, starring the original Broadway stars Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick, as well as movie stars Uma Thurman and Will Ferrell, and produced by Mel Brooks, the movie was slavishly faithful to the play. Given the musical's phenomenal success on Broadway, Universal Studios hoped that the film would match that success, garnering Academy Award nominations and box office gold.<sup>100</sup>

Yet the 2005 film version of *The Producers* failed to match any of those expectations. The film did receive four Golden Globe nominations, but no Oscar recognition, and it was a tremendous disappointment at the box office, grossing only about \$19 million in the United States, after spending an estimated \$45 million in production.<sup>101</sup> The film received at best mixed reviews, with many critics savaging not only Stroman's direction for its lack of imagination, but Brooks' material itself. This time, however, critics did not label *The Producers* offensive or disturbing, as in 1967, or as liberating and exhilarating, as in 2001, but instead as bland and passe. ". . . Mel Brooks' material—especially the retro queeny stereotypes—is excruciatingly dated," David Edelstein complained in *Slate*, and Kevin Crust in the *Los Angeles Times* concurred: "As creaky as the traditional musicals it once poked fun at, *The Producers* has been entombed—lox, shtick and two smoking bagels—as a theatrical fossil. . . ."<sup>102</sup> Indeed, in its guidelines for family viewing, the *Los Angeles Times* assured readers that "Typical Brooks' bawdiness is unlikely to offend at this point." These comments suggest that, by 2005, the nation's mood had changed substantially from that in 2001, when Mel Brooks' nostalgic, old-fashioned humor had been pronounced by reviewers as "fresh," "joyous," and "liberating."<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, the musical *The Producers* went on to close on Broadway on April 22, 2007, further suggesting that by the middle of the decade, the historical moment for the play's success had passed. *The Producers'* six-year run was

respectable, but nowhere near industry expectations after its record-smashing opening success: *Chicago* has run for over ten years, *Rent* ran for 12 years, and *Les Miserables* ran for 17 years.<sup>104</sup> Declining interest in both the play and the film *The Producers* over a six-year period suggested a substantial change in the national mood.

If the 2001 Broadway musical, *The Producers*, captured a zeitgeist of triumph, nostalgia, and complacency in American and American Jewish culture in the 1990s, by 2007, the nation's mood had shifted to one of political polarization and insecurity. The George W. Bush presidency and the war in Iraq sharply divided Americans in the years following 2001. Moreover, many American Jews became newly sensitive to and fearful of anti-semitism, both in the United States and throughout the world, in the wake of the attacks of September 11. Articles, books, and conferences devoted to a "new anti-semitism" sprouted throughout the United States, Israel, and Western Europe in the years after 2001, as the media paid much more attention to conflict in the Middle East, to Islamic terrorism, and to anti-semitism in the United States and Western Europe.<sup>105</sup>

The years after 2001 have been uneasy, divided, and anxious ones for Americans and for American Jews, and in this environment, audiences' comfortable assumptions about a Jewish victory over Hitler have been undermined. This is not to say that Jews have been newly racialized in American culture, or that they have lost their white middle-class status: this is by no means the case.

But in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new crop of Jewish comedians like Sacha Baron Cohen and Sarah Silverman has tapped into growing Jewish insecurities, bringing greater attention to contemporary anti-semitism in their routines, while simultaneously playing with their status as "white." In his 2006 mockumentary, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, Cohen disguises himself as an anti-semitic journalist, Borat, in order to goad others to express their anti-semitism: most famously, an audience at a bar in Tucson, Arizona, happily sang along with him: "Throw the Jew down the well/So my country can be free/You must grab him by his horns/Then we have a big party."<sup>106</sup> Cohen's film won media acclaim, attracted political controversy from Jewish and other groups, earned over \$128,000,000 in the United States alone, and even netted Cohen an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.<sup>107</sup> Using a different comedic premise, Sarah Silverman takes on the persona of a narcissistic princess who blurs the lines between her identity as a Jew and that of a white racist in order to make jokes about antisemitism and the Holocaust, as well as about other groups, including Asians and African Americans. For example, in her 2005 movie *Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic*, Silverman discusses the negative press she received for telling an anti-Asian joke on a talk show: "it hurt. I mean, as a Jew, as a member of the Jewish community, I was really concerned that we were losing control of the media."<sup>108</sup> Although the film was only issued in limited release and received mixed reviews, the press for *Jesus is Magic* made Silverman famous as a taboo-breaking hip comedian. "Silverman crosses boundaries that it would not occur to most people even to

have," Dana Goodyear wrote in an admiring profile in *The New Yorker*.<sup>109</sup> Silverman followed with a successful television show on Comedy Central.

