

## MLAS Jewish Humor – Judy Klass

In this course we will consider why Jews, who are less than 2% of the population, have had such a pervasive influence on American humor. We will try to understand what makes certain kinds of humor “Jewish,” specifically, and the extent to which secular, assimilated comics and writers nevertheless keep a “Jewish” perspective. We will consider the question of American identity, neuroticism and psychotherapy, political humor, and the politics of gender and humor (with “Take my wife – please!” jokes and lots of noisy Jewish women in the mix). We will watch a lot of clips in class, but there is also a great deal of reading, and students are expected to keep on top of it; that makes for a lively discussion. Students have to read a book on their own – a novel, a play or a funny person’s autobiography – and write a term paper about that book, drawing on secondary sources. There will also be films that are discussed along the way; students are strongly encouraged to watch films associated with the course, and may draw on them and compare them to written works in their papers. There will be a **movie quiz** at the end of the term that will hopefully demonstrate that you have seen at least five of the recommended films.

The books to buy for the course are:

*The Haunted Smile* by Lawrence J. Epstein

*The Sunshine Boys* by Neil Simon

*You Can’t Take It With You* by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart

*Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor* by Neil Simon

*Play It Again, Sam* by Woody Allen

*Heartburn* by Nora Ephron

Other readings will be available to you as class handouts and/or in the on-line version of our syllabus, on Blackboard.

### Course Grading:

Final grades will be determined by the following percentages:

Paper 1 20%

Paper 2 20%

Term Paper 30%

Quiz on screenings: 10%

Attendance/participation/attitude: 20% (if I give pop quizzes, they will fall into this area)

**Week One in classroom:** What is Jewish Humor? Why did Jews, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, make up over 70% of American stand-up comics when they were only 2% of the population? We’ll start with talking about Jews in Europe in the 1800s. We’ll look at Sigmund Freud’s book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, which contains a lot of Jewish jokes. We’ll talk about Heinrich Heine as a deeply unhappy man, a glittering wit, a maser of irony and a celebrated poet, and we’ll read a translated poem of his. We’ll talk about key types of Jewish jokes that were popular in Europe: shadchen (matchmaker) jokes, schnorrer (beggar) jokes and jokes about the city of Chelm which was supposed to be full of fools. We’ll read the Sholem

Alechem story “Modern Children” and look at clips from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is based on a number of his Tevye stories, including “Modern Children.” We’ll read an article about Sholem Aleichem’s granddaughter, Bel Kaufman, teaching a Jewish Humor course at age 100. We’ll look at clips of Gilbert and Sullivan, who were not Jewish, and discuss their profound influence on funny Jewish songwriters: Yip Harburg, Ira Gershwin and those writing songs and vehicles for the Marx Brothers. We’ll compare sequences like “I am the Captain of the Pinafore” with Groucho singing “My Name is Captain Spaulding, the African Explorer,” etc.

**Homework:** In Michael Epstein’s book *The Haunted Smile*, read Introduction (13 pages), Appendix (20 pages) and “The Land of Hope and Tears” (18 pages), a piece by Sarah Blacher Cohen on “The Varieties of Jewish Humor” (14 pages), the short story “Christopher K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N” by Leo Rosten (8 pages), and Michael Wex’s “Kvetch Que C’est?” (27 pages)

**Week Two in classroom:** We’ll discuss the homework texts. We’ll read some of Sholem Auslander’s “Foreskin’s Lament” and listen to the Leonard Cohen song “Who By Fire?” We’ll talk about vaudeville, blackface, Tin Pan Alley and Irving Berlin. We’ll talk about vaudeville stereotypes of Jews, often played by Jews, and self-hating Jewish songs, like Irving Berlin’s “Cohen Owes Me 97 Dollar.” We’ll look at clips from *The Jazz Singer* and *Funny Girl*. We’ll watch a documentary on Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice and Molly Picon. We’ll read the story “My Mother Was a Witch” by William Tenn. We’ll listen to some Burns and Allen.

