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Hebrew acts in British music hall: the career of Julian Rose

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On 23 December 1907 Charlie Chaplin, aged eighteen, stepped out on stage at Foresters' Music Hall in Bethnal Green in London wearing false whiskers and heavy make-up. It was his solo debut and it was to be a disaster. "After the first couple of jokes the audience started throwing coins and orange peel and stamping their feet and booing", Chaplin later recounted. He had been billed as "Sam Cohen – the Jewish Comedian" and had intended to perform material culled from an American joke book. The jokes had been "very poor", he later wrote, and "most anti-Semitic".¹

He had chosen the persona of "Sam Cohen" because at the time in London, in Chaplin's words, "Jewish comedians were all the rage". But he did not mean comedians who were in fact Jewish but, rather, comedians, Jewish or Gentile, who portrayed stereotypical immigrant Jews. These comedy turns, often referred to as "Hebrew acts", were an American import, which for a while became an established comedy sub-genre in Britain. In time, these acts evolved into less offensive Jewish comic characterizations and disappeared in their original form. Indeed, their extinction became so complete that most British Jews today are unaware that this type of comedy ever existed on British stages. A similar development took place in the United States but earlier, reflecting differences in the Jewish historical experience between the United States and Britain. These differences will become evident and the story of Hebrew acts in Britain will be told through the career of Julian Rose (1868–1935), a once well-known Jewish-American comedian. For thirty-five years, Rose performed in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere, chiefly in the character of "Levinsky", a comic Jew of Eastern European heritage. Rose became the pre-eminent Hebrew act comedian in Britain and by the late 1920s the story of old-style Hebrew acts in British light entertainment is largely his story.

1 Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1964), 97; Barry Anthony, *Chaplin's Music Hall: The Chaplins and their Circle in the Limelight* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 187–8; Stephen Weissman, *Chaplin: A Life* (London: J. R. Books, 2009), 146–9.



1 A caricature of Julian Rose as Levinsky, the stage character he inhabited in his career, signed “Our Hebrew Friend Julian Rose ‘Levinsky’ 1934”. Property of David Rose, Melbourne, and reproduced with his permission

The background: music hall in Britain

The term “music hall” is capable of being used in three ways: a demotic performance style, a particular section of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century entertainment industry in Britain, and a building with a specific entertainment purpose.² In its second meaning, “music hall” came to be used from the 1860s to describe the business of providing a type of light entertainment, mostly musical in content, to working-class and lower middle-class audiences. The business had its roots in the concert rooms of public houses, but by the 1850s purpose-built music halls, resembling theatres, started to be constructed. These were, however,

2 Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840–1914*, 2nd ed. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 84.

merely the forerunner of much grander and more lavishly decorated halls, starting with the London Pavilion, opened in 1885. There was also a proliferation of music halls, of different sizes and degrees of decoration and comfort, in cities and towns throughout Britain.³

Music hall became a business worthy of capitalist investment, and by 1913 there were sixty-four halls in London and 503 elsewhere in Britain.⁴ And with growth came greater concentration of ownership, some sixteen syndicates controlling more than 140 halls by 1914,⁵ and a more commercially efficient provision of entertainment. In the late nineteenth century, a music hall show might last three or four hours involving as many as thirty to forty items a show, but from the 1890s there was a shift to twice-nightly shows of two hours' duration each, presenting as few as a dozen acts. There was also a change in content, partly as a result of managers seeking to attract a wider audience, including more women and the better off, and partly as a result of pressure from local government regulators wishing to curb disreputable entertainment. A more varied range of light entertainment came to be offered, auditoriums became alcohol-free, and prostitutes were excluded from those central London theatres where they had begun to promenade.⁶

The wider range of entertainment that had evolved came to be referred to, appropriately, as "variety" and the places where it was performed were "variety theatres". "Music hall" began to connote a more old-fashioned and less seemly form of live entertainment, although for a while many used "music hall" and "variety" interchangeably. It was, however, as "variety" that commercial light entertainment, containing much of the spirit and form of late nineteenth-century music hall, became a national cultural institution, its elevation in status being marked in 1912 by the first variety British Royal Command Performance, attended by George V and Queen Mary, at the Palace Theatre in London, with the great Scottish entertainer Harry Lauder (1870–1950) topping the bill. Lauder performed in full Scottish national dress and was by 1911 said to be the highest paid entertainer in the world.⁷

3 Ibid., 85–6; Paul Bailey, ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986), xi; Oliver Double, *Britain had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 39; John Major, *My Old Man: A Personal History of Music Hall* (London: William Collins, 2013), 63–71.

4 Russell, *Popular Music*, 98.

5 Ibid., 88.

6 Ibid., 87–90; Double, *Britain had Talent*, 41–6.

7 Double, *Britain had Talent*, 42; Major, *My Old Man*, 128, 158–63.

*British music hall and American vaudeville:
a difference in comedy subject matter*

British music hall had always been prepared to look overseas for talent and ideas, and an early theatrical import from America, first arriving in 1843, was the minstrel show, an entertainment involving jokes, song, and dance and performed by white people with blacked-up faces.⁸ By the end of the century, the United States had developed its own theatrical light entertainment form, vaudeville, which in many ways mirrored British music hall. Many vaudevillians took a passage to Europe to tour British halls, just as some British entertainers sought success in vaudeville in the United States. However, while there were similarities between the two forms, and some performers, like Lauder, became stars on both sides of the Atlantic, vaudeville and music hall had their differences and one of these was in comedy subject matter.