Both Cohen and Silverman specialize in humor that discomfits their audiences—Jewish and non-Jewish—and they have thrived professionally and creatively with this humor. Reviewers have called Silverman and Cohen's humor "proudly offensive," "outrageous," and compared their social and political satire to that of Lenny Bruce and Jonathan Swift.<sup>110</sup> This type of humor is very different from the triumphant, nostalgic spirit of the 2001 *The Producers*, and much more appropriate to the uneasy first decade of this new millennium.

## Conclusion

The strange journey of *The Producers* over the past 40 years can tell us much about recent American history, particularly American Jewish history. The angry and chaotic 1967 version of *The Producers* reflected a country that was divided by generation and by politics, and a Jewish community that still perceived itself as being outside the mainstream of American culture, despite its middle-class white status. In 2001, the tamer, nostalgic and triumphal interpretation of *The Producers* as a symbol of American Jewish success reflected a nation tired of culture wars, and an American Jewish community that felt much more comfortably integrated into the middle-class mainstream. By 2007, however, with a newly polarized American electorate and an American Jewish population newly sensitive to anti-semitism, the nostalgic and triumphant interpretation of *The Producers* no longer spoke to American or American Jewish insecurities. Instead, it has been younger Jewish comedians like Sacha Baron Cohen and Sarah Silverman who have tapped into the political divisions and anxieties of the current era with outrageous black humor that both angers and discomfits audiences and, indeed, reminds us of the power and provocation that Mel Brooks originally offered in *The Producers* in 1967.

## Notes

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1. Gerald L. Zelizer, "Is 'The Producers' Tasteless?" *USA Today*, 31 May 2001, 13A.
2. J. J. Goldberg, "'Producers'—A Show for Our Time," *Newsday*, 22 June 2001, A45.
3. Thane Rosenbaum, "Commentary: Those Hilarious Nazis," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 May 2001, 4.
4. There are too few historical monographs that explore carefully Jewish participation in 1960s radicalism. For Jewish women in the civil rights movement, see Debra Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). For radical Jewish groups that participated in the antiwar movement, see Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
5. Michael Staub, ed., *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England Brandeis University Press, 2004), xviii-xxiii.
6. Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 19-152.
7. J. Hoberman makes this connection in "When the Nazis Became Nudniks," *New York Times*, 15 April 2001, sec. 2, 13.

8. Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 97.
9. For Geisel's anti-Nazi cartoons, see Richard H. Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* (New York: New Press, 1999). For anti-Nazi animated cartoons, see Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt, *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004).
10. For a guide to films featuring Hitler and Nazi villains, see Charles P. Mitchell, *The Hitler Filmography: Worldwide Feature Film and Television Miniseries Portrayals, 1940 through 2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002). Mitchell lists only two comedies between 1945 and 1970 (other than *The Producers*) that portray Hitler (and other Nazi villains) as figures of fun: *On the Double* (1961) and *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (1966).
11. For public disapproval of Hogan's Heroes, see Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143-45; and James D. Bloom, *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 123-25.
12. Hoberman, "When the Nazis were Nudniks," 13; Maurice Yacowar, *Method in Madness: The Comic Art of Mel Brooks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 83; William Karl Thomas, *Lenny Bruce: The Making of a Prophet* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1989), 38.
13. Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 73-75, 82-3; David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 149-53; Hoberman, "When the Nazis Became Nudniks," 13.
14. See Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 2006).
15. *Chicago Daily News*, 31 January 1969, as cited in Richard Pollak, *The Creation of Dr. B: A Biography of Bruno Bettelheim* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 307-8. Bettelheim initially made this comment in an impromptu fashion outside the students' demonstration, but he later repeated the sentiment on a local Chicago radio program and then in testimony before a special House subcommittee on education. His comments were widely reported in the national media. See Pollak, *The Creation of Dr. B*, 308-13.
16. Robert Skotheim, *Totalitarianism and American Social Thought* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 10.
17. Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Dell, 1968), 120-23, as cited in Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York: Twayne, 1998), 117-8.
18. For additional examples of liberals who perceived radical leftists as proto-fascists, see, for example, "Revolutionary Adventurism," *New York Times*, 8 May 1969, 46; "The New Fascists," *New York Times*, 17 December 1969, 54; Anthony Ripley, "'Squares' Picket at S.D.S. Offices," *New York Times* 27 June 1969, 42.
19. See, for example, James Weinstein, "Nach Goldwater Uns?" and Staughton Lynd, "Reply," in *Studies on the Left* 4 (Summer 1964), 59-64; and William Hedgepeth, "America's Concentration Camps: The Rumors and the Realities," *Look*, May 28, 1968, 85-90.
20. See Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 239-48.
21. Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 187-99.
22. For the rise of Jewish writers, see Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 30-50; Judith Doneson cites Dickstein to make a similar point. See Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002). For Jewish academics, see David Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
23. See John Cohen, *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 41-42. James Bloom notes that Bruce's monologue identifies Jews as dark, as well as outsiders. See Bloom, *Gravity Fails*, 158-59.
24. Philip Roth, "Goodbye Columbus," in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959; repr., New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 5.
25. See, for example, Lester Friedman, *The Jewish Image in American Film* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1987), 184-86; Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982), 179-83; Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 268-70; Donald Zec and Anthony Fowles, *Barbra: A Biography of Barbra Streisand* (London: New English Library, 1981), 43, 67-68; Frank Brady, *Barbra Streisand: An Illustrated Biography* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1979), 146-48; Jeff Lenburg, *Dustin Hoffman: Hollywood's Anti-Hero* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1983), 23.

26. For absence of either the name, "the Holocaust," or the discrete narrative of the "war against the Jews," in American mainstream culture before the late 1960s, see, for example, Gerd Korman, "The Holocaust in American Historical Writing," *Societas* 2 (Summer 1972): 259-65; Leon Jick, "The Holocaust: Its Use and Abuse Within the American Public," *Yad Vashem Studies* 14 (1981): 303-18; and Shandler, *While America Watches*, 23. There is debate over whether the term "the Holocaust" is limited to Jews. For good description of this debate, see Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 53-55, 112-22, 228-50. Most Holocaust scholars today use the Holocaust to refer specifically to the extermination of about 6 million Jews, but most also acknowledge that many millions of other people, including Poles, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, communists, Russian POWs, the handicapped, and members of the Roma and Sinti tribes (Gypsies) were killed by the same Nazi machinery.

27. For discussion of this universalism in the post-World War II era, and the shift towards the valuation of ethnic groups in the late 1960s and 1970s, see David Hollinger, "How Wide the Circle of the 'We'? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos since World War II," *American Historical Review* 98 (April 1993): 317-337.

28. For historical works that have emphasized silence regarding the Holocaust in American culture before the late 1960s, see, for example, Stephen Whitfield, "The Holocaust and the American Jewish Intellectual," *Judaism* 28 (1979): 391-407 and *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, Brandeis University, 1999), 168-96; Leon A. Jick, "The Holocaust: Its Use and Abuse Within the American Public," *Yad Vashem Studies* 14 (1981): 303-18; Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time For Healing: American Jewry Since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 212-17; Deborah Lipstadt, "America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950-1965," *Modern Judaism* 16 (October 1996): 195-214; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); and Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

29. For Jewish protests, see, for example, "The Gieseking Affair," *Newsweek* 33, February 7, 1949, 21-22. For Jewish prayer books, see Hasia Diner, "Post-World-War-II American Jewry and the Confrontation with Catastrophe," *American Jewish History* 91 (September and December 2003): 439-67. For Jewish educators, see Rona Sheramy "Resistance and War": The Holocaust in American Jewish Education, 1945-1960," *American Jewish History* 91 (June 2003): 287-313.

