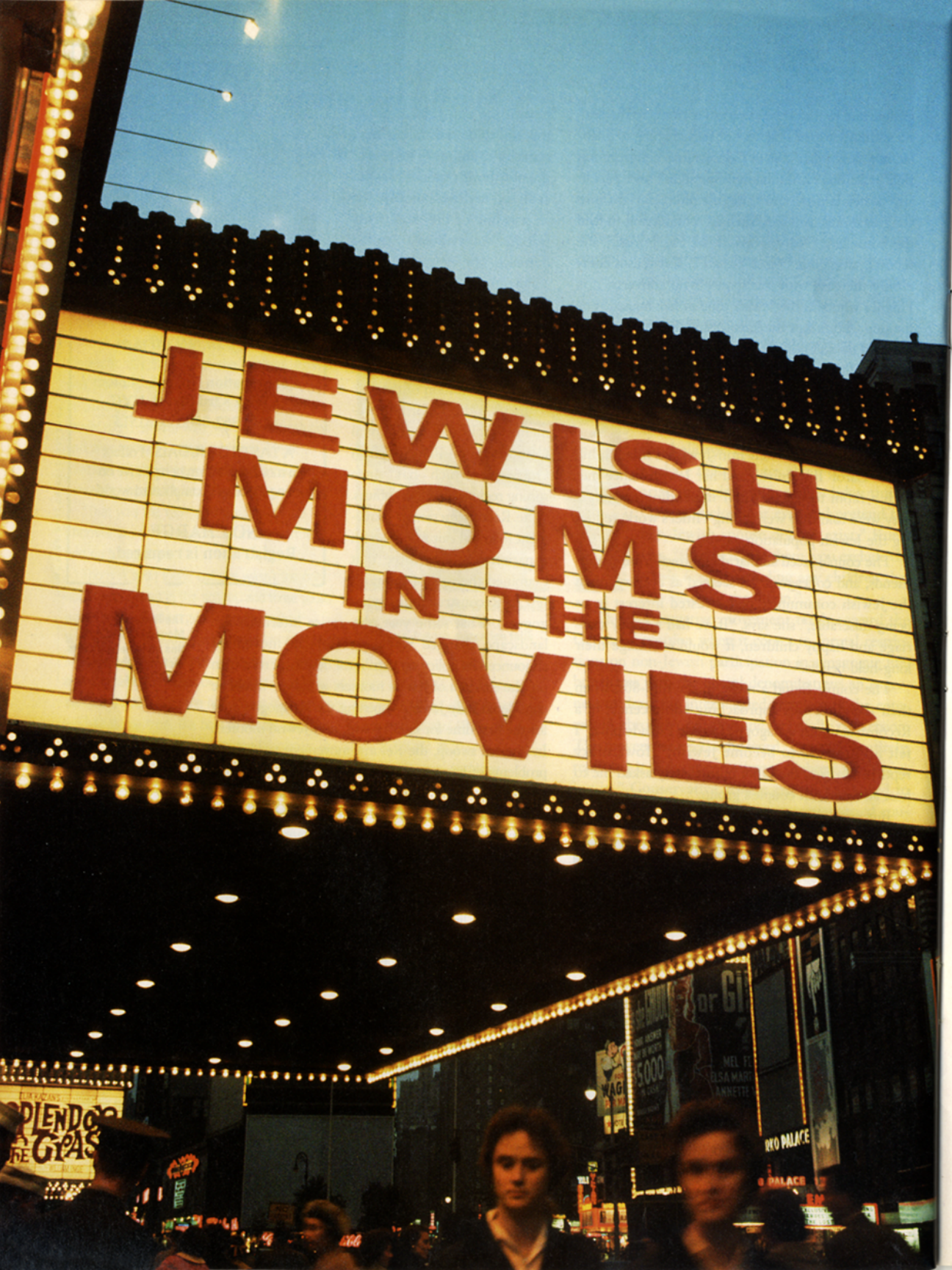


JEWISH MOMS IN THE MOVIES

THE GLORY OF
PLENDO
AND
GAS

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PALACE



Jewish filmmakers love their mothers. In fact, they love them so much that they'll do almost anything to get their mothers out of the country when their movies are released—at least those movies in which Jewish mothers appear as major characters. That's because throughout the years Jewish mothers have been portrayed as everything from stubborn, embarrassing, annoying, fat, and short to opinionated, smothering, worrisome, sarcastic, and spiteful.

