

Setting the Stage

On Armistice Day, November 11, 1938, Kate Smith introduced a new song, "God Bless America" on her CBS radio program, recorded live at the New York World's Fair. The song was instantly popular. Ms. Smith continued to sing it on every one of her radio broadcasts for the next year; she recorded it with RCA in 1939, the lyrics were introduced into the Congressional Record, and it has long been considered an alternate national anthem.¹ The song remains central to American popular culture today, and experienced a renewed burst of popularity after September 11, 2001, when congressmen, Broadway performers, baseball players, and stock traders all sang the song as a way of asserting their patriotic commitment.² "God Bless America" was originally written for the musical revue *Yip, Yip, Yaphank* by Irving Berlin, a Russian Jewish immigrant to America at the turn of the twentieth century, the son of a cantor, and one of the most successful writers of popular theater music in American history.³ The complete lyrics to the song are as follows:

While the storm clouds gather
Far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance
To a land that's free;
Let us all be grateful
For a land so fair,
As we raise our voices
In a solemn prayer.

God bless America,
Land that I love,
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with a light from above.

From the mountains, to the prairies,
 To the oceans white with foam,
 God bless America,
 My home sweet home.

Berlin's choice to become a secular American songwriter rather than a cantor like his father has long been the stuff of American immigrant legend.⁴ Indeed, "God Bless America" is one of the songs that has solidified the narrative of the transformation of religious Jew into secular American. But what about those bits about the "solemn prayer" and about God blessing America? How can a song that is a prayer be connected unproblematically with a writer who insisted on a secular identity? Or with a public sphere that is considered secular? What exactly does *secular* mean in this context?

As we can see in the national embrace of "God Bless America" (and of its composer), American popular entertainment forms a central part of established national culture. Songs, plays, and movies express the core values of this culture, through stories that rarely focus directly on God and blessings but rather on the theater itself. In Jewish-created American popular culture, however, the distance between God and the theater is far shorter than one might assume. First- and second-generation American Jews created a popular theatrical realm, one which is commonly understood as secular yet reveals itself on closer examination to be far more Jewish than the word *secular* would indicate. In this world of popular entertainment, Judaic values about freedom, performance, action, and communal obligation exist in productive tension with Protestant liberal ideals. Grounding the history of American popular culture in the multiple religious traditions that informed the worldviews of its practitioners allows us to understand more clearly why Jews were and are so deeply involved in American popular entertainment, how Jews successfully acculturated to America in the twentieth century, and how American liberalism developed and changed in response to the arrival of millions of immigrants from many different religious backgrounds.

Popular scholarly explanations for the persistent relationship between Jews and popular entertainment in America generally argue that the Jews who created Broadway musicals, Hollywood films,

superhero comics, or Tin Pan Alley songs were, above all, interested in leaving behind their (or their parents' or grandparents') immigrant roots and traditional religious observance, and assimilating into mainstream American society. The theater and other forms of popular entertainment seem to have offered a clear escape route.⁵ In my own work on Broadway musicals, I too have argued that the Jewish creation of popular entertainment offered a way for Jews to acculturate by creating a fantasy America, which was distinctly open to and tolerant of people like themselves. But this fantasy version of America—and the analyses that explicate it—posit the existence of a secular space outside of and untouched by religious ritual and values. This American secular space is seen as a kind of level playing field on which ethnic groups encounter one another and reshape that field to accommodate various forms of difference.⁶ This model of an American public sphere fails to take into account the deep-seated religious underpinnings of this form of secularism, the multiple ways in which religious communities express values and beliefs, and the unexpected venues in which those expressions appear.

The terms *religious* and *secular* share a distinct history firmly rooted in the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment. In the face of advances in science and the rise of liberal political systems in Europe and America in the late nineteenth century, scholars began to describe what became known as the secularization thesis, which argued that with the advent of modernity, the world was becoming less overtly religious.⁷ In the past few decades, religious studies scholars have taken issue both with the thesis itself (modern societies have not followed the neat arc defined by the thesis; religious belief and practice has survived and been transformed in the modern age) and with the universalizing assumptions on which the secularization thesis relies. As the scholar of religion Janet R. Jakobsen articulates, secularism cannot be understood as a general category; indeed, she argues, American secularism can be understood only in relation to the Protestant values that shaped so much of U.S. history.⁸ Recognizing the Protestant basis for the idea of the universal secular will allow us to distinguish between different responses to Protestantism and different types of secularisms.