30. For works that have emphasized the existence of popular and scholarly texts between 1945 and 1967 that represented the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, see Shandler, *While America Watches*; Lawrence Baron, "The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945-1960," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17 (Spring 2003): 62-88; Diner, "Post-World-War-II American Jewry," and Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*.

31. For a discussion of these coded messages in *Judgment at Nuremberg*, for example, see Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 102-3.

32. Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*.

33. For reviewers who commented on either the Jewishness of the film or its main characters, see Andrew Sarris, "Films," *Village Voice*, March 28, 1968, 47; Stanley Kauffmann, "Zero and Others," *New Republic* 158 (April 13, 1968), 24; Pauline Kael, "O Pioneer!" *The New Yorker*, March 23, 1968, 140. For Brooks' intention to make the film's characters and themes Jewish, see, for example, Tom Shales, "On '60 Minutes,' Springtime for Mel Brooks," *Washington Post*, 14 April 2001, C1.

34. The term, "double-coding," is from Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

35. Kenneth Tynan, "Frolics and Detours of a Short Hebrew Man," *New Yorker*, 30 October 1978, 112.

36. For other scholars who have argued for Bialystock and Bloom as sympathetic characters, even heroes, see Desser and Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers*, 149; Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, 187-89.

37. Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 81.

38. Holtzman, *Seesaw*, 254.

39. Philip Fleishman, "Interview with Mel Brooks," *Maclean's*, 17 April 1978, 6, quoted in Yacowar, *Method in Madness*, 81.

40. "The Mad Mad Mel Brooks," *Newsweek* 85, February 17, 1975, 56.

41. See, for example, Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 312-13; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19-71.

42. See Lucy Dawidowicz, "American Public Opinion," in *American Jewish Year Book* 69 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), 203-18; Marshall Sklare, "Lakeville and Israel: The Six-Day War and Its Aftermath," *Midstream* 14 (October 1968), 4-21; and Edward Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 207-8.

43. Jewish Liberation Project, "Editorial," in *Jewish 1960s*, 237. Originally published in *Jewish Liberation Journal* 1 (May 1969). For "Uncle Toms" and "Uncle Jakes," see Staub, *Jewish 1960s*,



xxi. Some radical Zionist Jews used these terms to criticize radical Jews in the New Left for their insufficient Jewish identity. See Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 208-209.

44. Staub, *Jewish 1960s*, 229-31, 239; Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 153-240.

45. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 220-43. Hoberman and Shandler include Mel Brooks' *The Producers* within this group of "'nice' Jewish bad boys."

46. See, for example, Staub, *Torn at the Roots*, 132-52; John Ehrman, *Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 38-39; 123-25.

47. For the editor's description of Brooks' insecurity and tyrannical behavior during the making of *The Producers*, as well as for his description of the distributor's decision to change the film's name, see Ralph Rosenblum and Robert Karen, *When the Shooting Stops . . . the Cutting Begins* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 192-209. It is important to note that the editor cut the neo-Nazi tribute in the interest of timing, not because the tribute was offensive or because it was overtly Jewish.

48. For more on the distinctive nature of the early 1960s as an era, see Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*, 3-13, 159-62.

49. See *New York Times*, 17 March 1968, 16D; see for Sellers' support of *The Producers*, Hoberman, "When the Nazis Became Nudniks," 13; Paul Mazursky, *Show Me the Magic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 45-6; Mitchell Glazer, "The Strange World of Peter Sellers," *Rolling Stone*, 17 April 1980, 44; and Ed Sikov, *Mr. Strangelove* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 275-77. Sellers apparently maintained an obsessive devotion to *The Producers* throughout his life, at one point dressing like Franz Liebkind and quoting his lines in an interview. See Peter Lydon, "The Goons and a Bomb on Broadway," *Sight and Sound* 5, February 1, 1995, 39; Gene Wilder, *Kiss Me Like a Stranger: My Search for Love and Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 171.

