

The Birth of Theatrical Liberalism

There was once a vulgarian who went to the synagogue on one corner of the street when he wanted to weep, and to a bawdyhouse on the other corner when he wanted to be gay. But once, when he wanted both to weep and be gay at the same time, he put up a theatre in the middle of the street that combined synagogue and bawdyhouse into one.¹

Jewish immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries landed in urban environments undergoing enormous social and cultural transformation. On the one hand, in the settlement houses, immigrant aid societies, and public schools that immigrants encountered every day, the purveyors of the Social Gospel preached a liberal Protestantism that worked to improve the educational, work, and living conditions of the urban poor and focused attention on a very particular type of assimilation to Protestant American norms. On the other hand (and often in direct opposition to the values of the Social Gospel), powerful mass entertainment industries were just beginning to emerge in vaudeville, motion pictures, and the popular press, ready to sell their products to a population already beginning to embrace what the historian Warren Susman called "the culture of personality."² Jews brought to this fertile environment their own particular worldview, a deeply theatrical sense of self, and an intense desire to succeed in the New World. This perfect storm led to the creation of a new form of American culture, that of theatrical liberalism, which combined salient features of Protestantism, liberalism, Judaic rituals and attitudes, and the inherent theatricality of a nation in formation. Characterized by a revolutionary embrace of theatricality as a viable social mode, the prioritizing of external action over internal intention, the celebration of self-fashioning as a uniquely American form of freedom, and the

construction of a theatrical community based on obligation rather than rights, theatrical liberalism emerged as the hybrid expression of a modern liberal and Jewish worldview.

The Wicked Stage Transformed

One of the most Jewish and most successful theatrical works of the 1920s, *The Jazz Singer*, by Samson Raphaelson, performed on Broadway in 1926 and made into the first "talking picture" starring Al Jolson in 1927, explicitly depicts the theater as the place where religion goes in modern secular America.³ In this play and film, we encounter Jacob (Jakie) Rabinowitz, the first Jacob of the modern American stage, and one who literally embodies the struggle between the theatricality and authenticity of his biblical forebear. Jakie becomes the American Jack Robin by performing on the vaudeville stage. This causes a rift between him and his immigrant father, an Orthodox cantor on the Lower East Side. Jack tries to convince his father that his choice to be a jazz singer is not so different from being a cantor:

CANTOR: I taught you to sing to please God, but you sang to please yourself. One minute you were singing in the synagogue and the next minute singing in the street. . . .

JACK: You're right, Papa. I am the same. You did teach me to sing songs of prayer. And I sang them here for you. But when I got out on the street with the other kids, I found myself singing the same songs they sang. And they're very much alike—our songs—and the street songs [*He sings "Ain Keloheinu," a Hebrew prayer tune. And then, suddenly, to exactly the same tune and with exactly the same plaintiveness but with a new rhythm . . . he sings a popular song.*]⁴

When asked to replace his father in the synagogue instead of performing on Broadway, however, Jack at first argues for the higher calling of the stage: "Show business is different from anything else," he says, "The finest actors keep right on working, even if there's a death in the family. The show must go on . . . It's like a religion" (ibid., 96). Although Jack does agree to grant his father's wish, it is his ultimate conversion to the stage that is most typical of plays and movies of the time. There

is a distinctly religious quality to these secular narratives; the theater is described as an all-consuming passion, a tradition, heritage, and way of life to which its adherents owe undying allegiance. There are countless rituals and myths that shape this religion, and a complex value system that determines the morality of those who operate within it.

We have come to accept this theatrical religion as commonplace, even clichéd. Some might toss it off as yet another example of bowing to the "temple of art." But there is nothing particularly sacred about the *art* here; in fact, the vaudeville show Jack appears in is a distinctly commercial enterprise and even the producer acknowledges that, aside from Jack's powerful rendering of his blackface "mammy" songs, the show isn't much good. But Jack argues not for his individual performance but for the theater itself as a new object of devotion. The religious content in stories about the theater tends to be overlooked or underplayed because the stories are treated as unequivocally secular works of popular culture, not to mention ephemeral, trivial, and undeserving of serious intellectual attention. Furthermore, these early backstage musicals undermined the conventional moral standards of religious Americans of the time—all those scantily clad women, young people leaving their families to go on the stage, showgirls in dubious relationships with wealthy men, actors pretending to be something they are not. Indeed, many battles were fought between self-appointed censors from religious organizations and the producers and writers of these shows and films over the apparently immoral nature of theatricality. But although the battles were often framed as a struggle between moral, religious folk and secular, immoral, and money-hungry businessmen and artists (which, in their ugliest characterizations, were represented simply as a battle of Christians vs. Jews), they may be more productively imagined as a battle between competing worldviews, differing visions of what constitutes religion and its corresponding secular culture.⁵

Christian culture has always regarded the theater with ambivalence. The story of this ambivalence was given historical shape and significance by Jonas Barish, a Jewish intellectual born in the precise time and place (New York City, 1922) when theatrical liberalism began to take shape, in his magisterial exploration of attitudes toward theatricality in European culture, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. In a survey spanning thousands of years, Barish shows how Christendom simultaneously embraced and

rejected the promises of the theater, using it for displays of religious pagantry, turning it into a key symbol of religious difference during the Reformation, and transforming it into a figure for the public sphere in early modern liberal thought. Anti-theatricality in Western culture can be traced all the way back to Plato, who was famously hostile to impersonation. As Barish notes, Plato's hostility to the theater became "the cornerstone of an anti-theatrical edifice" that has shown remarkable resilience in two millennia of European culture. While epithets from other art forms tend to be used in a positive manner (an "epic" struggle, "lyrical" beauty, a "musical" voice, etc.), he notes that

terms borrowed from the theater—theatrical, operatic, melodramatic, stagey, etc.—tend to be hostile or belittling. And so do a wide range of expressions drawn from theatrical activity expressly to convey disapproval: *acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene, making a spectacle of oneself*.⁶

The Roman Catholic Church for many centuries tolerated theatrical spectacles that emerged from religious activity (medieval church drama and passion plays), and the rites of the Church itself were overtly theatrical, performed with elaborate costumes, sets, music, and gestures. With the rise of Calvinism in the sixteenth century—which explicitly rejected Catholic theatricality—religiously based anti-theatrical movements gained momentum in many parts of Western Europe. The legitimization of the secular Elizabethan stage created a Puritan backlash that ultimately led to the brief closing of the British theaters in 1642. Like the rabbis we encountered earlier, Puritan pamphleteers labeled actors hypocrites, considered the creation of an alternate world on the stage tantamount to idolatry (competing with God for the gift of creation), fulminated against cross-dressing on the stage, and generally accused the theater of encouraging lewd and lascivious behavior.⁷ According to the Puritan pamphleteer William Prynne, God determined the character of each person, and it would be sinful, and hypocritical, to attempt to alter one's character through playacting: "He enjoy[n]es all men at all times, *to be such in shew, as they are in truth: to seeme that outwardly which they are inwardly*; to act themselves, not others."⁸ Absolute sincerity is the mandate of every good Christian, and the stage was seen as a sinful impediment to that goal.

THE
ENTERTAINMENT
OF THE
S T A G E,
A

Corrupt and Sinful Entertainment,

CONTRARY

To the whole Nature of Christian
Piety, and constantly to be avoid-
ed by all sincere Christians.



EDINBURGH,

Printed by Mr. JAMES DAVIDSON and Com-
pany, and sold at the said Mr. Davidson's
Shop, and other Booksellers in Town, 1727.

A typical Puritan anti-theatrical tract from G. Anderson, *Mr. Law's Unlawfulness of the Stage Entertainment* (1727). (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., reprint, 1974).

Lingering Puritanical influence, combined with the fact that the British theater was connected to the monarchy, led to skeptical reactions to theatrical activity in the newly formed American republic. In 1778 the Continental Congress passed an edict condemning the stage and demanding the dismissal of any government official "who shall act, promote, encourage, or attend such plays."⁹ Massachusetts banned plays of any kind until 1792, and even supporters of the stage, who prized the democratic social encounters it made possible, condemned the moral laxity of actors and associated the theater with prostitution.¹⁰ Interestingly, from the earliest days of the republic, Jews were deeply involved in defending the American theater. Two early nineteenth-century figures, Mordecai Manuel Noah and Isaac Harby, were influential in the English-language secular theater and in the face of Protestant disapproval, Harby published a "Defence of the Drama" in 1828, which argued for the theater as a civilizing force and a beneficent moral influence.¹¹

As the American Republic came of age in the nineteenth century, attitudes towards the theater shifted along with political movements. Democratic politics quickly became (and remain) a remarkably theatrical enterprise, as demonstrated both in Washington, D.C. in the rags-to-riches autobiography of Abraham Lincoln, and in the mid-nineteenth-century theaters themselves, as demonstrated in the meteoric rise of actors like Edwin Forrest, whose nationalist sentiments provoked the infamous Astor Place Riot.¹² The American ideology of socioeconomic mobility similarly led in the nineteenth century to an exploration of the theatrical skills necessary to fashion a new, upwardly mobile self, talents celebrated in P. T. Barnum's autobiography but treated with more suspicion in Herman Melville's 1857 cautionary tale, *The Confidence Man*. Coined in the United States in 1849, the "confidence man" served as a symbol of the instability inherent in a new meritocratic democracy and came to stand for the anxieties caused by a culture obsessed with self-fashioning. As Melville shows, in a nation that favored mobility and welcomed immigrants, one could never be sure what class people came from, who their families were, and if they were to be trusted. P. T. Barnum's *Autobiography*, published in 1854, which explained with pride his personal success at conning the public, was coolly received by most readers, and Mark Twain was similarly ambivalent about the colorful con men he depicts in *Huckleberry Finn* (1885).¹³ Actors, often seen as a particular breed of con man, received suspicious treatment in nineteenth-century American fiction such as *Franklin Evans* by Walt Whitman, a temperance novel in which theater, actresses, and alcohol work together to destroy the moral fiber of the central character.¹⁴ The dangers of the stage for young women were particularly stressed in these stories. *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott, describes the sisters' experience with parlor theatricals with cautionary suspicion, and her novel *Work: A Story of Experience*, contains an extended section in which the central character, Christie, goes on the stage and is changed for the worse by the experience. Anna Cora Mowatt's *Autobiography of an Actress; or, Eight Years on the Stage* likewise deals with the dangers the stage poses to a young woman.¹⁵

American high society continued to be biased against actors even when other prejudices against the theater began to soften. While high society theater audiences often enjoyed stage spectacles, they rarely

consented to admit professional performers into their ranks. And even though *attending* the theater became more acceptable over the course of the nineteenth century, many of the plays presented ironically warned audiences against the lures of *performing* on the stage. An overview of popular plays and melodramas of the period reveals a persistent sense that performing on the stage is seductive, sinful, and vulgar, and that those who practice the theatrical arts are neither respectable nor trustworthy. The theater is represented in countless nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century plays as an especially dangerous place for young women, whose virtue would be sullied by the very act of appearing on the stage. In the 1906 play *The Chorus Lady*, for example, a pair of sisters narrowly escape moral disaster on the vaudeville stage; the happy ending occurs when both end up back in the safety of a country village.¹⁶ In *Rollo's Wild Oats*, similarly, a young and innocent chorus girl, Goldie, is celebrated when she stops the show and prevents her lover from continuing with his dreams of theatrical success.¹⁷ A holdover from this anti-theatrical style, the early sound film *Applause* (1929) likewise features a down-and-out burlesque actress who saves her daughter from the stage by sending her to a convent.¹⁸

