

CHAPTER 4

*How Jews Became Sexy,
1968–1983*

“What’s a nice Jewish girl like me doing on the cover of *Playboy*?”

THIS CAPTION APPEARS, self-referentially enough, on the cover of *Playboy*’s October 1977 issue,¹ which features a photograph of Barbra Streisand, wearing white shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with the *Playboy* logo, reclining across the bottom half of a large white circle; Streisand’s extended left leg forms a line that transforms the circle into a *Q*, which presumably refers to the questions she will answer in what the leading headline bills as: “THE FIRST IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW WITH BARBRA STREISAND.” The caption (“What’s a nice Jewish girl . . .”) appears suspended above and to the right of Streisand’s head, evoking a cartoon-style thought bubble. The location of the caption and the use of the first person (“like me”) suggests that this is a question that Streisand is asking herself. Yet perhaps there is a more interesting question: why has *Playboy*, the self-appointed arbiter of feminine sexual attractiveness, chosen to feature “a nice Jewish girl” on its cover? How did Streisand become, in fact, “the first female celebrity in 24 years” to pose for the magazine’s cover?²

In March of 1962, fifteen years prior to her *Playboy* appearance, Streisand made her Broadway debut as Miss Marmelstein in Jerome Weidman and Harold Rome’s *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*. Critics praised the nineteen-year-old actress for her comedic skill but described her variously as a “homely frump,” “a sloe-eyed creature with folding ankles,” and “a girl with an oafish expression, a loud irascible voice and an arpeggiated laugh.”³ John McClain, writing in the *New York Journal-American*, wrote of Streisand that she “plays a secretary and resembles an amiable anteater.”⁴ The story of Streisand’s transition from “anteater” to (*Playboy*) “bunny” is not a saga of personal transformation; in fact, photos of Miss Marmelstein from 1962 reveal a physiognomy and physicality remarkably similar to those of Streisand in 1977.⁵ Her *Playboy* cover represents the apotheosis of an evolution in the way the Jewish body is perceived by an American audience. That is, the very characteristics of Streisand’s stage and screen persona that

marked her as a “homely frump” in 1962 mark her as a cover girl in 1977. Hence, the presence of the label “Jewish” on the magazine’s cover carries a dual significance: on one hand, it suggests that Streisand has become a sex symbol *in spite* of her Jewishness; on the other hand, it suggests that Streisand’s Jewishness somehow contributes to her sex appeal.

This chapter examines how Jewishness came to be perceived (at least in part) as sexually appealing in American popular entertainment during the period from 1968 to 1983. Because of Streisand’s central role in this evolution, particular attention is paid to her body of work, beginning with her appearance in the film *Funny Girl* (1968) and culminating in her title role (and directing turn) in *Yentl* (1983). I also explore corresponding changes in the perception of the male Jewish body, with special attention to the stage and screen work of Woody Allen. Like Streisand, Allen established a critically and commercially successful film career built largely around a screen persona that varies little from film to film. And, like Streisand, Allen’s screen persona is identifiably Jewish, whether as Allan Felix in *Play It Again, Sam* (1969, Broadway; 1972, film), Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall* (1977), or Isaac Davis in *Manhattan* (1979). In fact, because Allen played a string of explicitly Jewish characters throughout the 1970s critics have repeatedly interpreted his 1983 film *Zelig* as a metaphor for Jewish assimilation.⁶

While Streisand’s and Allen’s Jewish personae—their modes of acting Jewish—changed little between 1968 and 1983, the ways in which those personae were perceived changed significantly. As Robert Leslie Liebman observed in a 1984 article about the schlemiel in the work of Woody Allen, “Traits which are shameful in one context (or era) can be adorable in another.”⁷ The gawky singer and geeky comedian of the mid-1960s became the sexy superstars of the early 1980s; in so doing, Streisand and Allen both benefited from and helped to drive a shift in the way Jewishness was perceived as an element of sexual desirability. I will further argue that Streisand’s and Allen’s performances especially emphasize the sexual attractiveness of Jews as perceived by gentiles (and vice versa), and therefore present a complex and provocative example of the double-coding phenomenon described in chapter 3.

Funny Girl

Columbia Pictures’ 1968 film *Funny Girl*, directed by William Wyler, is based on the 1964 Broadway musical of the same name with music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Bob Merrill, and book by Isobel Lennart. The

show is ostensibly a biography of the Jewish American entertainer Fanny Brice, the top female box office draw of the 1920s and 1930s, star of vaudeville, Broadway, radio, and the Ziegfeld Follies. However, as Katheryn Bernheimer writes, "*Funny Girl* just so happens to be an equally accurate portrait of Barbra Streisand, the unconventional actress who made her screen debut in the hit musical."⁸ Like Brice, Streisand was born and raised in New York City. Both women began their performing careers while still in their teens and neither was classically attractive, but both used musical talent, determination, and a healthy dose of humor to achieve fame and fortune. As a result, *Funny Girl* is often perceived as being as much, if not more, a thinly veiled biography of Streisand as of Brice.⁹ It is important to note, however, that this characterization of *Funny Girl* is retrospective. When the stage musical first opened, Streisand was widely praised for her performance, but reviews focused primarily on the degree to which the show accurately captured the story of Brice. Similar responses greeted the film release.

Furthermore, as Felicia Herman notes, the description of *Funny Girl* as "a watershed in Jewish film history" is similarly inflected with a kind of nostalgia for "the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which sanctioned overt ethnicity as a form of revolt against the white, male, Anglo-Saxon Protestant ruling elite."¹⁰ This is not to say that *Funny Girl* was a minor film in the evolving public perception of Jewish women but rather to argue that it was just the first step in a series of works by Streisand and others that helped to redefine appropriate female behavior.

