

# H-Net Reviews

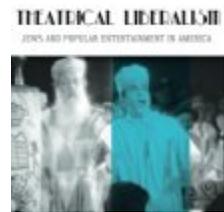
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Andrea Most.** *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America.* New York: New York University Press, 2013. 304 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-0819-4; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-2462-0.

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## Show and Tell

For roughly a century, American popular artists have often communicated to audiences in the hidden language of the Jews. Their lyricists and scenarists, their directors and producers have imagined a society in which no one would be taught to hate, and have exalted an utterly non-denominational God that blesses America. Such yearning to neutralize the effects of bigotry and exclusivity is understandable. But can the Jewish origins of so many winners of Oscars and Tonys explain anything else? Andrea Most answers in the affirmative. Her book is a bold effort to locate, within the apparatus of mass entertainment, something besides the claims of ancestral memories and loyalties. She posits the influence of Judaism itself. In the first half of the last century, biographies and autobiographies elided the specific ethnicity of the “Russians” or “immigrants” who had transformed popular entertainment. Not even as unobservant Jews could they be specifically identified. But now, a volume so scholarly that even its epigraphs brandish endnotes professes to see the Jewish religion as powering some of the most enticing and enduring works of the national imagination. The concealed sources of *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Pal Joey* (1940), and *West Side Story* (1957), Most argues, spring from faith, and not merely from foreskin.

The stage and screen are “commonly understood as secular,” yet such sites have in fact been “far more Jewish than the word *secular* would indicate. In this world of popular entertainment,” the author insists, “Judaic values about freedom, performance, action, and communal obli-

gation exist in productive tension with Protestant liberal ideals” (p. 2). She calls this ideology “theatrical liberalism” because it has “combined salient features of Protestantism, liberalism, Judaic rituals and attitudes, and the inherent theatricality of a nation in formation” (p. 39). Most thus acknowledges that this vision is not exclusively Jewish. And yet virtually her entire text treats theatrical liberalism as though it were “a Jewish secularism that retains many of the forms, behaviors, and values of a religious civilization, while effectively distancing itself from the specifically Jewish rituals and practices that would impede acculturation” (p. 87).

If Judaism is so decisive to the very definition of “theatrical liberalism,” however, why is *My Fair Lady* (1956) one stellar example of this concept? Its fidelity to *Pygmalion* (1912) is something that Most freely acknowledges. How could George Bernard Shaw have personified or promoted the Judaism that animates theatrical liberalism? She might have explored how director Moss Hart, as well as the durable songwriting team of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, altered Shaw’s play. That opportunity she forfeits. Nothing better exemplifies the capriciousness of her choices than *Hair* (1967); none of the creative figures responsible for this rock musical—James Rado, Gerome Ragni, and Galt McDermott—were Jewish. Yet she might have considered the screen adaptation (1979), because of the ethnicity of scenarist Michael Weller. The movie is not even mentioned, as *Theatrical Liberalism* ricochets from one text to another without of-

fering any principle of inclusion, not even the standard of aesthetic excellence. (That test the stage version of *Hair* would not pass.)

What is especially frustrating about Most's approach is the absence of any interest in identifying which sorts of works are excluded from the rubric of theatrical liberalism. What are its boundaries? What are its barriers to entry? How do they keep some contributions to mass entertainment outside of consideration? And how do Jewish ideas get conveyed, when writers and performers do not profess to exhibit any desire to do so? The author's effort to locate Judaism as a source of the special panache of popular culture is quite desultory. In *none* of the works that she examines is a direct connection established with explicitly Judaic ideas, much less with the Judaic ideas that she believes have helped to make "theatrical liberalism" so dynamic a feature of mass entertainment. *None* of the artists whose legacy is explored in *Theatrical Liberalism* are quoted as claiming Judaic notions as the source of the musicals and the movies that stem from the resolutely secular Jews who kept Americans entertained. The links she makes to Judaism are perfunctory at best.

The subtitle of this book is also misleading. Included are theories of performativity by Richard Schechner (a self-described atheist), Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1986). These instances exude formal innovativeness. But "popular"? Most claims to focus "almost exclusively on *popular* culture, works that were designed to appeal to a large mass of consumers, to meet the demands of 'show business'" (p. 250n21). That "almost" allows consideration of Mailer and Roth, among the key novelists of the second half of the last century. But why make an exception for them at all? It is not as though their fiction displays the "deep-seated religious underpinnings" that she purports to find in, say, *Young Frankenstein* (1974) or in *Zelig* (1983) (p. 3).

What Most chooses to analyze may come across as random because of the vagueness of her conception of "liberalism." She defines it as a "set of ideas about individual freedom, capitalism, and representative government that informed the founding of American democracy in the eighteenth century" (p. 9). But *which* ideas? She seems not to notice how liberalism, itself a rather unstable term, changed from the Enlightenment into its twentieth-century version, which has promoted active state intervention in the economy as well as dedication to civil rights and civil liberties. How *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *Funny Girl* (1964, 1968) are supposed to have

something to say about eighteenth-century democratic thought the author leaves unexplained. Only one of the artists whom she seriously showcases addressed the impact of capitalism, though well after it took its baby steps under Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. Arthur Miller certainly considered how capitalism limited "individual freedom." But if attitudes toward private enterprise were really central to the project of theatrical liberalism, why does this book omit plays like David Mamet's *American Buffalo* (1977) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), as well as Jerry Sterner's *Other People's Money* (1989)? These savage works tap into the tension between the pursuit of happiness and the dire consequences for others (that is, for society), and between competition and cooperation. Sales can endanger souls. And why is theatrical liberalism given credit for having "created a secular, universal rhetoric that protected Jews' newly acquired and deeply treasured civil rights" (p. 75)? Surely what ensured such rights was the framework of the U. S. Constitution, or—more broadly and simply—liberalism.

