

## THEATER

## A funny thing happened to them on way to success as stand-up comedians

## COMEDIANS

By Trevor Griffiths

Directed (on Broadway) by Mike Nichols  
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\$2.95

A little after eight, as the theater audience is settling down, six working-class Manchester lads come straggling into their night school class. They are studying to be comedians, stand up pub comics, under the guidance of Eddie Waters, their honorable old mentor.

Waters has been teaching them that comedy, like every other art—like all meaningful work—must be based not only upon fine technique, but also upon some underlying moral purpose. Their comedy has to be about something that matters.

This evening is the night of their final, a pass or fail performance at the local pub, which will be judged by a visiting examiner from the national comics guild. He will offer a professional engagement to those that make the grade.

As the men nervously rib each other we get to know, and, for the most part, to like them. And we quickly see how much it means to pass. For each of them it is the one way out of a dead end working class job.

Waters enters and puts them through their paces. They improvise on words, sounds or topics. He berates them for jokes that are racist or sexist; instructs them either to dump the facile humor or to bring out and examine the underlying hate.

In the course of the warm up exercises, it slips out that the examiner they are waiting for (a man named Challenor) is an old enemy of Eddie Waters'. Waters tries to play it down. The grudge won't carry over to the students. They're good lads. The best class he's ever had. They should just proceed with the routines they've been working on all term. But when Challenor finally arrives we learn that there's much more than a grudge between the two men.

Challenor is the arch enemy of everything Waters stands for.

He gives the men a few helpful pointers before the test. "You must seek your audience's level—which is low." Don't use your platform to espouse any cause of your own. "No chips on your shoulder. Spread the barbs around." A black joke, a Pakistani joke, hit on the women's libbers. If they follow his advice "they may all hope at least to be Bob Hopes some day. (Hah, hah)"

With that the class adjourns to the local pub to be graded. End of Act I.

From here on the action is as inevitable and suspenseful as a classic like *Oedipus*. Each man is being asked to sell out the significance of his art for the opportunity to go on practicing it. The audience watches in horror as some do and some don't.

After the performance, they adjourn back to the classroom for their grades. The sell-outs pass; those with integrity fail. The end of the third act centers on a conflict that has not been set up till this point.

The most talented, intense and crazy kid in the class has substituted a new routine at the last minute, one that not only fails the Bob Hope test, but fails to impress Waters because he sees no love and no art in it. There ensues a battle between youth and age, art and propaganda, revolution and social democracy.

To Trevor Griffith's great credit, he gives each man his due without reducing the politics to a matter of psychiatry. Yes, the old man is worn down by time and loneliness. Yes, the youth has been brought up without love. But so what? Perhaps it's true that many Weathermen wanted to kill their parents. But that's not why they were wrong (if they were). And perhaps older liberals are now simply tired from isolation and defeats. But that's not what makes them wrong (if they are).

I saw *Comedians* twice and each time I thought a different side won the argument. That's probably because I'm 35. Exactly between their two ages.

One amazing fact: when the

play begins, the classroom clock shows a little after eight. All the action—lectures, contest, judging—takes place in the two and a half hours that follow. (The trips to the pub and back happen during intermissions.) There is no dramatic telescoping of time. And yet there is never the sense of things moving slowly. Once in a while your eye may stray to the clock; you notice how late it's getting; you're sorry because that means you won't get to know these men better before the examiner comes, or the janitor locks up.

*Comedians* is an incredible feat of writing.

—Barbara Garson

Barbara Garson is the author of *MacBird* and *All the Livelong Day: the Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work*, Penguin, \$1.95.



## FILM

## Freaky Friday: not for females

## FREAKY FRIDAY

Screenplay by Mary Rodgers, based on her book

Directed by Gary Nelson, Rated G

Starring Barbara Harris and Jodie Foster

*Freaky Friday*, starring Barbara Harris and Jodie Foster, is the latest bit of "family fun" to emerge from the Disney studios. It is a sadistic little number that panders to our worst values and stereotypes.

Normally this sort of picture is ignored by reviewers. But when a film grosses \$400,000 in its first two weeks of release, it is getting to a lot of viewers. It might be a good idea to look at what sort of swill the audience is being fed.

The story idea is amusing enough—and harmless. A mother (Barbara Harris) and a daughter (Jodie Foster, the teenage hooker of *Taxi Driver*) start out the day at loggerheads. The bones of contention are everyday family fare: messy rooms, junk-food breakfast. They each wish to be in the other's shoes.