Streisand turned to the real-life example of Fanny Brice as a foundation for the behavioral model that Letty Cottin Pogrebin would later define as the archetypal "Jewish Big Mouth."

[T]he character of the clever, outspoken, Jewish girl has become a film convention that empowers every woman. Most important, films portraying the Ugly Duckling who rises above her appearance have assured girls with big noses and frizzy hair that they too can invent their own kind of terrific and leave Miss America in the dust.¹¹

Ironically, *Funny Girl* takes the first step toward this validation of Jewish womanhood by deemphasizing the real-life Jewishness of the other characters in the film. For the role of Nicky Arnstein, Brice's first husband, the Jewish director William Wyler cast Omar Sharif: tall, dark, handsome, and Egyptian.¹² More importantly, the only explicitly Jew-

ish behavior Nicky exhibits in the film is marrying Fanny.¹³ Similarly, the character of Florenz Ziegfeld (Walter Pidgeon) demonstrates no recognition of the real-life producer's (admittedly conflicted) history with Jewishness.¹⁴

Fanny's Jewishness, then, is established primarily by contrast. As she explains early in the film, "I'm a bagel on a plate of onion rolls." This declaration is a small but significant example of double coding. As Norman Nadel commented, "Only those who have known the magic of a bagel can appreciate how right that is."¹⁵ In 1968 (and even more so in the 1920s, when the scene is set), the bagel was "ethnic food," unfamiliar to the majority of the viewing audience. Thus, a dominant reading of the line emphasizes Fanny's exotic Otherness. But for the Jewish audience ("those who have known the magic of a bagel"), Fanny's self-characterization carries a wealth of sensory and cultural associations—associations that are familiar rather than exotic.

And just as the bagel is distinguished by its unique appearance, so does the question of Brice's (and by extension Streisand's) appearance dominate the encounter between the Jewish American performer and the mainstream entertainment industry. From the posing of the musical question, "Is a nose with a deviation / a crime against the nation?" to the selective retelling of Fanny's biography (Brice ultimately capitulated to the necessity of rhinoplasty, but Streisand's character does not), *Funny Girl* represents Fanny's appearance as the primary manifestation of her Jewish identity, as well as the primary obstacle she must overcome on her way to stardom. For Herman, this preoccupation with the Jewish nose undermines the film's insight into the Jewish American dilemma.

The reduction of Jewishness to mostly physical qualities reduces the struggle for acceptance by Jews to the almost banal question of whether society can accept a woman who "looks Jewish" as beautiful. Though both Fanny's success in the film and the popularity of the film itself have been taken by some as a symbol of Jewish acceptance in America, the film so oversimplifies the meaning of Jewish "difference" that the real complexities of Jewish integration remain ignored.¹⁶

While Herman correctly points out that Jewish "difference" is far more than physical, the importance of physical difference as an element of Jewish identity formation cannot be so easily brushed aside. "Dealing with the idea of the difference of the Jewish body" writes Sander Gilman, "becomes part of the search for identity."¹⁷ Joshua Halberstam

reports, based on his investigation into “the private conversations of American Jews,” that:

Most American Jews aren’t aware of [the] genetic studies and evolutionary theories, but they have no problem with the notion of “looking Jewish.” Barbra Streisand looks Jewish; Sharon Stone does not. If you are casting for a “typical”-looking Jew, you search for someone with curly hair, large nose, dark complexions, and dark eyes, not the fellow with the straight blond hair and tiny bobbed nose.¹⁸

That Halberstam uses the example of two Hollywood actresses, as well as the metaphor of theatrical casting, to get his point across, is noteworthy for two reasons. First, casting is one of the few areas in contemporary American social life where judging a person based on physical appearance is practiced openly; an actor is that rare worker who can be legally discriminated against based on race, gender, or disability. Second, Halberstam’s explanation of “looking Jewish” recognizes the inherent link between theatrical performance and the presentation of one’s body in everyday life.

In her oft-quoted essay on the performative nature of gender, Judith Butler writes:

The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter, but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well.¹⁹

For Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist, the physical body is simply a starting point. Her intent is to show that most behaviors that are conventionally regarded as masculine or feminine are not biologically determined but socially constructed. Moreover, the mechanism by which society comes to perceive these behaviors as gendered, and by which these perceptions are enforced and perpetuated, is “fundamentally dramatic.” When we meet someone, we don’t determine their gender by means of a chromosome test or by inspecting their genitals; we evaluate their behavior, the way in which they “do” their body, the way in which their body performs. We are in a sense the audience for

their performance, and in interpreting that performance we bring to bear a host of decoding strategies. Some of these strategies are conscious and some unconscious, but nearly all are learned rather than innate. Similarly, an individual may “stage” his or her gender (or other aspects of identity) in conscious ways (clothing, cosmetics, hairstyle) or unconscious ways (speech patterns, mannerisms). To suggest that gender is a performance is not to disavow its reality but to argue that this reality is neither fixed nor stable, dependent as it is on the web of performer-spectator interactions that characterize everyday life.²⁰

So, too, with looking Jewish. What it means to look Jewish has varied significantly from time to time and place to place. The stereotypes cited by Halberstam (“curly hair, large nose, dark complexion, and dark eyes”), bear a tenuous connection (at best) to the historical origins of Judaism in the Mediterranean region and no connection at all to the real variety of appearances among Jews in America and around the world, something Halberstam is quick to point out.²¹ In other words, there is little or no link between the biology of a Jewish body and the ways in which that body is recognized as Jewish, whether on the movie screen or the street corner.

