

Jews on Film: Movie Musicals

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Catalogue Description

Movie musicals were among the most successful and lucrative products of Hollywood's "golden age." American Jews are strongly associated with Hollywood cinema as producers, directors, writers, actors, and, most visibly, heads of studios. American Jews also played key roles as composers and lyricists of the music that emerged from Tin Pan Alley; appeared front and center on the Broadway stage; and helped define the collective body of work known as the "Great American songbook." In musicals from the 1930s through the 1980s—as in other movies from the period—Jews and Jewishness were often visible only in coded ways, if at all. This class will focus on six movie musicals that engage with questions of Jewish visibility, Jewish identity, and Jewish cultural production.

Class time will be devoted to close reading and discussion of the films on the curriculum. Participants should view films in advance of the class. (All selections are available through streaming services, DVDs, etc.). Some advance reading will be assigned to provide context for the films and the discussions.

Preparing for Class:

Students should view the six films listed below *before* our class begins. All six should be readily available via DVD and streaming services. (If you have trouble accessing a particular film, please let me know).

We *may* schedule a communal screening of *Funny Girl* on campus on the Monday night of our session. We will keep you posted about that.

Students who have not recently seen the 1927 version of *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crosland), starring Al Jolson, may find it helpful to view that film as part of your preparation for class. The Jazz Singer is in the DNA of many of the films we will study in class. (You may wonder why we are not including it in this summer's curriculum. *The Jazz Singer* [1927] was part of *last* summer's curriculum).

Films to Screen in Advance:

Duck Soup (dir. Leo McCarey 1933)

Take Me out to the Ball Game (dir. Busby Berkeley 1949)

Funny Girl (dir. William Wyler 1968)

Fiddler on the Roof (dir. Norman Jewison 1971)

The Jazz Singer (dir. Richard Fleischer 1980)

Yentl (dir. Barbra Streisand 1983)

Advance reading:

Fiddler on the Roof is based on Sholem Aleichem's short stories about Tevye the Dairyman, originally published in Yiddish between 1895 and 1916. Four of these stories provide the narrative backbone for the play and the movie. The four stories listed below can be found in the Penguin Classics collection listed below. You are welcome to read these stories in any version you can find but we will refer to the Penguin edition when we discuss the stories in class.

- Sholem Aleichem. *Tevye and the Dairyman and Motl the Tailor's Son*. Trans. Aliza Shevrin. New York: Penguin, 2009.

"Today's Children" pp. 36-53

"Hodl" pp. 54-69

"Chava" pp. 70-82

"Get Thee Gone" pp. 115-128

- *Yentl* is an adaptation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy." "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" can be found in many collections of Singer's fiction. Although Singer wrote in Yiddish, he collaborated in translating his fiction into English. All published versions of the story are identical.

Recommended reading:

The original film version of *The Jazz Singer* and the play from which it was adapted are both based on Sampson Raphaelson's short story titled "The Day of Atonement." The 1980 version of the film that we will study in class has a looser relationship to the short story (and a stronger relationship with earlier versions of the film). A scan of the story will be distributed to participants.