Jews were often implicated in this anti-theatricality. As Barish argues, anti-Semitism and anti-theatricalism share many common features.¹⁹ The popular anti-Semitic image of the Jew as a diasporic cosmopolitan, one who fits in everywhere but belongs nowhere, led to numerous comparisons between Jews and actors. In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche identifies what he sees as a peculiar and insistent relationship between Jews and performance, claiming that the Jews are "a people possessing the art of adaptability par excellence" and equating acting with the condition of being a Jew: "what good actor today is *not*—a Jew?" he asks.²⁰ In late eighteenth-century France, the questions of Jewish citizenship and of the rights of actors were debated simultaneously.²¹ Jewish rootlessness was likewise conflated with theatricality in European and American novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* are two of the best known), and both were viewed with suspicion by many nineteenth-century dramatists as well. The power of the nineteenth-century theater director to influence actors and audiences was often conflated with anti-Semitic attitudes as well. One example

(among many) of this phenomenon is *Trilby*, adapted by the American playwright Paul M. Potter from Du Maurier's novel of the same name. This play centers on the actions of the evil Svengali, a Jewish maestro who snatches a young innocent French girl from her fiancé and forces her, through the powers of hypnosis, to perform as a singer on the stage.²²

A more ambiguous example is Edmond Rostand's 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, whose central character is unable to pursue his romantic desires due to the size of his nose. He chooses instead to write and direct romantic scenes for another, vicariously engaging in seduction by becoming a kind of theater director. *Cyrano* opened in the midst of the Dreyfus affair, and Rostand was a vocal supporter of the wrongly accused French-Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus. While Cyrano is certainly not an explicitly Jewish character, he possesses many features of the theatrical Jew, in this case given a positive spin, perhaps as a means of arguing for the nobility of the spurned Dreyfus. Socially hampered by a large nose, Cyrano writes odes to the lovely Roxanne, but gives them to the more physically appealing musketeer "Christian" to deliver. Cyrano writes Christian's lines, directs him in how to recite them, and at one point even plays the part of Christian himself (under cover of darkness), all in order to vicariously experience the love of Roxanne.²³ Even when embraced by as noble a figure as *Cyrano*, however, theatricality is still suspect and ultimately self-defeating. Neither Cyrano, Roxanne, nor Christian achieve their desires, and Cyrano is able to reveal to Roxanne his true feelings—and himself as the true author of Christian's words—only when he is on the verge of death.

With the entrance en masse of first- and second-generation Jewish writers, directors, and producers into the world of American entertainment, however, attitudes toward the theater and theatricality in America underwent a radical shift. Theatrical life was transformed from the "wicked stage" to a celebrated, respectable, and quintessentially American cultural mode. An enormously successful new form—the backstage drama (or backstage musical)—emerged to articulate this new ethos, and plays about actors, or about putting on a show, became an extremely popular and long-lasting feature of American popular culture.²⁴ In the musical number "Life Upon the Wicked Stage," from the Hammerstein and Kern operetta *Show Boat*, for example, a showboat

actress comically bemoans the fact that the anti-theatrical connection between stage performance and sexual immorality is, alas, mistaken:

Life upon the wicked stage
Ain't ever what a girl supposes;
Stage door Johnnies aren't raging
Over you with gems and roses.

"The wicked stage," it turns out, is not so wicked after all. Ellie laments that, contrary to what a girl supposes, while one may depict vice in the theater (she tells us later that she can "play a hussy or a paramour"), the actress retains her virtue, much to her chagrin. While life on the stage does not necessarily lead to a better sex life off stage, however, it does offer something else which more than compensates for this lack:

I admit it's fun to smear my face with paint,
Causing ev'ryone to think I'm what I ain't,
And I like to play a demi-mondy role, with soul!

For Ellie, the reward of acting is the soulful pleasure of performance itself. Indeed, she rhymes "role" with "soul," implicitly connecting the internal with the external performance in a way that is typical of the works of theatrical liberalism. At the end of the song, she claims

If some gentleman would talk with reason
I would cancel all next season.
Life upon the wicked stage
Ain't nothin' for a girl!

But her chorus immediately disputes this, responding, "You'd be back the season after!" The theater may not offer Ellie the life of decadence and glamour she desires and which the nineteenth-century guardians of moral virtue abhorred, but it does offer something even more powerful. The freedom to "cause everyone to think you're what you ain't," is not dispensed with lightly.

While for centuries the theater was seen by most Americans as opposed to the values of good Christians, plays and films of the early

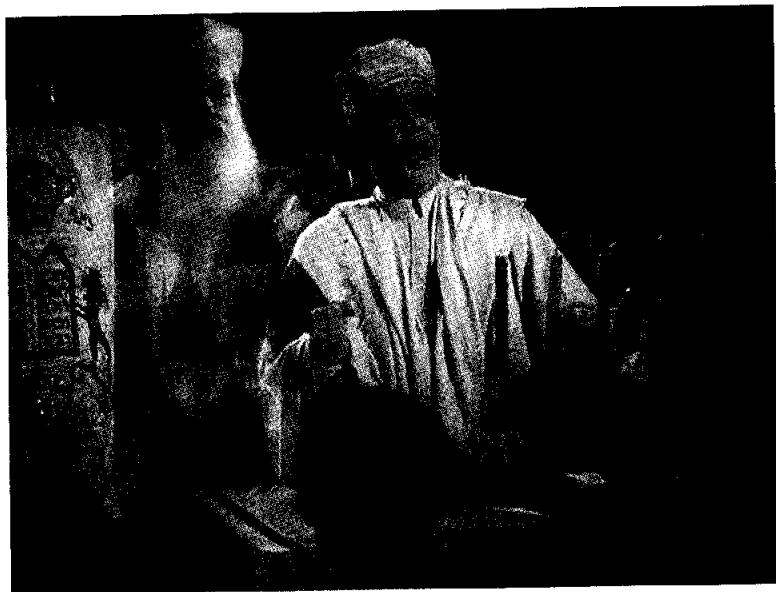
twentieth century began to feature positive comparisons between the theater (or "show business") and a moral life. Conversion to the ethos of the stage was a staple of the backstage musical in the 1930s. A typical Warner Brothers musical of the era, *Dames* (1934), for example, features the Puritanical and anti-theatrical Ezra Ounce, who leads a crusade against the very theater in which his nephew and niece are performing, only to be converted to the delights of the stage by the end.²⁵ In George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's comedy *Stage Door* (1936), the central character Terry describes her commitment to the stage: "It was almost a spiritual thing, like being dedicated to the church."²⁶ Similarly, in both Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's movie *Twentieth Century* and Ferber and Kaufman's play *Royal Family*, wavering converts are convinced to return to the stage when given the opportunity to perform in explicitly religious (albeit Christian) passion plays.²⁷ Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's hit musical *Babes in Arms* (1937) proposes the theater as the route to a more Emersonian-style salvation: putting on a successful show is a sign of self-reliance that will prevent the kids of Seaport, Long Island, from being sent away to a work camp where they will be "public charges."²⁸

Show Boat, in all of its various incarnations—the novel by Edna Ferber (1925), the fabulously successful stage musical with music and lyrics by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein (1927, as well as four Broadway revivals), and the two Hollywood films—retells American history, from the 1870s to the 1920s, as a story about the theater and, in doing so, reinvents theatricality as a respectable mode of American national and spiritual expression.²⁹ Just as in the backstage film musicals, the story of *Show Boat* foregrounds the battle between the forces of Protestant anti-theatricality and the more liberal, freedom-loving, and tolerant world of stage actors. In Ferber's novel, the mother Parthenia Ann Hawks (Parthy) is described as belonging to "the tribe of Knitting Women; of the Salem Witch Burners; of all fanatics who count nature as an enemy to be suppressed; and in whose veins the wine of life runs vinegar."³⁰ When presented by her husband, Andy, with the idea of living on a showboat, "the Puritan in her ran rampant. He would disgrace her before the community. He was ruining the life of his child" (ibid., 47). Likewise, in one of Parthy's first scenes in the play, she makes clear her feelings about the theater in a tirade to her husband, now Captain Andy, the director of the showboat:

PARTHY: An' you—you think more of your show boat troupe than you do of your own daughter's upbringing—Well, thank God, her mother had a good Christian bringin' up in Massachusetts. Where I come from, no decent body'd touch this show boat riff-raff with a ten foot pole—let alone have their daughters mixed up with them.³¹

Parthy makes it clear that despite the fact that the family lives on the boat, she does not want her daughter becoming an actress: "You stick to the pianner, young lady—no playactin' for you—." And yet, despite her apparent reliance on long-established American moral codes, in the context of *Show Boat*, Parthy's "religion" represents an immoral obstacle not only to the freedom of the characters to live, work, and love as they choose but to the very liberal ideals on which America is founded. Parthy's views are mocked in the novel, and she is given no songs in the musical. Instead, audience/reader sympathy is quickly won by the theatrical characters, including the two stars in Parthy's own family, her husband, Captain Andy, and their daughter, Magnolia. It will ultimately be Captain Andy, a firm believer in the moral and spiritual power of theatricality, whose values will lead the showboat, Magnolia, and the nation into a new age.

The end of the 1927 Warner Brothers film version of *The Jazz Singer* makes a more direct comparison between the theater and the synagogue, and both are acknowledged as spiritually edifying. Furthermore, the progression from one to the other is represented not as a fall from a higher moral position but as a natural development of Old World Jewish values. Torn between replacing his father at synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur and performing opening night in his first Broadway show, Jakie finally decides to honor his father and return to the Lower East Side. He passionately chants the Kol Nidre service as his father dies. We see the ghost of the father tap Jakie on his shoulder, bestowing a last paternal blessing on the performing Jacob before departing into the afterlife. At the same time, Jakie's producer and co-star girlfriend listen to the service through a window. The girlfriend directly compares his chanting to his stage performances. The intertitle reads, "a jazz singer—singing to his God." Jakie sings the final climactic note of Kol Nidre, and the film cuts immediately to an intertitle that reads, "the season passes—and time heals—and the show goes on," and then immediately



The ghost of Jakie's father gives him a final blessing as Jakie chants Kol Nidre in *The Jazz Singer*.

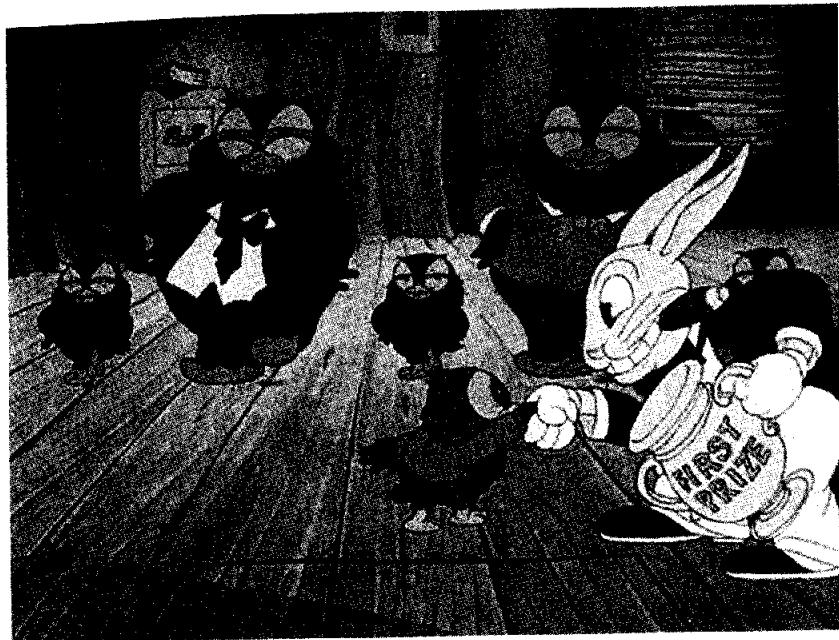
afterward to Jolson's famous star turn as Jack Robin in blackface singing "Mammy," with his beaming mother in the front row of the audience. "The show goes on" is an ambiguous intertitle here—which show? Is the synagogue service "going on" in Jakie's plaintive mammy songs? Or vice versa? Is this a progressive narrative, in which, as in Zornberg's interpretation of the Jacob story, Jakie's "performance" as an observant Jew secures his father's blessing and allows him to emerge into his more authentic self as an American jazz singer? Or does Jakie more directly resemble Levinas's definition of an *ish tam*? Like his biblical forebear, does Jacob become a man of integrity through his ability to perform without naïveté both the Kol Nidre (which gains his father's blessing) and the mammy songs (which gains him his mother's approbation, and his future as an American)? As the film ends, it becomes clear that in Raphaelson's America, at least, performance and religion are inseparable. Indeed, the most moral choice for Jakie is to choose both.

