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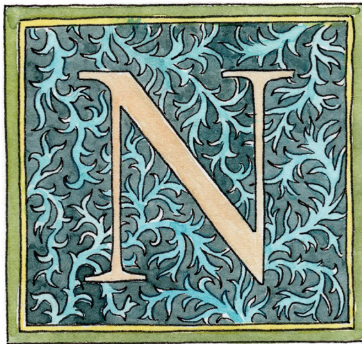
Jewish Masterpiece: *Blazing Saddles*

'We will all be in jail for making this movie'



OTHING is more stirring in Western movies than the horses. Beautiful and noble beasts, always our friends, they carry Indians, villains, and heroes across open plains; they bear John Wayne's bulk for a day but often stand around waiting, exhausted, probably underfed, yet always ready for some demanding task. In Mel Brooks's epic Western parody, *Blazing Saddles*, from 1974, a big, dopey cowboy, played by ex–football great Alex Karras, comes into the town of Rock Ridge and punches out a horse — roundhouses the animal right across the muzzle, causing it to fall on its side. It's one of Mel Brooks's scandalous city-boy jokes, mock heartless, a shocker. A little later, an old lady in a bonnet repeatedly gets punched in the stomach. She turns to the camera and asks, "Have you ever seen such cruelty?" Well, no, actually, we *haven't*.

Mel Brooks is not attacking horses or old ladies. What he's attacking are the leaden pieties built into so many Westerns. The Western is a great American art form, but it's a form that embodies a self-congratulatory myth — the vision of a virgin land where good people and righteousness triumph. The myth was repeated in books, in radio dramas, in comic books, in TV series, in epics, and in mild Saturday matinees. There are disturbing masterpieces such as John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) that complicate our feelings about righteous violence, but in 1974, most of the Western movies and TV shows familiar to Mel's audience were formally and emotionally conservative. Audiences loved the genre in part because it was so reliable and reassuring — the empty space conquered, savagery tamed, civilization inexorably advancing. After bringing peace, the classic Western hero leaves town, heading out for "the territory," a loner, a morally upright man of violence. In *Blazing Saddles*, Cleavon Little (as Black Bart, the sheriff) and Gene Wilder (as the Waco Kid), clean up the mess in Rock Ridge and leave in a Cadillac limo. They then go to a movie theater watching the movie they have all along been part of. Satire gives way to pop postmodernism.

Brooks's humor is edgy, and the edge is explicitly Jewish. He was born on a kitchen table in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn on June 28, 1926. His father, Max, a process server, died when Mel was an infant. "I can't tell you what sadness, what pain it is to me never to have known my own father," he said in 1975. But there was always the redoubtable Kitty, his mother, who favored him among her four sons. He had the confidence Kitty gave him joined to an unappeasable desire to reach the one person he could never reach. That inability can't tell us everything, but it's suggestive, and it may be linked to his conviction that laughter is the only real answer to death.

"Vive! Vivre!" he said to me once. "The joy of life. Comedy is

central to it....Comedy is the realization of being alive." His comedy became an all-out assault on taste, a celebration of the living body in all its gross misery and coarse happiness—in his mind, an assault on death. *Take that! I'm alive! You tried to kill us all and we're still here!* He attacks such supreme proponents of death — especially Jewish death — as Torquemada (in *History of the World, Part I*) and Adolf Hitler (everywhere, again and again). The Jew killers have to be brought into Jewish entertainment; they have to be kept alive in order to be humiliated by mockery. And the spirit of life-affirming gross comedy — much more serious than mere "black" or "sick" humor — also has to be affirmed again and again. It's the only way to keep death at bay.

Brooks's comedy is far more grim than most people acknowledge. If death must be conquered, he will spring laughter out of calamity by facing it over and over. Throughout his work, large projects and small, he displays an endless fascination with such experiences as fear and cruelty — for him, *the* source of humor, period. He makes that clear in "The Stone Age," one of the early episodes in *History of the World, Part I*. The Homo sapiens gather in an uncomfortable-looking cave. Out in front, a fellow in ratty pelts tries to put on a show. He tumbles and kicks up a leg and gets little response. It's definitely a slow night in the cave. Suddenly, a T-Rex appears; he grabs the entertainer in his jaws and carries him off screaming, and the cave dwellers fall into hysterics. It is the Birth of Comedy. In *Blazing Saddles*, a Quasimodo-like hangman works outside the attorney general's office, busily executing willing victims all day long. It's a standing joke. Throughout the movie, the bad guys are openly gleeful over the mayhem they will cause.

