REL 320: American Jewish Humor MW 2:15-3:35
Instructor: Jenny Caplan (jacaplan@syr.edu)
Office: 514 Hall of Languages
Office Hours: Mondays 12:30-2

“A person without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs. It's jolted by every pebble on the road.”(Henry Ward Beecher, 1813-1887)

“I wonder if illiterate people get the full effect of alphabet soup?”(Jerry Seinfeld, 1954-)

This course is a look at American Jewish history through one particular lens; that of the peculiar phenomenon of Jewish humor. There is a long history of Jews and humor which has nothing to do with the immigrant experience in America, but the immigrant experience in America nonetheless has a great deal to do with the humor that has been produced by Jews in this country, particularly in the 20th century. We will be reading some historical background on American Jews and some humor theory as our foundation for our understanding of film viewings, short stories, stand-up comedy performances and musical recordings. By looking at the way Jewish humor changed throughout the 20th century we should in the end be able to chart the way the lives of American Jews were changing and have a deeper understanding of the American Jewish experience.

Learning Objectives:

1. Learning to study religion from a critical and historical perspective
2. Learning how to interpret a text (film, etc.) through various theoretical models
3. Learning to write analytically about both religion and literature (film, etc.)

Required Texts:

Lawrence Epstein, The Haunted Smile
Woody Allen, The Insanity Defense
Neil Simon, Brighton Beach Memoirs
Nathan Glazer, American Judaism
Vincent Brook, Something Ain’t Kosher Here
Simcha Weinstein, Shtick Shift

Books will be sold at the campus bookstore, but all are available online. Most of these books will be available in the library, but be aware that an older edition may have different page numbers than are assigned. The Woody Allen book is a collection of all his short stories, so you can also find many of them in previously published books but, again, the page numbers will certainly be different.
Schedule of Classes

8/30: Introduction, “The King And The Wise Man”
   Read: Freud, Bergson, Cohen, Pekar

9/1: Humor
   Read: Perspectives, Kaplan: “Judaism as a Civilization”, Telushkin, Dundes

9/8: Humor/Yiddish Theatre
   Read: Stardust Lost Intro, Ch. 1. Glazer Ch. 5

9/13: Yiddish Theatre/Vaudeville

9/15: Vaudeville/Radio
   Read: HS Ch. 3, Glazer Ch. 6, “Star Gallery: The Marx Brothers”, Harpo Profile, Groucho Profile
   **Due: Short Paper #1**

9/20: Marx Brothers
   Watch: Animal Crackers
   Read: HS: Ch. 4, “Jews, Stooges, and Censors in Pre-War Hollywood”

9/22: Marx Brothers
   Watch: Animal Crackers
   Read: Jews of Prime Time Intro, Ch. 1, HS Ch. 6, Something Ain’t Kosher Ch. 1-3, Goldbergs
   Profile, Gertrude Berg Profile

9/29: Early TV
   Watch: The Goldbergs
   Read: Glazer Ch. 7, HS Ch. 5

10/4: The Borscht Belt
   Read: “Jewish Community in the Catskills”, “Jewish Comedy Writers of the 1950s and 1960s”
   **Due: Short Paper #2**

10/6: Borscht Belt
   Read: Make ‘em Laugh, Glazer Ch. 8-9, “Putting on the Schpritz”, Tom Lehrer Profile, Alan
   Sherman Profile, “Death on Second Avenue”

10/11: The Satarists
   Listen: Allan Sherman, Tom Lehrer
   Watch: Make ‘em Laugh
   Read: Sid Caesar Profile

10/13: Interlude
   Watch: Sid Caesar Interview, The Producers
   Read: HS Ch. 7, Mel Brooks Profile
   **Due: Midterm Paper**

10/18: Mel Brooks
   Watch: The Producers
   Read: I’m Dying Up Here pp. 1-44, Lenny Bruce Profile, Lenny Bruce stories
10/20: 1970s Stand-Up
   Read: *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, “Dr. Klockenmeyer”
   Watch: *Brighton Beach Memoirs*

10/25: Neil Simon
   Watch: *Brighton Beach Memoirs*
   Read: HS Ch. 8, *Insanity Defense*, Woody Allen Profile
   **Due: Short Paper #3**