Fortunately, not always at the same time.

But the traditional Hollywood image of Jewish mothers is starting to change. For all the stereotypical renderings, recent characters have been honest, fiercely supportive of their children, and among the funniest and most endearing characters ever to come out of Hollywood.

Even the annoying ones.

Jewish mothers have been portrayed as stubborn, embarrassing, annoying, fat, and opinionated.

The history of Jewish mothers on film goes back almost as far as the film industry itself. When Al Jolson says, "You ain't heard nothing yet" in 1927's *The Jazz Singer*, he could easily be referring not just to talking motion pictures, but to Jewish mothers as well. In the first talking feature film, Eugenie Besserer plays the devoted Mrs. Rabinowitz who supports her son's desire to pursue a life in show business even though her husband demands that the boy follow family tradition and become a

But is this changing?

JOEL
SAMBERG

cantor. But the screenplay limits Besserer to looks of torn devotion and not much more.

Tamara Shayne is similarly restricted as Mama Jolson (or, more accurately, Mama Yoelson) in *The Jolson Story* of 1946. Bosley Crowther, writing in the *New York Times*, quips that Shayne "drips goo and gumdrops" in her role.

Even Samson, in 1949's *Samson and Delilah*, has a Jewish mother who whines and complains rather tediously—and not even about his hair! "What did I tell you," complains Samson's mother (Fay Holden) to her husband, "he wants to marry a Philistine!" Of course, Victor Mature eventually does take up with Hedy Lamarr, who chops off his hair, rendering him weak and helpless. Before long he is blinded, tortured, and killed.

Now there's one Jewish boy who should have listened to his mother!

The 1950s pretty much followed the same road. *The Benny Goodman Story* (1955), for instance, is such an abbreviated version of the great bandleader's life that Berta Gersten barely has a chance to develop the character of Goodman's mother at all. Gersten says "My Benny" so many times that you almost expect to see "Steve Allen as My Benny" in the closing credits.

“Maybe our boy doesn’t want to be a Cantor, Papa.”

—Mrs. Sara Rabinowitz (played by Eugenie Besserer) in *The Jazz Singer*



COURTESY OF KATHYNA BERNHEIM

Overprotective caricatures are not the only stereotypes that actresses playing Jewish mothers have had to overcome. Often, talented actresses have had to tackle roles primarily defined by opposition to their son’s very un-Jewish jobs—as cops, stand-up comics, or actors. For instance, as Mrs. Brummel in *No Way to Treat a Lady* (1968), Eileen Heckart doesn’t think detective work suits her son Morris. The result is that Morris has to cope with a serial killer *and* a nagging mother.

In 1969, Nan Martin played a truly unflattering Jewish mother in the film version of Philip Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus*. In her film debut, Ali MacGraw plays a Jewish American princess; Martin, as her mother, portrayed one of moviedom’s first Jewish American queens. As Mrs. Patimkin, Martin’s greatest contribution to her household is to make sure everyone checks their own phones to see which line is ringing. “She was so aloof with me during the shooting,” MacGraw writes about Martin in her autobiography, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), “that it wasn’t until the last day that I realized her behavior had all been in character.”

Three years later, in *Portnoy’s Complaint*—another Roth novel adopted for the big screen—Lee Grant hauls out all the stereotypes in rendering Sophie Portnoy. Sophie is a mother with no patience or compassion. Alex (Richard Benjamin), her masturbation-crazed, sex-obsessed son, is in therapy because his life, like the movie itself, is one long Jewish joke. Many critics called the movie unfunny and vulgar—a lethal stereotype of Jewish families.

But this was the same decade in which things began to change for Jewish movie mothers. Instead of simply kvetching, they began to reveal the first signs of strength and sensibility.

Take Jan Miner, who appears as Sally Mar, Lenny Bruce’s mother in *Lenny* (1974). Sally is genuinely proud of her son, the infamous comedian. She moves to California to be near him, talks him into accepting his agent’s advice (which leads to higher-paying gigs), and even attends all of his obscenity trials. “I gotta tell you about the first time this schmuck ever appeared on stage,” she giggles proudly to Lenny’s girlfriend. But Sally, who doesn’t even mind that Lenny’s future wife is a *shiksa*, is a genuinely embraceable figure.