This proponent of absurdist fantasy ("The 2,000 Year Old Man," *Young Frankenstein*, etc.) is actually a stern moral realist. (His favorite Russian writer is Gogol, the sardonic genius who wrote "The Nose," "The Overcoat," and *Dead Souls*.) His moral realism is as much cul-

tural as personal in its origins. For centuries, the Jews were the victims of a bizarre joke, the ultimate double bind: They were God's chosen people, yet they were defenseless. In America, no longer defenseless, Jews could nevertheless be wary and demanding: A life had to have a shape, a meaning; an anecdote, a clear significance; a joke, a solid punch. Ignorance and illusion are good things to avoid — for Jews, such mistakes are far too dangerous. Jews insist on being in the know.

From the beginning, *Blazing Saddles* was a Jewish realist's attack on lying genre conventions. The script evolved from an unproduced work called "Tex X" by Andrew Bergman, then a publicist for United Artists and later a writer and director of his own movies. In Bergman's fancy, a Western town expecting a new sheriff like Tim Holt (a genial boyish beauty who starred in innumerable B-movie Westerns) instead receives a black man like H. Rap Brown (a sulfurous civil rights leader in the Sixties and Seventies). The idea joined time travel to culture shock. The town was to be shaken up, the conventions overturned. Brooks assembled a writing team that included Bergman; a neophyte named Norman Steinberg who had been bugging Mel about writing for a living; and another neophyte (and Steinberg's friend), Alan Uger, a dentist — at which point Brooks said, according to Patrick McGilligan's 2019 biography *Funny Man: Mel Brooks*, "I see four white guys here. Four Jews. We need a person of color."

The person of color turned out to be the most brilliant comedian of the day, Richard Pryor, then 32 years old, a profound and profane creative mind spilling in every direction. Pryor was a dirty-mouthed humanist who propounded a vision of the end of racism. To the "Tex X" script he added disreputable jokes and a liberal use of the N-word, a term he renounced a few years later, in 1979, after a trip to Africa. But in 1974, when he was working on the script, the word was alive for him — and for Bergman, too. "The 'N-word' was very much a part of my original 'Tex X' novella and first draft," Bergman says, "because

that was both the vernacular of the era and the emotional engine that drove the piece. What Richie did was liberate us to use it freely. A guarantor, if you will."

So! Four Jews knew they needed a brilliant black mind to complete their overhaul of the Western. In the writers' room, Brooks told his crew to throw in whatever crazy ideas they could come up with. He wanted scandal, tumult, uproar. "We will all be in jail for making this movie," he said. After much writing and rewriting, he and his collaborators came up with a scenario that substituted profane burlesque for the conventions that had stabilized so many movies and TV shows. What, for instance, did cowboys eat when they were out there on the plains day after day? Well, they ate coffee and baked beans, with the noisy result you hear in *Blazing Saddles*. How did gunslingers pull off such feats as shooting the guns out of their opponents' hands? Well, they didn't. As the Waco Kid, Gene Wilder accomplishes such a stunt without drawing his gun — Brooks's way of telling us the entire idea is nonsense. What were sexual relations like? In most cases, brief and paid for. We get a presentation of this truth in the greatest musical parody ever filmed — Madeline Kahn, as Lili Von Shtupp, doing a lewd version of Marlene Dietrich's bored S&M vamping in *The Blue Angel*, *Destry Rides Again*, and other movies. Lili's song, which Brooks wrote, is called "I'm Tired." ("I've been with thousands of men / Again and again / They promise the moon / They're always coming and going / And going and coming / And always too soon.") Stretching out Dietrich's German drawl, Kahn buggers her consonants and captures the goddess's uncertain relation to pitch, her voice running out of steam in the held notes.

