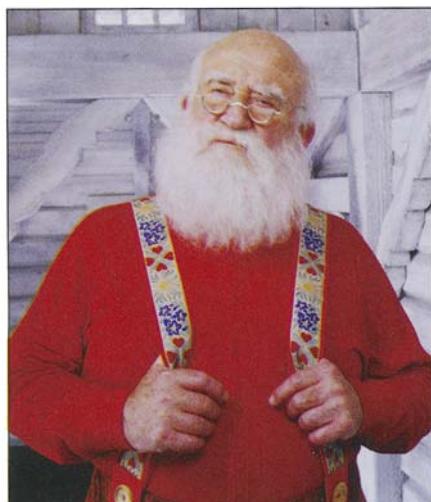


Dreaming of a White Hanukkah



(Above) Ed Asner plays Santa Claus in *Elf*
(Right) Rosemary Clooney, Danny Kaye, Vera-
Ellen and Bing Crosby star in *White Christmas*



Have you ever noticed that American Christmas movies are bursting with Jewish talent? Take 1954's *White Christmas*, one of the most beloved films because of its eponymous song. The song's writer was, of course, Irving Berlin, the Siberian-born son of a cantor, who wrote some 451 popular hits. He was in California and homesick for his family in New York when he wrote the "melancholy East European" tune in 1940, says Philip Furia, author of *Irving Berlin: A Life in Song*. Although he didn't celebrate Christmas as a child, he fondly recalled an Irish friend's scrawny Christmas tree that "towered up to heaven" on the Lower East Side.

The Jewish credit roll doesn't end with Berlin. It's no secret that the director, Michael Curtiz, who also directed *Casablanca*; the three screenwriters, Norman Krasna, Norman Panama and Melvin Frank; and co-star Danny Kaye were Jews. Not surprisingly, they gave the story a Jewish twist, interprets David Desser, co-author of the book *American Jewish Filmmakers*. The movie can be seen as a tale of how a Jewish GI (Danny Kaye), becomes integrated into mainstream American life after the war through his friendship with his former captain, played by Bing Crosby, who "by then," says Desser, "was the man perhaps most associated with a kind of genial Christmas spirit."

The great Jewish film moguls of that era were well-known for avoiding subjects that

might provoke anti-Semitism; they longed to be "real Yankees," according to Desser, and preferred to project an idealized vision of an assimilated American people onto the screen. These "Jewish immigrants seemed to have a knack for creating this universalist dream factory," remarks film producer Tom Teicholz. "They were in the entertainment business, not the religion business."

At the same time, their romantic, sentimental movies just so happened to remove Christ from Christmas. Philip Roth summarized the situation in his novel *Operation Shylock: A Confession*. His narrator observes, "God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, and He gave to Irving Berlin 'Easter Parade' and 'White Christmas.' The two holidays that celebrate the divinity of Christ—the divinity that's the very heart of the Jewish rejection of Christianity—and what does Irving Berlin do? Easter he turns into a fashion show and Christmas into a holiday about snow."

These secularized Christmas films are enjoyed by all. "A Christmas movie creates a kind of calm, entertaining place where we can all have the kind of white Christmas we'd like to have," Teicholz says. "The snow is white; the snow is falling; there's no darkness; it's all happy. That's reassuring. This is an example of good assimilation, in which Jews became part of the American culture by making Christmas movies. We also became part of American culture by watching them."

The 2003 film *Elf* may be the latest in the American Jewish Christmas film genre. Ed Asner, who grew up as one of the few Jews in his Kansas City neighborhood, plays the irascible but warm-hearted Santa in this holiday blockbuster. When asked how he felt about portraying the white-bearded symbol, Asner replied that he didn't identify *Elf* with Christmas, but with "a spirit of togetherness, which is priceless."

Elf's writer David Berenbaum, some 40 years younger than Asner, loved watching *Miracle on 34th Street* on television during his childhood. When asked, "Why is a nice Jewish boy making a Christmas movie? When is the Hanukkah film coming out?" Berenbaum said bluntly, "Hanukkah doesn't have the same cinematic tradition as Christmas."

So far, Hollywood has produced only one major Hanukkah feature film. Adam Sandler's 2002 *Eight Crazy Nights* is an animated romantic comedy filled with raunchy humor about sex, drugs and farts. Sandler's three variations of "The Hanukkah Song" have become favorites among Jews and non-Jews alike: "Put on your yarmulke, here comes Hanukkah. It's so much funukkah, to celebrate Hanukkah." But his film, which is a cult classic to some and silly to others, can't compete with the popularity of Christmas movies. Don't hold your breath waiting for *White Hanukkah*.—Joan Alpert