This rethinking of the secular is rooted in a reconsideration of the meaning of religion. In his foundational essay, "Religion, Religions,

Religious," Jonathan Z. Smith tracks the use of the term "religion" by explorers and scholars beginning in the sixteenth century, and of the development of the study of "world religions," arguing that the category of religion is "a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture."⁹ Tomoko Masuzawa builds on Smith's argument, showing how the notion of religion as a particular aspect of social life, rather than the organizing principle of a civilization, is a uniquely Protestant and modern idea, and the idea of "world religions" is closely linked to the rise of a particular nationalist and imperialist ideology.¹⁰ Robert J. Baird pushes this farther, arguing that "world religions" have long been understood in terms of their resemblance to or difference from Protestantism. Pointing to David Hume's eighteenth-century tract, *The Natural History of Religion*, Baird argues that Hume and other Protestant Enlightenment thinkers grouped together those aspects of a culture's social life that, like Protestantism, emphasized private, individual confessions of faith and called them "religion."¹¹ Hume was, of course, preceded by John Locke, whose "Letter on Toleration" of 1689 virtually invented the idea of the private sphere by defining religion as an inward matter of faith. Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini have argued that this new classification system not only created a set of practices called "religions" but also created pressure on non-Protestant groups to reinvent themselves as religions in order to achieve rights, freedoms, or social powers.¹² If certain private, individual acts are labeled as religion, then the rest of the culture becomes secular. American secularism therefore is built on a Protestant model, which divides aspects of culture into public and private spheres, and relegates religion to the private sphere.

How does Judaism, which has never neatly conformed to this public-private model, fit into this picture? The contemporary religion scholar Laura Levitt shows how many Jewish communities in Western and Central Europe, which up until emancipation were "self-governing corporate bod[ies]," were transformed in the nineteenth century into collections of voluntary individual adherents to a particular faith:

What religion offered to Jews in the liberal West was a Protestant version of religious community that they could apply to themselves as Jews. . . . Although political emancipation was the product of the age of reason, the end of the rule of religion, for Jews in the West, this version of the

rule of reason brought with it, ironically, a reaffirmation of religion, and specifically of religion as a kind of faith.¹³

In other words, in order to achieve civil rights, liberalizing Jews redefined themselves as members of a religion, Judaism, which much more closely resembled Protestantism. As Levitt shows, many Jews of Central European descent gladly embraced a new identity in America, which defined them as members of a particular faith, with all the religious and political freedoms granted to such faith groups; the Reform movement modeled many of its practices on mainline American Protestant behaviors. A number of Jewish thinkers in early twentieth-century America were self-consciously critical of Jewish movements built along Protestant lines. Rabbi Israel Friedlaender, an important figure in the early days of the Conservative movement, wrote in 1919:

It was a fatal mistake of the period of emancipation, a mistake which is the real source of all the subsequent disasters in modern Jewish life, that, in order to facilitate the fight for political equality, Judaism was put forward not as a culture, as the full expression of the inner life of the Jewish people, but as a creed, as the summary of a few abstract articles of faith, similar in character to the religion of the surrounding nations.¹⁴

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism, likewise argued in his 1934 manifesto, *Judaism as a Civilization*, that Judaism can survive in the face of science and scepticism only if it re-embraces the concept of Jewishness as a complete way of life, not simply a matter of private faith. Levitt demonstrates how Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America developed not only new religious movements in response to this transformation of Judaism but also a variety of Jewish secularisms.¹⁵ She argues that many Eastern European Jewish immigrants turned to secular Yiddish culture— theater, literature, politics, and art—as a means of achieving the rights and religious freedoms promised by American law while resisting self-definition as a faith group. Some secular Jews likewise turned to Zionism and the Hebrew language for similar reasons. And, of course, some American Jews retained their traditional practices and resisted secularization altogether, while others severed all ties to the Jewish community,

intermarried with Christians, and fully assimilated into the mainstream culture.

In Jewish-created popular culture in the non-Jewish public sphere such as the Hollywood films, Broadway plays, and popular novels written by secular American Jews, we find yet another distinctively Jewish response to the pressures of Protestant secularization. These secular Jews can be understood not simply as Jews who have given up religion but as Jews struggling to inhabit a public space shaped by a liberal Protestant conception of faith as an aspect of private life. The quality of this American- and English-language version of Jewish secularization is more elusive than its Yiddish counterpart not only because it is embedded directly within Protestant secular culture, but because it is designed expressly to appeal to members of that culture. At the same time, this form of Jewish secular culture has turned out to be extremely resilient, perhaps because it is so organically American. Although these writers and artists come from a wide variety of Jewish backgrounds, they are united by a liberal Jewish perspective that insists on the potential compatibility of Judaism with American liberalism. Rather than creating alternative secular spaces in which to inhabit a Jewish cosmos, therefore, these artists worked within the existing Protestant secular culture and found ways to reshape it to better reflect their own values, practices, and larger worldview. They wanted to be Americans, so they created works of American popular culture that would allow them to participate in that culture and let them do so on their own terms.¹⁶