50. Robert Hatch, "Films," *The Nation* 206, April 8, 1968, 486; Renata Adler, "Anyone for a Good Cry?" *The New York Times*, 31 March 1968, sec. 2, 1; Tom Milne, "The Producers," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 36 (November 1969), 234.

51. Moira Walsh, "The Producers," *America* 118, April 6, 1968, 451.

52. Marion Armstrong, "Incongruous Hilarity," *Christian Century* 85, August 28, 1968, 1082-3.

53. Armstrong, "Incongruous Hilarity," 1083.

54. Sarris, "Films," 47.

55. Kauffmann, "Zero and Others," 24.

56. John Mahoney, "Embassy's 'Producers' Hilarious; Mostel, Wilder Spark Brooks' Pic," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 28 December 1967, 3.

57. For Volkswagen's advertising campaign and the car's transition from "Nazi car" to counterculture car, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 62-68.

58. Norman Cecil, "The Producers," *Films in Review* 19 (April 1968), 244.

59. Hatch, "Films," 486.

60. Kael, "O Pioneer!," 140.

61. Alex Symons offers a more analytic, though not a historically contextualized, discussion of the ways that elite critics responded to *The Producers'* assault on traditional standards of taste. See "An Audience for Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: The Avant-Garde of the Masses," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 34, (Spring 2006), 24-32.

62. "The Making of the Producers," *The Producers*, Special Edition DVD (2005); James Robert Parish, *It's Good to be the King: The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), 182. The film also seems to have succeeded in Los Angeles and Chicago, big cities that also have large Jewish populations. It is important to note that the Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia screenings took place before Peter Sellers took out his ad lauding the film, and the New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago successes occurred after the Sellers ad. See Cliff Rothman, "Sellers' Choice," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2001, sec. 6, 1. While Mel Brooks has remembered the film's success in New York, Gene Wilder has emphasized that the film was ultimately a failure at the box office, leading Joseph Levine, the distributor, to sell the film to television. See Wilder, *Kiss Me Like a Stranger*, 133.

63. For DeGeneres, see "Yep, I'm Gay!" *Time* 149, April 14, 1997. For Ovitz's claims of a "gay mafia," see Mark Armstrong, "Ovitz: 'Gay Mafia' After Me," *E!Online*, 2 July 2002, <http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,10191,00.html> (accessed 12 December 2005); Nikki Finke, "Vanity Too Fair: Michael Ovitz's Gay Problem," *LA Weekly*, July 5-11, 2002, <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/02/33/news-finke.php> (accessed 12 December 2005).

64. For an argument about the existence of "straight panic" in response to the explosion of gay themes on television in the 1990s, see Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

65. For a discussion of homoeroticism in National Socialism, see Elizabeth Heineman, "Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeaking," in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (New York: Bergahn Books, 2005), 33-42. For the Nazi persecution of gay men, see Gunter Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-45*, trans. Patrick Camiller



(London: Cassell, 1995); Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986); and articles by Stefan Micheler and Geoffrey J. Giles in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, Herzog, ed.

66. Mel Brooks and Tom Meehan, *The Producers: The Book, Lyrics, and Story Behind the Biggest Hit in Broadway History* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 178. The annotated published script points out that the line is an homage to *42nd Street*.

67. See, for example, Renata Adler, review of *The Producers*, *New York Times*, 19 March 1968, 38; Mick, review of *The Producers*, *Variety*, December 6, 1967, 6. Although he offers a very different argument about *The Producers* as an avant-garde comedy appreciated by the masses, rather than elite critics, Alex Symons similarly notes the ways that this scene reflected an attack on elite critics' self-understanding. See Symons, "Audience for Mel Brooks' *The Producers*."

68. Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 71.

69. See the inside flaps and the photographs in Brooks and Meehan, *Producers*, for some examples of this generic style.

70. Brooks and Meehan, *Producers*, 23-24; Virginia Rohan, "Take the Money and Run," *The Record* (Bergen County, NJ), 19 April 2001, Y1. For musical theater at mid-century as dominated by Jewish artists, see Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Kathryn Edney has also noted Brooks' nostalgia for a Jewish art form in the context of the history of musical theater. See Edney, "Reclaiming the Jewish Stage: *The Producers*," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Boston, MA, 6 April 2007. Thanks to Kathryn Edney for providing me with a copy of her paper.