Samson Raphaelson was well aware of the radical argument about religion and performance he was making in the play. In his Preface, which was reprinted in the program book for the film, he wrote:

In this, my first play, I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1925—that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical revues, and dance halls—is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the America which goes sedately to church and synagogue. The jazz American is different from the dancing dervish, from the Zulu medicine man, from the negro evangelist only in that he doesn't know he is praying.

Both the exotic practices of the "dancing dervish . . . Zulu medicine man . . . and negro evangelist" and that of "jazz Americans" involve a kind of spirituality that is passionate, emotional, and difficult to contain, aspects of the "blues spirituality" discussed earlier. Raphaelson goes on to make the explicit link to Jews: "Jazz is Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, George Gershwin, Sophie Tucker. These are Jews with their roots in the synagogue. And these are expressing in evangelical terms the nature of our chaos today" (Raphaelson, *Jazz Singer*, 10). In both this preface and in his representation of Jack Robin as a blackface minstrel in the play itself, Raphaelson explicitly defines secular Jewish theatricality as a kind of passionate religious expression, showing how both the audiences and performers of jazz musicals are expressing a religious sensibility which is as fervent as more conventional religious practice ("going sedately to church and synagogue") and more effective in expressing the "chaos" of modern life. Jewish jazz, according to Raphaelson, shatters the rigid boundaries between religious and secular, private and public life: cabarets, musical revues, dance halls, and even, as Raphaelson has Jakie argue, the streets themselves, are the sites of passionate religious practice, if only we could recognize them as such.³²

In 1936 Warner Brothers produced an eight-minute animated spoof of *The Jazz Singer*. The song "I Love to Singa," on which the cartoon was based, was written by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg (both Jewish songwriters) for Al Jolson's final starring role with Warner Brothers in the 1936 film *The Singing Kid*. The cartoon features "Owl Jolson," the youngest member of a vaguely German immigrant family of musical owls, who has been banished from his home because he insists on singing jazz music rather than the classical music that his father ("Fritz Owl") reveres and at which his siblings excel (they emerge from their eggs as fully formed opera, violin, and flute virtuosos). Dejected and



"Owl Jolson" receives first prize from "Jack Bunny" as his family proudly looks on in *I Love to Singa*.

alone, Owl ends up auditioning for a radio talent show (hosted by "Jack Bunny") with his infectious rendition of "I Love to Singa." His bereft mother hears him on the radio and immediately tows the rest of the family down to the radio station, where they arrive just in time to see young Owl win first prize in the talent contest. The formerly strict Old World father is completely won over by Owl's delightful performance, and the cartoon ends with the whole family reunited and happily dancing and singing in a vaudeville-style rendition of the title song.³³ The cartoon indicates not just how popular and well-known *The Jazz Singer* was in the 1930s, but also how the conflict between theater and religion at the heart of that story had been resolved in a few short years. No longer is "Owl Jolson" faced with a choice between the two: unlike in *The Jazz Singer*, in which Cantor Rabinowitz must die before Jakie can move into the secular world of the theater, in this rendition, the whole family is happily converted to the world of the stage. By 1936 the battle had been won; theater represented the new sacred arena of American popular culture.

Action and Acting

In the opening scene of the Hecht/MacArthur film *Twentieth Century*, the star director Oscar Jaffe (John Barrymore) teaches a lingerie model, Lily Garland (née Mildred Plotka, and played by Carole Lombard, née Jane Alice Peters) to act. The process is slow, methodical, and painful. First, she must learn to enter a room with the proper bearing and composure. She must speak with the right accent and tone. Then she must walk across the stage in the correct manner and stop in a particular place before speaking her next line. Lily has difficulty remembering when and where to walk and to speak, and so Jaffe demands chalk and begins to draw lines on the stage indicating exactly where she should be at each moment in the play. Toward the end of the scene, a shot from above reveals a stage completely covered by white chalk lines. Lily must also learn how to scream in agony when her character learns that her lover is dead. She can't do it. Finally, Jaffe helps her along by sticking a pin into her backside at the appropriate moment. It works, Lily screams convincingly, and she is soon on her way to becoming a Broadway star. This method of building character involves little discussion of emotion and certainly no discussion of the actor's own internal psychological motivations. The acting philosophy of *Twentieth Century*, which references not only standard popular acting styles of the 1920s and '30s but also specifically the style of the hugely influential director David Belasco, is simple and straightforward: walk here, say this, a little louder, now walk there, look behind you, sit down, moan softly.³⁴ Do it over and over again until you feel it, understand it, and can convey it to those sitting in the very back row of the balcony.³⁵

Glancing through a prayer book in my synagogue one Shabbat morning, I found a set of penciled-in notes, a reminder a congregant, or perhaps a nervous bar mitzvah boy or novice prayer leader had jotted down, indicating how one should recite the *musaf amidah*, the set of prayers that conclude the morning Shabbat service. A paraphrase of the instructions (a set of behaviors, which are regular practice in any traditional synagogue): "Rise. Take three steps forward, then three back. Bow slightly. Sing altogether. Say this part to yourself. Mumble aloud. Repeat. Rise up on toes three times. Bend knees and bow slightly. Say

this part only between Sukkot and Passover. Step backwards and forwards, sway to the right, the left and bow forwards. Sit down." Similarly detailed instructions can be found in the Passover Haggadah: "Distribute pieces of the bottom matzah. Take a piece of matzah and break it into two pieces. Add the bitter herbs, dip it into the charoset, and eat it while reclining to the left." How do you light candles on Hanukkah? First, be sure your head is covered. Put the candles into the menorah from right to left, and light them from left to right, using not a match, but a separate candle, called a shamash. There are two blessings to say each night, and an additional blessing to say on the first night.

This kind of detailed instruction about how to act Jewishly is not limited to rituals related to praying in synagogue and observing holidays. One can find explicit, detailed instructions for daily behaviors of all sorts. How does a Jew wash hands before eating? Use a cup, not the faucet. Pour water on each hand three times, alternating hands each time. Then say the blessing, while drying your hands. If you are washing as part of the Friday evening Shabbat dinner, bless the wine first, then wash, then bless and cut the bread. No one should speak until the bread is blessed, but humming is permitted. An observant Jew can find in the Talmud instructions on just about any action a Jew might do in the course of everyday life, including having sex: "There must be close bodily contact during sex. This means that a husband must not treat his wife in the manner of the Persians, who perform their marital duties in their clothes."³⁶

For Oscar Jaffe in *Twentieth Century*, acting in the theater demands, above all, close and careful attention to the details of everyday behavior. So does Judaism. Like the Jewish impresario David Belasco, on whom the character of Oscar Jaffe was based, Jaffe knows that if Lily practices enough, and does so with the proper spirit and attitude, eventually she will be a great actor.³⁷ For Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most important American Jewish theologians of the last century, practicing is also key: "A good person is not he who does the right thing, but he who is in the habit of doing the right thing."³⁸ Heschel argued for the importance of *acting* Jewishly, even if one doesn't understand exactly why or doesn't feel spiritually moved to do so. "Judaism insists upon the deed and hopes for the intention" (ibid., 403). Action is the first step to spiritual illumination, not the last.³⁹ Inverting a famous line from Proverbs, Heschel insists "The way to pure intention is paved with good deeds." From doing will eventually

come understanding: "It is the act that teaches us the meaning of the act" (Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 404). Acting on the stage and acting Jewishly clearly have many affinities, and this common ground provided a space for secularizing Jews to maintain a familiar stance toward everyday behavior while simultaneously dispensing with the overtly religious rituals that formed obstacles to acculturation to the American way of life. In the self-consciously theatrical world of many early-twentieth-century plays and films, a good performance was the measure of a good actor. What an actor did on the stage is what mattered; what an actor believed—who an actor *really was*—was of little interest.

Theatrical liberalism privileged this external and public version of a self, the acting self. Americans have long wrestled with questions about where the "truth" of a self lies, and while action in the world has often been seen as a sign of good internal character, for most Protestants that internal, private faith is the driving force that animates action (rather than the other way around); faith, and the kinds of character traits that allow for and support Christian faith, determine one's chances of salvation and move one to act morally in the world. This Protestant divide between action in the world and private faith deeply influenced early liberal thinkers and helped shape American attitudes toward freedom of religion. For John Locke, for example, religion was largely a matter of faith, and faith is a private, not a state, matter. Separating church from civil government in this way allowed Locke to argue for civil rights not only for various kinds of Protestants but also for Jews, because a Jew's faith was not—in his liberal philosophy—the concern of the civil sphere. When Jewish thinkers began to engage with liberal ideas, they revealed the ways in which Enlightenment notions of religious toleration imperfectly fit the lives Jews actually lived.

The eighteenth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn responded to Locke by exploring the tension in Judaism between action and faith. In *Jerusalem* (1783), Mendelssohn wrote: "Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic law, there is not a single one which says: *You shall believe or not believe*. They all say: *You shall do or not do*. . . . Nowhere does it say: *Believe, O Israel, and you will be blessed; do not doubt, O Israel, or this or that punishment will befall you*."⁴⁰ Mendelssohn acknowledges that faith is required for one to accept the obligations of a Jewish life, but he points out that professions of faith are not required in

and of themselves.⁴¹ He points to the same key defining moment for Judaism that Levinas highlighted in his discussion of Jacob, when Moses, after receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, recited them aloud to the assembled Israelites at the foot of the mountain. The people then agreed to the terms of the covenant with God, saying, "*na'aseh v'nishma*," the exact Hebrew translation of which is "we will do and we will hear."⁴² This phrase has been the source of centuries of discussion among Jews because of the apparently reversed order of the verbs. Shouldn't we hear first and do afterwards? On the contrary, states Heschel. *Na'aseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will hear, argues for the importance of following laws, of acting, of living a life according to Jewish law, *in order to learn* or "hear" why, in order to develop greater understanding of the divine, and in order to bring the world closer to redemption.⁴³

Up until the modern period, to be a Jew therefore was not primarily to profess a particular set of beliefs but to act Jewishly in everything one did, from the foods one ate to the clothes one wore to the ways in which one interacted with other members of the community to the role one took in caring for one's house, crops, livestock, or the earth itself. As Tevye says, in the beginning of *Fiddler on the Roof*, "Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything, how to eat, how to sleep, even how to wear clothes."⁴⁴ Thousands of Jewish immigrants arrived on America's shores with the direct, lived experience of a traditional society deeply concerned with the ethical and spiritual implications of everyday behavior. John Dewey noted in *A Common Faith* (1934) that Jewish immigrants were among the few Americans who, in the early twentieth century, had a self-conscious connection to a religious civilization that permeated all aspects of daily life, and that was not limited to private, interior confessions of faith:

There are a few persons, especially those brought up in Jewish communities in Russia, who can understand without the use of imagination what a religion means socially when it permeates all the customs and activities of group life. To most of us in the United States such a situation is only a remote historic episode.⁴⁵

Accustomed to a culture which asserted the primacy of ritual and deed over declarations of faith, these immigrants confronted in early

twentieth-century America the oppositional force (and seductive energy) of a liberal political and social model that granted them freedom of belief and freedom of speech, but not necessarily the cultural freedom to *act* in accordance with those beliefs. For the most part, no civil law in America circumscribed the practice of Jewish rituals like kashrut, Sabbath observance, or the covering of heads. But the overtly secular, tacitly Protestant cultural and social sphere shaped the contours of modern American life, from the calendar and daily cycle to the proper place and time for religious practice to the forms and content of public education to attitudes toward social life, eating, fashion, relations between the sexes and between parents and children. This transparent overlay of Christian social practice in America made it almost impossible to become fully accepted Americans without giving up public signs of religious difference.⁴⁶ Most American Jewish writers and thinkers of this generation departed from traditional Jewish practice, but even the most assimilated of them did not completely embrace a worldview that relegated religious action exclusively to the private sphere.⁴⁷ Rather, Jewish writers and performers shaped a new kind of American public sphere, one which relocated the Jewish spiritual obligation to act in the world from an Old World religious context to a legitimately American arena, the world of popular entertainment.