Social class was central to music hall humour. An early comic genre was the “swell”, an upper-class comic character with exaggerated side whiskers, a top hat, monocle, spats, and expensive-looking clothing, a portrayal which poked fun at the upper class by ostensibly celebrating louche living and drunkenness. A later comic creation was the cheeky Cockney costermonger, long-suffering, down-to-earth, but ever-cheerful and resilient.⁹ Ethnic humour existed in the form of Irish, Scottish, and blackface acts, but humour based on this stereotyping played less of a part in music hall comedy in the 1890s than it did across the Atlantic in vaudeville.

At this time, a programme of entertainment in an American vaudeville theatre might include several ethnic turns with performers portraying Dutch (meaning German, “Deutsch”), Jewish (usually designated as “Hebrew”), Irish, or African-American comic stereotypes. Indeed, some successful performers might showcase their versatility by quick changes of make-up and costume, switching between ethnicities within a single programme.¹⁰ The most famous of the quick changers were the successful comic duo Weber and Fields, who devised the first popular dialect and slapstick Dutch act in the 1880s, but who were equally comfortable

8 Major, *My Old Man*, 177–81.

9 *Ibid.*, 77–95.

10 M. Alison Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish and African-American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 25.

2 Joe Welch,
c. 1900, who first
fully delineated the
stereotype of the
pathetic Jewish pedlar
in US vaudeville in
the 1880s and whose
comic career was ended
by the activities of
Jewish protest groups.
Photograph by White
Studio. © Billy Rose
Theatre Division, New
York Public Library for the
Performing Arts



performing as stage Irishmen or in blackface. In fact, both were of Polish-Jewish origin and their Dutch characterizations were based on the English usage of the foreign-born New York Jews among whom they had grown up.¹¹

The evolution of Hebrew acts in American vaudeville

The comic Jew as a character in American light entertainment first started to appear in the 1870s and by the 1890s the stereotype had become so well established that it would have been immediately recognizable to a vaudeville audience. A comedian portraying a Jew would shuffle or limp on stage with a hangdog look. He would have unkempt hair and whiskers, a big false nose, oversized shoes, an over-large black derby (bowler) hat pulled down to his ears, and a long dark coat dangling to his ankles. By the 1900s, almost every travelling burlesque show would have a Jewish

11 Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity 1860–1920* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 99–100; Ted Merwin, *In their own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 21–2; Jeremy Dauber, *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 224.

comedian, a grotesque figure providing a contrast on stage with the attractive dancing girls who surrounded him.¹²

A progenitor of this stereotype was Frank Bush, a talented mimic capable of portraying a range of ethnic stereotypes. Bush was a German-born Gentile, whose stage speciality from 1880 onwards was the comic Jew.¹³ It was, however, a Jewish performer, Joe Welch, who by the end of the 1880s had first fully delineated the stereotype of the pathetic Jewish pedlar. Dressed as described, he would shamble to front of stage and greet his audience forlornly with “Mebbe you t’ink I’m a happy man?” or “Oi, hev I gedt troubles!” Welch’s stage persona was that of the shoulder-shrugging Jewish loser.¹⁴ An alternative stage Jew also came to be developed by other comedians, such as M. B. Curtis, Julian Rose, and Joe Welch’s brother, Ben, and this was the lively, clever, fast-talking jokester.¹⁵ Despite their differences, however, both early comic Jewish stereotypes tended to possess the same inglorious personal characteristics: a pre-occupation with money, dubious honesty, and a cowardly strain.

With the coming of sound recording, many Hebrew act comedians recorded monologues or comic songs on wax cylinders and, later, on 78 rpm records. Some of these were bestsellers, the most famous being *Cohen on the Telephone*, first recorded by Joe Hayman in 1913, which sold two million copies for Columbia. In the recording, Cohen, unused to the telephone, makes comic mistakes and asides. The recording became a successful model for other records by other Hebrew comedians who placed the hapless Cohen in further comic situations.¹⁶

Between the 1830s and 1917, the United States received successive waves of Jewish immigrants, the greatest influx arriving from Tsarist Russia after 1881. The increasing number of Jewish stage representations from the 1870s onwards reflected the growing visibility of Jews in America. Jews were a growing presence in the American theatre world and, in certain big cities, among theatre audiences. They also became prominent in theatrical management. During the 1890s, a cartel, the Theatrical Syndicate, created by six Jewish booking agents and producers, almost monopolized

12 Paul Antonie Distler, “The Rise and Fall of the Racial Comics in Vaudeville” (Ph.D. thesis, Tulane University, 1963), 161; Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 102.

13 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 76–83.

14 Distler, “Rise and Fall”, 161–4; Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, 25–6; Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 224–5.

15 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 102.

