Directed by Mel Brooks
Written by Mel Brooks
Produced by Sidney Glazier
Music John Morris
Cinematography Joseph F. Coffey
Film Editing Ralph Rosenblum

Zero Mostel…Max Bialystock
Gene Wilder…Leo Bloom
Dick Shawn…L.S.D. - Lorenzo St. DuBois
Kenneth Mars…Franz Liebkind
Lee Meredith…Ulla
Christopher Hewett…Roger De Bris
Andréas Voutsinas…Carmen Ghia
Estelle Winwood…'Hold Me Touch Me'
Renée Taylor…Eva Braun
David Patch…Goebbels
William Hickey…The Drunk
Martin…Göring
Shimen Ruskin…The Landlord
Frank Campanella…The Bartender
Josip Elic…Violinist
Madelyn Cates…Concierge (as Madlyn Cates)
John Zoller…Drama Critic
Brutus Peck…Hot Dog Vendor
Mel Brooks…Singer in 'Springtime for Hitler' (voice)
(uncredited)
Bill Macy…Jury Foreman (uncredited)

MEL BROOKS (b. Melvin James Kaminsky on June 28, 1926 in Brooklyn, New York) served in WWII, and afterwards got a job playing the drums at nightclubs in the Catskills. Brooks eventually started a comedy act and also worked in radio and as Master Entertainer at Grossinger's Resort before going to television. Brooks was a writer for many years on such shows as Your Show of Shows (1950) Caesar's Hour (1954) and Get Smart (1965) before embarking on a highly successful film career in writing, acting, producing and directing. He is also one of the few people to win an Oscar, an Emmy, a Grammy and a Tony. He won an Oscar for the screenplay of The Producers (1967); 3 Emmys in a row (1997-1999) for his guest appearance as Uncle Phil in Mad About You (1992); 3 Tonys for The Producers- Best Musical, Original Music Score and Book (musical); and 3 Grammys- Best Spoken Comedy Album for "The 2000 Year Old Man In The Year 2000" (1998, with Carl Reiner) and two for The Producers (2001): Best Musical Show Album (as composer/lyricist) and Best Long Form Music Video (as artist). Brooks has many funny trademarks in his films, for instance his films often contain references to the film's sequel, which never come to pass. Good examples of this are History of the World: Part I (1981), Spaceballs (1987) and Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993). Additionally, Brooks always features one scene in his movies in which the main character is seated and staring blankly, wondering what went wrong, while his friends console him. In fun trivia, The Producers (1967) was the inspiration for the title of U2's album, "Achtung Baby". In 1975, Brooks was nominated for two Academy Awards for Best Writing, Screenplay Adapted From Other Material with Gene Wilder for Young Frankenstein (1974) and with John Morris for Nominated Best Music, Original Song Blazing Saddles (1974) for the title song. In 2013 he won a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Film Institute. Brooks has directed 12 films: Dracula: Dead and Loving It (1995), Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993), Life Stinks (1991), Spaceballs (1987), An Audience with Mel Brooks (1983, TV Special), History of the World: Part I (1981), High Anxiety (1977), Silent Movie (1976), Young Frankenstein (1974), Blazing...
Saddles (1974), The Twelve Chairs (1970) and The Producers (1967). He acted in all 12, plus another 37 films and TV series, some of which are Dora the Explorer (TV Series, 2014), Mr. Peabody & Sherman (2014), Special Agent Oso (TV Series, 2011), The Producers (2005), Curb Your Enthusiasm (TV Series, 2004), Up at the Villa (2000), The Simpsons (TV Series, 1995), Look Who's Talking Too (1990), The Tracey Ullman Show (TV Series), To Be or Not to Be (1983), The Muppet Movie (1979) and The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes’ Smarter Brother (1975). He also has 41 writing credits.

JOSEPH F. COFFEY (b. 1915—d. 2000, age 85, [specific dates and location unknown]) was a camera operator for Eddie Murphy: Raw (Documentary, 1987), Birdy (1984), Fame (1980), Kramer vs. Kramer (1979), Lilith (1964), Requiem for a Heavyweight (1962) and several other films. He was director of photography for only three films: For Love of Ivy (1968), The Producers (1967), and Up the Down Staircase (1967).

ZERO MOSTEL (b. Samuel Joel Mostel on February 28, 1915 in Brooklyn New York—d. September 8, 1977, age 62, in Philadelphia, PA) began his career in the 1930s as an art teacher at the 92nd Street "Y", the famous Young Men and Young Women's Hebrew Association located on Manhattan's 92nd St. His lectures were full of jokes as Mostel personally was a clown, and subsequently he was hired to perform at private parties. Mostel auditioned as a comedian at the downtown nightclub Cafe Society in late 1941, a jazz club. Initially rejected, owner Barney Josephson hired Mostel after Pearl Harbor, figuring his patrons, now at war, could use some laughs. It was Ivan Black, the club's press agent, who gave Sam Mostel the nickname Zero, explaining, "Here's a guy who's starting from nothing." Within a year, he was touring the national nightclub circuit and appearing on radio. Zero spent much of the war entertaining the troops overseas. In the post-war years, Zero began to branch-out as a straight actor. His early years were spent on Broadway, with his most famous role being Tevye, the milkman with marriageable daughters in Fiddler on the Roof and the performance gave Mostel his third Best Actor Tony. However the actor was famously passed over for the film version of the play. Mostel acted in 33 films and TV shows, some of which are Watership Down (1978), The Front (1976), Mastermind (1976), Foreplay (1975), Once Upon a Scoundrel (1974), Rhinoceros (1974), The Angel Levine (1970), The Great Bank Robbery (1969), The Producers (1967), A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1966), The World of Sholom Aleichem (TV Movie, 1959), Zero Mostel (TV Movie, 1959), The Model and the Marriage Broker (1951), Mr. Belvedere Rings the Bell (1951), Sirocco (1951), The Enforcer (1951), Panic in the Streets (1950), and Du Barry Was a Lady (1943). In 1969, he received a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actor - Comedy or Musical for The Producers (1967).

GENE WILDER (b. Jerome Silberman on June 11, 1933) with his trademark blue eyes and wild, curly hair, always seems to embody an impish, childlike spirit. Wilder started his career in theater, playing in many off-Broadway productions and says he picked the name 'Gene Wilder' because he couldn't see a 'Jerry Silberman' playing Hamlet. He admits now that he can't see 'Gene Wilder' playing Hamlet either. It was his role in the 1963 Broadway production of Mother Courage and Her Children that altered the course of his acting career. In its cast was Anne Bancroft, who was dating Mel Brooks at the time, and the relationship established between the two men eventually led to Wilder's becoming part of Brooks' "stock company". Wilder's performance as the endearingly frantic Leo Bloom in The Producers (1967) kicked off his celebrated collaboration with Mel Brooks and garnered him an Academy Award nomination as Best Supporting Actor. Wilder lost the award to Jack Albertson, who won for The Subject Was Roses (1968) and both would later co-star together in Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory (1971). In 1975 Wilder was again nominated, along with Brooks, for an Oscar for Best Writing, Screenplay Adapted From Other Material Young Frankenstein (1974). Wilder has acted in 36 films and TV shows, including Yo Gabba Gabba! (TV Series, 2015), Will & Grace (2002-2003), Alice in Wonderland (TV Movie, 1999), Another You (1991), Funny About Love (1990), See No Evil, Hear No Evil (1989), The Woman in Red (1984), Hanky Panky (1982), Stir Crazy (1980), The Frisco Kid (1979), The World's Greatest Lover (1977), Silver Streak (1976), The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother (1975), Young Frankenstein (1974), The Little Prince (1974), Blazing Saddles (1974), Rhinoceros (1974), Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask (1972), Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory (1971), Quackster Fortune Has a Cousin in the Bronx (1970), Start the Revolution Without Me (1970), The Producers (1967), Bonnie and Clyde (1967), Death of a Salesman (TV Movie, 1966) and The Defenders (TV Series, 1962). He also has 9 writing credits, among them The Lady in Question (1999, TV Movie), Murder in a Small Town (1999, TV Movie), See No Evil, Hear No Evil (1989, screenplay), The Woman in Red (1984), The World's Greatest Lover (1977), The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother (1975) and Young Frankenstein (1974, screen story and screenplay).