And in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, Mrs. Lapinsky is a classic example of a mother whose compas-

MOOREBOR EDWITIA AVWVWVW

“Mother’s Day came and went without a card, plus my birthday. Those things don’t bother me, but he’ll be 66, that’s a landmark in a life. So you’ll send a card, it wouldn’t kill you.”

—Sophie Portnoy (played by Lee Grant) in *Portnoy’s Complaint*



LEO

“Anyone new in your life I should know about? It’s my God given right to check. What about that Shapiro girl?”

—Ruth Schram (played by Anne Bancroft, second from left) in *Keeping the Faith*



RODOR ANENAVIVRINE ESSTW445

“Do you ever feel trapped by your life... Sometimes I wish I was a whole other person.”

—Pearl Kantrowitz (played by Diane Lane, left) in *A Walk on the Moon*



The Mother of Jewish Screen Mothers

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin points out in *Jewish Literacy* that the Talmud instructs parents to teach their children how to swim. That's because in ancient times, swimming was a common but dangerous daily activity. Today, the rabbi writes, "This commandment means that parents are

sion mirrors that of the Jewish filmmaker's real-life mother. Written and directed by Paul Mazursky in 1976, *Next Stop* features Shelley Winters as a mother who initially opposes her son's plans to leave home and become an actor. In the beginning, she is as grating as they come. "You call this an apartment?" she whines at her son Larry—much as Mazursky's own mother whined when he was starting out (he explains this in his recently published memoirs, *Show Me The Magic* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999]). But Larry inherits his mother's eccentricity and resilience, and uses it to land an important Hollywood audition. It is no surprise, then, when Mrs. Lapinsky looks at her son proudly at the end of the film and says, "Larry, be a good actor." He is, after all, a lot like her.

A string of likable Jewish mother roles continued into the 1980s. Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* called Jan Miner "impeccably cast" as a concerned Jewish mother in the 1980 film *Willie and Phil*. And even though Lainie Kazan comes close to caricature as Belle Karoka in 1982's *My Favorite Year*, she speaks and acts with such warmth and sincerity that it makes her very believable in what is basically a farcical role. In the film, Benjy, Belle's son, is charged with chaparroning famous Hollywood actor Allan Swann (Peter O'Toole) prior to a TV appearance. When Benjy brings Swann home for dinner, Belle, deaf to Benjy's pleas, lectures the big star for not visiting his daughter in more than a year. "Shame on you, Swannie," she says pitifully to the star, wagging her finger—before kissing him smack on the lips.

And then, of course, there is Woody Allen. As a filmmaker, Allen hasn't always been known for his genial mothers, even in his best pictures. In *Annie Hall* (1977), Joan Newman as Alvy Singer's mom was loud and not very likable, a cardboard cutout of a liberal, first generation, manic New York Jew. But all that changed in 1987 with *Radio Days*. In it, Julie Kavner is entirely believable and appropriately quirky as a mother who does not want her son to listen to the Westinghouse console all day long, even though she and her husband do just that. "We're different," she tells the boy when he points out the hypocrisy, "our lives are ruined already." Even a tough critic like Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* writes, "Julie Kavner, youthful and bouncy, is near-miraculous as the practical-minded, dreamy, goofy mother." It is honesty like Kavner's, even when

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RETMAN/CORBIS

required to teach their children whatever self-defense skills are necessary for survival." Shelley Winters, who played former swimming champion Belle Rosen in *The Poseidon Adventure*, is therefore a throwback to ancient times: Belle risks her life (losing it in the process) to find an underwater passageway so that a small group of passengers on the doomed ocean liner can make their way to safety.

As the mother of all on-screen Jewish mothers, Winters has played the character in every way imaginable in movies including *The Pickle*, *Over the Brooklyn*

Bridge, *Next Stop*, *Greenwich Village*, *Enter Laughing*, and *Delta Force*. In what may have been one of her toughest roles, she was called upon to keep her family intact as Mrs. Van Daan, who hid in the attic of Otto Frank's factory with her husband and son in 1959's *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Winters, born Shirley Schrift in 1922 in St. Louis, made her Broadway debut at 19 and appeared in her first movie at 21. She studied at the famed Actor's Studio under Lee Strasberg in the 1950s and won the first of two Academy Awards in 1959 for the *Anne Frank* film. (The second was for *A Patch of Blue* in 1965.) She was also nominated in 1951 for *A Place in the Sun* and again in 1972 for *The Poseidon Adventure*.

