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'Funny Man' review: Patrick McGilligan bio of Mel Brooks is detailed but pedestrian

FUNNY MAN: Mel Brooks
By Patrick McGilligan
Harper, 624 pp., $40.

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Special to Newsday

Comedy, it's been said, is tragedy plus time. Is there any better evidence of this proposition than "The Producers?"

Written and directed by Mel Brooks and overflowing with Jewish talent on both sides of the camera, the 1967 film tells the story of a has-been Broadway producer and his timid accountant, who come up with a clever way to make a killing — as long as they can find a surefire flop.

Their ticket to paradise is a play about the sunny side of Hitler, which they stage with an unforgettable production number that is surely one of the funniest segments in the history of cinema. The "Springtime for Hitler" set-piece is a surreally lush parody of so many vintage Broadway musicals, and the choreography includes a Busby Berkeley-style aerial view of Nazis formed into a rotating, goose-stepping human swastika. The obscenely hummable music accompanies such lyrics as:

We're marching to a faster pace

Look out, here comes the master race

I re-watched it recently and literally wept with laughter. But perhaps not just laughter. For "The Producers," remember, was made a mere 22 years after the liberation of Auschwitz. It represents not just Mel Brooks at his outrageous best (and, sometimes, worst), but the triumph of a people ready at last to dance on the grave of their persecutors.

The making of "The Producers" is one of the most interesting parts of Patrick McGilligan's highly detailed but disappointingly pedestrian new biography of Brooks, who comes across in this lengthy account as — let's not mince words — a brilliant, insecure, grasping, credit-hogging boor. A domestic example: McGilligan reports that he gave his first wife an allowance of just $3 a day and betrayed her almost continually with other women. After they divorced, the author tells us, he let her and their three children fall into financial straits.

Born Melvin Kaminsky in 1926 (he's the great-uncle of current State Sen. Todd Kaminsky of Long Beach), young Mel lost his father when he was just two, an event that left the four young

Kaminsky brothers and their determined mother to struggle along without him through Depression, war and the world's palpable hostility. But little Mel grew up in Brooklyn's Williamsburg section, in a Jewish culture so pervasive it was practically in the air he breathed. Like his father's death, it would condition his outlook, his humor and his creative choices for the rest of his life.

Now 92, Brooks was part of a comic cohort embodied with well-deserved exaggeration by the "Simpsons" character of Krusty the Clown, who was probably a nicer person than Brooks even if he never had Mel's talent. But seriously now: The story of Brooks' success feels familiar, if only because so many other legendary entertainers followed a parallel trajectory. Known as a cutup around his neighborhood, he broke into the business in the Catskills. After wartime Army service, he latched onto the era's king of comedy, Sid Caesar, eventually helping to write Caesar's pathbreaking TV shows of the 1950s. Caesar alums including Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon and others would cut a broad swath through popular culture, and despite his erratic work habits and abrasive personality, Brooks probably had as big an impact as any through such signature works as "Get Smart," "Blazing Saddles" and "Young Frankenstein."

But above all else, there is "The Producers," his first directorial effort. Setting a pattern for projects to come, he wrote it with the help of someone else, in this case a woman named Alfa-Betty Olsen, but kept the credit and the real money for himself. Although ignorant of filmmaking, he bullied and insulted the professionals he worked with. And the movie itself is a mix of comic genius, excruciating sexism and cartoonish homophobic stereotyping. Yet the performances and script are nothing short of brilliant. When Brooks won an Oscar for the screenplay, he failed to thank Olsen in his acceptance speech.

A veteran showbiz biographer, McGilligan has produced a book rich with knowledge of the industry and overflowing with the fruits of his research. Unfortunately, some of them might better have been left on the trees. He's also an awkward writer, a limited student of human psychology and not particularly insightful about Brooks' work. Nor does he seem to have much of a feel for the sheer Jewishness of the proceedings. At one point he resorts to the dictionary to explain what a bialy is.

Yet "Funny Man" still manages to be a pretty interesting book, especially for those of us who remember when American comedy seemed entirely Jewish. It will have to do for now.