DICK SHAWN (b. Richard Schulefand on December 1, 1923 in Buffalo, NY—d. April 17, 1987, age 63, in San Diego, California) was a quirky actor whose over-the-top, comedic performances initially had a difficult time finding an audience in the 1950s. Shawn’s luck changed when he replaced Zero Mostel in the bawdy musical A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum on Broadway and stole a small scene in the all-star epic comedy It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World (1963). However the one role that completely overshadows all of Shawn’s other


Kaminsky also worked the borscht circuit, and after nightclubs in the Catskills. The well-developed land mines and saw acti

He played his first gig for pocket money when he was around 14. As a Williamsburg boy, Buddy Rich, he also learned to play the drums. Mel Brooks also punched my feet and told me I was terrible. "Adorable or not, it was nevertheless some time before it occurred to him to become a professional entertainer. His

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Embarrassing confusion of identities, Mel Kaminsky changed his professional name to Brooks (a shortened version of his mother’s maiden name). He got his first break as a stand-up comedian in the classic manner, successfully taking over one night when the resident comic was ill. Brooks began his acting career in summer stock at Redbank, New Kersey, did some radio work, and graduated to tammel (social director) at Grossinger’s, the most famous of the Catskill resorts.

In 1949 his friend and fellow-comedian Sid Caesar asked him to write some of his material for NBC’s television series Broadway Review (paying him $50 a week out of his own pocket). The following year, when Caesar launched his pioneering ninety-minute comedy program Your Show of Shows, Brooks went along as writer and occasional performer. Caesar’s stable of writers included Woody Allen, Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart, and Carl Reiner. Albert Goldman has given this account of the show’s story conferences: “Every morning they would run from their analysis to…the City Center. They’d light their cigars, form a circle around Sid and watch him improvise like a one-man band until they were turned on. Then they’d jump up, start throwing lines, capping each other, doing business and screaming, until finally they fell down again, worn out with laughter. By the time they were through, Sid had the bit memorized and they would go on to the next shtick—six complete routines, a whole Broadway show revue every week.”

Regarded nostalgically by many as the greatest of all television comedy programs, Your Show of Shows ran for four years and was followed by Caesar’s Hour (1954-1957) and, briefly, by Sid Caesar Invites You (1958). Long before that Brooks had begun his series of impressive dialogues with Caesar’s straight man Carl Reiner, the latter acting as interviewer, Brooks as anything from Tibetan monk to astronaut. Reiner says that during the 50s we spent our days inventing characters for Caesar, but Mel was really using Caesar as a vehicle. What he secretly wanted was to perform himself. So in the evening we’d go to a party and I’d pick a character for him to play. I never told him what it was going to be, but I always tried for something that would force him to go into panic, because a brilliant mind in panic is a wonderful thing to see. For instance I might say, ‘We have with us tonight the celebrated sculptor Sir Joseph Epstone,’ and he have to take it from there. Or I’d make him a Jewish pirate….There was no end to what he could be—a U-boat commander, a deaf signwriter, an entire convention of antique dealers.”

Reiner’s most inspired and fruitful suggestion was to cast Brooks as a “2,000-Year Old Man.” He had been present at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (who came into the store a lot. Never bought anything.”) He had been analyzed by Freud himself (took me during lunchtime, charged me a nickel”). He had been married “several hundred times” and had “over forty-two thousand children, and not one comes to visit me.” At first Brooks and Reiner performed only for their friends, but their reputation spread until, by the late 1950s, they had become “a sort of ultra-bohemian cult.” Kenneth Tynan saw their act at a New York party in 1959 and concluded that Brooks “was the most original comic improvisor I had ever seen.”
At loose ends after the Sid Caesar shows finished, Brooks wrote some television specials while casting around for a new job. His marriage to Florence Baum was braking up, and in 1960 he followed Carl Reiner to Hollywood. The same year, he and Reiner recorded their “Two Thousand Year Old Man” interview, making an LP that sold over a million copies. *Two Thousand and One Years* and *At the Cannes Film Festival* followed and were almost equally successful, and there was a lucrative spin-off assignment for Brooks as the 2,500-year-old brewmaster in *Ballantine beer commercials*. Mel Brooks became a celebrity, a trusted guest on many television shows, where his genius for spontaneous repartee earned him the title of “the funniest man in the world.”

In 1962 Brooks was coauthor of a stage musical, *All American*, and the following year he conceived, wrote, and narrated his first movie, an animated cartoon called *The Critic*, in which a commentator sounding very much like the 2,000-Year-Old Man takes on a dot and a line. It was an auspicious debut, earning an Oscar that Brooks shared with Ernest Pintoff, who was responsible for the visuals. He had another and no doubt more profitable success in *Get Smart*, a television spy thriller spoof. Written by Brooks with Buck Henry for NBC and starring Don Adams as the bumbling agent, it ran from 1965 to 1970. During the making of *Get Smart*, Brooks commuted to Hollywood from New York, where he had settled again with his second wife, the actress Anne Bancroft, whom he had married in 1964. He was involved during this period in a variety of minor projects, but his continuing preoccupation was an idea that was such a surreal affront to convention and good taste (especially for a Jew) that Brooks found it irresistible—a lyrically romantic musical comedy with Adolph Hitler as the hero. Starting with a song title—“Springtime for Hitler”—he explored the theme in a novel, a play, and finally a film script. And in the end he found backers—Sidney Glazier and Joseph E. Levine—for what became his first feature, *The Producers* (1968).

The movie centers on a temperamental Broadway producer, Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel) who has touched bottom in his search for angels. With the hilariously reluctant assistance of his tax accountant (Gene Wilder), he concocts a larcenous scheme—to sell a great deal of stock in a guaranteed opening-night flop and then pocket what’s left of the investment. The turkey of his choice is a musical called “Springtime for Hitler.” To assure disaster he hires the worst direct

vulgarity and frenetic pace, calling it a “triumph of bad taste.” Brooks received an Oscar for his original screenplay, and the picture gradually acquired a cult following. Made for less than a million dollars, it was slow to recover its costs, but eventually did so and continues to be revived and rediscovered. For many critics, it remains the best of all Brooks’ pictures because, as James Monaco writes, “it deals with the New York entertainment world he knows and understands….The Producers succeeds because it’s properly manic and feverish, because it has faith in its own style and doesn’t depend on spoofery, and because, like Gene Wilder, it’s hysterical.”

Sidney Glazier was happy enough with *The Producers* to back Brooks’ second film—an adaptation of Ilf and Petrov’s classic farcical satire on the greedy materialism of post-Revolutionary Russia, *The Twelve Chairs*. Brooks, who had read the novel at his mother’s knee, wrote the scenario himself and filmed it on location in Yugoslavia for $1.5 million. A hectic narrative about three men pursuing a fortune in diamonds all over Russia, it stars Ron Moody, Frank Langella, and Dom DeLuise, and has a well-crafted cameo performance by Brooks himself as a vodka-sodden ex-serf yearning for the regular beatings of yesteryear.

Pauline Kael wrote that the period setting “gives Brooks an opportunity to show his nostalgic affection for the slapstick and mugging and innocent nuttiness of earlier periods,” even if the film “doesn’t go beyond gag comedy.” Kenneth Tynan thought that “the atmosphere of rural Russia is lovingly evoked and Brooks himself is superb….Yet the film as a whole never comes to life, its jokes seem shod with lead, and one watches gloomily as…it drags its slow length along.” Somewhat more subdued than Brooks’ other movies, perhaps out of respect for the original, it did not appeal to his fans and failed at the box office.

Undeterred, Brooks continued his flirtation with culture, writing a screen adaptation of *She Stoops to Conquer*, which he peddled with such a total lack of success that he began to believe his career was finished. Then in 1972 he met the agent David Begelman, who put together a deal with Warner Brothers under which Brooks, in collaboration with Andrew Bergman, Richard Pryor, and two other writers, was to doctor a script called “Tex-X.” Brooks wound up directing the revised script as *Blazing Saddles* (1974), for which he also wrote the theme music (in collaboration with John Morris) and both music and lyrics for four other songs.