In Jewish-authored plays, films, and novels of the early twentieth century, then, *acting* becomes a central moral and dramatic subject. But not just any kind of acting—this is self-conscious and theatrical acting. There is a strong Jewish tradition of acting with deep self-consciousness: centuries of debates on the how, what, where, when, and why of doing particular actions have kept Jews always aware that the actions they perform are not spontaneous expressions of personal faith (although these actions may inspire this sort of passion) but rather carefully rehearsed rituals laden with historic and symbolic significance.⁴⁸ Just as Heschel insists that "we do not have faith because of deeds; we may attain faith through sacred deeds," the plays, films, and novels of theatrical liberalism argue for the power of acting to shape belief and feeling. In Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, for example, the female lead, Anna, teaches her son to banish fear by whistling. In the song "Whistle a Happy Tune," the external performance of bravery actually effects an internal change from fear to confidence:

I whistle a happy tune,
And every single time
The happiness in the tune
Convinces me that I'm
Not afraid!⁴⁹

Show Boat similarly dramatizes the power of acting in one of its opening songs, "Make Believe." Gaylord Ravenal, a dashing gambler, and Magnolia, Andy and Parthy's daughter, have just seen one another on the dock. Magnolia insists they should not be speaking because they have not been introduced. Ravenal, an experienced gambler, is well versed in the theatrical arts. He suggests that they "make believe [they] know each other," arguing in song:

If the things we dream about
Don't happen to be so,
That's just an unimportant technicality.

Ravenal dismisses any anti-theatrical prejudice against playacting as a "technicality" and wholeheartedly engages in a serious game of acting. When Magnolia, eager to be an actress, jumps into the game, he pushes further, suggesting they pretend that they have "fallen in love at first sight." Gaylord sings:

Only make believe I love you,
Only make believe that you love me.
Others find peace of mind in pretending
Couldn't you? Couldn't I? Couldn't we?

Magnolia responds eagerly and innocently, but she has not yet fully come to understand the power of acting to shape her world. They are, after all, just pretending:

If we put our thoughts in practice
We can banish all regret
Imagining most anything we choose.

We could make believe I love you,
We could make believe that you love me.

Magnolia's *interior world* is driving the game (She "put[s] [her] thoughts in practice") and she therefore believes she remains in control. She assumes that *external* acting is far less important than *internal* motivations. The phrase "make believe," however, is a telling one. To act in a play is to "make" a belief that did not previously exist. Acting the part of lovers quickly leads to a change in their thoughts and feelings:

MAGNOLIA & RAVENAL: Might as well make believe I love you,

RAVENAL: For to tell the truth, I do . . .

[*Ravenal reaches up and kisses Magnolia's hand. They stand and gaze at each other.*]

In "make believe," acting creates faith, not the other way around. And in countless similar songs and scenes in backstage musicals, lovers, aspiring performers, eager idealists are encouraged to *act* and from this acting emerge new visions, new love, new worlds.

The climactic scene of act 1 in *Show Boat*, which calls into question the racial identities of the leading man (Steve) and lady (Julie) of the *Cotton Blossom*, also turns on the "truth" of acting, and the power of behavior to shape belief. With the boat docked in Mississippi, near her hometown, Julie is in great danger of having her mixed-race background exposed and, as Steve is white, both risk being arrested for miscegenation. During an afternoon rehearsal, a jealous stagehand sneaks off with Julie's photo and takes it to the sheriff. Soon a company member rushes into the theater to inform everyone that the sheriff is headed their way. Steve and Julie, who are both on stage rehearsing the parts of the romantic leads, spring into action. Steve whips out a pocket knife, seizes Julie's hand, and runs the knife across her finger, drawing blood. He then puts her finger in his mouth and sucks the blood as the rest of the company watches in confusion and horror. The sheriff arrives, and tells Captain Andy he is harboring a case of miscegenation. He exposes Julie as half-black (which comes as a surprise to the white members of the company), and notes she is married to a white man. Steve then steps up and responds:

STEVE: You wouldn't call a man a white man that's got negro blood in him, would you?

VALLON: No, I wouldn't. Not in Mississippi. One drop of nigger blood makes you a nigger in these parts . . .

STEVE: Well, I got more than a drop of nigger blood in me, and that's a fact.

VALLON: You ready to swear to that in a court of law?

STEVE: I'll swear to it any place. [*Takes a step forward, one hand outstretched*] I'll do more than that. Look at all these folks here. Every one of them can swear I got nigger blood in me this minute. That's how white I am.⁵⁰

When questioned, the members of the company swear to the truth of Steve's claim, and the couple are spared legal action. Drawing on and critiquing the irrationality of racial laws, the scene offers a stark commentary on the relationship between external action and internal truth. Julie and Steve both look white and yet one turns out to be "black" and hence denied rights and privileges in the state of Mississippi.

This determination of racial identity is based not on any external performance, or even on any obvious physical traits, but on truths deemed to be deeply embedded within the person, truths of the "blood" that must be taken on faith since all blood is, of course, red. In their best (and last) performance on the *Cotton Blossom*, Steve and Julie decide to act. They literalize, in a visual, dramatic, and self-conscious way, the faith-based theories about "one drop of blood" by having Steve ingest Julie's blood, on stage, in front of an audience (a double audience, since the audience for the play *Show Boat* is also watching). Steve has done what the laws deny is possible—he has changed his racial identity through performance and, in so doing, has undermined the very faith on which the law depended. Now he is "black." Or at least he is black for now, for as long as he performs this part his fellow company members can, in good faith, insist that he "has Negro blood in him." The sheriff is convinced of Steve's blackness; we are not. But it is the audience's belief system this action is meant to change, not the sheriff's. In externalizing the process of racial identification, Steve's action is meant to raise questions in the heavily race-influenced minds of 1927 audiences about not only the folly of racial science but also about the complicated relationship between acting and truth.⁵¹



Steve (Donald Cook) sucks the blood from Julie (Helen Morgan)'s finger in the 1936 film version of *Show Boat*.

The vaunted power of acting, which is "false," to change reality, which is "true," in 1920s and '30s popular culture led to a great deal of anxiety among cultural critics, and religious and political leaders. Hollywood especially became the target of those who lamented the rising status of acting, which its critics saw as a growing interest in cheap imitation, insincerity, and moral laxity and which was, more often than not, blamed on Jews.⁵² In the Warner Brothers musicals produced just before the intervention of the Production Code, we see dramatized the struggle between the theatrical impulses of the Hollywood movie industry and America's anti-theatrical heritage. In films like *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Dames*, and *Footlight Parade*, a censor or moral arbiter is at first staunchly opposed to the theater, and then converted to the joys and delights of popular entertainment by the end.⁵³ While theater itself is wholeheartedly celebrated in the early Warner Brothers musicals, however, a palpable concern remains about the blurry line between acting and deception. This ambivalence is most commonly illustrated by opposing pairs of chorus girls. The wide-eyed innocent, played in most Warner Brothers musicals of the era by Ruby Keeler, just wants to sing and dance. She has not been infected by the phoniness of the stage. She does not dye her hair platinum blonde. In each case, she falls

in love with her co-star (Dick Powell) offstage, and the love they sing of onstage is therefore "true." At the same time, the films also feature less wholesome chorus girls who lie and deceive in order to advance their own interests. In *Gold Diggers of 1933*, the chorus girls gleefully gull a pair of uptight Boston Brahmins and while their intentions are good (they are trying to insure Ruby Keeler's character can marry happily), their deceptive methods are depicted as decidedly unsavory. In *Dames*, the chorus girl Mabel tricks the upstanding but gullible Horace into backing a show and then blackmails him mercilessly. And the plot of *Footlight Parade* gleefully unmasks an actress who pretends to be "high-class"; she is ultimately discarded by the leading man in favor of his sincere and faithful secretary. Unlike Ruby Keeler's characters, who remain innocently unaware of the potentially corrupting force of the stage, acting in the theater appears to have infected these girls with phoniness and a tendency to lie and deceive. These films appease their critics by striking a careful balance between the wholesome joys of theatrical entertainment and the potential moral risks of the stage.

The German-Jewish director Ernst Lubitsch, on the other hand, had no such qualms, and his early sound films, perhaps more than any others, secured the position of theatricality in 1930s popular culture. Born the son of a Jewish tailor, Lubitsch began a career on the stage in his teens, receiving his early theatrical training in Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater. He worked as an actor in early silent films, often playing Jewish comic stereotypes. The silent films he directed were enormously successful in Germany, and Mary Pickford convinced him to emigrate to America in the 1920s, where he achieved even more remarkable success in Hollywood, directing a steady stream of hits for nearly twenty years. Lubitsch served briefly as head of production at Warner Brothers in the 1920s, where he acquired the rights to *The Jazz Singer*. He found his niche in the emerging Hollywood musical, and became famous for his sophisticated and stylish films. Thriving in this new genre, Lubitsch produced comedies almost exclusively, and the comedy of manners became his greatest success, both critically and at the box office. Made for adults, characterized by skillful implication and elegant sexual wit, these films embodied the ironic and urbane style that became known as the "Lubitsch touch." His style was distinctive and considered "European" or "cosmopolitan" because of his disregard

for American sexual mores. But the "Lubitsch touch" is best described as a passionate embrace of acting as the most interesting, most effective, and most ethical way to construct a self. Lubitsch worked with a string of talented writers, nearly all of them Jewish, and together they created an alternate universe in which a particular mode of adroit and self-conscious performance grounds the characters in a moral system that turns a blind eye to sexual impropriety and "minor" breaches of law like stealing or drinking in public—but insists on absolute fidelity to the laws of the stage.⁵⁴ Lubitsch was deeply invested in theater and artifice, but his films tended to explore not actors per se but the impact that acting, and the particular theatrical skills actors practice, can have in the social world of the street, the drawing room, and the bedroom. Even in the one film that takes a company of actors as its central characters—*To Be or Not To Be*—the bulk of the story focuses on what happens when those actors make use of their talents in a "real world" situation, when acting is taken as not just an artistic pursuit but as a way of life.