As Butler notes, however, even if the way one “does one’s body” is individually determined, it is also constrained by historical and social norms. Or, as Harley Erdman (citing Butler as an influence) writes in *Staging the Jew*, “Ethnicity, as shaped by history, as lived in the moment, is all too real most of the time. The power of culture, as expressed in both the beauty of difference and the injustice of oppression, asserts itself continually.”²² Sociological studies of perception further confirm that the ways in which viewers interpret each individual’s performance of his or her body do coalesce around culturally specific types. As Schneider writes:

One way in which we simplify the complex world of other people is to organize them into groups. We talk of Germans, Jews, and Italians; of college students, policemen; even of little old ladies in tennis shoes; and we attribute certain characteristics to all members of each group. On reflection, we are all perfectly willing to grant that college students come in all different shapes and sizes and that they have very different orientations toward the world; yet we still find ourselves classifying people into groups and then imputing certain characteristics to the members of the groups.²³

Or, as Halberstam argues, “Caricature? Of course, but caricatures always define type, and ethnic stereotyping is precisely the nub around

which group self-image rotates.”²⁴ We therefore need to understand looking Jewish as one element of acting Jewish on the stage, the screen, or the street. By positing Fanny Brice’s body—not her religion or behavior—as the obstacle she must overcome in order to succeed, *Funny Girl* demonstrates that the woman who looks Jewish can gain acceptance not by erasing, hiding, or avoiding her Jewish looks but by acting Jewish.

Play It Again, Sam

Buoyed by three Oscar nominations, *Funny Girl* was still in theaters on 12 February 1969, when *Play It Again, Sam* opened on Broadway at the Broadhurst Theatre. This three-act comedy, written by and starring Woody Allen, marked the writer/comedian’s Broadway debut. Allen plays Allan Felix, “a slight, bespectacled young man of about twenty-eight or twenty-nine who looks as if he just stepped out of a Jules Feiffer cartoon.”²⁵ As the play begins, Allan’s wife Nancy (Sheila Sullivan) has just left him. Despondent, he turns to his cinematic idol, Humphrey Bogart, for advice. Bogart (Jerry Lacy)—who appears at various moments throughout the play in dream sequences visible only to Allan (and the audience)—both represents and satirizes the film noir model of tough, autonomous masculinity against which Allan measures himself. When Allan asks him, “Why can’t I be cool? What’s the secret?” Bogart responds, “There’s no secret, kid. Dames are simple. I never met one who didn’t understand a slap in the mouth or a slug from a forty-five.”²⁶ Allan, by contrast, is a mass of insecurities: neurotic, hypochondriacal, and self-pitying. “I managed to fool one girl into loving me,” he says, “and now she’s gone.”²⁷ Yet at the same time he dreams of being tough, desirable, and sexually aggressive. The disparity between Allan’s idealized image of masculinity (Bogart) and his real-life behavior is the main source of comedy in the play.

Allan is as an example of what David Biale calls “the Jew as Sexual Schlemiel . . . the little man with the big libido and the even bigger sexual neurosis, a character comically unable to consummate his desire.”²⁸ While citing Allen as the foremost interpreter of the Sexual Schlemiel, Biale traces its roots back through Philip Roth’s Portnoy, borscht belt comedians, the American Yiddish theater, and “fin-de-siecle Hebrew and Yiddish literature.”²⁹ By the 1960s, Biale argues, the Jew as Sexual Schlemiel is a firmly established archetype. Referring to Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), a novel published the same month that *Play It Again, Sam* opened, he writes, “Roth’s self-conscious exploration of the

myth of Jewish erotic neurosis only works because Roth's readers *already know the codes*."³⁰ Similarly, for the audience that is familiar with this archetype Allan Felix does not need to explicitly label himself as Jewish; in fact, he is never explicitly labeled at all. His persona is already recognizable as a mode of acting Jewish.

But if *Play It Again, Sam* depends on the stereotype of Jewish sexual insecurity for its humor, Allen also uses humor to reposition that insecurity as somehow sexually attractive. After a series of ill-fated blind dates, Allan succeeds in winning the affection of Linda (Diane Keaton), the wife of his best friend Dick (Tony Roberts). Allan doesn't accomplish this by acting suave, sophisticated, or tough. Rather, it is when he stops trying to emulate Bogart and starts to be himself that he achieves romantic success. As Allan tells Bogart in the final scene, "The secret's not being you, it's being me. True, you're not too tall and kinda ugly. But I'm short enough and ugly enough to succeed by myself."³¹ "And," writes Robert Leslie Liebman, "since much of his [Allan's] appeal arises from his being a schlemiel, she loves him, not in spite of that fact, but in part at least, because of it."³²

For a general audience, one that does not recognize Allan as a Jewish character, *Play It Again, Sam* is simply a variation on "to thine own self be true." But for an audience that knows the codes Allan carries the banner for a Jewish masculinity that is explicitly contrasted with both Bogart and the only other male character in the play, Dick. While Bogart represents the dashing, macho image of masculinity offered by Hollywood, Dick represents a kind of Jewish inside joke on the stereotype of the repressed Christian male. Even his name, "Dick Christie," is a dirty joke: the goyish phallus.³³ Dick is ambitious, glib, and incapable of expressing emotion. He responds to Allan's divorce in financial terms: "Why do you feel like crying? A man makes an investment—it doesn't pay off."³⁴ For both Bogart and Dick, sentiment and emotional expression are forms of weakness, a weakness from which Allan suffers. But it is precisely this weakness that wins Linda's heart. And only when Allan emulates Bogart's toughness, in a playful reprise of the closing scene in *Casablanca*, does Linda surrender him and return to Dick (just as Ingrid Bergman returns to Paul Henreid).