Judaism has always existed for Jews beyond the reaches of the synagogue and organized religious practice, and in the early and mid-twentieth century Judaism continued to shape the worldview of so-called "assimilated" or "secular" Jews, albeit in ways that were not as obviously "religious" or "Jewish" as the observance of holidays or the maintenance of dietary laws. To identify this elusive American Jewish secular culture is not to look for overtly religious or ethnic representations on stage and screen. Rather, this book explores more subtle affinities between Judaism, liberalism, and the theater. The films, plays, and novels discussed here offer complex visions of imagined communities, individual desire, communal responsibility, and sacred space that emerged from the encounter of Judaic and Protestant worldviews that characterized the early- and mid-twentieth-century American Jewish experience.

Furthermore, the Jewish worldview that permeates much of American theatrical culture of the twentieth century reaches far beyond the Jews who created it. Its enormous popularity demonstrates the power of these ideas for many Americans, and shows how religious communities intersect and transform themselves within a pluralist national context. This book focuses specifically on the American Jewish case, and the particular relationship between Jewish-created popular culture and Judaism. But equally fascinating narratives could be told about the Catholic secularism of Irish American drama and the relationship between the Black Baptist church, African cultures, and the development of jazz, ragtime, and tap dancing.¹⁷

The American literary scholar Sacvan Bercovitch persuasively argued nearly four decades ago in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* that the apparently secular American public sphere was actually decisively shaped by religious culture, in his view by one particular religious group, Anglo-Protestant Puritans.¹⁸ This book expands on Bercovitch's claim, arguing that other religious groups—in this case, Jews—responded to the Puritan strain inherent in American liberalism in creative and productive ways, bringing their own spiritual and philosophical traditions to the project of developing and expanding the contours of secular liberal society. Puritans were famously anti-theatrical, and the Puritan-inflected liberalism Bercovitch describes is based on the idea of a true self that resides within each of us. The notion of a private essential self inherently deserving of individual rights lies at the core of America's foundational documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—as well as the many political speeches, Supreme Court decisions, and mass movements that form the established history of American liberalism. But centuries of American literary and popular culture from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* to *The Great Gatsby* to the films of Woody Allen celebrate a different kind of liberal individual, one who is theatrical, anti-essentialist, mobile, focused on exterior modes of self-presentation, capable of shucking off history and tradition and being repeatedly born anew. Herein lies an apparent paradox: How can a civic culture founded in an anti-theatrical understanding of the self contain and nurture a popular culture that celebrates theatricality? This book unravels that paradox in a journey that takes us from the Hebrew Bible to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the

Broadway stages and Hollywood screens of twentieth-century America. This journey raises questions about accepted oppositions such as private and public, religious and secular, interior and exterior, and elite and popular culture. Liberalism encompasses more than legal abstractions and political movements, and is expressed in a surprising variety of arenas. To understand the vibrant force of American liberalism, we will explore the dialectical relationship between its essentialist Protestant roots and the anti-essentialist theatrical impulses that have always been implicit (if generally repressed) in American culture, and which achieved remarkable creative expression in Jewish-created popular culture of the twentieth century.

The Protestant culture Jews encountered in America was not, of course, monolithic. Secular Jewish writers, directors, and performers were in close contact with diverse strains of Protestant thought, which often functioned in direct opposition to one another. Jeffrey Stout in *Democracy and Tradition* notes the competing interests of what he calls orthodox Christians—those whom Bercovitch focussed on whose theology is rooted in the Puritanism of Plymouth Rock—and liberal Protestants, who identify more with the democratic striving for perfection characteristic of Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey. These two types of Protestants express different views of liberalism, which mirror aspects of the essentialist/anti-essentialist paradox. He also identifies a third tradition, blues spirituality, which has its foundations in African American culture and African polytheism, and is far more theatrical in its liberalism than either of the other two. Stout describes the ways in which African Americans and liberal Protestants made common cause in the development of American liberal culture:

In jazz, rock, and film, as well as in novels, essays, and poems, the spirit of the blues and Emersonian striving for perfection have often reinforced one another, creating a combined cultural force that orthodox Christians have found deeply disturbing but have largely misunderstood as an expression of liberal secularism.¹⁹