*Blazing Saddles* is set in a little Western town threatened by the machinations of a smooth villain (Harvey Korman) and the paranoid state governor (Mel Brooks). The townspeople put their faith in a new sheriff and turn out to give him a hero’s welcome. The welcome goes sour when the new lawman (Cleavon Little) comes riding into the solidly racist town and turns out to be black. Nevertheless, the sheriff and his alcoholic sidekick (Gene Wilder) take on the wrongdoers and win.
The picture features a steady flow of bad language and scatological jokes (like the famous scene in which a group of cowboys fart their way operatically through the aftermath of yet another meal of beans around the old campfire). The conventions and mythology of the Western genre are mercilessly undermined, as when a burly thug knocks out a horse with a single punch, or when a dance-hall girl (Madel ine Kahn) performs an inventive burlesque of Marlene Dietrich. Patriotism and religion are mocked with equal gusto, and so are all kinds of racial stereotyping—notably in the scene in which a black chain gang, asked for a work song, oblige with a sophisticated rendering of “I Get a Kick Out of You.” And in the end, Blazing Saddles jettisons its own premises altogether, the action breaking through onto an adjoining set where a large-scale musical production number is being staged, and taking off into an immense brawl in which squealing chorus boys fight it out with stetsoned cowhands—a surreal confrontation between Busby Berkeley and the O.K. Corral.

Some Western lovers and other moralists were outraged, but millions—and especially the irreverent young—took the movie’s Rabelaisian vulgarity and lunatic invention to their hearts. Gerald Mast called it the comedy of Anomalous surprise,” and Kenneth Tynan “the comedy of deliberate overkill.” “It is farce with the gloves off,” Tynan wrote, “living proof that a feast can be every bit as good as enough. We are not invited to smile: we either laugh or cringe.” One of those who cringed was Pauline Kael, who found Brooks’ humor “intentionally graceless; he seems to fear subtlety as if it were the enemy of all he holds dear—as if it were gentility itself….We can share his affection for low-comedy crudeness and the comedy of chaos, but not when he pounds us over the head with strident dumb jokes, and not when we begin to feel uncomfortable for the performers—mugging and smirking and working too hard.” Such strictures did not prevent Blazing Saddles from becoming one of the most profitable comedies in movie history, establishing Brooks as a filmmaker of international standing and as “patron saint of going too far.”

Brooks himself claims that Blazing Saddles “has to do with love more than anything else. I mean when that black guy rides into that old Western town and even a little old lady says ‘Up yours, nigger!’ you know that his heart is broken. So it’s really a story of that heart being mended. That, of course, and my reverence for the Western movie, which developed as a child. I guess maybe the story also has a little to do with me searching for my own father….both Cleavon and Gene Wilder…are searching for someone to believe in. “Elsewhere he calls this his “first surreal movie. What I did when the gunfight spilled over into the Busby Berkeley set with fifty dancers was what Picasso did when he painted two eyes on the same side of the head.”

Having found a successful formula, Brooks stuck to it, turning out a succession of genre parodies. Young Frankenstein (1974), written by Brooks and Gene Wilder in collaboration, stars Wilder as an American neurologist who inherits his infamous grandfather’s Transylvanian estate and takes up residence there (“Pardon me, boy, is this the Transylvania station?”). Marty Feldman plays his hunchbacked servant, Cloria Leachman his formidable housekeeper, and Madeline Kahn his libidinous fiancée. Peter Boyle makes a lovable monster (especially when he and Wilder break into an unlikely rendition of Berlin’s “Putting on the Ritz”). And Gene Hackman makes a brief but telling appearance as the blind hermit the monster encounters in the woods.

Out of regard for the Karloff-Whale classic, the movie was shot (by Gerald Hirschfeld) in eerie, mist-bound black and white. For many critics, this remains the best-crafted of Brooks’s parody movies. Even Pauline Kael liked it, writing that “the style of the picture is remarkable consistent in tone….The movie works because it has the Mary Shelley story to lean on: we know that the monster will be created and will get loose. And Brooks makes a leap up as a director because, although the comedy doesn’t build, he carries the story through….Brooks even has a satisfying windup, which makes this just about the only comedy of recent years that doesn’t collapse.”

Like its predecessor, Young Frankenstein grossed more than $100 million, and Brooks used his new status as a money-spinner to sell Twentieth Century-Fox on the audacious notion of a film without dialogue. Silent Movie (1976) stars Brooks himself as Mel Funn, a reformed alcoholic director who sells his studio on the audacious notion of a film without dialogue. Lacking Brooks’ clout, Funn only gets his way by promising to sign up a galaxy of hard-to-get stars, and most of the film is concerned with the more or less ingenious tactics employed by Funn and his lunatic assistants (Dom DeLouise and Marty Feldman) to recruit such idols as Paul Newman, Burt Reynolds, James Caan, Anne Bancroft, and Liza Minelli. The film is a hit, and Funn’s studio is rescued from takeover by the vile multinational conglomerate Engulf and Devour.

Silent Movie was also a hit, though not on the monumental scale of the two that preceded it. Jay Cocks called it “brassy, incautious, funny without mercy,” but Penelope Gilliat found its humor “burly,” its jokes “for children.” It established Mel Brooks as a star in his own right, fifth in the annual list of names with box-office appeal. But his next film provided further evidence that he was losing the regard of the more serious professional critics, while continuing to wow large (though predominantly youthful) audiences.
High Anxiety (1977) was coauthored, directed, and produced by Mel Brooks, who also wrote the title tune, supervised publicity and distribution, and played the lead. He is Professor Richard H. (for Harpo) Thorndyke, a Nobel-winning psychiatrist with a fear of heights who is appointed director of the Pysoch-Neurotic Institute for the Very, Very Nervous. A Hitchcockian blond (played with wonderful prurience by Madeline Kahn) tells him of her suspicion that her millionaire father is imprisoned in the Institute, and Thorndyke discovers that he is enmeshed in a dark plot conceived by his sadistic head nurse (Cloris Leachman) and a masochistic doctor (Harvey Korman). Along the way the picture scores farcically off Spellbound, Vertigo, Psycho, The Birds, and North By Northwest, among other works by the director Brooks esteems above all others, and draws upon the talents of Hitchcock’s legendary special effects man Albert J. Whitlock.

Critics who had watched Brooks drive “his comic juggernaut through the Western, the horror film and the silent comedy” seemed to feel that when Hitchcock was the victim it was time to blow the whistle. High Anxiety had its admirers, like Richard Schickel, who found it deft and funny, but many shared the irritation of Philip French, who wrote that, since The Producers, “Brooks has moved steadily downwards in search of coarse laughs for and from mass audiences….The picture often looks like Hitchcock in his Universal period….and frequently recapitulates the Master’s work with would-be comic talent….But Brooks has no idea of how to build a sequence, how to tell a story, when to leave well enough (or ill enough) alone. Nor has he much understanding of Hitchcock.”

Noting that he had so far failed to wreck either the historical epic or the Biblical spectacular, Brooks went to work on both genres in The History of the World—Part ! (1981). It begins at the dawn of times, with apelike creatures discovering that standing upright facilitates masturbation, touches on a Neanderthal Sid Caesar’s invention of music and laughter, and moves on to show how Moses (Brooks) cheated the world of five additional commandments. Brooks is then resurrected as a “stand-up philosopher” in Ancient Rome, on the run with a black slave (Gregory Hines), a vestal virgin, and others from Emperor Dom DeLuise and the Empress Nympho (Madeline Kahn). Brooks stars again as Torquemada in a sequence that turns the Spanish Inquisition torture chamber into a Busby Berkeley production number and has two roles in the final section, appearing both as Louis XVI and the king’s look-alike chamber pot boy, pursued by bosomy ladies and revolving peasants.

Having failed to convince Brooks of the error of his ways, the critics this time seemed to have decided to relax and enjoy themselves. “Either you get stuck thinking about bad taste,” Pauline Kael announced, “or you let yourself go at the obscenity in the humor as you do at Bunuel’s perverse dirty jokes.” John Pym wrote that “the scatology, and Brooks is here at his most scatological, has a surprising…lack of prurience” while the Inquisition scene is “an exhilaratingly orchestrated piece of bad taste that provokes first groans of disbelief and then complicitous laughter.” For Vincent Canby it was “a film that redefines and clarifies the comic method of the six earlier movies….The point of Mr. Brooks’s use of foul language, obscene gestures, a preoccupation with bodily functions and with sex as the single most overwhelming human impulse is to remind us that we may not be quite as civilized [as we pretend].”