16 Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 225; Merwin, *In their own Image*, 24.

theatrical production in the United States. In New York in particular every level of show business became influenced by Jews, and it has been estimated that by 1905 half the people working in the city's entertainment industry were Jewish.¹⁷

During the 1900s, the portrayal of comic Jews on the US stage evolved and Jewish ethnicity came to be less grotesquely represented. Especially after 1910, a false beard and heavy dialect were no longer required for a comic character to be established to the audience as a Jew.¹⁸ Characterizations also became more benign. Indicative of this change was the arrival of the first of the successful series of *Potash and Perlmutter* comedy plays, based on the stories of Montague Glass. Potash and Perlmutter were two comic business partners, commercially oriented and speaking with a recognizably Jewish accent but beardless, smartly dressed, patriotic, and with hearts of gold.¹⁹ Seven plays were produced in the series between 1913 and 1926.²⁰

This evolution in the costume and character of stage Jews took place at a time when most Jewish immigrants and their descendants in America were becoming more prosperous and, generally speaking, starting to dress and sound more like Gentile Americans. This was partly a result of assimilation and partly of fewer Eastern European Jews reaching the United States to swell the numbers of the unassimilated. After 1914, the dislocations of the war in Europe and the dangers of an Atlantic crossing reduced immigration from Europe to a trickle. Then came the US Immigration Act of 1917 and subsequent legislation, which introduced significant barriers to immigration. The foreign-born, down-at-heel Jewish pedlar became a less appropriate figure for portraying on stage a representative Jew. There were also changes in public taste and in the format of theatrical light entertainment. More musical comedy, comedy plays, and revues came to be produced in theatres, and these entertainments provided less scope for the inclusion of knockabout ethnic comedy turns. This change affected all ethnic acts, not just the portrayal of stage Jews.²¹ A further reason still for the decline of the classic Hebrew act was Jewish communal protest.

17 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 93–4, 96.

18 *Ibid.*, 144–5.

19 Distler, "Rise and Fall", 170–71; Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 153–6, 170–71; Merwin, *In their own Image*, 83–7.

20 Edward D. Coleman, *The Jew in English Drama* (New York: New York Public Library, 1943), 77–8, 137.

21 Distler, "Rise and Fall", 184–7.

Communal protests in America

Although Hebrew acts were less common than Irish acts or blackface turns, they shared a common feature, namely the hostility which such acts engendered among those who felt that the group to whom they belonged was being subjected to public ridicule. The most violent responses to such mockery came from Irish Americans. Stage Irishmen were frequently portrayed as stupid, drunken, and brutal, while stage Irishwomen, sometimes played by female impersonators, were oafish and unfeminine. Irish Americans were known to react to such performances by showering the stage with eggs, fruit, and vegetables or by loud harangues from the stalls. On several occasions in the early twentieth century, there were notable theatre riots promoted by Irish nationalist organizations.²² By contrast, African Americans used non-violent, law-abiding tactics such as peaceful lobbying or legal action when objecting to dramatic representations. African-American organizations, preoccupied with opposing racial segregation and eliminating lynching, concentrated their energy on objecting to those theatrical performances thought likely to promote violence against Black Americans. One such target was the 1905 play *The Clansman*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan, later adapted as the 1915 feature film *Birth of a Nation*.²³

On 3 April 1910, Rabbi Joseph Silverman, the chief rabbi of a prominent New York Reform synagogue, rose in the pulpit to deliver a widely reported sermon in which he called for a vigorous campaign against the caricaturing of Jews in the press and on stage. "The stage Jew", he proclaimed, "is a stench in our nostrils, a disgrace to the country, an insult to the Jew, and a discredit to the stage." He spoke approvingly of the success of Irish Americans in opposing portrayals of the stage Irishman. Silverman's approach was taken up by other rabbis and became a subject of discussion at the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1910. Formed in 1889, the CCAR was an organization of Reform rabbis that had campaigned throughout the 1900s to alter the public image of the Jew in American life. There was nothing new in Silverman's declaration, but his call to action was an accelerant after which opposition to negative stereotypes of Jews became more widespread, organized, and effective.²⁴

22 Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, 51–81.

23 *Ibid.*, 130–36, 140–46.

24 Edna Nahshon, "The Pulpit and the Stage: Rabbi Joseph Silverman and the Actor's Church Alliance", *American Jewish History* 91, no. 1 (March 2003): 27; Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, 91–2, 124–5.

In 1913 a new Jewish organization, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), was founded whose aim was to fight antisemitism in all areas, including defamation on stage and in motion pictures. More specifically focused than the ADL, an Anti-Stage Jew Vigilance Committee was formed in Chicago in the same year, which made a systematic survey of Jewish comics playing in the area and sought to ban from the stage those that in the Committee's view exceeded the bounds of good taste. The activities of Jewish protest groups included letter writing, public forums, and boycotts, and a number of Hebrew comedians found it difficult to get bookings. One of these was Joe Welch, whose career was effectively brought to an end by boycotts, and who died in 1918. Another comedian adversely affected was Julian Rose.²⁵