Lubitsch's most brilliant collaborative effort—with Samson Raphaelson, who also wrote *The Jazz Singer*—was *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), which offers an elegant and passionate argument for acting as a higher truth within a most unlikely setting, the shady world of con games and bank robberies. Focusing on the love and career of two con artists, the film demonstrates the seductive power of brilliant acting and critiques those who extol sincerity but ultimately behave hypocritically. The film opens in Venice, with a "Baron" (aka Gaston, Herbert Marshall) and a "Countess" (aka Lily, Miriam Hopkins) at dinner. She convincingly performs the role of an aristocratic lady, but as the scene progresses it becomes clear that neither the Baron nor the Countess are what they seem to be. The Countess receives a phone call from a friend whom she pretends is another aristocrat, but when the film cuts to the person at the other end of the phone line, we see the "Countess's" down-and-out roommate. A robbery is discovered in the hotel, and the Countess informs the Baron that she knows about his illegal activities, that he has stolen the missing wallet from the room down the hall. "Baron," she says, "you are a crook. You robbed the gentleman in 253-5-7- and-9. [Pause.] May I have the salt?" The Baron tells her in return that she is a thief, that she has snatched the stolen money from him. The accusations escalate, becoming increasingly incredible. In the course of their brief encounter, it turns out

he has taken her brooch ("one very good stone"), she has taken his watch ("it was five minutes slow but I regulated it for you"), and when he finally reveals that he has stolen her garter without her suspecting it, she leaps on him, shouting "Darling! Tell me all about yourself. Who are you?"

Thus begins a passionate and resilient love affair. They love one another not for their honesty or sincerity but for their ability to trick, deceive, and con. And yet this love is, within the ethical parameters of the world of the film, true love. At the end, after a madcap adventure in which they attempt to con a fabulously wealthy and beautiful heiress, neither is punished for their illegal activities. On the contrary, they are rewarded with a happy ending. The only person ultimately punished is the heiress's banker, who is revealed to have been stealing from her for years. The difference between them? The banker insists on his sincerity and constancy ("I have enjoyed the confidence of this family for more than forty years"). His protestations of virtue make him a hypocrite. Gaston and Lily live in an utterly different moral universe, one in which acting, becoming someone else, is a celebrated life skill. Their crimes are inconsequential as they steal only from very rich people who don't suffer from their losses. The film therefore is not promoting stealing and deception but rather arguing for acting as a higher truth. The self-conscious performance of the crooks leads not only to true love but to a kind of honest passion that sincerity and confidence (which the banker professes) could never achieve. For Lubitsch, and for many other writers of popular theater and film of the time, the truth of a person cannot reside inside: How can one ever know what lies inside? The truth resides in *action*; the only way to judge character is to observe what people *do*. The only way to *be* someone is to *act*.

Performance and Freedom

Stephen Sondheim, Burt Shevelove, and Larry Gelbart's 1962 musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* revolves around the efforts of the central character, a Roman slave named Pseudolus (played on Broadway with unmistakably Jewish-inflected comic cadences by Zero Mostel), to obtain his freedom.⁵⁵ The Plautus-derived plot of the play follows Pseudolus as he schemes to marry off his young master, Hero, to the girl of his dreams, Philia, and thereby buy his (Pseudolus's)

ticket to freedom. Pseudolus imagines, casts, designs, directs, and performs the madcap theatrical performance that will allow him to achieve his goal. Early in the show, Pseudolus dreams about achieving his freedom in a duet with Hero titled simply "Free." The song consists of a series of questions posed by Pseudolus to Hero about the many roles he could perform if he were free:

PSEUDOLUS: Can you see me as a Roman with my head unbowed?

Sing it good and loud!

HERO: Free!

PSEUDOLUS: Like a Roman having rights and like a Roman proud?

Can you see me?

HERO: I can see you.

PSEUDOLUS: Can you see me, a reformer fighting graft and vice?

Sing it soft and nice!

HERO: Free!

PSEUDOLUS: Why, I'll be so conscientious that I may vote twice!

Can you see me?

Can you see me?⁵⁶

How does Pseudolus imagine freedom? He asks, over and over again, "Can you see me?" As the song develops, the roles Pseudolus will play when he is "free" pile up: poet, artist, lover, patriarch, citizen, man. For Pseudolus, freedom *is* performance; to be free is to have the right *to be seen as*, to play, whatever role he desires. This tendency toward performance is already indicated in his name, which, like that of the biblical Jacob/Yakov contains within it the implication that he is inherently skilled at lying and deception (Pseudolus literally means "lying one" or "false one"). At the same time, the song indicates the ways in which Pseudolus, the undisputed star of the show, is *already* a performer and therefore already free. Pseudolus, the (Jewish) slave, directs Hero, the (Roman) master, throughout the play, telling him how to dress, how to behave, where to look, where to go, how to *act*. In this song about Pseudolus's freedom, it is Pseudolus who tells Hero how to perform the word "free": "sing it good and loud," "sing it soft and nice." Pseudolus is an expert not only on the freedom of performance but on the performance of "free":

PSEUDOLUS: When a Pseudolus can move, the universe shakes,
 But I'll never move until I'm free.
 Such a little word, but oh, the difference it makes!
 I'll be Pseudolus, the founder of a family,
 I'll be Pseudolus, the pillar of society,
 I'll be Pseudolus the man, if I can only be—

HERO: Free!

PSEUDOLUS: Sing it!

HERO: Free!

PSEUDOLUS: Spell it!

HERO: F-r- double—

PSEUDOLUS: No, the long way!

HERO: F-r-e-e!

PSEUDOLUS AND HERO: Free! (ibid., 35–36)

Hero, a fine upstanding Roman citizen, does not know how to spell “free” such that it will coordinate with the syncopated beat of the music and give the duet the necessary climactic finish. Pseudolus must direct him; he understands how to perform “free.” *Forum* presents us with a comic vision of citizenship in a Republic, which is clearly a thinly veiled version of the American Republic. The song and the play are one big Jewish joke about Jews, the theater, and the broad American audiences for whom this theater is designed. In teaching Hero to perform “free,” and thereby to grant him citizenship, Pseudolus is tutoring Hero (and the audience) in a particular worldview that equates theatrical performance with the right to choose one’s own identity. The ironic twist here, of course, is that for Hero to speak the word “free” to Pseudolus is also *performative*. A master sets a slave free by *saying* that he is free. When the master Hero sings “free” correctly, he not only gives the slave Pseudolus his citizenship, but he also grants him the right to define himself via theatrical performance.

In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and countless other Jewish-created comedies of the early and mid-twentieth century, theatricality represents the freedom to escape oppression and parochialism by inventing and reinventing the self, and to be judged solely on the quality of one’s self-fashioned self-presentation. Theatrical liberalism represented for Jewish writers not only a spiritual calling but also

a means by which to model a self, to integrate into American society, to gain the freedoms inherent in social and economic mobility, and to insure the widest possible application of these freedoms for all Americans. In exchange for the long-sought-after rights promised by liberalism, Jews privatized their religion, transforming Judaism from a complete way of life to a private faith, thus transforming themselves into viable citizens of these new republics. But in doing so, a new quandary arose. For centuries, European Jews had married within their own communities and led lives largely separate from their Christian neighbors. Traditional Jews defined themselves as a displaced nation and God’s chosen people, carrying out a sacred task until the arrival of the messiah and the long-awaited return to Jerusalem. But as Jews began to leave traditional communities, enter the public sphere of European and American culture, and adopt the dress, habits, and citizenship of mainstream Christian society, this national and religious identity was destabilized and the question of “who is a Jew” became a pressing one both for modernizing Jews and for the Christian societies into which they were integrating. Multiple possibilities for communal self-definition arose: Zionist, socialist, Yiddish secularist, cultural humanist, assimilationist (i.e., French, German, American), and many others.

Anxious about the integration of Jews and Christians in modern metropolises, and the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between assimilated Jews and non-Jews, liberal Christian societies and governments looked for ways both to assimilate Jews and, at the same time, to articulate markers of Jewish difference. By the late nineteenth century, European and American Jews were popularly regarded not as a nation (since national identity conflicted with the project to incorporate Jews as citizens of the United States and other liberal democracies) but as a race.²⁷ The rise of racial science in America and Europe in the mid-to-late nineteenth century created a hierarchy of peoples (with “white” Anglo-Saxons at the top and “black” Negroes at the bottom), and offered security to those at the “top” of the race-defined ladder made anxious by the instability of identity in liberal cosmopolitan society. The rhetoric of race played a major role in the response to Jewish immigrants in America around the turn of the century. In the heavily racialized American society of the early twentieth century, Jews were labeled Hebrews (or Semites, or sometimes Orientals), a distinct race situated

somewhere in the middle of the racial hierarchy, not "white" but also not quite "black," and whose physical, psychological, and intellectual features were assumed to be transmitted genetically. Individual American Jews, whether or not they participated in Jewish religious or communal activities, and whether or not they self-identified as Jews, were considered to be racially marked. In a nation divided by race, racial status played a major role in the distribution of rights and privileges, and race was a central feature of discussions over immigration and citizenship policy.⁵⁸ While many Jews at first embraced racial self-definition as a mode of identification that asserted belonging while demanding little in the way of communal or religious obligation, with the rise of nativist immigration policies and American anti-Semitism in the 1920s and 1930s it quickly became clear that "off-white" racial designations (or indeed any labels imposed by outsiders) were dangerous for Jews and could prevent them from achieving full civil rights in America.⁵⁹ With the rise of Nazism in the early 1930s, the trap of a race-based identity became horribly apparent.

In response, American Jewish writers and artists utilized non-racial and anti-essentialist models of identity in order to argue forcefully against the snare of racial self-definition. In doing so, they unwittingly drew upon an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideal of self-formation initially embraced by German Jews eager to gain political rights. The German Enlightenment produced a new ideal for the rising middle class, a secular and aesthetic mode of self-creation through education known as *bildung*, in which success in social and political life was awarded on the basis of merit and achievement, as opposed to noble birth. As David Sorkin has shown, Jewish emancipation in nineteenth-century Germany was deeply intertwined with this notion of *bildung*, and Jews implicitly accepted a situation in which they would "regenerate" themselves via *bildung*—in other words, educate themselves in Enlightenment values and discard "backward" Jewish practices in exchange for citizenship or at least a measure of civil rights.⁶⁰ Understandably eager for emancipation, a generation of German Jews passionately embraced the principles of *bildung*, in effect re-creating themselves as secular, highly educated, cultured members of the German middle class.⁶¹ This embrace of *bildung* became a defining feature of middle- and upper-class Jewish life not only in Germany but in other

liberal republics (especially France and England); it eventually made its way to the United States, where Jews quickly became among the most avid consumers and purveyors of higher education and all forms of high culture. With the wholesale adoption of racial science and the rejection of the notion of personal self-formation, the rewards promised by *bildung* turned out to be specious in Germany, but they remained real in the United States, where the Jewish embrace of self-formation was reinforced and encouraged by the ideals of perfection inherent in the Emersonian—and inherently theatrical—strain of liberalism.⁶² The model of an American liberal self, which is consciously constructed, proved irresistible to Jews eager to refashion themselves as Americans, and by the mid-twentieth century this notion of self-formation was a defining feature of Jewish success in America. In theatrical liberalism, as in Enlightenment thought, *bildung* is a ticket to freedom: in guaranteeing the agency to *create* the self anew, theatrical liberalism gives actors the ability to escape oppression, to embrace multiplicity, and to determine one's own identity definitions in response to the challenges, threats, and seductions of modern American life.