As with Streisand's Fanny Brice, the Jewishness of Allen's Allan Felix is shown to be appealing by contrast. This pattern repeats itself in Allen's subsequent films, in which, as Biale writes, "Jews have the libidinal energy to win over gentile women from their desiccated WASP culture."³⁵ But because *Play It Again, Sam* does not explicitly identify its protagonist as Jewish, this aspect of the play (and the 1971 film, which featured the same cast) went largely unnoticed by gentile critics.³⁶ For

example, Richard Watts Jr., writing in the *New York Post*, called the play “a handsome and deserved tribute to Humphrey Bogart,” while Judith Crist of NBC-TV predicted it would “warm the hearts of movie nuts and Bogey fans.”³⁷ The Jewish reader must wonder if Watts and Crist left the theater during the intermission. Yet a dominant reading position often allows viewers to ignore even the explicit Jewishness of a character when acknowledgment of the character’s Jewish identity might be a barrier to the universalist reading. As Schneider notes, “We neglect both situational pressures and disconfirming evidence in our push to categorize a person according to group membership.”³⁸ So audiences for whom Allan’s ethnicity is a source of neither anxiety nor pride focus instead on the play’s romanticization of Bogart, who, like Allan, overcame being “not too tall and kinda ugly” to succeed as a ladies man.

The Way We Were

In *The Way We Were* (1973), Streisand reprises the role of the Jewish Big Mouth, this time as Katie Morosky, a left-leaning activist who falls in love with Hubbell Gardiner (Robert Redford) during the period immediately before and after World War II. The film begins in 1944, when Katie and Hubbell meet in a New York nightclub, where Hubbell (then a naval officer) is on leave. But this meeting is immediately followed by an extended flashback (lasting about twenty-five minutes or a quarter of the film) to their shared college years. In college, Katie is shown as an outspoken Jewish radical, making anti-Franco speeches on behalf of the Young Communists League (YCL). Hubbell is the campus golden boy, a handsome, blond decathlete to whom Katie refers disparagingly as “America the Beautiful.”³⁹ As in *Funny Girl*, Streisand’s character is initially framed as physically unattractive. But by 1973, with Streisand established as a movie star, convincing the audience that she is an ugly duckling requires more effort. Director Sydney Pollack takes multiple opportunities to comment on Katie’s alleged homeliness. When she makes an antiwar speech on the campus quad, Hubbell’s fraternity brothers wave placards reading, “Any Peace but Katie’s Piece.” In several other scenes, her frizzy hair and Jewish nose are presented alongside the impeccably coiffed, blonde beauty queen who is Hubbell’s steady girlfriend. At the senior prom, Katie is serving refreshments (a convention borrowed from the teen films of the 1950s and 1960s that signifies her inability to get a date). When her fellow communist Frankie (James Woods) finally asks her to dance, she

tells him, “You know, I’ve never been to a dance before, except the one the YCL gave for Spain.”

Katie initially sees Hubbell the way the Young Communists see America: beautiful and empty. She is not attracted by his physical beauty, and only when he writes a brilliant short story for their senior English class does she become interested in him. Still, another scene is required, one in which Hubbell demonstrates his sense of humor and disavows the elitism of his fraternity brothers, before Katie allows herself to be smitten.

When the film’s action returns to 1944, Katie and Hubbell consummate the romance that was interrupted by graduation and the war. Katie’s appearance has changed significantly: her hair is straight (“I have it ironed” she tells Hubbell), and her wardrobe is stylish and more flattering. Pollack’s direction aids her transformation: the camera sees Katie in soft focus, the cinematic gaze lingering at length on her proudly Semitic profile. Clearly, her Jewishness is intrinsic to her sexual appeal to Hubbell. Here, however, the way Katie *acts Jewish* is even more important than the way she *looks Jewish*. It is her passion for politics and compassion for humanity that captivate Hubbell and lead to their eventual marriage. Exasperated during an argument, Hubbell complains that Katie is “sure about everything”; in the next breath, he asks, “Do you know you’re beautiful?” Moreover, Katie’s politics and Jewishness are explicitly conflated. For example, when she becomes pregnant she tells Hubbell that her father has given his approval to three potential boy’s names: “Solomon David Gardiner, Thomas Jefferson Gardiner, or Eugene V. Debs Gardiner.”

Herman notes that some critics regard the ultimate failure of Katie and Hubbell’s marriage as a critique of Jewish-gentile intermarriage. Yet,

Katie and Hubbell’s relationship fails not because Katie is a Jew and Hubbell is not but rather because Katie represses her idealism in order to stay with him; and when she finally decides to stand up for what she believes in, Hubbell cannot accept her autonomy. The divorce occurs more for reasons of gender than of religion or ethnicity.⁴⁰

Perhaps this is why the Jewishness of Streisand’s character, while much more explicit than in *Funny Girl*, was unremarked by critics invested in the universal appeal of the romantic plot. Vincent Canby, for example, managed to review *The Way We Were* for the *New York Times* without once using the word *Jew* or *Jewish*, though he does call Hubbell “a

WASP of the sort that can only be true in romantic movies.”⁴¹ As a further demonstration that not everyone recognizes the double-coded indicators of Jewishness, Canby attributes Katie’s frizzy hair to “the era of the electric curling iron.”⁴² Lawrence Grobel, on the other hand, acknowledges the intermarriage aspect of the film but deemphasizes its importance, writing, “In the film, Streisand lives out the fantasy of thousands of women whose features aren’t perfect, as she captures the all-American blond-haired, blue-eyed gentile by the sheer force of her personality and wit.”⁴³ While Grobel’s description clearly identifies Redford’s Hubbell as a “gentile,” he seems to suggest that Streisand has “passed” by appealing to a vast audience and demonstrating a sex appeal not normally associated with Jews.