Brooks says he has no desire to make a serious film—“there are 131 viable directors of drama in this country. There are only two viable directors of comedy.” The other one is Woody Allen, with whom Brooks is often compared, both of them being small, hypochondriac, New York Jewish graduates of Your Show of Shows, much influenced by years spent in analysis. Both, moreover, have achieved something close to total freedom in the way they make their movies because, as Allen says, “the studios feel we’re on a wavelength that’s alien to them. They believe we have access to some secret formula that they don’t.” It has been suggested that the central difference between them is that Allen is an introvert, Brooks an extrovert. Gene wilder has said that “the way Woody makes a movie, it’s as if he were lighting ten thousand safety matches to illuminate a city….What Mel wants to do is set off atom bombs of laughter.”

Time allows that Brooks “is not a subtle man.” His punch lines can be seen coming a mile way. Good and bad gags are pushed indiscriminately. He is often tasteless—certainly he has a fourteen-year-old’s overestimation of the comic possibilities of the word doodoo. But when he is good, he is splendid, and he is the only commercial American filmmaker today (with the occasional exception of Woody Allen) working in the low comedy, slapstick tradition of Buster Keaton and the Marx Brothers. “James Monaco agrees that Brooks can be memorably funny, but maintains that his films are “essentially sophomoric, which, of course, has made them a big hit with the sophomores….Mel Brooks is extraordinarily capable of making very funny movies about people—people he knows—but he’s chosen instead to concentrate on movies about movies, and not very insightful ones at that.”

A more serious side of Brooks’ nature is evident in two of the three films made so far by his production company, Brooksfilms. The first, Fatso, written and directed by Anne Bancroft, has been described as “a funny, touching, crazy film about overeating.” The second was David Lynch’s The Elephant Man (1980), about the hideously misshapen John Merrick (John Hurt), who was rescued from dreadful suffering as a circus freak to end his life in peace and considerable celebrity at a London hospital a century ago. This daring film rewarded its backers by becoming one of the great critical and commercial successes of the year. The director said of Brooks that he showed no inclination to interfere in the making of the picture, but “simply acted as protector of the film from beginning to end”—“Mel is powerful and aggressive and he makes things work.”

In 1983 Brooks produced and starred in Alan Johnson’s To Be or Not To Be, a remake of Ernst Lubitsch’s 1942 black comedy about a troupe of second-rate actors embroiled in a plot
to save the Polish underground from the Nazis. Although the film got mixed reviews, Vincent Canby observed that “it’s no news that Mr. Brooks is one of our national treasures,” combining “brainy madness and epic self-assurance.”

Elsewhere, Brooks has been described as “a short, compact man possessed by a near-manic degree of nervous energy.” He is a wine and food connoisseur and is said to be something of a closet intellectual, with a passion for the Russian novelists. Brooks says that he went through six years of psychoanalysis “to learn how to be a father instead of a son,” apparently he succeeded, since his friend Gene Wilder regards him as a father figure. Brooks has four children of his own—three by his first marriage to Florence Baum, and one by his second, to Anne Bancroft. An animated film version of The 2,000-Year-Old Man, directed by Leo Salkin, and with the voices of Brooks and Reiner, was released in 1974.

Will Harris, “Mel Brooks Interview” (AV Club, 9 September 2011)

The friendship between Mel Brooks and Dick Cavett may not be as widely trumpeted as the one between Brooks and his longtime collaborator Carl Reiner, but the two first met in the mid-’60s while working on an advertising campaign for a beer manufacturer, and have remained close ever since. In December 2010, Brooks and Cavett sat down at the Saban Theater in Beverly Hills to tell tales of their lives and times, even bringing “surprise” guest Reiner into the proceedings for a story or two. The resulting performance, Mel Brooks And Dick Cavett: Together Again, premières on HBO tonight. The A.V. Club spoke to Brooks before the special, discussing his friendships with Cavett and Reiner, the experience of co-writing Blazing Saddles with Richard Pryor, the unexpected increase in the number of Spaceballs fans over the years, and whether he’d ever tell his fans to go fuck themselves.

Mel Brooks: I want you to know I’m completely unprepared.

The A.V. Club: I’ll try to go easy on you.

MB: But that’s the way I always am. [Laughs.] It’s better. It’s so much better, I find. You know, the first two records that Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks made [as] The 2,000 Year Old Man, we weren’t in business yet. We were kind of still entertaining ourselves and some friends. Like, we’d go to a dinner party with friends, and they’d say, “Do The 2,000 Year Old Man!” So I never knew what Carl would ask me, and it always turned out to be somewhat more insane and funnier that way. The first two albums we did, 2,000 Years and 2,001 Years, were just off-the-cuff. Ad-libbed. After that, we made a third one, which I think was called At The Cannes Film Festival, and we had to have subjects, at least. Not jokes. We never wrote jokes. But we wrote subjects. Who would the characters be, and where were the settings and stuff, so I’d get an idea. Quite often, it was better if he said like, “I’m here in the studio of the famous Greek sculptor, Andreas Vuteenisc,” or whatever. [Laughs.] And then we would talk for a while, and then we’d either get lucky or not lucky. Quite often, we’d get lucky. Like, if he said, “That’s beautiful! Why did you create it, and why do you display it in such a strange place as above your doorway?” I’d say, “In the voice of The 2,000 Year Old Man” “Well, that’s not really one of my sculptures. I didn’t really make it. Somebody brought it in and put it there. It’s called the air conditioner.” So we’d get lucky just being foolish and ad-libbing. That’s why I wanted you to know I’m totally unprepared: depending on what you ask, you might get an answer in a Jewish accent.

A.V.C: Together Again kicks off with a clip of you stepping onto the stage of Dick Cavett’s talk show in 1970, but you’d actually worked with him before that, though, right?

MB: Oh, yeah, we did the Ballantine Beer commercials. I was the 2,500 Year Old Brewmaster. [Laughs.] A lot of it was good. All of it was ad-libbed. Of course, since it was commercials, he had one or two stopping points where he had to mention the name of the beer. But it was great. We really enjoyed it.

A.V.C: Was that your first encounter with Cavett, or had you met him before that?

MB: It was before he had his show, so yeah, it was the very first time I’d encountered him. And I remember saying, “You know, for someone who’s not Jewish, you’re pretty good.” [Laughs.] And he took it the right way. It was meant to be just a silly joke.

A.V.C: And you’ve kept in touch over the years?

MB: Oh, yeah, he’s always calling me from Montauk, telling me that he was at a restaurant the other night and he overheard what people said, and if it’s particularly engaging and funny, he’ll call me and tell me. We talk maybe once or twice a month and just catch up. He was surprisingly funny [on the special]. In fact, he was too damned funny. I like him to be kind of genteel and witty. I told him that. “On the show, I don’t want you to be really funny. I want you to be witty. I can always top witty with belly laughs. But I can’t top really funny. So don’t be really funny.” [Laughs.] And he was bad. Which is to say that he was really funny. Many times. He told that terrible, terrible story about Tallulah Bankhead. [Laughs.] Wow. That was really shocking. And wonderful. And then, you know, every once in a while he would say something like, he imitated Alfred Hitchcock speaking and said, [Doing a Hitchcock impression] “Grace Kelly was the most promiscuous woman I have ever met.” I’m like, “Where did this come from?” [Laughs.] But I love him. And I’m so glad that we did this, because outside of Carl Reiner, I’m really not that comfortable onstage with other partners. But I was comfortable with Cavett.

A.V.C: I actually contacted Cavett to see if there were any questions that he didn’t get to ask you during Together Again.

MB: You did? [Laughs.] What did he say? What did he say?