While these campaigns had much support among American Jews, the leadership of the protesters came from a particular section of American Jewry – an assimilated professional elite of German Jewish origin, who tended to be members of Reform congregations. Despite the centralization of the show business industry in New York, the most prominent initial campaigns originated not from that city but from among Jews in the less metropolitan setting of Chicago, and had something of the character of a Middle American campaign against low comedy.²⁶

Protests undoubtedly played a part in eliminating Hebrew acts of the type performed by Joe Welch, and these acts had largely disappeared from vaudeville by 1918.²⁷ It is possible, however, to overstate the impact of these protesters, a view taken by the historian Ted Merwin.²⁸ Hebrew acts had begun to evolve into less egregious forms of characterization some years before Rabbi Silverman delivered his call for action. Nevertheless, the vocal activities of these groups put considerable pressure on some theatre managers who did not want to lose any part of their potential Jewish audience, and contributed to the change in taste which made ethnic ridicule less acceptable in popular entertainment. An example of the impact of Jewish pressure is that before the opening of *Potash and Perlmutter* in 1913, the play's adapter from the original Glass stories, Charles Klein, was so apprehensive about how the play might be received by American Jews that his name was not printed on the play's original programme.²⁹

Jewish comic figures with some stereotypical characteristics continued

25 Distler, "Rise and Fall", 188–191; Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 50–153; Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, 92, 117, 124–30, 151–2.

26 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 151–2.

27 Ibid., 150–53.

28 Merwin, *In their own Image*, 72–3, on Distler, "Rise and Fall".

29 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 153.

into the 1920s to be portrayed in vaudeville, as is evidenced by the many monologues and sketches containing this kind of material listed in Edward Coleman's *Jew in English Drama* (1943), but the stereotypes had evolved. Welch's pedlar had gone and in his place a range of more assimilated, less alien, more neighbourly yet unmistakably Jewish types came to be substituted. A popular comic duo of the time were Smith and Dale (Joe Saltzer and Charlie Marks), clean-shaven, wisecracking, speaking in Jewish dialect, obviously Jewish but not specifically identified as such.³⁰ Vaudeville was, however, on the wane and in the late 1920s and early 1930s it was largely killed off in theatre-based form by the advent of talking pictures.

A contrast with America: Jews in British music hall

In the years after 1881, Britain was affected by the same wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration as the United States, and by 1914 only New York and Chicago exceeded the number of Jewish immigrants living in London.³¹ Numerically, however, Britain was a long way behind America. The Jewish population of Britain in 1920 has been estimated at 295,000, but the United States had 3,600,000 Jews, with 1,500,000 in Greater New York alone.³² In terms of population size, therefore, and absent other factors, British Jews could not be expected to make the same cultural impact on their host society as their co-religionists did in the United States. British music hall/variety in the period 1880–1930 was mainly a Gentile-owned and managed business and there existed only one sizable syndicate controlled by a Jewish impresario.³³ The Jewish presence in music hall was at its greatest in agencies, where Richard Lazarsfeld Warner had by 1900 created the largest theatrical agency in Britain, Warner & Co.³⁴ By comparison, the Jewish on-stage presence in turn-of-the-century British music hall was small and there were few Jews among the foremost performers. A proxy for ascertaining the proportion of performers who

30 Merwin, *In their own Image*, 23–5, 28–30.

31 Lloyd P. Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England 1870–1914*, 3rd ed. (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001), 16–17.

32 *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1925), vol. 5, 174; vol. 12, 371, 373.

33 Sir Walter de Frece MP: *British Jews in the First World War*, <https://www.jewsfww.uk/sir-walter-de-frece-mp-1722.php> (accessed 25 July 2020).

34 Ann Lazarsfeld-Jensen, "The English Warner Brother triumphs over Religious Hegemony on the Road to Celebrity and Dynasty", *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 32–41.

3 Frank Bush, 1890, a non-Jewish American comedian and mimic who brought a Hebrew act to London. Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts



were Jewish and adhered to at least some tenets of the Jewish religion is the Music Hall and Variety Artistes Burial Places list (on the website Music Hall and Theatre 1839–1904 History Site Dedicated to Arthur Lloyd).³⁵ This lists the burial places of 191 performers, though only two of these are in Jewish cemeteries. But just because show business in Britain was a largely Gentile business, it did not mean that Jews were not keen to get into it. For many Jews with an urge to work in music hall but lacking useful connections, a potential *entrée* into show business might be to play a Jew on stage once the chance to do so began to arise more frequently after the comic Hebrew stereotype arrived on British stages in the 1900s. It was also an opportunity for career advancement for those Jewish performers already in the business but struggling to progress.³⁶

The arrival of Hebrew acts in Britain

It was only a matter of time before American Hebrew acts would start to arrive in British music halls. Vaudevillians were generally happy to try their luck in Britain and the managers of British music halls were always on the look out for novelty. Frank Bush came to London from America in May 1902 to play at the Palace Theatre, where he was billed as a mimic.

35 <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Burialss.htm> (accessed 25 July 2020).