Suddenly, the metamorphosis takes place—by magic. The humor and the conflict of the movie reside in the fact that neither mother nor daughter has the skills to fill the other's role. Annabel can't drive a car, but as her mother, must. Mrs. Andrews can't play a glockenspiel or march in the school band, but must as Annabel. This would be funny enough if the lives of each of them were not such empty stereotypes.

The film makers take it for granted that mother's role is to be exclusively at the service of husband and child. Never mind if Daddy expects her to single-handedly cater a huge buffet lunch for a large group of his business associates and clients. Never mind if daughter is expected to attend school classes, band rehearsal, have friends and also perform as star water-skier to entertain Daddy's crowd in the afternoon.

The men in the picture show that if they are tough and demanding the fliberty gibbet little

women will shape up and do their bidding. Even the boys look on both women as pure sex objects.

This isn't family "fun"—it is propaganda. It is propaganda for male/female roles that are rapidly becoming obsolete. It seems hard to believe that Disney's Hollywood suburbia could be so totally unconscious that there is a world out there a-stirring.

*Freaky Friday* may not have blood and gore all over the floor—qualifying it for general viewing—but it has plenty of psychological violence. In the end mother and daughter resume their own persons, glad not to have to live the other's life—but with no feeling of compassion one for the other. Neither realizes that her own life is pretty grizzly. No one would want to be a female after seeing this "hilariously funny" picture. It's the pits.

—Mavis Lyons

Mavis Lyons is a film editor in New York, and reviews films regularly for *In These Times*.

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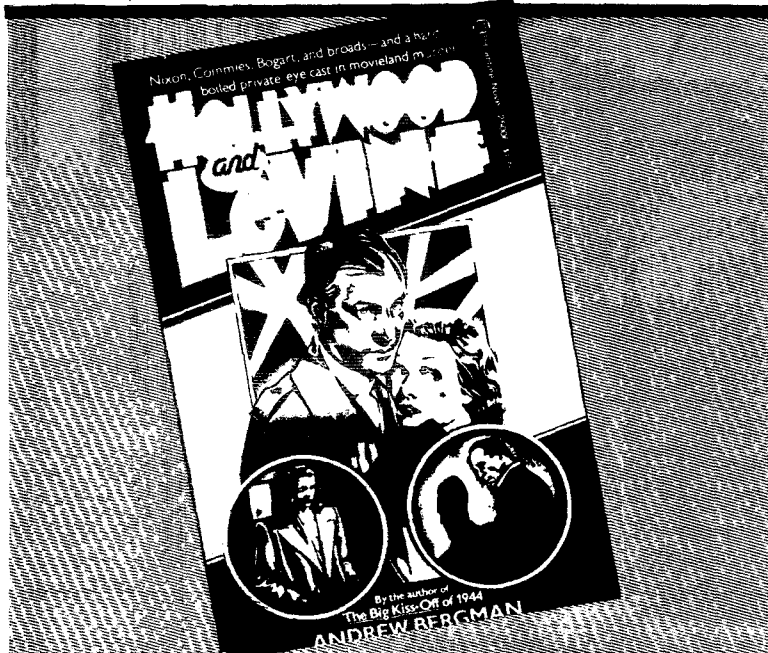
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## BOOKS

## Private (left) eye hunts Hollywood witchhunters

**HOLLYWOOD AND LEVINE**  
By Andrew Bergman  
Ballantine, paperback, \$1.75

Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler have been difficult acts to follow. Very few detective fiction writers have succeeded in breaking the bonds of the formula or in presenting a private eye whose character is strikingly original.

Andrew Bergman attempts with *Hollywood and Levine* to establish himself in the genre. His dick Jack Levine has several unusual traits. First, he's Jewish; second, he's politically left, having signed petitions for Sacco and Vanzetti and for Loyalist Spain.

By 1947, however, Levine has become something of a hack, grinding out a living by investigating suspected marital infidelities. Walter Adrian, a classmate from the City College of New York, now a high-priced Hollywood screenwriter, hires him to find out why Adrian is being canned by his studio.

Soon there is a dead body (Adrian's) and Levine discovers that his old friend was a Communist, a member of the Hollywood CP branch, which faces imminent extinction.

At this point, Bergman introduces actual historical people. Levine is brought to a clandestine meeting with Congressman Richard Nixon, who is readying a House Un-American Activities Committee witchhunt in Tinseltown.

Bergman's Nixon is smart and santonious, obviously a bad guy, but nothing like the foul-mouthed, grubby character the White House tapes revealed.

