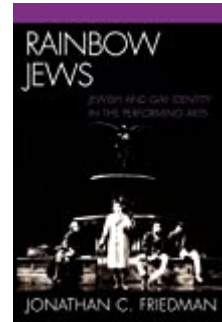




Jonathan C. Friedman. *Rainbow Jews: Jewish and Gay Identity in the Performing Arts.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. 204 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-1448-3.



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Queer Jews

In recent Jewish studies literature, much has been written about the general self-images of the Jewish male. These have fallen into two opposing categories. The first is the “tough” Jew, that is, the idealized hypermasculine, militarized, and muscled, though not very intellectual, Jew of the Zionist project with its variations of the “Muscle-Jew,” and, later, the “sabrá.” The second image is that of the “queer” or “sissy” Jew with its historic alternatives of the *yeshiva-bochur* and *mensch*: the effeminate, gentle, timid, studious, and delicate Jew of traditional Eastern European Jewish culture who devoted his life to the study of Torah. Both models of masculinity were “openly resistant to and critical of the prevailing ideology of ‘manliness’ dominant in Europe.”[1]

In *Rainbow Jews*, Jonathan C. Friedman, associate professor of history at West Chester University, explores Jews who are literally *queer*. In doing so, Friedman adds to a number of recent works addressing Jewish identities in the performing arts. These include: Henry Bial’s *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (2005); Omer Bartov’s *The ‘Jew’ in American*

Cinema: From the Golem to Don’t Touch My Holocaust (2005); and *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, edited by Vincent Brook (2006), as well as my own “From Jeremy to Jesus: The Jewish Male Body on Film, 1990 to the Present,” in Santiago Fouz-Hernández’s edited collection *Male Bodies in Global Cinema* (2008).

Specifically, Friedman sets out to explore “the intersection of gay and Jewish identity in the sphere of the performing arts, specifically cinema and theater,” and how they have been “constitutive in the construction of both Jewishness and gay identity over the past decades” (p. 2). His book seeks to answer two key questions: “Have images of gay identity intersected in plays and films over time, and to what extent has Jewishness played a role in shaping gay sexuality in the performing arts” (p. 2).

Chapter 1, “Homophobia and Tolerance in Judaism,” provides some contextualization for discussion of these issues by exploring Judaism’s, often contradictory (he ar-

gues), attitudes toward homosexuality. Here, he draws heavily on the work of Daniel Boyarin, Steven Greenberg, and others. Chapter 2, "Jews, Homosexuality, and the Performing Arts in the United States," then gives a brief summary of gay and Jewish themes in U.S. cinema and theater from 1890 to 1969 when the Stonewall riots occurred in New York City. Chapter 3, "Gay Jewish Voices 'Come Out,'" continues this exploration up to 1982. Together, these introductory chapters cover familiar material for those who are engaged in the study of Jewish identities and/or the performing arts and may not have anything new to add. Chapter 4, "Kaddish: AIDS, Jews, and the Performing Arts," focuses the discussion more and takes it to the 1990s. The next chapter examines gay and Jewish identities in film and theater during the 1990s with an emphasis on small independent productions and regional film festivals. Chapter 6 focuses on Jewish lesbians in film and theater, while the final chapter concentrates on gays and lesbians in Israel. These last two are welcome, particularly with their emphasis on alternative Jewish femininities, an area that could be productively explored even further given how much of a raw deal Jewish women have, and continue to, received on screen.

However, it is a shame that the book was published when it was as it misses out on more recent and interesting mainstream cinematic representations of homosexuality and lesbianism which the author could have productively explored. These include the lesbianism of *Kissing Jessica Stein* (directed by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld [2001]), the homosexuality (and homophobia) featured in the most recent film of Eytan Fox (*The Bubble* [2006])—Friedman does explore his previous films *Yossi and Jagger* [2002] and *Walk on Water* [2004], *Lucky Number Slevin* (directed by Paul McGuigan [2007]), and the biopic of Harvey Milk (*Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant [2008]). I would be interested to learn what Friedman makes of

these recent productions and if they point to any wider changes in American and Israeli society respectively. Indeed, perhaps these examples can be included if *Rainbow Jews* goes to a second edition.

It would have also been useful, or perhaps this is too much to ask, if Friedman's focus had been wider than the two poles of U.S. and Israeli cinema. Friedman does mention *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (directed by John Schlesinger [1971]), but beyond that there is no attempt to explore theatrical and cinematic production in other countries. Of course, while the film industries of Europe, Canada, South America, and Australia have not been as historically strong as that of the United States or Israel (in Jewish terms at least), some interesting representations of Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism have emerged. The French film *L'homme est une femme comme les autres/Man is a Woman* (directed by Jean-Jacques Zilbermann [1998]), for example, depicts the travails of a gay French Jewish man who is bribed by his uncle to marry a Jewish woman. The opening shots depict him not only cruising in a gay sauna to the strains of *klezmer* (a highly unusual use of that type of music), but also, as a gay Hasidic Jew, hiding his sexuality from his family complete with detachable *peyot* (sideburns). But these limitations are not Friedman's fault rather those of a subject area that occasionally fears to tread beyond the familiar: Israel and the United States.

Overall, however, these quibbles aside, *Rainbow Jews* provides a readable and useful primer on the intersection of gay and Jewish identities in the performing arts and is a welcome addition to the growing stable of books in this area.

Note

[1]. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 23.

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