Jewish creators of popular entertainment often operated in similar ways, drawing on aspects of liberal Protestantism and blues spirituality as well as Judaism to create culturally potent forms, which were likewise

easily misunderstood by orthodox Christians as expressions of a religiously vacant (and hence debased) liberal secularism. The power of this popular culture resides not in its secular neutrality, however, but in its specific spiritual vision, one that makes use of secular cultural modes to express a morally coherent and passionately felt worldview.²⁰ First- and second generation American Jewish writers and directors negotiated a position for themselves within and alongside these multiple strains of Protestant American liberalism by reimagining key aspects of traditional Jewish culture as theatrical. In the process, they created a new form of secular Judaism, expressed in a hybrid and enormously successful popular culture, which tapped into the theatricality of American democracy and spoke (and continues to speak) to a broad American public.

Artists of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s created compelling images of what it might mean to be a modern liberal American, images that were discussed, debated, rejected, embraced, and transformed throughout the twentieth century. My term for this worldview is *theatrical liberalism*, which combines two complex ideas. The first, “*theatrical*,” will be treated in depth in chapter 1. The second, “*liberalism*,” is in many ways the subject of the entire book, but its specific use in theatrical liberalism requires some explanation. The liberalism to which I refer is classical liberalism—the set of ideas about individual freedom, capitalism, and representative government that informed the founding of American democracy in the eighteenth century—as opposed to the use of the term *liberal* to mean politically left wing, or a member of the American Democratic Party. This more recent definition of the word “liberal,” however, does have an important historical relationship to the development of theatrical liberalism. Indeed, at the same time that theatrical liberalism became synonymous with certain forms of American popular culture, American Jews emerged as a consistently liberal voting bloc, and the epithet “New York Jewish liberal” came to express both a particular political position and a particular kind of popular culture. Classical liberalism, however, refers to a complete system of political, economic, and metaphysical concerns. Theatrical liberalism largely focuses on philosophical questions about the nature of the self and community, and spends less energy on debates about governing structures, law, or free markets, although these issues do arise in individual plays and films via the metaphor of the theatrical community.

Jewish writers and directors of popular culture wrestled with the challenges of constructing a modern liberal Jewish self and imagining a society in which such selves could reach their fullest potential. They probed the boundaries of both Judaism and liberalism to figure out what liberty might mean for a Jew: How free were Jews to fashion selves while remaining within the parameters of an ethical and spiritual tradition that placed limits on individual freedom? Their works raised questions about whether Jewish men and women were equally free to fashion selves, and they explored the ways in which the particular structure of Jewish families and communities shaped possibilities for self-fashioning. Engaging with ideas drawn from Protestant liberalism, Judaism, and acting theory, these writers and directors wondered about the source of the self, which is, after all, the basis for a doctrine of natural rights. Is it a gift from God, a product of race, or history? Or is it defined by one's actions in the world? Similarly, their works questioned whether identity is private or public, unified or multiple, shifting or stable. Making use of theatrical metaphors, they vigorously debated the role of a liberal individual in relation to his or her community. In a world that privileged individual rights over the obligations that form the core of Jewish practice, what would keep liberal Jews bound to one another, if anything? Is liberal individualism morally defensible in Jewish terms?

Hundreds of American plays and films written and directed by Jews in the early twentieth century find common ground in their shared responses to these questions. Four key features distinguish works of theatrical liberalism from other works of American popular culture. First, these works reconstruct the theater as a sacred space, a venue for religious expression, and the performance of acts of devotion, thereby turning theatricality into a respectable cultural mode. All the works discussed in this book are, to a greater or lesser extent, about the theater and the performance of identity. Most are explicitly meta-theatrical, and many are part of a new genre invented to express the worldview of theatrical liberalism—the backstage musical (or backstage play)—which combines the conventions of romantic comedy with the drama of putting on a show. This form offers the ideal structure in which to consider questions of individual choice, self-fashioning, and communal obligation. Second, in celebrating theatricality, these plays and

films privilege a particularly Jewish attitude toward action and acting in the world, stressing the external over the internal, public over private. Third, these works strenuously resist essentialized identity categories, promoting a particular kind of individual freedom based on self-fashioning. Theatrical liberalism guaranteed secular Jews the freedom to perform the self, a freedom cherished by a people so often denied the right to self-definition, whether by Christian dogma or racial science. And fourth, that individual freedom is circumscribed by a set of incontrovertible obligations to the theatrical community. In these plays and movies, there is a palpable tension between the liberal rhetoric of rights and the Judaic rhetoric of obligation (*mitzvot*), and the moral weight of these stories turns on the fulfilling of theatrical obligations, even at the expense of individual rights. And while these shows embrace the commercial demands of the free market—indeed their success is most often judged on the basis of their popularity—when theatrical obligations come into conflict with the logic of the marketplace, the obligations take priority. “The show must go on” was the new dogma of the theatrical liberal.²¹