A.V.C: “With your background, what did your parents tell you about Santa?”
MB: [Admiringly] Oh, that was good. That was good. I would’ve said, “Never heard of the guy. Jews never heard of this guy, you know. The only time we ever met him, I think he was doing a bit for Coca-Cola. He had a nice red face, and he was drinking a Coke. That was the only time I ever saw Santa.” [Laughs.] That’s pretty good. That’s a pretty good question. Look at this guy! He still comes up with ’em!

AVC: Speaking of Carl Reiner, what an astonishing coincidence that he should happen to have been in the audience for the taping of the show.

MB: Yeah, well, I said, “You’d better be there, because we’re going to throw a spotlight on Seat R2, and there’s gonna be a mic there, so you might as well sit there. Because I’m sure he’ll bring up The 2,000 Year Old Man, and you’re gonna have to give us the genesis, because you’re the architect.” [Laughs.] I don’t want to take any credit or responsibility for The 2,000 Year Old Man. That’s all Carl.

AVC: The rapport and comic timing between the two of you kicks in the second he steps up to the mic. Is the friendship as strong now as it was then?

MB: Yeah, as a matter of fact, we… do weird things. [Laughs.] We entertain each other. I remember once about—oh, I don’t know, was it a year ago or so? He took a band off a cigar that he’d been given—he doesn’t smoke anymore—and it was so beautiful, the cigar band, that he put it on his finger and was admiring it. And I said, “Where’d you get that ring? It’s a beautiful ring.” He said, “No, it’s just a cigar band.” I said, “Are you kidding? They wouldn’t take the time and trouble. Look at all the work that went into that! That’s not a cigar band. That’s a ring, man!” [Laughs.] And, you know, we’d go back and forth with that. Just two Jews in a room, no audience. Once in a while, we crack up and fall on the floor.

AVC: So you two still hang out regularly?

MB: Oh, yeah, I still see Carl two, three times a week.

AVC: During the special, Cavett discusses how Bob Hope’s visit to Lincoln, Nebraska, was more or less the first time he’d ever been face to face with a real star.

MB: He does. And he says something brilliant: “There was nothing between us but air.” I thought that was just magical. A wonderful descriptive phrase.

AVC: Do you remember your first significant celebrity encounter?

MB: You wouldn’t know mine. It was a guy named Larry “Buster” Crabbe. He played Flash Gordon, and he was Tarzan for a year or two, back when Johnny Weissmuller abdicated or something. So there was Larry “Buster” Crabbe, and he was at a Loews theater in Brooklyn. And in those days, they did a movie, maybe two movies, and they’d still by doing a little revue—a couple of juggling acts and stuff—then bring out the star. And the star at this one was Larry “Buster” Crabbe. So I was 12 or 13, and it was really thrilling to see him there. I waited back at the stage door, there’s an alley, and there were a couple of people, and I was [high-pitched gasp]. But I was a smart little kid, and when he came out, I screamed, “Larry ‘Buster’ Crabbe, you’re the best thing since sliced bread!” And he really laughed. He got such a kick. He said, “How old are you?” I said, “I’m 12, and I loved the show. Can I please have your autograph? I know it’s a bother.” And that’s the first autograph I ever got. Larry “Buster” Crabbe! Flash Gordon! With an Indiana accent? So anyway, that was the first celebrity I ever met. My heart stopped. I couldn’t believe I saw him in person. “That’s the guy who saved everybody on planet Earth!”

AVC: You talk in the special about how you developed a certain degree of friendship with Alfred Hitchcock, whose films were the direct inspiration for High Anxiety. Did you hear from any other actors or directors from genres you parodied?

MB: Well, first of all, I admired Hitchcock so much. I was just head over heels in love with him and his work. I don’t think he was even nominated for an Academy Award—he certainly never won one—and I tried to figure out why. I said, “Why the hell not?” [Although Hitchcock’s only Oscar was the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award, he did actually pull five Best Director nominations during his career. —ed.] I mean, my God, Psycho, The Birds, North By Northwest… the most insanely creative guy. Even the early stuff like Saboteur, the very early works, you could see there was a master of film. Maybe the best director in the world, and he never won. And I finally figured it out. I said, “I know why I have never been nominated for an Academy Award for directing.” The only Academy Awards I’ve ever won, one was for The Critic, a cartoon [short], and the other was for The Producers, for the screenplay. But Hitchcock wasn’t taken seriously because he was a personality. He did the TV show [Alfred Hitchcock Presents], and he was ribald and witty. And friendly. And you know, intimacy breeds contempt. You’ve got to be lofty. Got to be Fred Zinnemann or somebody we don’t know to get an Academy Award. Not a personality.

There was a semi-personality, though, and that was the other director I was going to talk to you about, the other director I was in love with and thought was a great artist: Billy Wilder. He had seen my work. So did Hitchcock. He loved Blazing Saddles. Every once in a while, he would say, “You know, you’re very bright. You’re very good.” It was wonderful to get praise from those guys. And Billy Wilder, he loved The Producers. He thought it was a work of genius. So I hung around
with him, and I asked him all kinds of questions. I had lunch with him and followed him around like a poodle. I loved him. I mean, a guy who could do Some Like It Hot and could also do Ace in the Hole. I thought it was the most dramatic movie I’d ever seen. Such drama. And then he could do The Fortune Cookie. He could do a comedy. He could do any kind of picture. He was just a master director.

AVC: How was the experience of working on Curb Your Enthusiasm with Larry David?
MB: Oh, that was great. I mean, that’s the guy. He is the guy. He’s that pain-in-the-ass guy. [Laughs.] He is! He’s very argumentative, and he always thinks he’s right! But it was a great experience. He has great flow. He goes with the punches. And I’m such an ad-lib type guy myself, so it was great. It was perfect. The vocal ping-pong on that show was all real, and most of it was made up. It was great. It was a great experience. But you know, you’d never want to live with him. He’s not anybody that I think anybody would ever want to live with. Right or wrong, he’s so damned opinionated. And contemptuous of any ideas but his own. [Laughs.] But you get what you pay for, and he’s worth it.

AVC: You’ve worked with Larry David, you’ve worked with Paul Reiser. Are there any current comedians you’d like to work with?
MB: I don’t know. Nobody’s asked me. But I like a lot of stuff. Mad About You was very fun. Because they gave me this insane character in Uncle Phil, so I could comb my hair crazy and behave in a truly insane fashion, which, you know, half of me is really, truly insane. And I will do extraordinary things. You know, I never stuck to the script on that show, which they must’ve found crazy, because other actors have to wait for the right line to come in on. So finally I at least decided to give them the last line of each speech, so I could give them their entrance. [Laughs.] But I really enjoyed working with Helen Hunt and Paul. They’re so good. So talented.

AVC: The A.V. Club did a piece recently called “ Heckling Hitler: 15-plus attempts to make the Führer funny,” which included The Producers and both versions of To Be Or Not To Be, and the whole thing was more or less inspired by a comment you made to Spiegel International: “With comedy, we can rob Hitler of his posthumous power.” Do you think you’ve succeeded on that front?
MB: Well, yeah, I think. You get on a soapbox, and these guys are brilliant orators, but you can cast a spotlight of ridicule. You’re gonna bring anybody down if you make fun of them and people laugh at them. So that was my mission. I did a wonderful bit, and it’ll be on—I’m working on a Mel Brooks box set. I don’t know what that is, but I’m working on it.

AVC: That’s for Shout Factory, right?
MB: Yeah, for Shout Factory. It should be out next summer. Or Christmas. I don’t know. But I’m getting things together for it like “The Hitler Rap” that I did for To Be Or Not To Be. A lot of weird stuff. There may actually be 15 minutes in the box set on Hitler. You know, he’s been a very important source of revenue for me. [Laughs.] Adolf Hitler. We’re getting even with him.

AVC: Nostalgia obviously pays pretty big dividends for you, but have you given any thought to writing a new script or directing a new film?
MB: No, but a lot of people have been after me to do a Broadway production of Blazing Saddles: The Musical. And I’ve got a few good ideas for songs and for production numbers and such, how to open it up. And it’s a pretty good idea, because it’s almost a musical in and of itself. Just that one number that Madeline Kahn did, it took to the heavens, it was so beautiful, her performance of it. “I’m Tired,” you know, when she did the Marlene Dietrich take-off. Just that alone, it would be worth the evening for, I think. So, you know, I’ve got to think about it. It’s pretty dangerous stuff, using the N-word. I wouldn’t shy away from it, but I don’t know if I could get away with it. I got away with it then. I don’t know if I could get away with it today. [Laughs.] But if I did it, I certainly would go all the way.