36 M. J. Landa, *The Jew in Drama* (London: P. S. King & Son, 1926), 278.

In the quarter of a century since the inception of Bush's Hebrew act, his comic turn had softened a little. His stage costume was not as dingy as in earlier days and his humour was a little less about laughing at Jews and more about laughing with them.³⁷ Nevertheless, the Musical and Dramatic Notes columnist of the *Jewish Chronicle*, the foremost publication serving the anglicized, middle-class Jewish public, was aghast: "Mr Bush made his first entrance as a 'Stage Jew' . . . the impersonation consisting of a burlesque of a Jew talking in broken English. The character was held up to ridicule to a degree which was accentuated by the 'make up'. The whole thing was in the most questionable taste".³⁸ The columnist said he believed that such American acts would be unsustainable in Britain because managers of music halls would be afraid of offending Jews in the audience, but he was later proved wrong.

In the years that followed, Hebrew acts became an established comic sub-genre in music hall. American comics continued to arrive in Britain to perform such material³⁹ and the *Jewish Chronicle* continued to deplore the stage Jew "with his covetousness, his broken accent, his dirty appearance, and his general comicality",⁴⁰ but the imported form was starting to nativize.

An early and unusual example of the staging of Jews for comic purposes by British performers and of a British Jewish audience's response was the successful 1905–6 Fred Karno music hall sketch *Moses & Son*.⁴¹ Karno (1866–1941) was an impresario who produced comedy on an industrial scale, and whose large organization eventually comprised thirty troupes on tour worldwide with a repertoire of more than twenty sketches.⁴² His leading comedian was Fred Kitchen (1872–1951), a key early influence on Charlie Chaplin. In 1905, Karno was looking for new material and Kitchen proposed to him a comic sketch where all the cast would be recognizably Jewish, except for the main comedian, who would be a Gentile. The hour-long piece, to be written by non-Jews, would be set in a fictitious Jewish bank, *Moses & Son*, with Kitchen playing the role of a Gentile porter. In his posthumously published autobiography, Kitchen wrote that to recruit the cast an advertisement was placed for Jews to play Jews on stage, and

37 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 83.

38 *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter JC), 16 May 1902, 30.

39 E.g. JC, 14 Sept. 1906, 30.

40 JC, 24 Feb. 1905, 9.

41 Landa, *Jew in Drama*, 279.

42 Weissman, *Chaplin*, 150–51.

on the day of the audition at the Victoria Theatre in London “hundreds turned up, and though the cast for the new sketch was a fairly large one – running to about sixty people – there were enough would-be and had-been performers in the theatre that day to have cast a dozen such sketches – and to have provided the audience as well”. According to Kitchen, Jewish audiences were not offended by the sketch and when *Moses & Son* opened at the Holborn Empire “the theatre was packed to overflowing with Jews” and “they went away delighted”.⁴³ Karno and Kitchen did not put together an all-Jewish sketch again. They must nevertheless have thought that Jewish stereotypes, carefully handled, were good box office material, as comedians capable of playing a comic Jew were thereafter regularly brought into Karno’s comic troupes. Indeed, for the 1913 sketch *Bungle’s Luck*, another comic vehicle for Kitchen, “several well-known Hebrew comedians” were reported as included.⁴⁴

During the period from the early 1900s and into the First World War, the Hebrew act increasingly appeared on the bill in British music halls. Some performers were Gentile and some were Jewish, some were American and some were home-grown. A list has been compiled of comedians who performed Hebrew acts in Glasgow music halls from about 1906 to 1919.⁴⁵ This comprises twenty-four acts in total, solo and duo, suggesting a small but enduring comedy sub-genre being played occasionally in the city’s music halls and, one assumes, with the same incidence of performance in other big cities. Forty per cent of British Jews lived outside London in 1914⁴⁶ and this geographical spread aided diffusion. If a comedian performing in a provincial music hall wanted to raise a laugh with a Hebrew act, it would help if members of the audience had at least seen a Jew in their home town, even if the sight did not conform to the stereotype of a Joe Welch pedlar.

In the years before the First World War, there is little evidence of any toning down of ethnic ridicule in the staging of Hebrew comedy in Britain, and the *Jewish Chronicle* regularly decried Hebrew acts which lampooned Jewish people. It was a “recent introduction from the land of the dollar . . . and it is not necessarily ‘touchy’ to resent it.”⁴⁷ It was also a subject

43 Fred Kitchen, *Meredith, We’re in! The Life Story of Fred Kitchen told by himself* (privately published: Frederick Simon Kitchen-Dunn, 2012), 159–60.

44 JC, 28 Feb. 1913, 37.

45 Paul Maloney, *The Britannia Panopticon Music Hall and Cosmopolitan Entertainment Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 120.

46 Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain 1656–2000* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 130.