A remarkable amount of American comedy created by Jews features characters who are running for their lives. These characters escape their enemies and achieve freedom not by outrunning or outshooting their oppressors but by transforming themselves into someone else. The ability to create and re-create a self is fundamental to the freedom of theatrical liberalism, and the late 1920s and 1930s witnessed an explosion of Jewish-created popular performance styles, which celebrated changeability itself. The ethnic comedians of vaudeville, who could adopt a character with the change of a hat, a nose, a feather, or colored face paint were a central feature of high-class Broadway revues of the 1920s and '30s such as the *Ziegfeld Follies* and the *George White Scandals*. In a flash, Eddie Cantor transformed himself from Jewish neurastheniac to Greek cook, to black errand boy, to Indian chief and back again in the play and film *Whoopie* (1928). Fanny Brice was well known for her ability to do "imitations." Willie Howard, in the smash hit Gershwin musical *Girl Crazy*, miraculously transformed himself from Jewish taxi driver, to a woman, to a variety of famous performers (Maurice Chevalier, Al Jolson, etc.) to a western sheriff, to an Indian chief.⁶³ In Betty Boop (created by the Fleischer Brothers) and Looney Tunes (created by

a team of mostly Jewish Warner Brothers artists including Mel Blanc) cartoons, characters regularly changed shape, size, character, gender, costume, and performance style in order to outwit pursuers or seduce lovers. In "A Hare Grows in Manhattan," one of a number of stories of Bugs Bunny's early years, Bugs spends the entire cartoon escaping a pack of enormous dogs on the Lower East Side by putting on various costumes, voices, accents, and characters. Likewise, in explaining the origin of his iconic line, "What's up, Doc?," in yet another animated bio-pic, Bugs Bunny shows how he turned the trope of transformation and escape (from Elmer Fudd) into theatrical gold. Superheroes Superman and Batman, invented by Jewish comic book artists in the 1930s, similarly based their success on their ability to change identity, thereby eluding and ultimately triumphing over their enemies.

Jews were not, of course, alone in turning to the theater as an alternate model for constructing identity in the early twentieth century. Indeed, we see similar impulses among black and Irish Americans, both of whom had a stake in retaining control over their own identity-formation and who used self-fashioning as a way of resisting racialized identity definitions imposed by an unsympathetic majority. This qualification also applies, to a certain extent, to gay men, although the dynamic of self-fashioning is somewhat different as many gay writers and directors were also members of the other groups. During the early and mid-twentieth century, however, it is in Jewish-created American performance that the freedom inherent in self-fashioning is thematized most directly and persistently. There are some clear historical reasons for this. By the early twentieth century, Irish Americans were largely seen as white and were therefore increasingly less concerned with their particular racial position in American society. For African Americans, on the other hand, theatrical self-fashioning offered only limited freedoms, due to the visibility of their difference. Jews could play blacks, but it was much more difficult for blacks to play Jews. Jews occupied a racial space that was in flux and therefore subject to the manipulations of self-invention.⁶⁴

A brilliant argument for the liberating possibilities of theatricality, Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 film *To Be or Not to Be*, tells of the escape of a Polish theater company from the Nazis immediately following the Nazi invasion. The mixed company of Jewish and non-Jewish actors uses

every theatrical technique at their disposal to escape the worst threat to Jewish freedom in the modern age while also skewering the intensely anti-theatrical philosophy of the Nazis themselves. The film opens with the startling image of Adolf Hitler walking the streets of Warsaw, only to be revealed, a few minutes later, as a member of the Polish theater company dressed in costume for a production about Nazis, which is about to open on the stage. Before the actor has a chance to play Hitler, the Nazis invade Warsaw, the production is cancelled, and the theater is closed. The actors become involved with a member of the Polish Underground, and use all of their talents to save the Resistance from destruction. In the process, the lead actor (of both the theater company and the film), Joseph Tura, played by the real-life Jewish actor Jack Benny (born Benjamin Kubelsky) impersonates a Nazi SS officer and then a Nazi spy. In the first scene, Tura, dressed in the costume for the cancelled play, momentarily fools the Nazi spy Siletski by playing the role of Colonel Ehrhardt. Tura's broad impersonation ("So they call me Concentration Camp Ehrhardt!") seems dangerously unconvincing until we meet the real Colonel Ehrhardt, who turns out to be as vulgar and oafish as Tura imagined him to be. Tura's ability to so successfully "play" a Nazi clearly undermines Nazi power and raises questions about the purity of Nazi ideology. In the second scene, Tura, now dressed as the recently murdered spy Siletski, enters Nazi headquarters for a meeting with Ehrhardt, only to discover in the waiting room the *real* body of Siletski. In a tight spot, Tura thinks fast and, pulling a fake beard from his pocket, replaces the dead Siletski's real beard with the fake one. When Ehrhardt enters, Tura insists that he is the *real* Siletski, and demonstrates his point by revealing that the dead Siletski is wearing a fake beard. The Nazis are, at this point, totally confused, and Tura goes free. The Nazis' inability to distinguish between reality and performance once again undermines their power, turning them into the straight men for yet another Jewish joke. It also raises questions about Nazi racial ideology—if they can't distinguish the real Siletski from the fake one, how can they possibly distinguish a Jew from an Aryan?

In the final climactic (and complicated) escape scene, the Jewish actor Greenberg recites Shylock's speech from *The Merchant of Venice* ("Hath not a Jew eyes?") before an audience of real and fake Nazis, thereby protecting the members of the resistance in Warsaw and enabling the escape

of the entire theater company to England. Filmed in 1941, this final successful performance is both poignant and powerful. On the one hand, the scene is clearly a fantasy; by 1941 Lubitsch must have known that such a performance would have been unlikely to be rewarded with freedom. On the other hand, the scene expresses Lubitsch's firm belief in the power of theatricality to protect the performer from the entrapment of essential identity and to insure freedom from oppression. In the liberal utopia of *To Be or Not to Be*, even a Jew playing a Jew in front of Adolf Hitler himself can escape if he gives a good enough performance. Hitler insisted that biology was destiny; Lubitsch protested that freedom means the right to play whatever role you choose. This kind of utopian vision still seemed possible in 1941 when the extent of Hitler's Final Solution was still largely unknown. Only a year later, this film could never have been made and, as we shall see, in the wake of revelations about the concentration camps, Jewish directors and writers began to seriously question their faith in the powers of theatricality to guarantee freedom.

Just as theatrical liberalism gave Jewish actors the tools to escape Hitler, it also gave American women the tools to escape the sexist confinement of marriage. In countless comedies of the 1930s, women characters are forced to choose between their acting careers and marriage. They decide in favor of the theater every time. These actresses at first yearn to leave the stage for a simple, "normal" life with a husband and children, but they quickly come to realize the risks inherent in this trade-off. Marriage would force them not just to leave the stage but to leave behind the freedom to play multiple roles and the right to fashion multiple selves, which the stage makes possible. For these women characters, as for their Jewish creators, the freedom theatrical performance offers is priceless. In *Twentieth Century*, for example, the star, Lily, boards a train for New York with a young society gentleman with whom she has been having an affair. She plays at being heartbroken at his departure. As the train pulls out of the station, however, her beau informs her that he is not getting off the train, that he is accompanying her to New York. She panics. George Smith is not only a bore, he does not understand the incredible power and freedom that self-fashioning has given to Lily. She will not give it up. In a fit of anger, he cries "stop acting!" But that is just what she refuses to do. Similarly, in the Ferber and Kaufman play *Stage Door* (1936), Louise, one of the beloved members of the Footlights



Joseph Tura (Jack Benny) pulls Siletski's beard while the Nazi soldiers look on in *To Be or Not to Be*.

Club (an actresses' rooming house) that forms the setting for the play, departs to be married in St. Louis. Her choice is presented as the result of failed talent rather than romantic desire:

LOUISE: I guess I wasn't very swell or I wouldn't be getting mar—[*Catches herself.*]—that is, any girl would be glad to give up the stage to marry a wonderful boy like Bob—. . . Well, if any of you ever come out that way with a show, why it's only a hundred miles from Milwaukee. Don't forget I'll be Mrs. Robert Hendershot by that time, and Wisconsin's perfectly beautiful in the autumn—. . . [*It's no use. She cannot convince even herself, much less the rather embarrassed young people around her.*]⁶⁵

When a letter arrives from Louise in the second act, describing married life ("The luncheon was lovely. Everything pink," etc.), the girls are horrified. "Well, I'll never complain again," one actress declares. "This makes my eighteen a week on the radio look pretty wonderful."⁶⁶ And indeed,

by the third act, Louise is back in New York, happily going on auditions again, eating cheap boardinghouse food, and cherishing her right to act.

Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman's play *The Royal Family*, (very) loosely based on one of early twentieth-century America's most famous theatrical families, the Barrymores (here called the Cavendishes), likewise centers on the struggles of two female members of the Cavendish clan (Julie and her daughter Gwen) to find romantic love and domestic happiness without sacrificing the freedom the theater insures. The young Gwen wants to marry Perry, a solid Connecticut businessman, but Perry does not understand the world of the stage. He loves Gwen, but he can't imagine life married to an actress:

PERRY: I'd do anything in the world for you, Gwen. I'd die for you! But I can't be one of those husbands. Hanging around dressing rooms! . . .

What am I going to do every night. See the show!

GWEN: But you wouldn't want me to be one of those wives, would you?

Bridge and household and babies!

PERRY: Well, why not! What's the matter with that!⁶⁷

Gwen and Perry do manage to come to an agreement but the arrangement does not last. Gwen's turn as happy wife and doting mother is extremely short-lived.

Julie likewise is tempted by Gil Marshall, an old flame who left years ago and returned home a millionaire. Upon their reunion, he tells Julie that he left her so that she could go ahead and become an actress. And now, he asks, "How about it? Are you happy?" Julie, flustered and exhausted by the swirl of events in her family responds, "Happy! I don't know." But Gil does: "You've had too long to think. It's settled," he insists (*ibid.*). Gil is ready to take over as long as Julie submits to his static image of her, set up as a lady of luxury "in a country house somewhere." She and Gil plan to be married when her show closes and he completes his world travels. Gil returns in act 3, but he is a little bit too enthusiastic that Julie's play is finally closing:

GIL: When you finally wired that the end was in sight—that the play was actually closing—do you know what I did? I gave everybody on the place a holiday with double pay. . . .

JULIE: I'm very—honoured. (*ibid.*, 98)

He then goes on to extol the delights of the "substantial" people he works with: "And you'll meet real people. None of your. . . Solid! Substantial! The kind that make a country what it is" (*ibid.*, 98). It slowly dawns on Julie that Gil knows nothing of who she is and has no appreciation for her talents. Most importantly, he cannot wait to get her away from the freedom of the stage and trap her into a single identity: as his wife. Julie pulls away from him and gratefully accepts an offer to perform in yet another play. The trap that marriage represents for Julie, Gwen, Louise, or Lily is contrasted with the marvelous freedom of performing on the stage, and marriage—at least the sort of marriage that involves giving up the stage and agreeing to a singular version of the self ("Mrs. Robert Hendershot")—falls short. These plays can be read allegorically as a story about Jewish resistance to essentialization. Standing in for Jewish women *and* men (and adding to a long history of feminization of Jewish men), these actresses refuse to commit themselves to relationships that will shut down their freedom to self-fashion and allow others to define them.

