



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

Institute of Continuing Education

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## Jewish humour in the films of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen

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**Start date** 20 May 2016

**End date** 22 May 2016

**Venue** Madingley Hall

Madingley

Cambridge

**Tutor** Dr Colin Shindler

**Course code** 1516NRX116

**Director of Programmes**

Emma Jennings

**For further information on this course, please contact**

Public Programme Co-ordinator, Clare Kerr  
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**To book** See: [www.ice.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ice.cam.ac.uk) or telephone 01223 746262

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### Tutor biography

Colin Shindler has maintained an active interest in twentieth century American and British social and cultural history whilst pursuing a wide-ranging career as a writer and producer in television, radio and motion pictures, and as an author of books and journalism for over thirty years.

He graduated with a degree in History from Cambridge and remained to complete his PhD thesis later published as *Hollywood in Crisis* (1996). His other monograph on Hollywood and American society was *Hollywood Goes to War* (1979). He has been lecturing and teaching undergraduates and postgraduates at Cambridge since 1998 but he is best known as the screenwriter of *Buster* starring Phil Collins and Julie Walters, the producer of the BBC drama series *Lovejoy* and as the author of the childhood memoir *Manchester United Ruined My Life*.

He wrote and presented *Sport and the Movies* for BBC Radio Four's *Archive on Four* in November 2010 as well as a monthly newsletter for *The Film Programme*. Little Brown published his new bestseller, an oral history of National Service in May 2012 and on the same day *Headline* brought out the second part of his autobiography *Manchester City*

Ruined My Life. He has been frequently heard on The Today programme and PM on Radio 4 which recently broadcast Rumours, his feature length play on Private Eye and the Profumo Affair. His next book will be an analysis of post-war England football captains as a mirror of social history. His latest book *Four Lions: The Lives and Times of Four England Football Captains* is a study of post-war English social and cultural history to be published in May 2016.

## **Course programme**

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### **Friday**

Please plan to arrive between 16:30 and 18:30. You can meet other course members in the bar which opens at 18:15. Tea and coffee making facilities are available in the study bedrooms.

19:00	Dinner
20:30 – 22:00	Screening: My Favorite Year (1982)
22:00	Terrace bar open for informal discussion

### **Saturday**

07:30	Breakfast
09:00 – 10:30	Session 2: The Borscht Belt and Television in the 1950s
10:30	Coffee
11:00 – 12:30	Session 3: Mel & Woody: The Early Years
13:00	Lunch
14:00 – 16:00	Free
16:00	Tea
16:30 – 18:00	Session 4: Mel and Woody: The Glory Years
18:00 – 18:30	Free
18:30	Dinner
20:00 – 21:30	Screening: Crimes & Misdemeanors (1989)
21:30	Terrace bar open for informal discussion

### **Sunday**

07:30	Breakfast
09:00 – 10:30	Session 6: Mel and Woody: The Later Years
10:30	Coffee
11:00 – 12:30	Session 7: The Inheritance Factor
12:45	Lunch

**The course will disperse after lunch**

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## Course syllabus

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### Aims:

The aim of this course is to understand better the films of Woody Allen and Mel Brooks by putting them in the context of Jewish history during their lifetimes. We start with a look at the cultural landscape of America of the era that included the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Sid Caesar and Milton Berle and finish with an examination of their legacy in terms of modern Jewish American humour. We aim to examine too the rising political and economic power of the American Jews and see how that is reflected in their humour.

### Content:

The two evening sessions are devoted to screenings of two full length feature films. The first is made by Mel Brooks's company and though he doesn't appear in it, the film lovingly details his first steps in show business and his suffocating Jewish home in Brooklyn. The second is a perfect blend of Woody Allen's comic genius with his high moral seriousness. The other sessions deal with their films in their chronological appearance; each making his first film in 1967 – Woody with *Take the Money & Run* and Mel with the gloriously inspired *The Producers*. As Mel proceeded with commercially successful movie parodies, Allen started to push the boundaries, moving from "the early funny films" to creating masterpieces like *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* before regularly bemusing his audience with very unfunny films like *Interiors* and *Another Woman*. As Mel ran out of creative juice he stopped making films but Woody kept up his relentless schedule of one film a year. Throughout most of their films runs that irrepressible strain of New York Jewish humour which is the basis of this course.

### Presentation of the course:

This is a generously illustrated series of presentations. In addition to the screenings of the two full length feature films each session will feature more than a dozen clips not just from the films of Brooks and Allen but in the first and last sessions in particular, their social and cultural background. The last session should include material with which students will probably be most familiar culminating in *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the recent work of new Jewish comedians like Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer. Students are encouraged to contribute their own responses to Jewish humour and in particular to a comparison of American Jewish humour with its British equivalent.

**Outcomes:**

**As a result of the course, within the constraints of the time available, students should be able to:**

At the last count Woody Allen has directed 46 films (probably two more will arrive during the weekend) but I hope students who have enjoyed the course will be impelled to track down the many films they have not seen. Having taken the course they should then be able to recognise many of the traits that have been analysed in class.

The point of the course is that Jewish humour originates in Jewish history and that it has already started to develop in new directions. Students should be able after the course to see the new trends in a much better perspective.

I hope that many students will have read the novels of Philip Roth so that after the course students will be able to see the parallels between the finest Jewish American novelist and the finest Jewish American film makers.

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## Reading and resources list

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Listed below are a number of texts that might be of interest for future reference, but do not need to be bought (or consulted) for the course.

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Author	Title	Publisher and date
V Brook & M Grinberg (eds.)	<i>Woody on Rye</i>	Brandeis UP 2014
Jason Solomons	<i>Woody Allen Film by Film</i>	Carlton 2015
Marion Meade	<i>The Unruly Life of Woody Allen</i>	Weidenfeld 2000
Alex Simons	<i>Mel Brooks in the Cultural Industries</i>	Edinburgh 2012
Philip Roth	<i>Portnoy's Complaint</i>	Vintage 1969
Woody Allen	<i>Collected Prose</i>	Picador 1992

### Website addresses

<http://www.awordinyoureye.com/>

<http://www.melbrooks.com/>

<http://woodyallen.com/>

**Note** Students of the Institute of Continuing Education are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current Institute course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

*Information correct as of:* 28 April 2016