71. See, for example, Michael Feingold, "But Unseriously," *Village Voice*, 28 August 2001, 64; Ed Siegel, "What's Old is New Again in the Best Musicals," *Boston Globe*, 27 May 2001, M1. Not all theater critics or scholars, however, identify the 1960s as the death knell of the traditional Broadway musical, nor do they see traditional Broadway musicals divorced from political relevance or tragedy. See, for example, Andrea Most, *Making Americans*, 28-31; and Barry Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2004).

72. For a short but useful summary of battles over the legacy of the 60s, see David Farber and Beth Bailey, *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 167-173.

73. Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987); Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 17-55; and William Bennett, *The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), 16-31.

74. See, for example, Ed Siegel, "What's Old is New Again," M1; Frank Rich, "Journal: Springtime for Adolf and Tony," *New York Times*, 12 May 2001, A15; Michael Feingold, "But Unseriously," 64; Frank Scheck, "The Producers," *Hollywood Reporter*, 20 April 2001; "Laughing All the Way to the Bank," *Times* (London), 23 April 2001; Charles Isherwood, "The Producers," *Variety*, 23 April 2001, 16; and Robert Feldberg, "Producers Phenomenon Grows," *The Record* (Bergen County, NJ), 29 April 2001, Y6.

75. Some contemporary critics noted this shift from black humor to nostalgia, though they did not explore the historical context that accompanied that shift. See Brendan Lemon, "Springtime for Mel Brooks' Producers," *Financial Times* (London), 23 February 2001; Margo Jefferson, "Broadway Choices: Old World Edifice or Sleek Machine," *New York Times*, 13 May 2001, sec. 2, 10; and Leon Wieseltier, "Less Than Zero," *The New Republic*, 28 May 2001, 50. Michael Phillips of the *Los Angeles Times* briefly notes the way that Brooks' 1959 date permits the play's "aggressive political incorrectness." See "Spring(time) Forward," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 April 2001, F1.

76. See Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 153-55.

77. For Holocaust denial gaining more legitimacy and attention in the late 1970s and 1980s, see Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). See, for example, Yehuda Bauer, "Whose Holocaust?" *Midstream* 26 (November 1980), 42-46; and Edward Alexander, "Stealing the Holocaust," *Midstream* 26 (November 1980), 46-50.

78. Jean-Francois Steiner, *Treblinka* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967); Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1968); and Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975).

79. See, for example, Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry, 1933-1945* (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1968); Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Holocaust Melodrama," *New York Times*, 22 May 1967, 41; Jack Kuper, *Child of the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); Eliot Fremont-Smith, "Books of the Times: Moral Trauma and the Holocaust," *New York Times*, 12 February 1968, 37.

80. For the valuable argument that 1978 was a crucial year in American Holocaust consciousness, see Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 11-13.

81. It is worth noting that some reviewers suggested that it was not strange at all that the musical, *The Producers*, was a success because Brooks' humor was simply part of a larger culture in which the Holocaust had become kitsch. See, for example, Daniel Mendelsohn, "Double Take," *New York Review of Books* 48, June 21, 2001, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/14271> (accessed 18 December 2003); Wieseltier, "Less Than Zero."

82. For statistics on intermarriage in 2001, see United Jewish Communities, *National Jewish Population Survey, 2000-2001*, [http://www.ujc.org/local\\_includes/downloads/3905.pdf](http://www.ujc.org/local_includes/downloads/3905.pdf) (accessed September 11, 2007). There has been substantial debate over intermarriage statistics, but scholars generally agreed by 2001 that the intermarriage rate for Jews who had married recently was between 40 and 50 percent. For a different perspective on Jewish demographic statistics, see Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, *American Jewish Identity Survey 2001* (February 2002) at [http://www.egonmayer.com/emayer\\_ajis.pdf](http://www.egonmayer.com/emayer_ajis.pdf) (accessed September 11, 2007). For American Jews' resistance to intermarriage in the earlier half of the twentieth century, see Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 43-54.