The picture began as a Jewish project and became a Jewish-black project — in retrospect, a case of two outsider groups banding together with results both comically explosive and moving. Explicitly, Mel's love of cruel jokes, his insistence on humor as the answer to

death, was joined to black outrage over racism and also to the kind of liberal Jewish temperament that flourished in the Sixties and Seventies. Mel deserves a lot of credit: His generosity to blacks comes without condescension or sentimentality. If cruelty is the source of Mel's comedy, racism itself, one of humanity's nastiest jokes, was a great big target. "When you parody something," Mel wrote in his autobiography, "you move the truth sideways." In the beginning, white cowboys ask for a song from black workers on a railway gang. Rather than "Camptown Races," the minstrel-show favorite that the whites want from them, the workers sing Cole Porter—"I get no kick from Champagne…" A little revenge is playing out here: The blacks are suave, modern, musically sophisticated, the whites crude and dumb. Like all the whites in town, they happily sling the N-word around.

No one, as I remember, missed the point in 1974, but recently the picture has been buzz-bombed on social media as racist. The sound of the N-word hurts too much even when the people using it are shown as jerks. But *Blazing Saddles* is anything but a racist movie. Whoopi Goldberg got it right (in a December 7, 2022, episode of *The View*) when she said, "It deals with racism by coming at it right, straight, out front, making you think and laugh about it." It does so by clothing social satire in crass, funny jokes. You laugh at the outrageousness before realizing that it's your own attitudes that are being mocked. Brooks's excesses have a cleaning force; he is an extraordinary exposer of social pretense and false righteousness.

Pryor, who certainly thought racism could be funny, wanted to play Black Bart, but he was freebasing cocaine and Warner Bros. couldn't get insurance for him, though much of his shiv-like wit survives. His substitute, the handsome and charming theater actor Little, has an easy way about him — he looks great on horseback in his Gucci Western range wear. In a flashback narrated by Bart, Brooks turns up

as an Indian chief with an enormous headdress and red, white, and black war paint streaming down the sides of his ample nose. He faces Bart's ancestors, who, excluded, are bringing up the rear in a wagon train heading West. "*Schvartzes!*" cries the chief. "*Loz em gaeyn!*" (Let them go!)

Jews welcome blacks to the Old West — and also warn them against it. At the center of the movie, a friendship develops between the Waco Kid and Bart, who is at first astonished by the racial contempt he experiences in town. The Kid then describes the townspeople to Bart as "people of the land. The common clay of the New West. You know... *morons*." That's a more relaxed version of the acid sentiments one can imagine H. Rap Brown expressing. And we think, *Well, yes, the two can't be insiders; nor do they want to be*. Jew and black can show up in the Old West only as interlopers and satirical myth busters — and then leave (in that Cadillac).

Like most comics, Mel Brooks is an opportunist; he goes where the laughs are. (The big campfire farting sequence is not as bold as he claims; he knew well enough that young audiences would howl with delight when they were pushed.) Yet the black-Jewish alliance against the racist white settlers not only works very well as comedy; it becomes, by means of its energetic warmth and contempt, a political statement. Mel and his gang suggested that hypocrisy lies beneath so much supposedly moral violence in Westerns, that scorn lies beneath genteel manners. If the movie seems funnier now than in 1974, it also feels more heartfelt, too. For all its crude jokes, *Blazing Saddles* is a sweet liberal dream of companionship and soul brotherhood triumphing over the bigots and the squares.

But one has to ask: Could anything like it be made now? The question is not so much "bad taste" as it is our sensitivity to all kinds of hurt. Wouldn't the inspired Madeline Kahn number be shelved as a rude assault on women? The language, the atti-

tudes, the outrages large and small, the nervous-making jostling of whites and blacks, and, finally, the grand-scale surreal messiness of the settings, the West giving way at the end to a Warner Bros. soundstage where a musical is being shot—all of this puts anything like *Blazing Saddles* out of the question in contemporary Hollywood. From the beginning, of course, Mel Brooks meant to shock. The playful-dirty tone, the seemingly spontaneous, tossed-off barbarities began in that writers' room. But some kinds of shock have become inadmissible. From our cautious and respect-laden vantage, the movie is funnier and more dangerous than it was 50 years ago. It's like some jewel-encrusted dagger (okay, a jewel-encrusted plastic dagger) recovered from a long-ago civilization, too threatening for our more fretful time. ✴