Rights vs. Obligations

By insisting on *actor* as the most liberating of all identities—an identity free of identity—theatrical liberalism created a secular, universal rhetoric that protected Jews' newly acquired and deeply treasured civil rights. At the same time, this kind of rights-based freedom, the individual right to self-fashion, is deeply rooted in Enlightenment liberalism and liberal Protestantism, and differs in important ways from Jewish jurisprudence. Throughout these works of theatrical liberalism, the rhetoric of rights—the right to be oneself, to self-fashion, to take advantage of opportunities and advance to fame and fortune free of interference—is in constant tension with another legal rhetoric, emerging from a different legal culture, the system of *obligation* or what in Hebrew is called a *mitzvah*.⁶⁸ In the genre-defining backstage musical film *Gold Diggers of 1933*, produced by Warner Brothers and directed by Mervyn LeRoy, the plot turns on a climactic moment when a show may *not* be able to go on.⁶⁹ Barney, the producer (Ned Sparks), is stuck without a leading man and is trying to convince Brad (Dick Powell)—investor, songwriter, and love interest in the film—to take his place. Brad, who has hidden the fact that he comes from a deeply anti-theatrical Boston Brahmin family, is resistant to appearing

on stage because he doesn't want his older brother to discover that he has been involved in the theater. The girls in the company, however, think he won't perform because he is hiding from the police:

BARNEY: [*Forcefully*] You've got to go on in his place!

BRAD: [*Positively*] I can't do that, Barney. [*All cluster around Brad*]

BARNEY: What do you mean you can't? The curtain is ready to go up.

There's a show going on. Your songs are in it, your girl is in it, your money is in it—you've got to go out and do it.

BRAD: [*Shaking his head*] There's a reason why—

BARNEY: There is *no* reason—There can't *be* any reason [*Brad shrugs.*] All right—what is your reason?"

Trixie, the straight-talking showgirl (Aline MacMahon), steps in to give Barney a hand, backed up by Polly (Ruby Keeler), another performer and Brad's girlfriend:

TRIXIE: Listen, I don't care even if you have to go to jail after the performance. You ought to forget about yourself and do it anyway. Do you know what this means—if the show doesn't go on? It means that all those girls in this show—all those poor kids who threw up jobs—and who'll never get other jobs in these times—all those kids been living on nothing—starving themselves these five weeks we've been rehearsing—hoping for this show to go on—and be a success—They're depending on you! You can't let them down—you can't—if you do—God knows what will happen to those girls—They'll have to do things I wouldn't want on *my* conscience. And it'll be on *yours*—You can go out and sing Gordon's part and put this show over—and if you don't—I don't care what the reason is—

[*Brad looks at Trixie, then at Polly, wavering in his decision.*]

POLLY: [*Catching his arm*] She's right, Brad, I don't care what the reason is.

Finally, Brad is won over:

BRAD: [*Thoughtfully*] I hadn't thought about it that way. [*He pauses. All look at him hopefully. With sudden decision.*] Yes, of course, I'll do it!

[*There is a general gasp of delight*] (*ibid.*)

Brad has every *right* to refuse to go on the stage. But the language by which he is convinced is not that of rights but of obligation. Barney could have given Brad a fiery speech about his right to live up to his potential, to be his own person, to resist the anti-theatrical prejudice of his brother that keeps him from doing what he loves. Instead, he insists that Brad is *obliged* to take on the role. Trixie goes on to argue that the entire company is depending upon him and if he doesn't perform, everyone will suffer. (She also reinforces the notion of the theater as a moral site that keeps sin at bay—if the girls can't act, they will become prostitutes.) But what obliges him? Why is it incumbent upon Brad to save the show? The theatrical community has a complicated relationship to a system of individual rights. Theater is fundamentally a collective practice, and the ultimate source of authority in the theater is the collective itself. In other words, without a number of participants each fulfilling a set of prescribed obligations—producer, director, actors, designers, technicians, house staff, and of course audience—the show cannot proceed, and the entire theatrical system would cease to function. In the unwritten but universally acknowledged laws of the theater, all members of the company are obligated to do what they can to make sure that *the show goes on*.

Although the self-fashioning at the center of theatrical liberalism draws its authority from the American liberal ideology of individual rights, the freedom to shape the self in these plays and movies is embedded within and circumscribed by a set of communitarian obligations that more closely resemble Jewish *mitzvot* (commandments). In twentieth-century America, while the individual freedom to perform (and, if one is very talented and lucky, to become a star) is central to the ethos of theatrical liberalism, this freedom is possible only within a system of obligations imposed by the covenant of The Theater, and shared by each member of a theatrical community. When someone in a 1930s play or movie insists to his or her co-star that "the show must go on," the conversation is over. There is no alternative. Members of a theatrical community are responsible to each other, to the audience, to the producers, but even more importantly to the higher calling of the theater, to guarantee that the show goes on night after night and that it is the best show it can be.

Robert M. Cover makes clear in his work in comparative jurisprudence that the liberal rhetoric of rights and the Jewish rhetoric

of obligations are based in two different collective myths. "The story behind the term 'rights,'" he argues,

is the story of the social contract. The myth postulates free and independent if highly vulnerable beings who voluntarily trade a portion of their autonomy for a measure of collective security. . . . The first and fundamental unit is the individual, and "rights" locate him as an individual separate and apart from every other individual.⁷¹

Collective solutions are certainly possible (and, at times, desirable) under the social contract, but even these collective solutions "arrive at their destination by way of a theory that derives the authority of the collective from the individual." The myth of Judaism, on the other hand, is the myth of Sinai, "a collective—indeed, a corporate—experience" (which likewise allows for individual autonomy, but ultimately derives its legal authority from the collective acceptance of the law). Social movements in the United States organize around civil rights, Cover argues, while in Judaism, the kinds of entitlements that rights legislation protects have little meaning without an accompanying obligation. In other words, U.S. law determines what protections an individual is entitled to. Jewish law determines who is obligated to act in particular situations and what they are obligated to do.⁷² Cover is interested in his own hybrid position as a Jewish American lawyer, and so he illustrates how both systems have devices in place to address injustice, but, depending on the situation, one system might be more effective than the other in addressing these problems. For example, in the struggle over women's roles in Judaism, feminists tend to argue for women's *right* to lead prayer or be called to the Torah. But for traditional Jews, this argument from rights is unpersuasive. They argue that women are not obliged under the law to do these things and so the only persuasive way to change the system would be to reinterpret the obligation to include women (a difficult, but not impossible task). On the other hand, while American law may guarantee children the "right" to an education, this "right. . . is not even an intelligible principle unless we know to whom it is addressed. Taken alone it only speaks to a need" (ibid., 9). How to turn need into reality? Of course, the American system makes this happen through a complicated structure of taxation and legislation,

but when failures in education occur, no particular person or group is held responsible. Jewish law, on the other hand, never discusses the rights of the child; rather, it addresses those upon whom the obligation to educate is incumbent. The specific obligations of parents, teachers, communities, and homeowners is clearly spelled out in the law and universal (male) schooling among Jews has been a reality for at least two millennia.

Cover makes a strong case for the centrality of obligation to the definition of a Jew: "to be one who acts out of obligation is the closest thing there is to a Jewish definition of completion as a person within the community."⁷³ Indeed, when Jewish children reach maturity, they do not come into their majority rights; rather they become bar or bat mitzvah, literally son or daughter of the commandments/obligations. This explicitly Jewish version of coming-of-age is echoed in *The Royal Family*, as the daughter Gwen prepares to take on her first major role on the professional stage. Her uncle Dean congratulates her:

Quite an event! Quite an event in the theatre! . . . About to enter into your great inheritance! To come before the public as the descendant of a distinguished family! It is not a trust to be taken lightly, my dear. Remember that not only will all of us be watching you, but your gifted ancestors as well.⁷⁴

Dean does not describe her debut in the more familiar terms of American coming-of-age, as the moment when she is free to pursue her own path, to make her way in the world. Rather, Gwen's theatrical debut is described here like a bat mitzvah, the moment when she will take her place in her family's history and accept the mantle and obligations of the community.

The notion of "doing a mitzvah" is an extraordinarily resilient one among Jews, even Jews who are, in all other respects, resolutely secular. The theater, especially in the works under discussion here, is uniquely positioned to balance these notions of *obligation* and *rights*. To be a performer is to assert one's right to self-fashion; to perform as well as one can is a means of fulfilling one's obligation to the theatrical community. Cover ends his article with an attempt to synthesize the two legal systems, arguing that believing in the moral value of certain rights is only

part of the project of correcting injustice; one is also obligated to make every effort to realize those rights. The theater offered a similar synthesis to secular Jews, albeit a synthesis that required belief not in a transcendent God who issued a set of commandments but in a community of believers and a set of traditions.

The drama of *The Jazz Singer* is an exploration of the conflict a Jewish immigrant faces when trying to reconcile these two differing legal systems. The play sets up a conflict between individual rights (the right to be whatever Jakie wants to be) and obligations (the duty to honor his parents and to observe Jewish tradition). Does he have the right to reject his parents and the traditions of his people to become a jazz singer, to self-fashion? His non-Jewish girlfriend Mary insists he does: "I want to see you live your own life. If the thing you want most is to be a black-face minstrel, then don't let *anything* stand in your way—not your parents—me—anything."⁷⁵ Jakie stares into the mirror at his painted face, ready for his upcoming performance, and instead he sees a vision of his father chanting in the synagogue. "The songs of Israel are tearing at my heart!" he cries. Jakie is torn apart trying to figure out to which system—individual rights or communal obligation—he owes his loyalty. As we have seen, he ultimately chooses to honor the obligations of his Jewish community. The play leaves the ending ambiguous, unsure how (or if) the Jewish system of obligation can survive in the American theater. The film, on the other hand, which spoke to a broader audience, insisted on a synthesis of the two, placing Jakie squarely on the stage at the end. Somehow, *The Jazz Singer* film argues, by pursuing a career as a performer, Jakie has found a way to assert his newfound rights *and* also meet his incumbent obligations.

One of the distinguishing features of the *mitzvot* is that only Jews are obligated to practice most of them; most *mitzvot* must be fulfilled within a Jewish family or Jewish community. The borders of that community are extremely well-protected by Jewish law, and among the worst sins in traditional Judaism therefore is exogamy. When children marry non-Jews, parents are instructed to mourn for them as if they were dead. As Jews acculturated to American society, intermarriage became a more common and more acceptable choice, and marriage between Christian and Jew formed the centerpiece of numerous plots of American plays, novels, films, and television shows.⁷⁶ The struggle in these stories is

between the rhetoric of obligation and a rights-based argument, which insists on the primacy of romantic love and free choice in marriage. *The Royal Family* provides a fascinating obligation-based counterargument to this standard plot. The play does not deal directly with Jews, Christians, or intermarriage, but it does set up two distinct value systems, the "normal" world of businessmen, Connecticut lunches, rising early and meeting people of substance, and the theatrical world of high-strung characters, personal eccentricity, family loyalty, and devotion to art. In the first instance, individual rights are paramount; in the second, unexpectedly, communal obligation determines appropriate behavior.⁷⁷ To be more specific, in the first, the individual rights of the *men* are paramount—their rights as husbands to define women as their wives and to curtail their life choices. In the second, the *women's* obligations counterintuitively insure their freedom, specifically the freedom to play any role they choose. The liberal subject is figured as *male* here, and the freedoms promised by liberal individualism apply only to men. For women, the more liberating choice is, ironically, the world of communal obligation: the theater.

The men are represented here as interlopers who will take the women away from family, tradition, heritage, and true spiritual fulfillment. If the women intermarry with them, they will not only lose their freedom but will also sacrifice the opportunity to bequeath that freedom, and its accompanying heritage, rituals, and traditions to the next generation. The stark contrast between these two options is, needless to say, far more simplistic and monolithic than the reality of Jewish and liberal Protestant approaches to communal obligation and individual rights. It reflects a particular American Jewish response to liberal individualism, dramatized and heightened for the stage. Nonetheless, the structure of this choice sets up the theatrical life as a sort of stand-in for Jewish life in more ways than one.