10/27: Woody Allen
   Watch: *Annie Hall*
   Read: *Insanity Defense*, “The Sacrifice of Isaac”

11/1: Woody Allen
   Watch: *Annie Hall*
   Read: SAK Ch. 4-5, *Jews of Prime Time* Ch. 7, Jerry Seinfeld Profile, “Seinfeld”

11/3: Seinfeld
   Read: HS Ch. 9, SAK Conclusion, “Bring in the Klowns”, Larry David Profile

11/8: Seinfeld and Larry David
   Read: HS Ch. 10, SAK. Ch. 7, “Roseanne” 1 & 2, Joan Rivers Profile, Phyllis Diller Profile, Gilda Radner Profile
   **Due: Short Paper #4**

11/10: Interlude (Gender)
   Watch: *Making Trouble*
   Read: “Star Gallery: Howard Stern”, “Jews and Pornography”

11/15: The Shockers; Stern and Silverman
   Read: *Shtick Shift* pp. 11-49 “Star Gallery: Adam Sandler”
   Watch: *Funny People*
   Listen: “The Hanukkah Song”

11/22: Adam Sandler
   Watch: *Funny People*
   Read: SS: pp. 63-107, *Jewish Self Hatred* pp. 107-138, HS Ch. 11-12, Jon Stewart Profile, Bill Mahr Profile

11/29: Politics and Self-Hatred; Borat, Ben Stiller, Jon Stewart, Bill Mahr

12/1: Presentations

12/6: Presentations
   Read: “Not The Last Word”

12/8: Presentations and Wrap-up

**Grading:**

Short Papers: You will be asked to write 4 short papers over the course of the semester. These papers should be 2-3 pages (double spaced) in length and discuss material covered in that portion of the course. You should address the fundamental questions of the course as well as relating the material you have chosen to American Jewish history and the social environment of the time period. I will drop the lowest short paper grade of the semester.
which means you may only do 3 if you so choose. But I recommend doing all 4 so that you have some grading insurance.

Midterm Paper: Your midterm paper should be 5-7 pages in length and is due October 13th. It should serve as your opportunity to go into something from the first half of the course in more depth. It can be an expansion of a short paper you found particularly engaging, a topic you wish we could have covered in more depth, or something from the time periods discussed that we were not able to cover. If you choose material not covered in the course you MUST discuss it with me in advance.

Presentation: You and a partner will choose a figure or other topic not covered by the course and research it. You will then present the information to the course in a 7-10 minute oral presentation.

Final Paper: Your final paper should be 5-6 pages in length and is due December 13th by 5pm in the Religion Office (HL 501). This is your individual portion of the final project and your chance to tell me what you learned about your chosen topic.

Attendance and Participation: This is a relatively small upper level course and good attendance and participation is expected. Once add/drop period ends you may have up to two absences for any reason; you do not need to clear these with me, they are yours to use as you see fit for things like illness, family emergency, mental health, overloaded weeks, job interviews, etc. After those two absences, however, nothing short of a documented medical emergency will be excused so plan wisely when using your absences.

Grading Breakdown:

Short Papers (10 points each x 3): 30 points
Midterm Paper: 20 points
Presentation: 10 points
Final Paper: 25 points
Attendance and Participation: 15 points

Statement Regarding Disability-Related Accommodations
Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, 315-443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to the instructor and review those accommodations with the instructor. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodations as early as possible is necessary. For further information, see the ODS website, Office of Disability Services, see http://disabilityservices.syr.edu

Academic Integrity Statement
The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. For more information and the complete policy, see http://academicintegrity.syr.edu/

Class Courtesy
All students are expected to follow simple rules of academic courtesy with respect to fellow students and instructors. Please come to class on time to avoid disrupting the class. Once class begins, you must refrain from personal conversations. You must put away all non-course reading materials (e.g. newspapers). Turn off and put away all cell phones and MP3 players. Refrain from using computers for any non-course related activities. Please avoid premature preparations to leave class; I will let you know when class is over. Eating is not allowed during class. You may be asked to leave the class for the day if you do not follow these rules.