

Jewish
Women's
Archive

GETTING INTO TROUBLE

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR "MAKING TROUBLE"

A FILM PRODUCED BY THE JEWISH WOMEN'S ARCHIVE

For more information about the film, visit jwa.org.

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The mission of the Jewish Women's Archive is to uncover, chronicle and transmit the rich history of North American Jewish women to a broad public. As part of that mission, JWA joined forces with independent filmmaker, Rachel Talbot, to produce a documentary about six funny Jewish women: Molly Picon, Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker, Joan Rivers, Wendy Wasserstein, and Gilda Radner. In their own day, these women were among the most popular entertainers in the land. *Making Trouble* captures the important — but until now, little-known — legacy these comedians have left to us all.

The film played at over 70 film festivals all over the country and abroad in 2007-2008; panels and Q & A sessions followed many screenings. In Santa Fe and Seattle, St. Louis and Cincinnati, Baltimore and Brattleboro, and in many other places, audiences wondered about the choices and sacrifices these women had made and the paths they had taken. Would Molly Picon have been such a big star if she hadn't used a Yiddish accent? Did Sophie Tucker ever regret leaving her son behind to pursue her career? Did TV viewers who adored Gilda Radner think of her as a "Jewish comedian"?

On the next page, we provide a list of questions that can serve as "conversation starters." There are no right answers — just ideas to ponder and share. On the back of this booklet is a list of films and books we think you will find useful — and fun — if you want to know more about the women featured in the film and the tradition of funny Jewish women.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

WHY "MAKING TROUBLE"?

- What title would you choose for a film about funny Jewish women?
- Who do you think is the biggest "troublemaker" in the film? Why?
- In what sense can all women comedians be considered troublemakers?
- Who would you include in a film about American Jewish women who "made trouble"?

BEING A FUNNY JEWISH WOMAN...

- Are there funny Jewish women who are not in the film who you think should have been included? Who?
- Is there anyone among the six comedians featured in the film who you think should not have been included? Who?
- Is there anything particularly Jewish about the humor of these women? If so, please give examples.
- Is there anything particularly female about their humor? For example, how do issues of physical appearance, money, ambition, marriage, childrearing, illness, and loss figure in their comedy?
- What similarities and differences do you see among the six women featured in the film and the four comedians eating and schmoozing at Katz's Deli?

THREE GENERATIONS OF FUNNY JEWISH WOMEN...

- Do you think audiences in 1936 found Molly Picon's crossdressing in "Yidl Mitn Fidl" to be shocking? Why?
- Why did money and professional success seem to have had particular importance for Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker? Do you think the price they paid in their personal lives was too high? Would they have to pay that price today?
- Joan Rivers's comedy style is more risqué than that of most of the other women in the film. What stereotypes has she challenged as a Jewish woman comedian?
- One of the "Saturday Night Live" writers discusses the hate mail Gilda Radner received after she appeared in a mock ad for "Jewess Jeans." Why were some viewers so upset? Do you find the sketch offensive? If so, why?
- Wendy Wasserstein says about Dr. Gorgeous, a character in "The Sisters Rosensweig," "I'm going to give that woman back her dignity." What do you think she meant? Why did Wasserstein feel this was so important?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

BOOKS, FILMS, DVDS AND ALBUMS

Molly Picon

"Yidl Mitn Fidl" (National Center for Jewish Film, [brandeis.edu/jewishfilm], 1936)
So Laugh a Little, by Molly Picon (Messner, 1962)

Fanny Brice

"Be Yourself!" (Kino International, 2007)
Fanny Brice: The Original Funny Girl, by Herbert G. Goldman (Oxford University Press, 1992)
The Life and Times of Fanny Brice, by Barbara Grossman (Indiana University Press, 1991)

Sophie Tucker

"The Golden Jubilee" (Sepia Recordings, 2005)
"The Great Sophie Tucker" (Jasmine Music, 2005)
"Last of the Red Hot Mamas" (Asv Living Era, 2006)
"Some of These Days" (Golden Options, 1997)
Some of these Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker, by Sophie Tucker (Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1945)
Sophie Tucker: The First Lady of Show Business, by Armond Fields (McFarland & Company, 2003)

Joan Rivers

"Joan Rivers - Live at the London Palladium" (Standing Room Only, 2006)
Bouncing Back: I've Survived Everything ... and I Mean Everything ... and You Can Too, by Joan Rivers (The Easton Press, 1997)

Gilda Radner

"SNL - Best of Gilda Radner" (Lions Gate 2005)
"Gilda Live!" (Warner Home Video, 1994)
Bunny, Bunny: Gilda Radner, a Sort of Love Story, by Alan Zweibel (Villard, 1994)
It's Always Something, by Gilda Radner (Simon & Schuster, 1989)

Wendy Wasserstein

The Heidi Chronicles: Uncommon Women and Others & Isn't It Romantic, by Wendy Wasserstein (Harcourt, 1990)
Shiksa Goddess, (Or, How I Spent My Forties) Essays, by Wendy Wasserstein (Alfred A. Knopf, 2001)
The Sisters Rosensweig, by Wendy Wasserstein (Harcourt, 1993)

General Resources

Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor, by Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed. (Indiana University Press, 1987)
The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America, by Lawrence Epstein (PublicAffairs, 2001)
Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s, by Gerald Nachman (Pantheon Books, 2003)
From Mae to Madonna: Women Entertainers in Twentieth-Century America, by June Sochen (University Press of Kentucky, 1999)
A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture, by Nancy Walker (University of Minnesota Press, 1988)