47 JC, 14 Feb. 1908, 24.

on which readers' letters were published. What seemed most shocking to readers was that this caricaturing of Jews was usually conducted by fellow Jews "who sow the seed of anti-Semitism on Gentile soil", and "greatly spread Jewish hatred amongst the ignorant class of the British public".⁴⁸ It was also particularly concerning that such mockery seemed to be considered acceptable humour by many Jews in the audience, particularly young Jews, who imitated it for their own entertainment and diversion.⁴⁹ Even more forceful hostility was expressed by writers in the Yiddish newspapers produced in London's East End, in which the humour of *hibru komedyens* was reviled.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, no organized Jewish pressure group seeking the banning or boycotting of offensive Hebrew acts in Britain came into being at this time comparable to those in the United States. Nor do there seem to have been many documented examples of Jewish members of an audience objecting to Hebrew act material during a performance. The dearth of reported incidents is significant in itself. There is Chaplin's story of his reception at Foresters' Music Hall in 1907. Julian Rose was heckled in Brighton and London in 1909. Two more examples relate to actions in Leeds by members of the local Jewish community in 1912 and 1913. In the former year, at the Leeds Hippodrome a Scottish comedian, Jack Whitford, "accompanied a joke about a Jew's harp with a gesture supposed to be peculiar to the race", which led to protests. In the latter year, also at the Hippodrome, Harry Webber, a Hebrew comic, told some stories about Jews that led to hissing, followed by an apology from Webber, followed by more hissing, and then to the interrupters being removed from the auditorium.⁵¹ Clearly, there were Jews in Leeds who were prepared to make their feelings known about on-stage mockery to an extent unusual in British music halls, and this is the reason the *Jewish Chronicle* considered the incidents worthy of report. These relatively minor demonstrations by local Jews should also be viewed in the context of and perhaps also as a protest against the treatment of Jews in Leeds generally, where the levels of antisemitic prejudice and violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were among the worst in any city in Britain.⁵²

48 JC, 6 Feb. 1914, 32; 24 Nov. 1911, 37.

49 JC, 10 Jan. 1913, 41; 1 Aug. 1913, 31.

50 Vivi Lachs, *Whitechapel Noise: Jewish Immigrant Life in Yiddish Song and Verse, London 1884–1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 49–50, 211–12.

51 JC, 16 May 1913, 21.

52 E. Krausz, *Leeds Jewry: Its History and Social Structure* (Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1964),

Ranged against Jewish critics of Hebrew acts were those Jews who felt that their community should be able to take a joke, as “Fairplay” wrote to the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1911 (it is possible that this letter was sent by Julian Rose or a connection; Rose was at the time working in Britain).⁵³ Although such opinions were rarely openly expressed by Jews, it was a view held by the influential Harry Lauder. Asked by the *Jewish Chronicle* in December 1913 for his views on the issue of “the much-discussed ‘Hebrew Comedian’”, Lauder, who was of course in the business of ethnic stereotyping, rallied to the support of his fellow comedians: “As to the man who objects to the ‘Stage Jew’, rather than patronize the music-halls, he’d better see a doctor”, he said. “It’s only a bit of stage fun after all. I don’t think it would be fair to dream of regarding the average Hebrew ‘turn’ as typical of or ridiculing the Jew”. He added that he saw no difference between these performances and his own Scottish “turn”.⁵⁴

On 14 April 1914, *Potash and Perlmutter* opened at the Queen’s Theatre in London, nine months after its debut on Broadway. It received an ecstatic review from the *Jewish Chronicle*: “As a piece of characterisation it has seldom been excelled on the stage”, wrote the reviewer, who had clearly been waiting many a year to see more pleasant Jewish comic characterizations than were the usual fare in Britain.⁵⁵ Despite the outbreak of the First World War in August, the play was still running in London’s West End a year later when its two American leading men, Augustus Yorke and Robert Leonard, gave an extended interview to the *Jewish Chronicle*. The conversation got round to Hebrew acts and Leonard, who had in the past performed as an old-style Hebrew comic, told his interviewer that during his year in Britain he had frequently visited music halls and seen many Hebrew acts:

and I tell you I come away positively upset at the way they murder the Hebrew type. Now such a thing would not be tolerated in the States. Over yonder, the Hebrew player has to be more careful. If he produces a caricatured Jew, all the heads of the Jewish community band together and lodge a protest with the manager . . . Over there Jewish public spirit is more candid and more aggressive, but here wounded Jewish feelings are suppressed . . . I daresay English Jews are just as sensitive as American Jews at silly jokes being constantly perpetrated at their expense; but I

6, 17; Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876–1939* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 110; Murray Freedman, *Leeds Jewry: The First Hundred Years* (York: Leeds Branch of the Jewish Historical Society of England, 1992), 12, 130–31.

53 JC, 10 Nov. 1911, 34, letter from “Fairplay”.

54 JC, 12 Dec. 1913, 32.

55 JC, 24 April 1914, 30.

suppose your “landleit” [countrymen] have learned to suffer in silence. They sit in the music hall, receive a wound and smile it off. . .⁵⁶

It is apparent from the trade press in 1915 that there were plenty of Hebrew acts on British stages in the depths of a world war. *The Performer*, published by the Variety Artistes’ Federation, gave details of current acts and these provide insight into the content and tone of the comedy performed. On 14 January it reported that at the Bath Palace Theatre the comic sketch *Goldberg & Family* was playing, while at the Empress in Brixton an American comedian was portraying *The Yiddisher Paperhanger*, noting that “love of money [is] a feature of each, as described”. And on 15 June, it reported that at the Camberwell Palace *Sherlock Hyams* was on the bill, a sketch in which “a firm of Jewish moneylenders is mistaken for detectives”. The stereotypes being portrayed in these scenarios would have given offence to many Jews. It is hard, then, to disagree with Leonard’s view of the portrayal of Jews in British music hall comedy at this time or with his characterization of British Jewry’s largely passive response.

