Tyrannosaurus Rex

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Film As Literature

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Criticism of *The Jazz Singer*

INTRODUCTION

As the most commercially successful talking picture, *The Jazz Singer* has certainly earned its place in cinematic history. The movie tells the story of a young man named Jakie who dreams of pursuing a career as an entertainer despite his devout Jewish father’s wishes for him to follow in his footsteps and become a Cantor in the synagogue. While the movie became an astounding success due to introducing the world to the first major talking picture, the film has come to be highly criticized for being overdramatic, promoting the rejection of Jewish values, and appearing downright racist.

OVERLY EMOTIONAL

Traditionally, silent films must include over-the-top acting to appeal to a diverse audience, but the acting in *The Jazz Singer* takes it too far. The amount of pathos expressed by Jakie’s parents in the film is only eclipsed by actor Al Jolson’s overdramatic portrayal of Jakie, even observed by his costar character Mary Dale who says, There are a lot of jazz singers, but you have a tear in your voice”. Given that this film takes place in the late 1920’s when gender roles were in full effect, Jakie’s abandonment of family values in exchange for chasing dreams can be interpreted as “a classic woman’s role” (Musser 198). Sexist by today’s standards, audiences of the 20’s interpreted his familial disregard in favor of lucrative income to feel more like a passive “weepie” than an innovative talkie.

THE REJECTION OF JEWISH VALUES

Secondly, critics found the storyline of the film to be very assimilationist and disrespectful to the religion of orthodox Judaism. While the movie is based upon Sam Raphaelson’s short story “The Day of Atonement,” seeing a protagonist “choose between the secular religion of the stage and the sacred religion of the Jews” (200) is extremely difficult to watch since Jakie chooses the theater over the church. In essence, a symbolic character in mass media was telling the world that it would be okay to seek entertainment over religion. Furthermore, culture critic and author Lester Friedman condemned the film, calling it “ ‘assimilationist’ because it presents a model of success that ‘depends upon a severe curtailing, if not a total rejection of traditional Jewish values’’’ (196). Lastly, Jakie Rabinowitz adopts the stage name of “Jack Robin,” which was perceived at the time as him turning his back on his Jewish roots.

RACIST TEXT

Lastly, what’s unbelievable to a modern audience is how the filmmakers of *The Jazz Singer* got away with using several scenes of the main character singing in dancing in blackface. Critics believe this makeup was not only racist towards African American communities but also Jewish communities because the character was escaping one culture to imitate another. Jolson’s character also sings “Mammy” while wearing blackface, which now symbolizes “an empty icon of African American suffering” (205) in his portrayal of racial melodrama. During the time of the film, many African Americans comedians and others and had popularized the style and trend of using blackface had “abandoned [this] performance practice that they found demeaning” while Joelson had been “seen guilty as perpetuating them” (213). Of course, audience has mixed reviews during the time of the movie, but if anyone were to play *The Jazz Singer* now inside of a diverse classroom, the movie host would be sure to receive some glances of disgust.

CONCLUSION

The movie industry, much like any media outlet will always be prone to critics. The degree of criticism the movie met with during its release in a turbulent era in American history would not compare to the backlash it would receive for racial insensitivity on multiple fronts today. On the other hand, some would even argue that “ a Jew using blackface to play a black man who sang spirituals with black singers about the plight of the ancient Jews: this was a powerful assertion of shared experience and unity” (210). Regardless of the reception the movie received in 1927 or how it is perceived, *The Jazz Singer* will forever hold a place in cinematic history as the first film to introduce synchronized sound to the world, a whole new innovation in movie making and the theatrical experience.

WORKS CITED

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