83. For the historic association of Jews with liberalism, see, for example, Lawrence Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews* (New York: Free Press, 1956); Werner Cohn, "Sources of American Jewish Liberalism—A Study of the Political Alignments of American Jews," (PhD diss., New School for Social Research, 1956); Steven M. Cohen, *The Dimensions of American Jewish Liberalism* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1989); Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For Jews turning against liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, see, for example, "Liberalism and the Jews: A Symposium," *Commentary* 69 (January 1980); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); and John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

84. See, for example, David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, "Introduction: The Dialectic of Jewish Enlightenment," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, eds. Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-13.

85. See Hoberman and Shandler, *Entertaining America*, 248.

86. "The Yada-Yada," *Seinfeld*, Season 8, Episode 153, originally aired April 24, 1997, at <http://www.stanhecaddy.com/sounds-kramer-jerrys-an-antidentite.html> (accessed August 1, 2007).

87. Vincent Brook offers a similar analysis of *Seinfeld* as anti-multicultural show, glorifying consumer society above any ethnic or religious group. See Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 98-117.

88. "Laughing All the Way to the Bank," *The Times* (London), 23 April 2001, 12-13.

89. Michael Phillips, for example, omitted Jews from his list of the groups that might conceivably protest *The Producers*, a list that included the Swedish Bombshell Anti-Defamation League, the AARP, ACT UP and the African American Cops With Irish Brogues support group. See Phillips, "Spring (Time) Forward," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 April 2001, F1. Most reviewers, like Phillips, simply did not address the play's Jewish stereotypes at all; some noted them briefly in the context of the play's "equal opportunity" offensiveness. Frank Rich noted the Jewish stereotypes, but did not complain about them; his article rejoiced in the play's willingness to embrace all stereotypes. See Rich, "Journal: Springtime for Adolf and Tony."

90. See, for example, Suzanne Fields, "Crossing the Line: Nazis Join Pop Culture," *Washington Times*, 26 July 2001, A19; Mildred Levine to the editor, *New York Times*, 6 May 2001, sec. 2, 4; Eli J. Kleinman to the editor, *New York Times*, 6 May 2001, sec. 2, 4. J. J. Goldberg reported that there were some angry calls to the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League the night after Mel Brooks thanked Hitler for "being so funny," at the Tony Awards ceremony. Goldberg, "The Producers—a Show for Our Time," *Newsday* (New York), 22 June 2001, A45; see also Cipi Lobel to the editor, *New York Times*, 5 June 2001, A22.

91. "Springtime for Mel Brooks," *Seattle Times*, 5 June 2001, B4. For Bialystock and Bloom as heroes, see Michael Feingold, "Glitzkrieg," *Village Voice*, 1 May 2001, 73; Ellen Schiff, "Sinners, Scandals, Scoundrels, and Scamps on the American Jewish Stage," *American Jewish History* 91 (March 2003), 93-96.

92. Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 122, 74.

93. See conversation between J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *Entertaining America*, 279.

94. Brooks and Meehan, *Producers*, 25. For more descriptions of Brooks' working with fans as producers, songwriters, and actors, see Brooks and Meehan, *Producers*, 18-20, 21; Alex Witchel, "'This Is It—As Happy As I Get, Baby': Nathan Lane," *New York Times Magazine*, 2 September 2001, 22.

95. Virginia Rohan, "Take the Money and Run," Y1.

96. Brooks and Meehan, *The Producers*, 194.

97. Michael Feingold, "Glitzkrieg," 73. See also Schiff, "Sinners, Scandals, Scoundrels, and Scamps," 95.

98. Clive Barnes, "Springtime for Broadway," *New York Post*, 20 April 2001, 43. Liz Smith approvingly cited Barnes' review to argue that the play was not offensive. See Smith, "The Mel Phenomenon," *Newsday* (New York), 24 April 2001, A13.