Julian Rose: early career in America

A comedian who took advantage of this disjunction between the United States and Britain was Julian Rose. A hard-working and mobile entertainer, his career had two successful phases: in the United States in the 1900s and in Britain in the 1920s and early 1930s. In the latter, he became the exponent *par excellence* of an older style of Hebrew act. He performed on stage, made records, worked extensively in radio, and appeared in several British talking pictures. His work is well known through press reports, recordings, and film, but he wrote nothing for publication about himself and little of his personal correspondence has survived.⁵⁷

Julian Rose was born Julius Rosenzweig in New York City on 6 September 1868, the son of a Jewish immigrant from Krakow in Austrian Poland, who latterly ran a cigar store. At home, the Rosenzweigs were German-speakers. A key influence on Rose’s ultimate choice of career was his elder half-brother, Henry Rosenzweig (1857–1910), who was an actor and theatrical director, adopting the stage name Henry Lee. In the 1890s, Rose was employed as an accountant by the telephone company in Philadelphia. He became used to amusing his co-workers with humorous

56 JC, 30 April 1915, 16–17.

57 Information from Julian Rose and David Rose, Julian Rose’s grandson and great-grandson, respectively, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

4 Julian Rose without make-up, out of costume, and unrecognizable as “Levinsky”, c. 1920. Property of David Rose, Melbourne, and reproduced with his permission



characterizations in Jewish dialect and was encouraged by his half-brother to put together a Hebrew act, which Rose first tried out at the Philadelphia Turf Club and other private venues. He was a success and went into vaudeville full-time.⁵⁸

The act Rose developed was one he lived off for thirty-five years. On stage, he seems initially to have adopted the same garb as a Welch type of pedlar,⁵⁹ but soon moved on to a more prosperous-looking costume. To portray a mature Jewish gentleman, he would wear a bald-head wig, a false hooked nose, and fake whiskers. It would be impossible for any comedian playing a comic Jew to wear such make-up today; facially, he looked like an antisemitic caricature. Off stage, however, “Julian Rose might be taken for the Bishop of Barataria or any other high Church dignitary, so classical was the cast of his features and so impressive his demeanour”, or so an Australian journalist wrote of Rose’s visit there in 1911.⁶⁰ In content the act was a mixture of monologue, patter, and comical song. The humour came from malapropisms, misunderstandings, and wisecracks, all spoken in

58 *New York Sunday Telegraph*, 22 Oct. 1906, 5; Distler, “Rise and Fall”, 164–6.

59 Distler, “Rise and Fall”, 165.

60 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 31 July 1934, 9.

dialect and at high speed. He was said to be capable of delivering his lines at the rate of two hundred words a minute “and rarely seemed to pause for breath”.⁶¹ As to his stage persona, he adopted the soubriquet of “Our Hebrew Friend”, intending to portray a stereotypical Jew in costume and speech, who was neither rich nor poor, just an ordinary fellow: the non-threatening Jew round the corner with whom a Gentile might be on good terms. The *Morning Post* in 1908 (one of several press reviews republished together to promote Rose’s trip to Britain) described him and his stage *entrée* thus: “A rather squat, little middle-class, middle-aged Jew enters. He is clad in a light grey frock coat and trousers. He has none of the tricks of the comedian and seems to be making his way to the centre of the stage to make an announcement.”⁶² A problem with his comedy, however, was that in striving to be amusing, Rose chose to align his act with negative popular stereotypes of Jews. Once elements of dishonesty, greediness, avarice, and cowardice were accepted as part of Rose’s Jewish comic world, he laid himself open to the charge of purveying antisemitic humour.

By 1899, Rose was appearing in vaudeville in New York. It was in these early days of his career that he first developed his *Levinsky at the Wedding* monologue, a comic description of a Jewish wedding. Some of the jokes are weak by contemporary standards, but others endure, such as the gloomy rabbi’s address to the groom in the course of an unglamorous wedding: “There are three incidents in a man’s life: he is born, he is married, he dies. Now all you have to do is die.”⁶³

Rose’s *Levinsky* evolved over the years, but remained his comic mainstay; indeed, his name became synonymous with *Levinsky*. On stage he played “Levinsky”, and he was frequently referred to as such in advertising material. Churning out the monologue, sometimes at the rate of three shows a day, enabled Rose to become a vaudeville star and for a time in the 1900s to earn \$850 a week.⁶⁴ Over the years there were a number of further versions of *Levinsky*, whose experiences came to include buying a car and staying at the seaside.

In 1903, Rose became contracted to the Martin Beck western vaudeville

61 *The Era*, 18 Sept. 1935, 17.

62 *Morning Post* reported in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 April 1908, 18.

63 For transcriptions of Rose’s *Levinsky at the Wedding*, *Then I’ll be satisfied with Life*, and *Becky the Spanish Dancer* see the author’s website, <https://oldmontaguestreet.co.uk/article-1> (accessed 23 Nov. 2020).