Film critic David Desser offers other perspective.

In the melting-pot myth, as seen especially in popular culture, it is a white male prerogative to have relations with the dark female, who may be fearsome or villainous but who is nevertheless in many instances a potential object of desire so long as she marries the white male and lives in his white society. . . . [But] attraction to the dark woman, and the eventual marriage to her or the rejection of such a marriage in favor of one’s own race, is problematized because of the questions of race and gender. A kind of intermediary is therefore needed, a gender and racial ambiguity needs arise—one found in that conflated, mythic Other known as the Jews.⁴⁴

Desser is commenting on the portrayal of intermarriage in early cinema, but his comments suggest another factor at work in the Jewish sex appeal Streisand demonstrates in *The Way We Were*. Jewish-gentile intermarriage was certainly a concern among Jews in the early 1970s, as evidenced by the incredibly hostile response of Jewish organizations to the short-lived 1972 television comedy *Bridget Loves Bernie*.⁴⁵ Yet white-black miscegenation was probably a larger source of anxiety to the population at large. As Michael Rogin and Karen Brodtkin have noted, American Jews in the middle of the twentieth century were commonly thought to occupy a kind of anomalous position on the racial ladder, somewhere between white and black.⁴⁶ With the rise of the sexual revolution and the “Black Is Beautiful” movement, perhaps Streisand and other Jewish performers became the unlikely beneficiaries of the white gentile audience’s anxiety about interracial romance. As a “white” woman and a Jew, Katie Morosky offers the white gentile audience a “safe” way of exploring the sexual appeal of the Other. At

the same time, the resolution of *The Way We Were* shows Jewish women that they can act Jewish and still attract a goyish hunk like Robert Redford, though once they get him they might not want to keep him.

Annie Hall

Regarded by many as Woody Allen's best film,⁴⁷ *Annie Hall* (1977) earned Allen Oscars for Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Screenplay (Allen with Marshall Brickman), as well as a Best Actress award for Diane Keaton in the title role. As the character Alvy Singer, Allen once again reprises his role as "sexual schlemiel"; but what distinguishes *Annie Hall* from Allen's earlier films, such as *Bananas* (1971), *Sleeper* (1973), and *Love and Death* (1975), is that for the first time this schlemiel is explicitly identified as Jewish. Indeed, the film presents the romance between Alvy and Annie (Keaton) as an intercultural encounter. As Bernheimer writes:

The relationship between neurotic *nebbish* Alvy and all-American *shiksa* Annie provided Allen with the perfect opportunity to mine his favorite themes, chief among them the difference between Jews and gentiles. Although religion is never an issue between Alvy and Annie, much of the tension in their romance can be attributed to ethnic conflicts.⁴⁸

Some of these ethnic conflicts are portrayed quite explicitly. In the most commonly cited scene in the film, Annie takes Alvy home to meet her WASP family.⁴⁹ As Annie and her parents (Colleen Dewhurst and Donald Symington) exchange flat, suburban banalities over flat, suburban cuisine, Alvy imagines himself as he must appear to them: as a black-clad Hassidic Jew, unable and unfit to participate in polite society. This is contrasted, via split screen, with a scene of dinner at the Singer household: a conversational and gastronomic free-for-all. Although the humor depends on exaggeration of both cultural stereotypes, Allen clearly stacks the deck in favor of his own Jewish background: the Singers (including Mordechai Lawner and Joan Newman as Alvy's father and mother) are loud and vulgar, but they are alive in a way that the Halls are not; or, to put it in comedic terms, this juxtaposition of scenes positions the Jew as comedian and the gentile as straight man.

This is also the model for Alvy and Annie's relationship. As in *Play It*

Again, Sam, Keaton ably sets up Allen's punch lines. So, in addition to the more explicit contrasts the film draws between Jewish and gentile culture, *Annie Hall* also suggests that Allen's hip but self-deprecating sense of humor is intrinsic to Alvy's Jewishness. And because this film (unlike Allen's other works) is so explicitly framed as an intercultural encounter, Alvy's mode of acting Jewish—as the humorous sexual schlemiel—stakes a claim as an archetype of Jewish masculinity. As a result, even the characteristics of Alvy's behavior that are not explicitly marked as Jewish become part of the film's representation of Jews.⁵⁰ Bernheimer writes: "Although Allen is an intensely private person, he has revealed more about himself to the audience than almost any other contemporary film artist. Because he is so thoroughly Jewish, Allen can thus be credited with providing audiences with a detailed profile of a specific Jewish personality."⁵¹ However, the significance that viewers attach to Alvy's "specific Jewish personality" is conditioned in large part by the cultural knowledge and expectations they bring to the film. Members of the Jewish audience, those who already recognized the schlemiel as such in Allen's earlier work, respond to the familiarity of the character. For them, Allen's appeal lies in his ability to observe the humor in everyday situations. But audiences not familiar with Jewish performance codes see the intercultural encounter from the point of view of Annie; like her, they learn what it means to act Jewish as the film progresses. Early in the film, for example, Annie orders a pastrami sandwich on white bread with mayonnaise. Alvy's rolling eyes and horrified expression are an in-joke to some of his viewers and a "teachable moment" for the rest.