AVC: You got “street cred,” as it were, for Blazing Saddles by bringing in Richard Pryor to work on the script. How did you first run into him?
MB: I think I saw Richard Pryor in New York. I think he was at the Vanguard. I was writing Your Show Of Shows, and I told him, “You’re an absolute genius. I mean, you just condense life and you put it into a 40-minute show. People, relationships, fear of death… you’ve got everything. You just tell the truth in a stark, honest, crazy fashion. You’re really terrific, and I want to be your friend.” And we were friends for a long time.

AVC: What was the collaborative process like on the script, given your different comedic sensibilities?
MB: Well, you know, one of the writers was a dentist. Al Uger. He was Norman Steinberg’s partner. So he gave us the dental point of view on the Old West, whatever that is. [Laughs.] Steinberg was a young lawyer who wanted to be a comedy writer and not a lawyer, so we got the legal point of view on the Old West. You would think that Richard Pryor would give you the black view. You know, the black guy’s torment and broken heart. But no, he loved Mongo. He wrote, “Mongo only pawn in game black view. You know, the black guy’s torment and broken heart.” Brilliant. He loved Mongo, so a lot of Mongo was Richard Pryor. And I wrote a lot of the black stuff, always checking with Richard. “Can I say this? Can I say that?” Like, I would do some bad black jokes, and Richard would say, “Good, go with it, fine.” And every once in awhile, he’d say, “Yeah, that’s all right to say that. But that’s not funny.” He was terrific. Blazing Saddles happened this way: I’m walking down the street and I hear somebody say, “Looking for change?” I look up, and it’s David Begelman. He’s running a big agency with Freddie Fields—CMA—and he says, “You know, something came into my office the other day from Richard Zanuck and
David Brown. It’s called *Tex X.* I said, “That’s an intriguing title. What is it?” He says, “It’s about a black sheriff in 1874 and how they want to string him up.” I said, “You know, I like to write my own stuff.” But I was broke, my wife was pregnant, and he said, “Well, you know, maybe I can get you some real money if you write and direct it. Come back to my office.” I came back to his office and read this treatment by… I think it was by [Andrew] Bergman, all by himself. I read it, I loved it, and I called Bergman and said, “If I do this, would you write it with me?” He said, “Absolutely.” I said, “And we need a black guy to validate any use the N-word.” [Laughs.] “We can’t do that. And there’ll be a lot of it, because there’ll be rednecks who’ll be happy to use the N-word at the drop of a hat.” So he says, “Sure.” And I say, “Also, I like this kid Norman Steinberg.” By the way, Norman Steinberg went on to do *My Favorite Year* for my production company. Beautiful, beautiful movie. And he’s a great writer. So I said to Begelman, “Okay, we’ll do it. And I’ll direct it.” So we all sat in an office in New York, and when it got to be two or three in the morning and there was nothing open but Chinatown, we’d go down to Chinatown and have Chinese food and keep writing. [Laughs.] We just enjoyed each other’s company. And it turned out to be quite an unusual and crazy, funny, brave script. I kept saying to all the other writers, “Write anything you want. Write from the bottom of your heart. Write from your unconscious if you can get in there. Write everything you can, because this ain’t gonna get made, anyway.” [Laughs.] And strangely enough, Warner Bros. liked it.

It’s a great, great story, the birth of *Blazing Saddles.* We wrote it. I went to Hollywood, I filmed it. There was a rough cut, I showed it to [Warner Bros. executive] John Calley and [Warner Bros. chairman] Ted Ashley and… well, there was a lot of different people. And Calley was the only one who chuckled. There were no laughs. I mean, Jesus, you figure you’d get a few! But Leo Greenfield, who was in charge of distribution then, said, “I’ve never said to anybody in his company, ‘Let’s eat this picture, just pay for it, eat it never show it, because it would embarrass the company.’ I’m saying it now.” [Laughs.] He says, “This is too embarrassing. We can’t release this picture.” So we were finished, you know, because they all kind of agreed that it was just too irreverent, too crazy, cast a bad light on Warner Bros.

So Michael Hertzberg, who was the producer of it—and of *The Twelve Chairs,* also—said, “I’ve arranged for a screening at Studio Screening Room 12, it’s the biggest screening room at Warner Bros., and I’ve invited every secretary, every assistant, everybody.” Two hundred seats. Strangely enough, come 7 o’clock that night, there were about 300 people there, all packed in, sitting in the aisles, going against fire regulations. And almost as soon as the Warner Bros. logo burst into flame and burned away like an old-fashioned Western, when the Chinese worker who’s building the railroad faints from 110-degree heat and Slim Pickens says, “Dock that chink a day’s pay for napping on the job,” right from there, they never stopped guffawing, laughing, falling over themselves. It really was an old-fashioned laff riot. That’s L-A-F-F. And it must’ve gotten back to some of the executives, because suddenly they’re saying, “Well, let’s open it in three cities, in theaters like the East Side of New York, the Loop in Chicago, and Sunset Boulevard in L.A.” So they opened it in these three cities, and it got all kinds of great reviews, really. Ebert and Siskel went nuts for it in Chicago. It just was great. And then slowly but surely they fed it to some more cities and many theaters, and it was a big hit. But I thought we were finished. I thought that was the end of it. But when the reviews first came out for my first movie, *The Producers,* Renata Adler—you don’t forget the names—of *The New York Times* crucified it, and I said, “Look, I made a living with *Get Smart,* I can go back to television.” That’s what I thought. I thought *that* was the end of my movie career.

**AVC:** Your comedy is generational to the point where it seems like the majority of your younger fans are holding up *Spaceballs* as your defining work.

**MB:** They do. They do! You know, kids come over to me at various places—theaters, restaurants, and stuff—and they talk about *Spaceballs* and even *Robin Hood: Men in Tights.* I don’t know if they’ve even heard of *Blazing Saddles!*

**AVC:** Does it surprise you that your fan base has developed in such a way that different films appeal to different generations?

**MB:** It is amazing. Well, you know, *Spaceballs* is a weird combination, because it’s a simple, sweet little fairytale, and it’s crazy and out-there and making fun of and taking apart sci-fi, *Star Wars,* and *Star Trek.* So the kids, they get it. They’re with it. And all the little girls love it because it’s a little fairytale where the princess gets to marry the right guy.

**AVC:** With the ongoing fan base for *Spaceballs,* the time would seem to be right to finally do *History Of The World, Part II: Jews In Space.*

**MB:** Well, I mean, that’s just a great title. But there’s nothing behind it, you know, except what you saw on the screen: a couple of guys with teffins doing a hora. That’s about it. [Laughs.] There ain’t much to write about with Jews in space, because very few of them will venture into space. You can find them in lobbies. They’ll be in lobbies in any great hotel or office building. But you won’t find too many Jews in space. I found the only ones—there were maybe half a dozen of ’em—and I filmed them.

**AVC:** Jumping back to the special, Cavett tells how Jack Benny said to him of his over-exuberant fans, “Sometimes you just want to tell them to go fuck themselves.” Do you echo those sentiments? It seems like it’s probably only one “may the Schwartz be with you” away from happening at any given moment.

**MB:** No, no, never. I’m so grateful. I never thought I’d make a living not lifting, not driving, not working at a machine somewhere, making garments. [Laughs.] So I just think it’s a miracle that just for bullshitting and talking and making funny...
faces you get to pay the rent. They give you thousands of dollars, you can go into a restaurant and order anything you want. I can’t believe it. So I’ve never turned on my fans.