99. Michael P. Finn to the editor, *New York Times*, 6 June 2001, A30. See also Mashey Bernstein to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, 27 May 2001, 79.

100. See, for example, Gabriel Snyder, "U's Crowd of Contenders," *Variety*, June 20-26, 2005, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117924683.html?categoryid=1019&cs=1&query=U%27s+crowd+of+contenders> (accessed May 19, 2009); Jesse McKinley, "A Broadway Blockbuster Does the Hollywood Math," *New York Times*, 6 November 2005, sec. 2, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/movies/moviesspecial/06jess.html?scp=1&sq=broadway%20blockbuster%20does%20hollywood%20math&st=cse> (accessed May 19, 2009).

101. Box office figures from The Internet Movie Database, at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0395251/business> (accessed August 14, 2007).

102. David Edelstein, "Blood From Stones," *Slate*, 16 December 2005, <http://www.slate.com/id/2132618/?nav=fo> (accessed August 14, 2007); Kevin Crust, review of *The Producers*, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 December 2005, at <http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-producers16dec16,0,2381358.story> (accessed August 14, 2007).

103. Robert Feldberg, "Producers Phenomenon Grows," *The Record* (Bergen County, NJ), 29 April 2001, Y6; Frank Rich, "Springtime for Adolf and Tony," *New York Times*, 12 May 2001, A15.

104. The 2004 season of the HBO situation comedy *Curb Your Enthusiasm* reflected the industry's expectations for the Broadway play: the plotline of the season revolved around the notion that Mel Brooks would have to sabotage his musical (by hiring *Curb* star Larry David) if he wanted the musical to fold. The plotline, of course, mirrored the plot of *The Producers* itself. See *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, "Opening Night," originally aired March 14, 2004, <http://www.tv.com/curb-your-enthusiasm/opening-night/episode/304588/summary.html> (accessed August 28, 2007).

105. See, for example, Jonathan Sacks, "The New Anti-Semitism," *Ha'aretz*, 6 September 2002, <http://israel.jcca.org/articles.htm?y=620051118152416> (accessed August 14, 2007); Phyllis Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism and What We Must Do About It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Pierre Andre-Taguieff, *Rising From the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004); Mark Strauss, "Antiglobalism's Jewish Problem," *Foreign Policy*, 12 November 2003, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=2791> (accessed August 14, 2007). For debate over the existence of "new anti-semitism," see, for example, Brian Klug, "The Myth of the New Anti-Semitism," *New Republic*, 2 February 2004 (posted 15 January 2004), <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040202/klug/5> (accessed August 14, 2007); Tariq Ali, "Notes on Antisemitism, Zionism, and Palestine," *Counterpunch*, 4 March 2004, <http://www.counterpunch.org/ali03042004.html> (accessed August 14, 2007).

106. *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Dune Entertainment, 2006), dir. Larry Charles.

107. Statistics about Borat's box office <http://www.boxoffice Mojo.com/movies/?page=daily&id=borat.htm> (accessed August 16, 2007). For the Anti-Defamation League's comments about *Borat*, see Anti-Defamation League press release, 28 September 2006, [http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Mise\\_00/4898\\_00.htm](http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Mise_00/4898_00.htm) (accessed August 16, 2007).

108. *Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic* (Black Gold Films, 2005), dir. Liam Lynch.

109. Dana Goodyear, "Quiet Depravity," *New Yorker*, October 24, 2005, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/24/051024fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/24/051024fa_fact) (accessed September 11, 2007).

110. Lou Lumenick, "Kazakh it to Me!" *New York Post*, 2 November 2006, [http://www.nypost.com/seven/11022006/entertainment/movies/kazakh\\_it\\_to\\_me\\_movies\\_lou\\_lumenick.htm](http://www.nypost.com/seven/11022006/entertainment/movies/kazakh_it_to_me_movies_lou_lumenick.htm) (accessed August 28, 2007). See also Goodyear, "Quiet Depravity;" Owen Gleiberman, review of *Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic*, *Entertainment Weekly*, November 9, 2005, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1127828,00.html> (accessed August 28, 2007).