In *The Royal Family*, both potential suitors, Gil and Perry, are represented as outsiders. They do not share the family's faith, they do not understand the pull of theatricality, they do not appreciate the obligations family members have to the theater, and they believe that their "normal" lives are clearly preferable to the Cavendishes' unusual lifestyle. Fanny, the grande dame of the family and fierce protector of their theatrical heritage, firmly disapproves of Julie's choice of Gil, despite his enormous

bank account, but she didn't mind Julie's first husband. He was a loafer, she says, but at least he was an actor.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the "Jews" here are women, or at least figured as women (the male members of the Cavendish family do not face the same challenges to their freedom), once again referencing the well-established feminization of Jewish men in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture, and raising questions about who exactly constitutes a Jewish liberal subject.⁷⁹

Gwen's first scene with her fiancé Perry points out their nearly irreconcilable differences. Gwen is supposed to go to a lunch prepared by Perry's mother in Connecticut, but it conflicts with a play reading she needs to attend. The reading is an incontrovertible obligation. In their argument, it becomes clear that Perry simply cannot understand the obligations of the theatrical life:

GWEN: I can't go with you, Perry. I've got to go to Wolfe's office to hear the play read. There's no way out of it. I've got to do it. . . .

PERRY: You're joking.

GWEN: But, Perry, I'm not! I know it sounds silly—

PERRY: Silly! It's cuckoo! I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life. You can't mean you're breaking this date just to go and hear somebody read a play . . .

GWEN: Now, Perry, please try to understand this. It's part of my job, and it's important.

PERRY: Important to hear some idiot read a play that you've read again and again!

GWEN: But it's more than that—it's a ceremony! (*Royal Family*, 37)

Perry, living in a totally different cosmos from Gwen, cannot see the importance of these theatrical rituals; they seem to him utterly pointless. We can see here how theatrical rituals are rendered sacred. These rituals have intrinsic meaning for Gwen; she intuitively understands the importance of the ceremony, although she cannot explain it effectively or rationally to Perry. She might as well tell him that she cannot go out with him for ice cream because she ate meat two hours earlier, or that after the birth of their first son, he will need to be circumcised. When Gwen and Perry discuss their differences, the conversation often sounds like countless similar arguments in films and plays of the 1920s

over Jewish-Christian intermarriage: "We'll be living in two different worlds!" Perry complains. "But those things adjust themselves. Lots of other people have got around it," Gwen responds (*ibid.*, 38–39).

In a fury, Gwen decides she will give up the stage and convert completely to Perry's way of life. She will not allow her family's commitment to arcane traditions to ruin her life:

GWEN: If you think I'm going to give him up for a miserable little stage career just because we've always done it . . . You're not going to ruin my life! . . . I'm going to marry Perry Stewart and be a regular person! And nothing you can say is going to stop me! (*ibid.*, *Royal Family*, 42)

Gwen wants to be a "regular person"; she wants to assimilate, to reject the peculiar obligations her family and her heritage demand, and just melt into the comfortable embrace of a real, normal, non-theatrical American man. She makes an argument for the universal over the particular that echoes numerous Jewish sons' and daughters' of the stage, page, and screen arguing with their immigrant parents: "I'm sick of being a Cavendish! I want to be a human being!" (*ibid.*, 42).

Her mother, Julie, and Fanny, her grandmother, impress upon Gwen the importance of the theatrical gifts she has inherited, insisting that even if she decides to marry Perry, she not give up her distinctive way of life. Julie offers an American Jewish solution to her problem:

JULIE: Marry him if you love him, Gwen, but don't give up everything to do it! The day might come when you'd hate him for it. . . . Oh, I know! There's love. But you can be the most fortunate person in the world, Gwen. You can have both. But for God's sake don't make the mistake of giving up one for the other. (*ibid.*, 61)

To "have both" is to combine individual freedom with a life of obligation. The mother and grandmother launch into a passionate defence of the theater, describing what they've given up to remain faithful to it ("I've missed parties and dinners and rides and walks!"), and how it sustains them in their darkest moments: "You've got to leave, and go down to a stuffy dressing room and smear paint on your face and go out

on the stage and speak a lot of fool lines, and you love it! You couldn't live without it!" (ibid., 62).

Gil and Perry, both fine upstanding businessmen, want traditional wives, and they fail to understand the rituals, faith, and values of the Cavendish family. The play turns the standard American Jewish intermarriage plot on its head. In conventional intermarriage stories of the time, of which the long-running play *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922) was the best known, a young Jewish man succeeds in winning the hand of a non-Jewish girl, usually of a higher social class. The couple faces opposition from both families, which is resolved through the extraordinary force of romantic love (or the power of grandchildren to sway the sentimental hearts of their grandparents). The parents are portrayed as backwards and old-fashioned, the children are romantic and sympathetic. In *The Royal Family*, however, the audience's sympathy lies squarely with the unconventional, theatrical (and arguably old-fashioned) Cavendishes. The upper-class, blueblood life of wealth, privilege, and respectability offered by the men is seen as an ironically individualist trap, and the happy ending occurs when both women reject their men in favor of meeting their theatrical and familial obligations, and performing in another play. By the end of the play, the entire Cavendish family is planning an enormous extravaganza, in which all of the members of the family, the baby included, will perform. The non-Cavendish men are completely marginalized (The stage directions read, "*They stand a little apart from the group, hands in pockets, thoughtful.*") and eventually they depart to do "business," and the women gratefully return to their family's, and the theater's, warm embrace.

Conclusion

Nearly thirty years after penning "God Bless America," Irving Berlin wrote a rousing anthem that neatly expressed all of the values of theatrical liberalism. Introduced in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* in 1946, "There's No Business Like Show Business" is sung by a couple of theater producers aiming to convert the backwoods Annie Oakley into the world, and worldview, of the theater. Here we see the America upon which Berlin asked that God rain blessings. "What's show business?" Annie asks. Her producers respond with a rousing celebration of theatrical liberalism. They describe the many roles available: "The cowboys,

the wrestlers, the tumblers, the clowns, the roustabouts who move the show at dawn." They note that this is an actively self-fashioned world: "the costumes, the scenery, the makeup, the props," a world in which acting takes precedence over truth: "There's no people like show people / They smile when they are low." A world which is meritocratic, with success dependent on good acting:

Yesterday they told you you would not go far,
That night you open and there you are,
Next day on your dressing room they've hung a star.
Let's go on with the show!

The rewards of good acting? "*Ev'rything* about it is appealing." The commitment to acting:

You get word before the show has started
That your fav'rite uncle died at dawn.
Top of that your Pa and Ma have parted,
You're brokenhearted, but you go on.

And even in a capitalist culture, the obligation to the theater comes first:

Even with a turkey that you know will fold,
You may be stranded out in the cold,
Still you wouldn't change it for a sack of gold
Let's go on with the show.⁸⁰

For Berlin, for the characters in *Annie Get Your Gun*, and for the writers, performers, and producers of the works of theatrical liberalism, the theater is "show business." It is a commercial practice, which is squarely situated within the liberal free market; the success of a show depends upon its popular commercial appeal. And yet, the practitioners of "show business" nonetheless have an ambivalent relationship to profit. In refusing to exchange one's commitment to the stage for a "sack of gold," Berlin's devotees of "show business" revise Max Weber's Protestant work ethic in a manner typical of theatrical liberalism. To stick with the theater, even when it does not generate a profit, does not make

rational sense in the world of business. While success in the theater certainly depends on talent and dedication, for Annie and her colleagues, "show business" is not exactly a "calling" in the Weberian sense—a God-given vocation through which she can generate profit.⁸¹ Rather, it is an entire worldview. Individual plays may run forever or fold overnight, but the theater itself is not up for sale. To trade the theater for a sack of gold would be to place oneself outside of the theatrical liberal system altogether. Insisting on a vision of America which is theatrical at its core, Irving Berlin's "show business" argues that to be American is to be a theatrical liberal and vice versa. In turning the "wicked stage" into a site for American virtue, theatrical liberalism transformed assimilationist American ideology from an either/or choice between religious Judaism and secular liberalism into a remarkable synthesis of the two, a new American ethos for the twentieth century.

In the period following emancipation in Europe, Jews were often negatively identified as actors, as ciphers, chameleons, rootless cosmopolitans, always working to fit in, trying a bit too hard. Jews were, according to this model, deeply *inauthentic*, a people willing to exchange internal consistency for artifice in order to reap the superficial rewards of assimilation and acceptance. But Kern, Hammerstein, Hart, Ferber, Kaufman, Berlin, Raphaelson, Lubitsch, and many others turned this anti-theatricality on its head. In *The Royal Family*, Gil claims that he will take Julie away from imitation and introduce her to real men, men of substance. But as the Cavendish family draws together at the end, with all of their eccentricities, superstitions, arcane rituals, and devotion to performance, they are nonetheless undeniably *real*, tied to something larger than themselves, loyal to one another and to their heritage, and determined to persist in the face of the forces of "normalcy" that aim to convert and entrap them at every turn. As the grandmother Fanny says, "[W]e're held together by something more than tables and chairs" (*Royal Family*, 85). Like *Trouble in Paradise*, *To Be or Not To Be*, *Show Boat*, and countless others (as well as in Levinas's reading of Jacob), these plays and movies ultimately reposition theatricality as authenticity. Acting is not a jettisoning of substance but rather an assertion of a kind of freedom that entails, for Jewish writers of this period, an ecstatic celebration of the most substantial version of reality they can imagine. For an eager generation of American Jews, this new Jewish secularism promised a heady, never-before-achieved

combination of individual freedom, communal mission, spiritual sustenance, and action that regulated and sustained itself without recourse to divine revelation or divine judgement, promised full acceptance into American society, and at the same time resisted total assimilation. Theatrical liberalism is 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. While theatrical liberalism shares many features of Protestant American secularism (language, dress, calendar, diet, devotion to individual freedom, and civil rights, to name a few), even casual observers sense a difference. For better or worse, references to "New York culture," "East Coast liberals," "Broadway and Hollywood," mark a vaguely defined "sensibility," which is American yet somehow different from that of Protestant America. The relatively peaceful co-existence of these alike yet different sensibilities within the borders of a single national culture is a testament to the flexibility of both American liberalism and Judaism.

And yet there is a nagging insufficiency here. Is the transition from Judaism to theatrical liberalism perhaps too easy, too smooth? After all, the actions, the obligations, the national mission, the spiritual heart of Judaism are contained in the Torah, which is not simply a shared literary text, play, or screenplay, but divine revelation. Is it possible that the theater could provide to its initiates the kind of sustenance that God provided to religious Jews? Julie, in *The Royal Family*, believes that it can: "Earthquakes, and cyclones, and fire and flood, and somehow you still give the show. I know it says in the contract that you stop for acts of God, but I can't remember that I ever did" (*ibid.*, 61). In Julie's world, and in theatrical liberalism, people acting takes precedence over acts of God. But it is difficult to sustain a belief system with no clear source of authority at its core. Torah, divinely revealed, had shaped Jewish life for millennia; theatrical liberalism needed to remain connected to that heritage to nurture a truly sustainable and revolutionary American Jewish secularism. This connection, which demanded not the re-establishment of religion but a new understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, began with theatrical liberalism, but it would be decades before Jews could openly embrace and assert this liberalism as a type of *Jewish* secularism. The path toward this goal involved a significant detour in the direction of humanism and authenticity.