Biale, though he does not use the term *double coding*, nevertheless sees this educational function of Allen's films as "a hidden agenda . . . to identify America with Jewish culture by generalising Jewish sexuality and creating a safe, unthreatening space for the schlemiel as American anti-hero."⁵² The comic fumbling of the schlemiel, Biale argues, deeroticizes the Jewish body, undermining the "Jew as hypersexual" stereotype that is a staple of racial anti-Semitism.⁵³ In this reading, Alvy does seduce the Christian woman, Annie, but his seduction is so ludicrously inept that it represents no threat to Christian culture. Biale continues, suggesting that a

deep insecurity about the Jew's position in American culture seems to underlie this instinctive turn to comedy. Perhaps the distancing afforded by comedy can at once relieve anxiety and win over a potentially hostile gentile audience. If Jewish sexual neurosis is as funny as Allen would have it, if America can laugh at the

Jew and see its own neuroses in his, then perhaps the Jew will be accepted as an organic part of the cultural landscape.⁵⁴

The phenomenal critical and commercial success of *Annie Hall* suggests that by 1977 this kind of acceptance was not far away. Indeed, the anti-Semitism that Alvy experiences in the film is largely of his own paranoid imagining, such as when he insists that a coworker's slurred inquiry "Did you eat?" is actually a taunt: "Jew eat?" Of course, this makes Alvy the perfect reflection of a certain portion of his audience: those prepared to hear a Jewish-specific (and often anti-Semitic) discourse when there is none intended. We might read this "Jew eat?" moment as Allen's own kind of resistance to the external stereotyping of his films as Jewish. Alternatively, it may be a joke at the expense of Jewish critics, who complained that Allen's public persona perpetuated anti-Semitic stereotypes: they, like Alvy, get overexcited about nothing at all. Perhaps, in fact, "Jew eat?" carries both meanings. The degree to which Allen's manner of acting Jewish represents a response to this kind of perception of the self as Other is addressed later in this chapter.

"The First In-Depth Interview with Barbra Streisand"

Playboy magazine's October 1977 issue hit newsstands almost simultaneously with the theatrical release of *Annie Hall*. While Allen was promoting the appeal of the schlemiel, Streisand was carrying the banner of Jewish women into the lion's den: *Playboy*, the symbol of white male heterosexuality in America. Given *Playboy's* obsession with the female body, Streisand's interview must be considered with regard to the complex history of the "Jew's body," a history fraught with both ambiguity and anxiety. This history has its roots in a discourse of race that dates back to the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Nineteenth-century science, in the service of burgeoning European and American nationalism, postulated genealogical difference as the underpinnings of cultural difference. These genealogical differences were organized in a strict hierarchy, which purported to explain "scientifically" why the white European was the epitome of the civilized modern man, why the Negro was biologically incapable of attaining the lofty moral and intellectual perch of the Englishman, and why the Jew, though cunningly intelligent, would always remain physically and morally defective.

In this model, the Jews were not only inferior but also a mongrel race. Many of the physical defects of the Jew were attributed to pro-

longed interbreeding with blacks. This theory served two functions: first, miscegenation served as an illustration of the Jews' moral inferiority; and, second, it provided a mechanism of "degeneration" that explained away the politically inexpedient fact that early Christianity (and Christ himself) was descended from Jewish blood. This model of Jewish racial impurity reached its apotheosis, of course, with Adolph Hitler, and the shadow of the Holocaust forms the backdrop of any attempt to decode Jewishness through the physical traits of performers.

As Gilman notes, the Jew's nose often serves as the focal point of this conversation:

The Jew's nose makes the Jewish face visible in the Western Diaspora. That nose is "seen" as an African nose, relating the image of the Jew to the image of the Black. It was not always because of any overt similarity in the stereotypical representation of the two idealized types of noses, but because each nose is considered a racial sign and as such reflects the internal life ascribed to the Jew and African no less than it does physiognomy.⁵⁶

As a result, the Jewish audience regards Streisand's refusal to "fix" her Jewish nose as a key element of her personal legend.⁵⁷ Rather than downplaying or ignoring the importance of her nose as an element of her public persona, Streisand tells *Playboy* (only partly in jest) that her nose is, like Samson's hair, the secret of her success.

Playboy: What is it, do you think, that makes your voice so special?
Streisand: My deviated septum. If I ever had my nose fixed, it would ruin my career.⁵⁸

When Lawrence Grobel, the interviewer, follows up by asking if she ever considered rhinoplasty, Streisand elaborates.

In my earlier periods, when I would have liked to look like Catherine Deneuve, I considered having my nose fixed. But I didn't trust anyone enough to fix it. If I could do it myself with a mirror, I would straighten my nose and take off that little piece of cartilage from the tip. . . . See, I wouldn't do it conventionally. When I was young . . . it was like a fad, all the Jewish girls having their noses done every week at Erasmus Hall High School, taking perfectly good noses and whittling them down to nothing. The first thing someone would have done would be to cut off my bump. But I love my bump, I wouldn't cut my bump off.⁵⁹

Streisand's response is telling in both what she says and what she does not say. She freely acknowledges that her nose differs from the classically beautiful ideal (represented by Catherine Deneuve). She similarly locates the desire to change one's nose in the Jewish American community in Brooklyn, where she grew up. At the same time, she suggests that the desire to look like someone else is an adolescent phase; one that she herself has outgrown. Yet she does not condemn her high school classmates for their assimilative desires. On the contrary, she is critical of "Jewish girls having their noses done" not because the procedure (or the desire for it) is inauthentically Jewish but because it is unnecessary.

