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CHAPTER 1

Performance Studies, Mass Culture, and the Jewish Problem

At 8:00 p.m. on the evening of Thursday, 14 May 1998, the Jewish Museum in New York City hosted a panel discussion entitled “Young Jewish Writers” featuring novelist Allegro Goodman (The Family Mantantos), Marcie Hersham (Tales of the Master Race), Thane Rosenbaum (The Colossus of Gotham), and Aryan Lee Stedman (The Illustrated Sabra). The conversation, moderated by Ellen Poll (Among the Ginzberg), focused in part on how the writers’ perceptions of their own Jewish identity did or did not affect their professional craft. As part of the museum’s inaugural “Live at the JMM” series, the event was specifically intended to attract a younger, hipper, Jewish audience than the institution’s typical public programs. Although the discussion was lively, the hall was sparsely filled. Many spectators left early. The real interrogation of contemporary Jewish American identity was taking place elsewhere.

At 9:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on that very same evening, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) broadcast the final episode of its top-rated comedy, Seinfeld (1992-98). The self-titled “Show about nothing” features comedian Jerry Seinfeld as a comedian named... Jerry Seinfeld. The character of Jerry is explicitly identified as Jewish in selected episodes, and this identification is reinforced through a variety of visual and linguistic performance codes. Jerry has dark hair, dark eyes, and a stereotypically Semitic profile. His accent (especially in the early episodes) sounds like his real life upbringing in Queens and Long Island. He resides on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, a largely Jewish neighborhood. His last name, Seinfeld, is unmistakably different from the Anglo-Saxon norm and is recognizable to a Jewish audience as German-Jewish in origin.

Yet, while Jewish critics and viewers alike identify Jerry Seinfeld as unmistakably Jewish, his religious and ethnic background is essential to the narrative in only a handful of episodes scattered over the show’s nine-year run on NBC. The vast majority of episodes contain no explicit reference to Jews or Jewishness. The episodes that do acknowledge his Jewishness tend to downplay its importance. For example, in one episode Jerry suspects that his dentist has converted to Judaism so that he can tell Jewish jokes without being labeled a bigot. When a priest asks Jerry, “Is this offensive to you as a Jewish person?” he replies, “No. It is offensive to me as a Jew.”

Other elements of the show, such as Jerry’s relationship with his family, that might be read as Jewish are not explicitly connected to religion or ethnicity. The viewer is thus free to miss or ignore any implied Jewish message. Yet Mary Kaye Schilling and Mike Fliberty of the mainstream magazine Entertainment Weekly labeled Seinfeld “quintessentially Jewish.” And within the Jewish community, as film and television critic Vincent Canby observed, there is no ongoing conversation about the Jewishness of the series and its characters that has spanned and outlined the series’ original nine-year run in prime time. Indeed, Seinfeld’s relentless assertion of quotidian reality can itself be seen as a humorous and self-deprecating indicator of Jewishness. As Jon Stratton, who devotes an entire chapter to Seinfeld in his recent book Coming Out Jewish, writes:

The underlying narrative issue of Seinfeld is, I will argue, intrinsically Yiddish, though ultimately a function of many other migrants and their descendants in the United States. This issue is usually addressed by describing Seinfeld as a show about nothing.

As Stratton implies, the description of Seinfeld as a show about nothing is as provocative as it is misleading. It suggests that Seinfeld resists interpretation, that any meaning the audience ascribes to Jerry’s Jewishness, or any other element of the series, is purely unintentional. But, as the title of Stratton’s volume suggests, the notion that Seinfeld is about is really something: something ambiguous, cloaked, hidden—something Jewish.

This book analyzes the work of Jewish American writers, directors, and actors in theater, film, and television in the United States from 1947 to the present. Performances created by Jews for consumption by a mass audience are prime sites for analyzing what I call acting Jewish, a critical formulation of Jewish American identity in the latter half of the twentieth century. I use the term acting Jewish to indicate the liminal, fluid, and multi-real nature of this formulation, as well as to emphasize the importance of the performer-spectator interaction in generating it.
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