The adjective (theatrical) that modifies that noun (liberalism) is crucial to Most's argument. It makes theatricality not only a repudiation of essentialism, as Most notes, but in doing so offers a chance to try on different masks, to shuffle the cards of identity. Theatricality bestows the promise of self-fashioning that enhances American individualism, as the nineteenth-century emphasis on character morphed into the twentieth-century appreciation of personality. Theatricality gives Jews in particular a chance to *enact* the demands of "certain aspects of Judaism" that have "an affinity" with the nation's popular culture (p. 12). To be a modern Jew is to be "forced by historical circumstances to adopt double roles and to use performance as a survival strategy" (p. 21).

And yet, of the greatest American dramatic works, none by a Jew matches the relevance of a play that Most mentions only briefly: *Long Day's Journey into Night*. She describes it as "popular" in the 1940s (p. 263n23); and though Eugene O'Neill did complete it in 1941, it was not staged until fifteen years later. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) may or may not include Jewish characters. The debate on this subject is unresolved, and Most sees the Loman family as Jewish. But none of the characters are at all associated with the theater, whereas James Tyrone, the father-husband in O'Neill's play, had been a famous thespian. *Long Day's Journey into Night* might be an ideal example of theatrical liberalism. It explores the clash between familial obligation (Most reads collectively as "Jewish") and self-satisfaction (individualism is

supremely American). But because O'Neill was not Jewish, her thesis ought to stir some skepticism.

The challenge that Most has assigned herself might be stated as follows. What would be an example of a distinctively Judaic idea, plucked from a complex religious system, to further not only social inclusion but show business success as well? Like commentators before her, she is struck by the order of the verbs in the Hebrews' vow to do and then to hear (*na'aseh v'nishma*). Thus, before even knowledge of what the deity requires, the practice of *mitzvot* is to be adopted and honored. From this vow has followed the sense that persistence in obeying the dictates of divine law—even without understanding it or thinking through to a belief in it—can achieve internal compliance. The practice of ritual that cannot be rationalized may result in the piety that might not otherwise have been summoned.

But by emphasizing the priority of conduct over belief itself, and by tracing this idea in popular culture, the author makes some mistakes. Primacy need not be equated with priority, which has two meanings, only one of which is temporal. What happens first need not be what matters most. Nor is it possible for human beings, regardless of how impulsive they may be, to do something without the brain directing such activity. Even when the interval between intent and palpable result is brief, all human activity is in some sense deliberate, a consequence of desire (or of reaction to stimulus).

But even if it were possible for action to be so separated from thought, why it would be admirable is hardly self-evident. Most fails to see anything problematic about the primacy of unreflective conduct, and treats uncritically the exaltation of action itself. An ethos that disparages thoughtfulness is historically associated with political extremism. Her namesake, the anarchist Johann Most (1846-1906), promoted "the propaganda of the deed," an appeal for spontaneous violence against private property and against officialdom. His contemporaries on the other end of the political spectrum, the far-right movement in France, called themselves Action Française; and Futurism, which influenced Fascism, also celebrated the thuggish thrills of direct action. Only in passing does *Theatrical Liberalism* mention the Yippies. Their literary legacy includes Jerry Rubin's embarrassingly awful *Do It!*

(1970)—aptly titled, but not cited. Why Most makes the supremacy of the deed so pivotal to the most logocentric of peoples, whose aptitude for abstract thought has often been noted, is mystifying.

*Theatrical Liberalism* leaves obscure whether a new name is being proposed for a way of thinking that previous observers have detected, or whether the author is claiming to describe a phenomenon that she alone has discovered. But her book would have been stronger had it attempted something less ambitious but still difficult, which is to explore the cultural affinity between a talent for reaching the masses and the influence not of religion but of ethnicity. Consider, for example, how Most decided which artists to include. Their lives had to establish "a clear connection to Judaism, through their own education, contact with the Jewish *habitus*, and belief systems of parents or grandparents" (p. 11). If the piety of two generations earlier has to be invoked, the definition suggests a rather weak or even absent link to the religion of the artists themselves—but does sound like the salience of ethnicity. The only way that her argument can be salvaged, though at the cost of freshness, is to concede that the Jews who helped shape show business were, like Harry Houdini himself (ycept Ehrich Weiss), escape artists; and what they fled from (often quite ferociously) was normative Judaism.

The most devastating riposte to this book is its opening example, which is "God Bless America" (1938). Not only was Irving Berlin detached from any formal or explicit adherence to Judaism, but he also married outside the faith and did not raise his daughters within its ambit. Its claims, he understood, had historically penalized those who observed it; and therefore Berlin's own musical genius and its social and economic rewards served to emancipate him from the price of peoplehood. As outsiders, or at least as the progeny of outsiders, such Jews harbored special incentives to make names for themselves (usually quite literally). As Jews by birth, they undoubtedly brought special memories as well as patriotic gratitude to their creative and performative tasks. But the inclusion of such committed assimilationists as Berlin in *Theatrical Liberalism* inadvertently guarantees collapse of the case that the author advances for the influence of religion.

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