**Homework:** In Epstein, “Curtain Up, Curtain Down,” (31 pages) “Cantors’ Sons, Jazz Singers and Indian Chiefs” by Andrea Most (23 pages) , “Constantinople” by William Tenn (9 pages) “The Loudest Voice” by Grace Paley (6 pages) and the full-length play *The Sunshine Boys* by Neil Simon.

**Week Three in classroom:** We’ll discuss the homework texts. We’ll look at clips from the film of *The Sunshine Boys* with Walter Matthau and George Burns. We’ll look at clips of the film *Whoopee!* with Eddie Cantor. We’ll talk about radio and listen to a whole Burns and Allen show. We’ll read an excerpt from Groucho Marx’s autobiography *Groucho and Me*. We’ll read an S.J. Perelman piece “Frou-Frou, or, The Future of Vertigo.” We’ll read a bit of Clifford Odets’ play *Waiting For Lefty* and read Perelman’s parody “Waiting for Sanity.” We’ll look at some of *Horse Feathers* and *Monkey Business* – Marx Brothers movie Perelman scripted. We’ll talk about the Algonquin Round Table and read some Dorothy Parker. We’ll read Moss Hart’s essay “Men at Work” about working with George S. Kaufman.

**Homework:** In Epstein, “Theater of the Mind” (23 pages) and the full-length play *You Can’t Take It With You* by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. Students need to **write their first paper** on one or more of the texts we have been looking at.

**Week Four in classroom: Hand in papers.** We’ll discuss the homework texts. We’ll look at Marx Brothers movies with George S. Kaufman scripts – particularly

*Animal Crackers*, and compare it to an excerpt from the Kaufman and Hart play *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. We'll also look at *Duck Soup*. We'll talk about anti-Semitism in Europe in the 1930s and how it affected America, and how Jews in films became less overtly Jewish. We'll listen to some Jack Benny on the radio and watch the beginning of the film *To Be or Not To Be*, directed by Ernst Lubistch, with Benny and Carole Lombard. We'll compare it to a bit of Mel Brooks' version of *To Be Or Not To Be*. We may spend more time reading works by Jews who were part of the Algonquin Round Table.

**Homework:** In Epstein, "Laughing in the Dark" (24 pages) and "The Jewish Alps" (21 pages) plus my reading on the Gershwins' and George S. Kaufman's *Of Thee I Sing* (26 pages) "The Bar-Mitzva" from *Marjorie Morningstar* by Herman Wouk (14 pages) and "The Seder" from the same book (14 pages). Some of *It's Not Easy Being Me* by Rodney Dangerfield (24 pages), the story "I Stand Here Ironing" by Tillie Olsen (7 pages), and "Oedipus Schmedipus, As Long as He Loves His Mother" by Telushkin (11 pages).

**Week Five in classroom:** We'll discuss the homework texts. We'll watch some of *The Jewish Americans* – a segment about comedy in the Catskills. We'll read the essay "Laughtermakers" by Albert Goldman. We'll listen to Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner do more of the 2000 Year Old Man. We'll talk about the Golden Age of Television, and watch a documentary about Mel Brooks. We'll watch a clip of Sid Caesar doing double-talk. We'll talk about McCarthyism, and how it affected all the left-wing Jews involved with entertainment. We'll watch a bit of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

**Homework:** In Epstein "The Magic Box" (25 pages), some of Joan Rivers' autobiography *Enter Talking* (28 pages), a little more Dangerfield (6 pages) and the full-length play *Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor* by Neil Simon. Also some short stories: "Brooklyn Project" by William Tenn (7 pages), "Disappearing Act" by Alfred Bester (18 pages) and "The Jewbird" by Bernard Malamud (10 pages)

**Week Six in classroom:** We'll discuss the homework texts. We'll watch some *Sgt. Bilko* in class, and a bit of a documentary about the show *The Goldbergs*. We'll read a little of *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and Joan Rivers talking about Nichols and May and improv at Second City. We'll watch a documentary on Nichols and May. We'll watch a clip of Lenny Bruce. We'll listen to songs by Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs and Tom Lehrer. We'll act out a Jules Feiffer vignette about Superman. We'll watch a clip of Lena Dunham. We'll read "The Lions" by Moacyr Scliar