What exactly constitutes a Jewish artist? I focus on those writers with a clear connection to Judaism, through their own education, contact with the Jewish *habitus*, and belief systems of parents or grandparents, or through otherwise living in close enough proximity to a traditional Jewish community to have absorbed clear messages about what constitutes Jewish values and practices.²² These writers and artists emerged from many different types of Jewish communities. A majority of those who achieved success in the first few decades of the twentieth century were second-generation descendants of Central European Jews: Edna Ferber, George S. Kaufman, Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers, and Lorenz Hart. By the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s many American-born Jews of Eastern European descent, such as Irving Berlin, Arthur Miller, Leonard Bernstein, and Jerome Robbins, as well as a number of assimilated German Jews like Ernst Lubitsch and Kurt Weill, had entered the sphere of American popular culture as well. But the evidence for Jewish sensibility lies more directly in the texts than in the biographies of the writers. In the texts, the distinctions one would expect of Jews from different geographical and class backgrounds break down in favor of a remarkably coherent set of distinctively American

Jewish cultural ideas. As these cultural ideas became part of the popular culture, they took on a life of their own. I am not arguing for an exclusive claim to theatricality on the part of these Jewish writers and directors; rather, I highlight the affinity between theatricality and certain aspects of Judaism as at least a partial explanation of the Jewish attraction to and success in American popular entertainment. These Judaically inflected ideas are by no means the exclusive property of Jews, and many were later adopted by those with no particular connection to traditional Jewish life.

Theatrical Liberalism begins with a discussion of two key topics, which form the theoretical underpinnings for the book: theater and theatricality. The primary text of chapter 1 is the dramatic narrative in Genesis of Jacob pretending to be his twin brother Esau in order to gain Esau's birthright and his father's blessing. This glance backward at a biblical story may seem surprising in a book devoted to exploring twentieth-century American popular culture. But centuries of commentaries on this ancient story of performance reveal an ongoing discussion about the ways in which Jewish selves are—and ought to be—formed and performed. In chapter 2 we follow the birth and flowering of theatrical liberalism in early twentieth-century America, examining in detail its major ideological and dramaturgical features in a wide variety of films, plays, and other popular entertainment of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and beyond. In the wake of the Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust and the post-war Red Scare, many artists began to raise questions about the morality and efficacy of theatrical liberalism. Chapter 3 examines the expression of this ambivalence in works that critique and reconfigure the backstage musical and romantic comedy—and the acting style that supported them—as inherently false and naïve. Rodgers and Hart's modernist musical *Pal Joey*, Arthur Miller's "tragedy for the common man" *Death of a Salesman*, and Bernstein, Laurents, and Sondheim's adaptation of a Shakespearean tragedy, *West Side Story*, all express deep disillusion with the values of theatrical liberalism.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the values of theatrical liberalism caught the imagination of Jewish social scientists, who found it useful for explaining everyday behavior. At the same time, a newly emerging Jewish ethnic pride led to a celebration of "authentic" Jewishness in popular culture. Chapter 4 explores the tension between these two

impulses in the work of Erving Goffman, Sid Caesar's early television sketches, and the musicals *My Fair Lady*, *Funny Girl*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. The debates over theatricality and authenticity reached a peak in the later 1960s and 1970s as theatrical activity spilled off of stages and screens, and boundaries between audiences and performers disintegrated. Examining representations of the 1967 march on the Pentagon, the performance theory of Richard Schechner, the film parody *Young Frankenstein* by Mel Brooks, and the essays of Lionel Trilling and Cynthia Ozick, chapter 5 explores how Judaic ideas about idolatry and self-fashioning informed countercultural debates about art, entertainment, and identity. The popular embrace of multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by a renewed faith in theatricality, now reimagined as performativity by Jewish scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Marjorie Garber. Chapter 6 constructs a conversation between their academic writing on identity and popular theatrical representations of Jews in multicultural America in works such as Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, Woody Allen's *Zelig*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Long replaced in the popular culture by the secular Judaic values of theatrical liberalism, Judaic texts, rituals, and ideas began to slowly re-emerge into public view at the end of the twentieth century. The book concludes with a brief discussion of the ways in which theatrical liberalism is changing in order to incorporate art and entertainment which once again reimagines the distinction between the religious and the secular in the American public sphere.