

# To Be a Jew or To Act as a Jew: That is the Question



Helen Mirren (left) playing Golda Meir (right)

**You don't have to** be Jewish to love Levy's Real Jewish Rye.

One of the amusing stories of the acting profession is a remark by Laurence Olivier. During the making of the film, *The Marathon Man* in 1976 the co-star Dustin Hoffman, the method actor, played the role of a graduate student troubled by a conspiracy headed by a Nazi war criminal played by Olivier. Hoffman was in bad physical shape having stayed up for three days without sleep to achieve the appropriate emotional condition of the character, and to be convincing. Olivier, amusingly replied, "Why don't you just try acting dear boy. it's a lot easier."

Indeed, actors should act, that's their profession. This jocular remark reflects problems of representation, and indirectly of identity politics, in the acting profession. Should characters be cast on the basis of their skills or for

their "lived experience." The latter in practice would deny the performer the opportunity to impersonate another person, one from another religion, culture, time, or sexuality. A specific issue has arisen over whether non-Jews, gentiles, should be cast to play a Jewish man or woman. Care is being taken of how minorities are portrayed on stage and screen, but some agree that Jewish performers face a unique problem.

Acting is the art of mimicry, mimesis, expressed in voice, accent, movement, motion, behavior, reference to social norms, and the general study of others. Representation is world, a form of imitation of the real world, holding as it were the "mirror up to nature." The wider, general issue is that the need for authenticity and realism may need some person of a particular age, sex, or race, when deciding who should be chosen to play characters of particular religions, ethnicities, or sexualities. It is improbable that Barbra Streisand will ever be cast to play Mother Theresa, but it is more open whether should gay roles should go exclusively to gays, and conversely whether gays should play straight roles. Or should King Richard III be played only by actors with scoliosis, a condition the King had. More typical is the fact that the healthy Daniel Day-Lewis played, and won an Oscar, for his role in *My Left Foot* as a person with cerebral palsy.

It is evident that in recent years, even before BLM, more concern and authenticity, has been shown in casting minority roles, whether relating to race, disability, or sexual orientation. Yet, an exception appears to be that Jewish characters are still often, though not regularly, played by non-Jews. The specific relevant controversial issue is the questioning by the well-known British Jewish actress and comedian Maureen Lipman of the casting in a film of the even more well-known non-Jewish British actress Helen Mirren, as Golda Meir, Israel's Iron Lady and only female prime minister, 1969-1974, because "the Jewishness of the character is so integral." Lipman explained, "I'm sure she (Mirren) will be

marvelous, but it would never be allowed for Ben Kingsley to play Nelson Mandela. You just couldn't even go there."

The film, *Golda*, being directed by a Israeli director, Academy Award winner, Guy Nattiv, is set during the Yom Kippur war in 1973.

Mirren, the center of the discussion, was born in London in 1945 of an English mother who came from the working class and a Russian father of aristocratic descent. Her grandfather, a diplomat, had been sent in 1915 to England by Tsar Nicolas II to negotiate an arms deal with the UK, and was forced to remain when the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917. Stripped of his land and money, he became a taxi driver. His son, father of Helen, played the viola and worked in a textile warehouse in the East End where he met his wife.

Helen has had a distinguished career, winning an Oscar and Olivier awards, having a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Virtually the Queen of acting, she has been Elizabeth I and II of England, Cleopatra, and Catherine the Great as well as a Mossad agent and a Jewish refugee.

Now aged 76 she is wearing facial prosthetics, smoking cigarettes to become Golda. Mirren has said that Golda Meier was "a formidable, intransigent and powerful leader. I only hope I do her justice. It is a great challenge to portray her at the most difficult moment of her life."

Maureen Lipman, now 76, the actress and political activist, especially in pro-Israeli groups and criticism of the perceived increase in antisemitism in the UK, has also had a long and successful career on the British stage and screen, winning an Olivier prize, expressed the fact she was "uncomfortable" with the casting of Dame Helen as Golda, because "the Jewishness of Meir's character is so integral." Yet, Lipman herself played a non-Jew among her other roles, starring as a Church of England vicar in a comedy special of

the *Vicar of Dibley* in 2015.

Accompanying the view that Jewish roles should be played by Jewish actors and actresses are two separate arguments that there are few roles for Jewish women actresses, and that often Jewish female characters are serotyped in unpleasant ways such as a nagging mother or spoiled American Jewish princess.

The controversy over Mirren is not a new problem, one of who should represent diversity on stage. Sarah Silverman the comedian and actress commented on the casting of non-Jewish Kathryn Hahn as the very Jewish Joan Rivers in a TV series. Right now, Silverman argues, representation matters: it also has to matter for Jews as well, especially Jewish women.

More broadly two matters arise: should Jews be respected as a distinct minority group; and can non-Jews in performance adequately reflect the Jewish community and Jewish experience?

Earlier in 2019 Maureen Lipman was one of the performers in British television and theater to sign an open letter about the casting of non-Jews to play Jewish characters, a practice that some have called "Jewface."

In September 2019 the American musical *Falsettos* opened in London. Though it was written by two Jews and features a bar mitzvah, there were no Jews in the cast, and the director was not Jewish. The 2019 letter complained that a show so obviously concerned with Jewish religion and culture as *Falsettos* should have had Jewish representation

In Hollywood, and on the stage in both the U.S. and UK some Jewish actresses have had success; among them are Barbra Streisand, Natalie Portman, Gal Gadot, Rachel Weisz, Scarlett Johansson. Yet there has been an increasing trend for non-Jewish actors to play ethnic Jewish characters.

Among the more prominent and notable non-Jews are; Charles Heston had been Moses in 1956 in *The Ten Commandments*, Ben

Kinsley has been the Jewish accountant in Schindler's list, Leonardo DiCaprio as the stockbroker in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Natalie Wood as Marjorie Morningstar, Millie Perkins as Anne Frank, Felicity Jones portrayed Ruth Bader Ginsburg in *On the Basis of Sex*, Will Ferrell as the Jewish psychiatrist in *The Shrink Next Door*, and of course Charlie Chaplin as the Jewish barber in *The Great Dictator*. Recently, Jonathan Pryce has appeared as *Fagin*, and Juliet Stevenson as a Holocaust survivor.

The most disturbing aspect is the allegation of Jewface, an allusion to Blackface, the make-up used, mainly, by performers of non-African descent to portray a person, often a caricature, of African descent. This practice, often associated with the minstrel shows of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which exemplified racial stereotypes in a vulgar way, and with music hall performers such as Al Jolson, in *The Jazz Singer*, declined with the civil rights movement and disappeared with BLM, contributed to the use and increase of racial stereotypes. Blackface was seen as offensive, and racist. This is still the case with the criticism that Laurence Olivier played the Moor of Venice in the production of *Othello* with a very dark makeup and emphasis on blackness.

The reference of Blackface, though not an exact parallel, is to Jewface, the casting of non-Jews playing Jewish characters, and at worst using stereotypes of Jews, frizzy hair, big nose, New York accent, Yiddish inflection. Jewface is seen as portraying Jews with their Jewishness front and center.

How does one best represent diversity on stage or screen? The issue of performers portraying characters of different religions, sexualities, or ethnicities, has become hypersensitive. Representation is important and is a complex issue, especially in the casting of minority roles, in the light of racial, sexual and other factors. Yet the argument is plausible that Jews constitute a special case. In an era where

antisemitism is virulent, where there are attacks, verbal and physical, on Jews around the world , it is important, indeed essential, to present accurate representation of Jews and Judaism.