Let me tell you one more story, about Ronny Graham. Have you ever heard of Ronny Graham? He was the star and the MC back in 1952 when I had my first sketch on Broadway. It was called New Faces Of 1952, and Leonard Sillman was the genius behind it. He discovered a lot of people. He did New Faces Of 1934 and found Henry Fonda and Imogene Coca. And then he did New Faces Of 1952, and he discovered Paul Lynde and Eartha Kitt and Carol Lawrence and Robert Clary and Alice Ghostley. All wonderful, talented people. But the MC was Ronny Graham. And like I waited for Buster Crabbe, people would wait for Eartha Kitt, and Paul Lynde and Alice Ghostley to some degree, and they’d sign autographs. There was always a big tumult at the stage door of the Royale Theater at 45th Street. And for some reason, Ronny Graham would come out much later, and there was never anybody waiting for Ronny Graham or his autograph. But that didn’t bother Ronny. He would burst out of the door, saying, “Let me live! I have a life, too, you know! I can’t sign autographs every night! Give me a break! I can’t breathe here!” [Laughs.] He’d do this whole bit as if he was surrounded by an audience. It really had me on the floor. Every night, he’d say, “I’m just like you! I’m just an ordinary person!” So, anyway, fans, I’ve never been ungrateful. I’ve been assaulted by press and fans, but for me, it’s fine. It’s like chocolate pudding with whipped cream. Thank you, and thank you again. I’m glad to do it as long as I can.

Sean Woods: “Life Advice rom Mel Brooks” (Men’s Journal, June 2013)

Dutch Master! I'm not even a cigar." The comedy icon is explaining his reluctance to participate in the career retrospective documentary for PBS's 'American Masters' series titled 'Mel Brooks: Make a Noise,' airing May 20th (a DVD version of the documentary comes out the next day, on May 21). "I thought it was a little too much hubris," he continues. "I don't mind my work being appreciated, but I'm not sure about personal reward. I think 'American Masters' went behind my back and got my grandchildren and said ‘call your grandfather and tell him it's a good thing, he'll enjoy it.’” So, 'Men's Journal' figured it was a good time to call the 87-year-old Brooks up and get some wisdom from one of the all-time entertainment greats. Here's what he told us.

What should everyone know about women?

Avoid the short ones — there's a hidden anger in them, and you never know when the heck it's going to come out. Although there was a great exception to that – my mother was very good-natured, and she was about 4-foot-11. There may be other exceptions; I like Sarah Silverman, I don't know how tall she is. She's OK. Kristen Chenoweth, she's very short, and she's very talented. But you know, I haven't seen her she may get very angry. All short women have a delayed fuse. Marry a taller woman: My wife was an inch or two taller than me; it's a sign of security.

What should everyone know about money?

It's no damn good. You know that's what my movies are about, really? I had a theme: My movies are about love or money. Love or success. Love or society crowning you. I boil it down to love and companionship. That seems to be sacred and much more important than success. At some point in your life, you got to say, "I really can't go after money. I got to go after other things. It's important, and we completely lose sight of that. When you're starting out, it's fine, you want to make enough so that you can feed your family. It makes sense. But you get to when you're just wasting your time and making a lot more than you need. These days, I'm Mr. Turn-down. I said, "I got enough. I got enough. I'm not going to sacrifice time, which, is a much more important commodity than money."

What's the best advice you've ever received?

Around five years ago, Father John Frasier, who's a Catholic priest said, "Get out of the Jew business and join us, the Catholics, because you're not going to be covered after you're done." I never did leave the Jew business, even though I liked him very much. Jews can't promise any afterlife. I think we say, "This is it."

What did serving in the Army during World War II teach you?

Basically, to duck. Because the Germans were very good shooters. I was a corporal, I had eight men under me, every once in a while we had to go on patrol. It's scary, but you got to do it. Being brave is being scared and worried and still doing it. Because if you're just a wacko, a mashugana, a crazy guy, then you're not brave, your nuts! But I was very lucky. I got over there sometime in February, and by May 8, the war was over. The only complaint I have is it was noisy. My ears turned brown and yellow because I would stick Camel cigarettes in my ears because the guns and the artillery make so much noise. Probably saved my hearing, even if it discolored my eardrums and everything – it took years for them to return to a normal color.

What's the secret to a good joke?

It's information. It's the buildup. If you just go with the punch line, it's not as funny as if you take your time and explain where you are, who is in the joke, and then how it explodes. Pacing is a matter of talent: You got it, or you ain't. The Greek actor Andreas Voutsinas, from the 'Producers,' always gave me good advice – he'd say, "Or you got it, or you ain't." It was as simple as that. I would say to him, "We're in America, Andreas. You can't start things with Or."

What do you do when you offend people?

Oh, you have to risk it. To hell with them. When I did 'Springtime for Hitler,' the war was not even cold. And the
memory of being in concentration camps was still vivid for Jews. It was literally in bad taste. People like rabbis and would write to me and say, "This is execrable." And I'd say, "You can't bring folks like Hitler down by getting on a soapbox -- they're better at it than we are. But if you can humiliate them, ridicule them, and have people laugh at them -- you've won." I knew 'Springtime for Hitler' was perfect, I knew it was right. I said to my friends, they may have to catch up with me. I may be a little ahead the curve at this point and have to wait for some of the world to catch up with me.

**But what's the limit? When should someone be offended?**

It's true, there is a limit. You got to know the line. For me, it's concentration camps. You know the movie 'Life is Beautiful' can't be funny. The subject matter is not fertile, you can't grow anything in that. It's just ashes. So I have my limits. I use the N-word in 'Blazing Saddles'. But it was to show how despised, hated, and loathed this black sheriff was. Without the N-word, you couldn't have the story. You got to tell the truth.

**What advice would you give to a younger you?**

Forget about correcting your past. You learn from your past as you go along. You can't say, "If I had . . ." You say, "OK, all right. That was a mistake. I won't do that again." That's how you learn.

**After the Sid Caesar show ended, you were broke. What did that teach you?**

It was really tough because I was used to living large. When I met Anne [Bancroft], I was spending her money. She'd give me money under the table. So one time we were at a Chinese restaurant, and I had a lot of wine, and I got a little drunk, and I left a five-dollar tip, and she whacked me across the face. She said, "What are you, crazy? You're spending my money!" You think you're looking good, leaving a big tip. Forget it. I laughed like hell, I hit the floor laughing.

**What's the secret to a happy marriage?**

Estelle Reiner, Carl's wife, she said, "Find someone who can stand you." It's true! You got to find someone who can stand you and your wackiness, and all your anger and your happiness. Someone who can stand you and enjoys you. Ann and I lasted 26 years together until she passed away.

**What role does religion play in a man's life?**

That's a tricky question. If you're not indoctrinated into some kind of religion when you're young, then it can play very little. I'm rather secular. I'm basically Jewish. But I think I'm Jewish not because of the Jewish religion at all. I think it's the relationship with the people and the pride I have. The tribe surviving so many misfortunes, and being so brave and contributing so much knowledge to the world and showing courage.

**What did you learn as a child during the Great Depression?**

We had very little in terms of hard stuff, like a nice apartment or good silverware or good food. There was my mother, and we were four boys. My father had died at 34. I was only two, but up until nine, I had the greatest life. Even though it was only fried eggs and beans on Friday night, it was great; I was happy. I'd be on the streets playing. You can't do better than that. Then when I was nine, it all kind of crashed for a while because there's a thing called homework. And I intrinsically realized, "Ah, so this is it. Nothing is free; they want you to pay. You got to pay to be in society. First you start with homework."

**How does a man find his calling?**

A lot of it is luck. You find yourself in a job, and you love it, and you stick with it, and that's your calling. I don't think you stand on the top of a mountain and throw your hands up to God and say, "What is my calling?" I don't think it works! You stumble on your calling. Whatever it is, whether you're a ladies' salesman in the garment center or a pit boss in Vegas or a comic, you need to be able to say, "I'm very comfortable doing this."

**How should a man handle regret?**

Let it go! Don't dwell on it. I would go to the racetrack every once in a while, and I'd start yelling, "It was by a nose!" I would go on and on, and then my racing buddy, Darrell Richard, who was on the 'Donna Reed Show' would say to me, "Leave it on the bus, don't dwell on your regrets." And he's right. It's hard not to, but don't regret, just forget about it. Don't take negative time, just take positive time.