Streisand makes it equally clear that her nose is her own, not to be trusted to others' ideas of beauty, be they Jewish or gentile. In a separate portion of the interview, when she has been asked about her professional reputation as a stickler for detail, she explains:

Once, after I'd OK'd the photograph for an album cover, I noticed something about it looked funny—only to find out it was my nose. It had been retouched, the bump was removed. Somebody at the lab probably thought, This will please her. I told the lab people that if I'd wanted my nose fixed, I would have gone to a doctor.⁶⁰

In this context, Streisand seems to indicate that her decision to "keep" her nose is an individual choice, albeit one made in the face of both external and internal anti-Semitism.⁶¹ Streisand is not claiming that the Jewish nose or the Jewish body is particularly attractive. She implies instead that beauty and sexual attractiveness are, like ethnicity, based in performance. She is beautiful and sexy because she chooses to act beautiful and sexy. A Jewish reader might turn to her performance of her public persona as a valorization—"nice Jewish girls" can be just as sexy as the "playmates" who occupy the pages surrounding the Streisand interview.

But on another level Streisand's exegesis of her own face to the readers of *Playboy* is a way of asserting that Jewish women do not necessarily look "different," nor are women who look different necessarily Jews. As Vivian Sobchack writes in "Postmodern Modes of Ethnicity":

We live in what seems to be the advanced stages of an age of representation, and thus we are perhaps more aware of the inauthenticity and theatricality of "being American." . . . In this context, nearly all those visible markers that once separated the cultures of "ethnic" descent from the "American" culture of consent, that

signaled the boundaries of otherness and gave it ethnic identity, integrity, and authenticity, are detached from their original historical roots and have become “floating signifiers” available for purchase by anyone. Ethnicity, too, seems based on consent.⁶²

As anti-Semitic physical typing diminishes, more overtly Jewish faces can be screened without calling attention to themselves. The codes remain but only to the degree that they are internalized in cultural memory. With each reappearance, the nose with the bump becomes less the “Jewish nose” and more “Barbra Streisand’s nose.” The tortured history of the former is replaced with the star power of the latter.

In 1968, *Funny Girl* asked whether society could accept a woman who looks Jewish as beautiful. In 1973, *The Way We Were* answered with a resounding yes. Speaking to *Playboy* in 1977, Streisand implicitly declared the question no longer relevant. This not only opened the door for stereotypically Jewish-looking women to play romantic leading roles, but it also set the stage for the more complex interrogation of Jewish female sexuality that Streisand would undertake in the film *Yentl* (1983), to be discussed later in this chapter.

Manhattan

Released in 1979, *Manhattan* was Woody Allen’s follow-up to *Annie Hall*.⁶³ Once again, Allen plays a variation on the schlemiel, Isaac Davis, a forty-two-year-old, twice-divorced television writer. When we first meet Isaac, he is dating Tracy (Mariel Hemingway), a seventeen-year-old blonde knockout. Isaac alternates between astonishment at his good fortune (“Can you believe I’m dating a girl who does homework?”) and taking Tracy’s attraction to him for granted. “You can’t be in love with me” he tells her, while praising himself for “my wry sense of humor and astonishing sexual technique.” Later, when explaining that the difference between their ages is too great to be overcome, he tells her that when she is thirty-eight he’ll be sixty-three: “You’ll be at the height of your sexual powers . . . of course, I will, too, probably.” During the course of the film, Isaac leaves Tracy to pursue a relationship with Mary Wilke (Diane Keaton). Mary is the mistress of Isaac’s best friend (Michael Murphy), and this forms the central comic premise of the film. But in *Manhattan* Keaton’s character is not simply a comic foil for Allen, as she was in *Annie Hall*. Instead, she becomes a more traditional romantic object, allowing Allen as Isaac to transcend

the schlemiel and become, if only for a while, a more conventional leading man.

This is consistent with the overall tone of *Manhattan*, which is much more self-consciously concerned with definitions of male sexuality. The film is framed as Isaac's story, told in retrospect. It opens with Allen's voice-over: "Chapter One. He adored New York City. He idolized it all out of proportion. No, make that: He romanticized it all out of proportion." As the voice-over continues, Allen continues to revise his self-description, finally settling on: "Chapter One: He was as tough and romantic as the city he loved. Behind his black-rimmed glasses was the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat. New York was his town and always would be." The joke here is intertextual; since Allen has not yet appeared on the screen, this description of a Raymond Chandler-style hero is funny only in contrast to Allen's established schlemiel persona. But Isaac's rewriting of his own introduction is also a signal that this persona is about to undergo a revision.

Isaac is as neurotic, hypochondriacal, and hypersexual as any of Allen's earlier characters, but he is also demonstrably emotional and protective. In his earlier works, Allen played a man who sought relationships with women as a means of overcoming his own insecurities. But in *Manhattan* first Tracy and then Mary are drawn to Isaac because he is more stable than they. Tracy turns to Isaac as a father figure, and Mary sees him as a superior alternative to the married man with whom she was previously involved. To further emphasize Isaac's desirability as a stable mate, when Isaac first walks alone with Mary the film's soundtrack supplies an instrumental version of Gershwin's "Someone to Watch over Me." When the lovers consummate their relationship, Mary tells Isaac that he is "wonderful" in bed but also (or perhaps because) "You're someone I could imagine having children with."

Isaac's suitability as a father is showcased elsewhere in the film, as we see him expressing his love for his son Willy. This is played against a more conventional view of masculinity in the scene where Isaac goes to pick up Willy from the home of his ex-wife Jill (Meryl Streep) and her lesbian lover Connie (Karen Ludwig). Isaac plays the entire scene dressed in a tight black T-shirt, evoking Marlon Brando's Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.⁶⁴ Isaac's comic inability to match this conventional standard of masculinity is juxtaposed with his display of paternal affection and commitment, as he and Willy leave the apartment and are next seen playing playground basketball with the "Father and Son All-Stars." So, while Isaac still has elements of the schlemiel in his character, he also has some more traditional masculine virtues.