Levine turns down an assignment to spy on his dead pal's buddies. An FBI informer-provocateur enters the picture along with an unprincipled studio boss and "the kind of a dame who could make you crazy." And Humphrey Bogart (in person) enters the chase.

Bergman is not entirely sympathetic to his Communist characters whose politics, he says, "were just a kind of self-righteous charade." They are timid and ineffective, a sharp contrast to many of the real Communists who helped organize the industry under very difficult conditions. (The film *Hollywood on Trial*, which treats this aspect of Hollywood history, suggests that the effectiveness of Communists in organizing film unions was a major reason for the witchhunts.)

About the right—the FBI, Nixon, the Red hunters—Bergman is resolute. He nails them as villains, and at the book's end, Levine—travelling across the country from California to New York—gets the sense that an essentially decent people are on the precipice of a nervous, nasty period.

*Hollywood and Levine* is a well-written, facile mystery, but not much more. Bergman has made clever use of the genre's archetypes, but he has failed to

## MUSIC

## Master of teen tragedy takes a curtain call

**PHIL SPECTOR'S GREATEST HITS**  
Warner-Spector

This is an unusual album in its conception of eulogizing a producer rather than the individual stars of this particular age of rock and roll. Phil Spector was a master of teen tragedies, love refrains and sexual pleas, all packaged in his original arrangements, which usually included cavernous walls of sound that backgrounded and highlighted many of his three-minute masterworks. This album contains all of Spector's great and near Top Ten successes; it also evokes the permanence of our cultural fascination with the melodramatic.

Melodrama is usually associated with 19th century theater, that evolved into the early cinema (most notably D.W. Griffith). It then became manifest in dramatic radio shows of the '30s and '40s and it now exists in its most visible form through the morning and evening soapers of television. Spector's records were able to reproduce such cultural desires in a new format—the 45 disc—whose playing time averages two minutes and 45 seconds.

It was within this framework that he was able to produce *Not Too Young to Get Married* (complete with Greek chorus), *You've Lost That Loving Feeling*, *Walking in the Rain*, *He's a Rebel*, *Uptown*, etc.—hits that became temporary inspirations for so many of their consumers.

transcend them. His book is superior to the confectons of Nicholas Meyer (*The Seven Per Cent Solution*) and the pop junk of Roger Simon (*The Big Fix*). But the post-World War II generation still awaits its first genuinely innovative mystery novelist.

—Sidney Blumenthal

Sidney Blumenthal is the editor of *Governments* by Gunplay (New American Library.)

Play this double album while thumbing through a photo collection of Diane Arbus. Her work seems to chronicle Spector's fans in many ways. Her pictures of the overgrown rock holdovers, with their two small kids, are signs of people living in a world that supposedly moved so fast that 45s were the most effective manner of entertainment, intellectual stimulation, and cultural enlightenment.

Spector produced songs of passion, but passion that was either verboten because of age (*We're Not Too Young to Get Married*) immaturity or social stratification (*He's a Rebel*, *Uptown*, *Spanish Harlem*).

His songs were successful because they had a distinctive aural quality, a stamp of personality that distinguishes Spector's productions from all other records of the era, marking them as individualistic attempts both musically and socially. Beyond the distinctive pulsing sound, the echoing refrains, was the direct appeal to the buyer, the members of the 12 to 18 set, those folk who listened to the AM radio and sorted out the unique from the pedestrian.

45s were the mainstay of the record business in the late '50s and early '60s. Spector survived in this corporate business as an individual, a man who personally produced the records that his Phillies label sold. "Be my be my

be my pretty baby, my one and only baby," may not be lyric poetry, but it was lyric sound for AM radio, one that attracted a discerning audience that still exists today.

These songs still make sense and rather than evoking nostalgia, make clear a part of our cultural history. Beyond the groups that Spector created (Ronettes, Righteous Brothers, Crystals) the album contains songs he produced out of his sound labs with previously established personae.

Most notable is Ike and Tina Turner's *River Deep - Mountain High*, Spector's Teutonic-Wagnerian masterpiece of the 45 framework. When this massive attempt met a commercial failure, Spector reacted like any other abused genius: if America refused to accept his ambitious sound arrangements, neglected Tina Turner's scorching vocals, then there was nothing else to do but go into semi-seclusion.

It was also the era of the economic dominance of the album over the 45. Spector's framework for creation was being destroyed. He went on to produce the Beatles—as a group and as individuals—but his career as a producer of 45s had ended.

This album is a successful lament of his artistic passage.

—Joe Heumann

Joe Heumann teaches media-related subjects at Eastern Illinois University.

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