**What's the key growing old, but staying young?**

Be interested in everything. You don't have to adore it. I don't adore hip-hop, I don't think it's great music, but I'm interested, I listen. I like Norah Jones, Madonna, whatever -- they're good! I watch a lot of new films, I see everything. I still read, I like books, whether they are old books, new books. I'm interested -- you gotta stay interested!

**What role does courage play in a man's life?**

You got to be brave. If you feel something, you've really got to risk it. Quentin Tarantino does that, and I'm proud of him. Because a lot of stuff is just god-awful, but right next to it is something profound, poignant, and new. I like his taking chances with 'Django'. He takes more chances then any filmmaker, and I do like it.

**What role does vanity play in a man's life?**

You need it. It's not such a bad thing. A brushstroke of vanity is good to add into the mix, to balance your timidity. We're all blessed with a lot of timidity and a lot of worry and anxiety, and vanity is a good antidote. I don't need a lot of it, but a brushstroke of it is a good thing. You got to root for yourself. Who the hell else is going to root for you if you don't root for yourself? You gotta say, "Up, up with Mel! Mel's the best." And I'm not talking Gibson, I'm talking Brooks.

Roger Ebert: “The Producers” (June 23, 2000)

Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder have a scene in "The Producers" where they roll on the floor so ferociously we expect them to chew on one another. Mostel is so manic and barbarian, Wilder so panicked and hysterical, you wonder why spit didn't
get on the camera lens. The whole movie is pitched at that level of frenzied desperation, and one of the many joys of watching it is to see how the actors are able to control timing and nuance even while screaming.

This is one of the funniest movies ever made. To see it now is to understand that. To see it for the first time in 1968, when I did, was to witness audacity so liberating that not even "There’s Something About Mary" rivals it. The movie was like a bomb going off inside the audience's sense of propriety. There is such capacity in its heroes, such gleeful fraud, such greed, such lust, such a willingness to compromise every principle, that we cave in and go along.

The movie stars Mostel and Wilder as Max Bialystock, a failing Broadway producer, and Leo Bloom, a nebbishy accountant. Bialystock raises money for his productions by seducing checks out of little old ladies, who come to his office to fool around ("We'll play the innocent little milkmaid and the naughty stable boy!"). Bloom is sent to do his books, and finds that Bialystock raised $2,000 more than he lost on his last failure. You could make a lot of money by overfinancing turkeys, he muses, a glint in his eye: "The IRS isn't interested in laps." This leads to their great inspiration: Max will venture into "little old lady-land" and raise thousands of dollars more than they need for a production that will be guaranteed to fail. The critic David Ehrenstein traces the first use of the phrase "creative accounting" to "The Producers," and Bialystock and Bloom make it into a fine art. "Hello, boys!" says Max, plopping down next to his safe and patting the piles of money.

Their formula for failure is a musical named "Springtime for Hitler," with a dance line of jackbooted SS girls and lyrics like, "Don't be stupid, be a smarty! Come and join the Nazi Party!" Their neo-Nazi playwright Franz Liebkind (Kenneth Mars) roars up to opening night on a motorcycle, wears a Nazi helmet into the lobby, and tells them, "It's magic time!" Reaction shots during the first act show the audience paralyzed in slack-jawed horror.

How did Mel Brooks, the writer and director, get away with this? By establishing the amoral desperation of both key characters at the outset, and by casting them with actors you couldn't help liking, even so. Like Falstaff, Zero Mostel's Max Bialystock is a man whose hungers are so vast they excuse his appetites. There is a scene where he scrubs his filthy office window with coffee, peers through the murk, sees a white Rolls-Royce and screams, "That's it, baby! When you've got it, flaunt it! Flaunt it!" You can taste his envy and greed. "See this?" he says to Bloom, holding up an empty setting. "This used to hold a pearl as big as your eye. Look at me now! I'm wearing a cardboard belt!" It is typical of this movie that after he says the line, he takes off the belt and rips it to shreds.

Mostel was a serious actor, a blacklist target, an intellectual. His performance here is a masterpiece of low comedy. Despite a comb-over that starts just above his collar line, he projects optimistic vanity, spitting on his hand to slick back his hair before Miss "Hold me! Touch me!" (Estelle Winwood) enters for her weekly visit. What Mostel projects above all is utter confidence. He never has second thoughts. Perhaps he never thinks at all, but only proceeds out of Darwinian urgency.

Gene Wilder was a new face in 1968, introduced to audiences with a key supporting role in "Bonnie and Clyde" (1967), also as a character consumed by nervousness. His performance in "The Producers" is a shade shy of a panic attack. On the floor with Mostel looming over him, he screams, "Don't jump! Don't jump!" Mostel starts to hop in a frenzy, and Wilder escapes to a corner, hides behind a chair, and screams, "I'm hysterical! I'm hysterical!" Mostel pours a glass of water and throws it in his face. Wilder delivers another classic line: "I'm wet! I'm hysterical, and I'm wet! I'm in pain, and I'm wet, and I'm still hysterical!"

The movie's supporting stars became briefly famous after the movie came out, although none found equally funny material again. Mars was a bug-eyed fanatic, up on the roof with his pigeons, singing Nazi songs, later ordering an audience member to stop laughing because "I am the author! I outrank you!" To the Nazi jokes Brooks added gay jokes, with the flamboyant couple of Broadway director Roger De Bris (Christopher Hewett) and his valet Carmen Giya (Andreas Voutsinas). At one point Max, Leo and Carmen crowd into a tiny elevator, and are expelled breathless and flustered. Heterosexuality is represented by the pneumatic Lee Meredith, as Ulla, the buxom secretary, who types one letter at a time and then pauses for a smile of self-congratulation. The other great supporting performance is by Dick Shawn as the actor who plays Hitler; in a movie made at the height of the flower power period, he's a hippie constructed out of spare parts, with his finger cymbals, Campbell's soup can necklace and knee-high shag boots.

To produce a musical named "Springtime for Hitler" was of course in the worst possible taste, as an escaping theater patron observes in the movie--to the delight of Bialystock and Bloom, who were counting on just that reaction. To make a movie about such a musical was also in bad taste, of course. It is obvious that Bialystock and Bloom are Jewish, but they never refer to that. As Franz Liebkind rants, they nod, because the more offensive he is, the more likely his play will fail. Brooks adds just one small moment to suggest their private thoughts. As the two men walk away from the playwright's apartment, Bloom covers the red-and-black Nazi armband Franz has given him.
"All right, take off the armband," says Bialystock, taking off his own. They throw both armbands into a trash can. Leo spits into it, and then Max does.

The best sight gag in the movie is the one at the end of a long day spent by Max and Leo walking around Manhattan and perfecting their scheme. Finally at night they find themselves in front of the fountain at Lincoln Center. The music swells. Leo cries, "I want everything I've ever seen in the movies!" And then the fountain leaps up. Everyone remembers the fountain. The music and the dialogue make it into a punch line instead of just a surprise.

Like most of Brooks' films, "The Producers" is cheerfully willing to go anywhere for a laugh. In Brooks' next film, "Blazing Saddles" (1974), he produced the famous campfire scene, long before Eddie Murphy's Klumps had their troubles with intestinal gas. Gene Wilder worked with him again in the wonderful "Young Frankenstein" (also 1974), and Brooks has remained prolific; high points are "Silent Movie" (1976), with its narcissistic Burt Reynolds shower scene; the Hitchcock spoof "High Anxiety" (1977), where the tracking shot breaks a plate-glass window, and the underrated "Life Stinks" (1991), inspired by Preston Sturges' "Sullivan's Travels."

Mel Brooks began in big-time show business as a writer for Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" in 1950; Carl Reiner and Neil Simon were fellow writers. That he didn't have a career as a stand-up comedian is surely only because he chose not to.

I remember finding myself in an elevator with Brooks and his wife, actress Anne Bancroft, in New York City a few months after "The Producers" was released. A woman got onto the elevator, recognized him and said, "I have to tell you, Mr. Brooks, that your movie is vulgar." Brooks smiled benevolently. "Lady," he said, "it rose below vulgarity."
Louise Erdrich
Thursday, March 10, 2016

Where:
Kleinhans Music Hall
3 Symphony Circle
Buffalo, NY 14201

Date: March 10, 2016
Time: 8:00 p.m.
Patron VIP Reception: 7:00 p.m.