Winters purposely put on weight for her role in *The Poseidon Adventure*, and some insisted she went overboard. Critic Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* said, "She's so enormously fat that she goes way beyond the intention to create a warm, sympathetic Jewish character. It's like having a whale tell you you should love her because she's Jewish."

Enter Laughing (1967), a semi-autobiographical tale co-authored and directed by Carl Reiner, was Winters's first attempt at playing the mother of a son with show business aspirations. But she did it with far less humor and personality than in 1976's *Next Stop*, *Greenwich Village* (which Kael called Winters's best performance) and *The Pickle* in 1993. In *The Pickle*, written and directed by Paul Mazursky, Winters plays a mother who loves her son unconditionally, despite the fact that he is a miserably failed film director.

Critics hated *The Pickle*, but they liked Winters. Roger Ebert said the entire movie seemed false except for the scenes between mother and son (played by Danny Aiello)—scenes that provide deep, effective moments of truth. Just like in real life.

Most of the time, anyway.—JS


ishly educated at the same time.

"We need to spend more on building Jewish identity, reinforcing Jewish families, and ensuring Jewish continuity," he agrees, "but anyone who thinks there's a single path to that end is a fool."

Adas Israel advertises its Jewish literacy course in the *Washington Post* for about \$1,000 a pop. It's an expensive proposition, according to Rabbi Miller, until you consider that most of the conversions she performs

are on people who attended the course. "If you get six, eight, ten people who decide to convert," she asks, "isn't it worth it?"

The important thing, says Usher, is to devote serious thought to the problem rather than ignoring it and hoping it will simply go away. "Interfaith marriage is now a given," she says. "It's up to us Jews to stop wringing our hands and shape the issue." ❧

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Movie Moms *continued from page 65*

sardonic, that keeps Jewish movie mothers standing tall.

Speaking of standing tall, Diane Lane takes Jewish mothering to entirely new heights in *A Walk on the Moon*. In the 1999 melodrama, Lane, as Pearl Kantrowitz, languishes at a Jewish resort in the Catskill mountains facing the reality that her life has been reduced to one major decision: A&P or Waldbaums? Granted, Diane Lane, who most recently played Christina Cotter, Mark Wahlberg's decidedly un-Jewish girlfriend in the summer blockbuster *The Perfect Storm*, is not your typical Jewish movie mother. She isn't short and fat, for one thing.

But Lane turns in an honest performance that gives Jewish mothers an identity rarely seen in the movies, particularly when she dances topless at Woodstock. And Lilian, Pearl's mother-in-law, is played affectionately by Tovah Feldshuh. Who but the wise, worldly, and somewhat mystical Lilian can sense something so terribly wrong? Lilian eventually tells Pearl that she knows Pearl is cheating on her husband Marty, setting the gears in motion for a reconciliation.

And now, most recently, Hollywood has given us another refined and admirable Jewish mother in *Keeping the Faith*, a buddy comedy about a rabbi (Ben Stiller) and a priest (Edward Norton) who fall in love with the same woman (Jenna Elfman)—a blonde shiksa with a smile that can melt even the most kosher heart. The rabbi's mother is played by Anne Bancroft—no stranger to Jewish mother roles (she played Harvey Fierstein's mom in 1988's *Torch Song Trilogy* and the Jewish matriarch in Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound*, a 1992 TV movie). In *Keeping the Faith*, Bancroft is by turns insightful and outrageous. But through it all, she manages to provide unconditional love to her smitten son—and not without a little bit of that old-time wisdom.

Clearly, things are not so simple for Jewish mothers today, many of whom face decidedly more complex challenges than those who blazed the trail. How, then, can they possibly come off so well? Possibly because many filmmakers do indeed think of their own mothers when writing or directing Jewish mother roles. And since most of the filmmakers themselves are so successful, they make sure their mother characters get the respect they deserve. If they didn't, you can be sure they'd never hear the end of it. ❧

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