In fact, by the end of the film, when Isaac has seen the error of his romantic ways and made a commitment to Tracy, he has transcended the schlemiel almost entirely and become, in Yiddish terms, a mensch—a person, one of the good guys. The mensch stereotype is as recognizable to a Jewish audience as the schlemiel and is perhaps even more easily identified with. But rather than presenting one view of masculinity as superior to another *Manhattan* spoofs all such constructions. Throughout the film, Mary refers to her ex-husband Jeremiah as “sexually masterful.”⁶⁵ She repeatedly cites his sex appeal as the reason she married him and why she had trouble divorcing him. Isaac feels intimidated by this memory, but when the audience finally meets Jeremiah we get the real punch line: Mary’s ex-husband is played by Wallace Shawn, an actor who is physically very similar to Allen. Shawn’s Jeremiah is short, nonathletic, balding, and nasal voiced. Shawn is also Jewish, though this is much less a part of his public persona than it is for Allen. After meeting Jeremiah, Isaac comments on how the man failed to live up to his expectations, adding, “It’s amazing how subjective all that stuff is.”

Yentl and Zelig

Having spent the 1970s demonstrating the appeal of characters who proudly assert both their Jewishness and their sexuality, Streisand and Allen each directed and starred in films released in 1983 that addressed the question of “passing.” In *Yentl*, Streisand plays a young Jewish girl who masquerades as a boy in order to gain access to the yeshiva education that women were denied in late-nineteenth-century Russia.⁶⁶ In *Zelig*, a faux documentary, Allen plays Leonard Zelig, the 1920s “human chameleon” whose desire to be liked is so strong that he changes his personality and physical features to match whatever group he is with.⁶⁷

These two films represent the culmination of the historical trajectory I have laid out in this chapter vis-à-vis the perception of the Jewish body in performance. In their earlier works, Streisand and Allen adopted and adapted stereotypical Jewish traits, helping to reposition Jewishness as consistent (if not synonymous) with sexual attractiveness. In so doing, they implicitly challenged conventional ideas of beauty, sex appeal, and what it means to act Jewish. In *Yentl* and *Zelig*, this challenge is made explicit. Elaine K. Ginsberg notes that “both the process and discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either

threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent.”⁶⁸ Thus Gilman sees *Zelig* as Allen’s attempt “to lay to rest the polar definition of self-hatred espoused by writers such as Bettelheim,” Whitfield calls the film a “cinematic exploration of the radical instability of identity.”⁶⁹ In a similar vein, Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof write that *Yentl* “provides us with a very powerful and potentially disruptive situation that calls into question and threatens to destroy conventional sexual configurations.”⁷⁰

In both films, the disruption of conventional identities is mirrored and enhanced by a corresponding disruption of conventional film genres. *Yentl* is no ordinary musical; all eleven songs are sung solo by Streisand and are used as a means of revealing Yentl’s interior monologue. *Zelig* carries the frame of the documentary to the extreme, blurring fiction and reality by including commentary from such real-life figures as Susan Sontag and Saul Bellow, alongside those of fictional characters such as Eudora Fletcher (Mia Farrow) and Paul Deghuere (John Rothman); groundbreaking computer technology was used to insert Allen’s character into 1920s newsreel footage.

That said, the passing that is performed in *Yentl* and *Zelig* is not as simple as it may first appear. Yentl successfully passes as a boy in the eyes of her study partner Avigdor (Mandy Patinkin), and Zelig passes as a host of disparate characters, but the audience is in on the joke, so to speak. In fact, in each case the dramaturgy of the film *requires* that the audience be aware of the protagonist’s “true” identity. The dramatic tension of *Yentl* depends on the audience’s awareness of Yentl’s masquerade. Much of the humor in *Zelig* depends on the viewer’s ability to recognize the real historical figures improbably juxtaposed with Allen’s smiling countenance.

As a result, though both films play (in the best sense of the word) with the *idea* of passing, they ultimately reject the *practice* of passing in favor of a grounded and fixed identity. Allen explains, regarding *Zelig*: “I wanted to make a comment with the film of the specific danger of abandoning one’s own true self, in an effort to be liked, not to make trouble, to fit in, and where that leads one in life in every aspect and where that leads on a political level.”⁷¹ Similarly, in *Yentl*, Streisand’s character is clearly portrayed as the exception that defines the rule of Jewish femininity. When Yentl is forced to abandon her masquerade, she does not stand and fight for a reconsideration of gender roles in Russian Jewish culture but instead emigrates to America at film’s end.

And yet this exploration of the idea of passing is not without importance, especially when it is set against the backdrop of Streisand and

Allen's prior work. Because the two actor-directors have established themselves as arguably the most recognizably Jewish performers in American entertainment, the desire to pass that is evidenced in the films' takes on a double-coded significance. For Jewish audiences in 1983, *Yentl* and *Zelig* asserted both the possibility of passing and the undesirability of doing so. But for the dominant reader who is able to mark Streisand and Allen as Jews the films reconfirm a belief in the desirability of passing and the impossibility of doing so.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the way audience perceptions of Jewishness changed between 1968 and 1983 is that Rex Reed, reviewing *Yentl* for the *New York Post* in 1983, unwittingly echoed Norman Nadel's comment about *Fiddler on the Roof* two decades earlier, declaring: "The movie [*Yentl*] is like rye bread; you don't have to be Jewish to love it."⁷² In 1964, Nadel, a Jewish critic, used this one-liner as a way of staking claim to *Fiddler* on behalf of the Jewish audience, while reassuring the gentile audience that the musical was not too Jewish to be enjoyed by all. When Reed, a gentile critic, repeats the quip, it has a converse meaning: he acknowledges the Jewishness of *Yentl* while claiming the right to enjoy it for a general audience. To paraphrase another popular advertising slogan of the day: you've come a long way, *bubbe*.