**Homework:** In Epstein, "Is There Any Group I Haven't Offended?" (36 pages) Joan Rivers talking about Lenny Bruce (4 pages), "The Jew as Comic" by Joseph Dornison (12 pages), "My Apology" by Woody Allen (5 pages), "Count Dracula" by Woody Allen (6 pages), "The Kugelmass Episode" by Woody Allen (15 pages), the short play *God* by Woody Allen (27 pages), my reading on funny Jewish songwriters (60 pages), plus "The Pious Cat" by IL Peretz, (2 pages), "The Chicken" by Clarice Lispector (3

pages), “Profile of the Hen of the Golden Eggs As She Lay Dying” by Moacyr Scliar (8 pages) and “A Good-Looking Couple” by Etgar Keret (4 pages).

**Week Seven in classroom:** We’ll discuss the homework texts. We’ll listen to some old Woody Allen stand-up routines. We’ll watch his fifty-minute film *Oedipus Wrecks* from the trilogy *New York Stories*. We’ll talk about gender stereotypes – Jewish mothers, JAPs, nebbishy men, etc. We’ll talk about sex and psychotherapy in Jewish humor and literature. We’ll read a section of *Marjorie Morningstar* in which she is accused of being a “Shirley.” We’ll read some of Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*. We’ll read some of Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*. We’ll read Wendy Wasserstein’s short play *Workout*. We’ll watch a documentary sequence on Joan Rivers, Gilda Radner and Wasserstein. We’ll read “Shazam” by Moacyr Scliar.

**Homework:** In Epstein “I Need the Eggs” (24 pages) and “Kosher at Last” (16 pages), The full-length play *Play It Again, Sam* by Woody Allen. The long one-act play *The International Stud* by Harvey Fierstein. Letty Cottin Pogrebin’s “From Marjorie Morningstar to Dirty Dancing” (15 pages), approximately 50 pages of pieces by Fran Liebowitz.

**Week Eight in classroom:** We’ll discuss the homework texts. We’ll read a piece by Esther Fuchs, alleging that most Jewish humor is intrinsically misogynist. We’ll watch a clip of Henny Youngman. We’ll talk more about political humor. We’ll watch some Mort Sahl and some Jackie Mason. We’ll listen to some songs by Randy Newman. We’ll watch some old clips of Jon Stewart and Lewis Black. We’ll watch a segment of “A Closer Look” with Seth Meyers. We’ll read some of Aleichem’s story “Hodel” to set up a story for homework.

**Homework: Write second paper.** In Epstein, read “Masters of Their Domain” (32 pages). Read excerpts from *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot* by Al Franken (47 pages), “The Unkosher Comediennes” by Sarah Blacher Cohen (18 pages), “The Doctor Is Three and the Lawyer Is Two” by Telushkin (28 pages), “Shrimp” by David Rakoff (10 pages), and “Dark Meat” by David Rakoff (13 pages). Read “On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi” by William Tenn (21 pages).

**Week Nine: Hand in papers.** We’ll discuss the homework texts. We’ll watch some clips from *All in the Family* and *SOAP*. We’ll watch some old clips from Saturday Night Live – and Andy Kaufman doing his thing. We’ll read some Amy Schumer. We’ll watch an episode of *Seinfeld*. We’ll read some short, funny pieces by Nora Ephron. We’ll look at some Telushkin. We’ll talk about love and relationships and read some of Jerry Seinfeld’s book *SeinLanguage*.

**Homework: Write term paper on a book you have read on your own.** In Epstein, read “Not the Last Laugh” and “The Cost of Victory” (15 pages). Read the Nora Ephron novel *Heartburn*. **Finish watching movies for quiz.**

**Week Ten: Hand in papers. We'll take the movie quiz.** We'll discuss the novel and Epstein. We'll watch an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. We'll read other short, funny pieces by Nora Ephron. We'll watch some bits from Andy Samberg and Rachel Bloom. We'll watch bits from some Woody Allen and Mel Brooks films. We'll watch some Amy Schumer.