

Jews, Assimilation, and the Jazz Age *The Jazz Singer (1927)*

"In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression - - perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of Jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer."

Production Information:

Directed by Alan Crosland. Based upon Samson Raphaelson's short story "The Day of Atonement" (1921) which was made into a Broadway play in 1926. In the play, Jakie goes to the synagogue to sing for his father—just the opposite from the film. Adapted for the screen by Alfred A. Cohn. Produced out of Warner Brothers studio headed by Darryl Zanuck. Run time 88 minutes.

Cast: "Jakie Rabinowitz" played by Al Jolson (born Asa Yoelson in 1886) America's favorite jazz singer. Warner Oland as "Cantor Rabinowitz", Eugenie Besserer as "Sara Rabinowitz" May McAvoy as "Mary Dale."

Film History:

Radio, movies, advertising, and mass-circulation magazines promote a national, secular culture. Movies become a key place where social and cultural behaviors are learned. Vaudeville, where white men sometimes painted their faces black and pretended to be "Negro minstrels," was in decline. In the minstrel show white entertainers put on blackface and "imitated" or "caricatured" slaves in the South and ex-slaves in the North.

Most well known of the transitional movies that introduced sound. It was the first feature-length film to include spoken dialogue as part of the dramatic action. Approximately 25% was sound-synchronized with vocal and musical numbers. A complete "talkie" would be the gangster film, *Lights of New York* filmed in 1928.

The Hollywood studio, Warner Brothers, invested half a million dollars in the Vitaphone system that would connect sound with movement. *The Jazz Singer* brought in \$3.5 million at the box office and catapulted Warner Brothers into the limelight.

Movie studios, which owned theaters as well as production and distributions networks, built luxurious "movie cathedrals."

Creation of a core *American* (not Christian) story: Wholesome innocent coming from loving but confining family needs to find his (typically male) full potential. Since he is basically good, his bondage is situational. He must shake free the past so leaves home. There he struggles to meet life's challenges (struggle between good and evil) which gives him self-confidence, endurance, and the "can-do" spirit. Future is open and gracious, righteousness produces success.

Story often follows pattern of Jewish men whose fathers do not adapt well to New World so “New World” sons forge emotional alliance with mothers. Warner Brothers fall into this pattern. Movies “swiftly and painless” dissolve assimilation problem. The “movies as world of possibility where anything can happen. The movies can redefine us. The movies can make us new. The movies can make us whole.” (Gabler, 145)

The film was remade twice in 1952 with Danny Thomas (as Jerry Golding) and Peggy Lee (as Judy Lane), and in 1980 with singer-songwriter Neil Diamond in the lead role as the cantor's son with legendary co-star Laurence Olivier as his father. An “homage” to *Jazz Singer* appeared on the “Simpsons” as *Like Father, Like Clown*.

Social History:

The question of assimilation was a critical one for the millions of immigrants coming to the US. What was an “American”? Who should become one? Many of these were from Eastern Europe, including many Jews. Immigrants settled in urban centers such as those in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

African Americans were also moving in from the South. Cities became crowded, causing pollution and housing problems. The “lower East Side” of New York City (where the film is set) became emblematic of Jewish communal life in the US. Immigrants lived in the cities because this is where the jobs were. Industrialization brought about new and cheaper goods, but also factory disasters and labor problems.

Connection between Jews and blacks in urban centers. African Americans as source of American popular culture. Jazz as a black art appropriated by whites. Jews as middlemen between African Americans and WASP culture—as agents, editors, record company owners, movie producers.

“The call of my race.” What we now call “ethnicity” was up to 1930s called “race.” Race, ethnicity, and religion all come together in name “Jewish.”

In 1919 the country ratified the 19th Amendment outlawing the brewing and selling of alcohol but since 1917 the country had basically been dry. Prohibition caused a bustling illegal trade and organized crime developed. By 1927 women had received the vote and increasingly were working outside of the home (22% would be by 1933). The Stock Market became a popular place for average people to invest but the declining farm economy portended problems.

Religious History

Jews immigrated to the United States in large numbers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. This first wave was made up of mostly German Jews who had trades and education. They were liberal in their religious observance. When Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe came beginning in the 1880s, they disruptive the easy relationship German Jews had established with their Christian neighbors. Eastern European Jews,

such as those in the film, were less educated but--if religious at--all were more conservative. We now call them “Orthodox” Jews and they follow closely Jewish law as it was interpreted by village rabbis in Europe.

Most Jews who immigrated from Eastern Europe were not religious, the most observant stayed home. Pogroms made it impossible to return home (unlike Catholic Italians). Desire to assimilate, desire to “make it.” Well aware of American dislike of foreign, especially non-Christian. Survival to blend in. The “secular” is a good place for Jews. Movie making Jews not observant but most not Christian—buried in Jewish cemeteries.

Jackie makes a “guest appearance” at synagogue but his future is as Jazz singer. “American story”—religion as supplement but not distraction from work and progress. Choosing work/individual fulfillment over family/religion and love. Play based on Al Jolson’s experience whose father also was a rabbi/cantor who didn’t approve of his “jazz” (any kind of fast) singing.

Orthodox, Eastern European Jews, “stood out” from both their Christian and German Jewish neighbors. Eastern Orthodox Jews speak “Yiddish” (Jewish) which is a dialect of German written using Hebrew script. They wear special clothing, sometimes cut their hair certain ways (especial those following certain rabbis), and do not eat pork or mix milk and meat together. Men and women are separated in their synagogues and women cover their hair after they marry. Like all Jews, the Orthodox keep holy the Sabbath (Yiddish: Shabbos) by having special prayers at home. Men may go to synagogue where they pray and study.

Of the holidays, Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—is one of the most important. It is a day of communal recognition of sin and is marked by a day of fasting and prayer. Families begin the holiday by asking for forgiveness of one another for the wrongs they have committed. In the synagogue, men and women (in separate areas) listen to a *chazzan* (cantor) who chants prayers.

The *Kol Nidre* is the most famous and is recited as a prelude just before the sun sets. It is a prayer in Aramaic asking God to release us from vows undertaken, but not fulfilled. The first line is: “All the vows that we made that were false to our faith and all the promises and oaths which once we swore shall be void now and forever more.” Jews ask God for forgiveness of sins committed against him but they must ask the offended to forgive them for human transgressions. The famous *chazzan* who appeared in the film, Yossele Rosenblatt refused to sing it for the movie and sang a Yiddish song instead. It is customary to wear white garments, symbolic of purity but also of the white death shroud that Jews are buried in.

“Jews” (any minority group) becoming Protestant. Protestant notion that work is a “calling” a “vocation” —not merely something to keep you fed. Work has a spiritual dimension. Puritan understanding of “work ethic” that leads to capitalism (cf. Max Weber). Protestant ethic: no work, lazy, therefore sinful. Other groups seeing self as distinct from work, not defining inner self or having a “saving” character.

References:

Neal Gabler, *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (1988)

<http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday4.htm#YKL>

<http://www.filmsite.org/jazz.html>

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/filmnotes/jazzsingernotes.html>

Questions to Think About

What religious rituals are performed and how do they aid in plot development?

How is the Jewish Mother portrayed differently from the Jewish Father? What do you think the filmmaker is saying about the role of gender in religion?

Why do you think that Al Jolson wears blackface?

How is music used?