64 Distler, “Rise and Fall”, 178.

circuit as a headline act.⁶⁵ Also in that year he made his first wax-cylinder recording with Edison Records. He later recorded with Columbia and other labels, and his Columbia records were supported by widespread newspaper advertising in the United States. Ronald L. Smith's *Comedy Stars at 78 RPM* (1998) lists thirteen cylinders and discs recorded by Rose, not counting re-issues, the last made in the 1930s.⁶⁶ Many of these recordings mix patter and song, and are a reminder of an age of comedy when a comedian would be expected to sing some comic songs and generally to finish off his act with one.

In 1904–5, Rose landed the leading role of Ikenstein, “a Hebrew gentleman”, in a Broadway comedy-melodrama called *Fast Life in New York*, but the play was not a success.⁶⁷ He returned to the vaudeville circuit and in March 1908 crossed the Atlantic to give his *Levinsky* routine an airing at the London Coliseum and London Pavilion. He received excellent press reviews,⁶⁸ although some of his British audience, unaccustomed to his American-style fast patter, found him difficult to follow: a review in the *News of the World* said that “he rolls off [his patter] in a thin vibrant voice at a rate which is staggering. The problem is that he sometimes overdoes it, or frequently during the monologue he was indistinctly heard, and people were continually enquiring of their neighbours, ‘what did he say?’ ‘I missed that’.”⁶⁹ The *Jewish Chronicle* reviewer, more accepting of Hebrew acts than other journalists on the paper, was enthused and wrote that Rose’s act was “screamingly funny, bears no trace of prejudice, and Jewish theatre-goers can see Mr Rose without the least annoyance”.⁷⁰ Rose returned to America in August 1908, but came back later in the year for further engagements, including topping the bill as “Baron Levinsky”, a comic Hebrew villain, in the pantomime *Little Red Riding Hood*.⁷¹ It was a part specially written for him, itself a mark of his success. Someone who came to see Rose in the pantomime was Reverend A. A. Green, the minister at Hampstead synagogue. The Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire, Hermann Adler, had heard rumours that the role played by Rose “represented Jews in an unpleasant light” and Green was asked to

65 *Ibid.*, 166.

66 Ronald L. Smith, *Comedy Stars at 78 RPM: Biographies and Discographies of 89 American and British Recording Artists, 1896–1946* (Jefferson, NC and London: MacFarland, 1998), 165–7.

67 Distler, “Rise and Fall”, 166.

68 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 April 1908, 18.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *JC*, 8 May 1908, 26.

71 *London Daily News*, 22 Dec. 1908, 1.

investigate. Rose invited Green to view the performance and Green found it “so artistic and so gentlemanly, that, try as I would, I could find nothing to offend me.” He met Rose backstage and was charmed into writing a letter expressing his opinion of the performance, which Green naively provided. About three years later, he was surprised to find that his letter “was being used as an advertisement outside a London theatre” and for Rose’s regular act rather than a family-oriented pantomime.⁷² Green was criticized by fellow Jews for providing the letter to Rose,⁷³ but Rose continued to use the letter for self-promotional purposes for the next quarter of a century (the last-known time in 1934).⁷⁴

In the spring of 1909, Rose returned briefly to the United States and then came back to Britain, where he performed in the early summer of 1909. In all, during 1908–9, he made eight transatlantic crossings in seventeen months. He had found favour with British audiences, and established a reputation with theatre managers as a marketable comedian.

Rose’s return to America was to pursue another opportunity which involved playing a comic Hebrew. This was *In Hayti*, a musical comedy vehicle for the blackface comedians McIntyre and Heath. Rose played “Bizzy Izzi Rosenstein, an unctuous financier”,⁷⁵ and was one of the few white performers in the show not to be in blackface. The production had a six-week run on Broadway in August–October 1909 and afterwards toured the United States well into 1910.⁷⁶ Rose then travelled to Australia, appearing in several cities between November 1910 and March 1911. He established a liking for the country, which led to a second tour a decade later. He would also have been pleased to be out of the United States at this time as divorce proceedings had brought him unwanted publicity.⁷⁷ By August 1911 Rose was back in Britain again, where he worked in halls all over the country for much of 1912.

Rose then entered a period of professional difficulty and personal crisis. He had become a target of Jewish reformers in the United States seeking to suppress old-style Hebrew acts.⁷⁸ He also started to get trouble from Jews

72 JC, 1 Dec. 1911, 30.

73 Letters, JC, 3 Nov. 1911, 33; 24 Nov. 1911, 37; 1 Dec. 1911, 30; 8 Dec. 1911, 42.

74 *Sydney Evening News*, 26 Feb. 1934, 3.

75 As described in the *Nevada State Journal*, 21 March 1910, 10.

76 IBDB Internet Broadway Database (accessed 26 July 2020); *Los Angeles Herald*, 22 March 1910, 7.

77 E.g. “Actor loses divorce suit”, *New York Daily Tribune*, 13 Aug. 1910, 13.

78 Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, 125.

in his audiences. An incident of this type happened on one of his early trips to Britain.

In June 1909 Rose was fined £3 and £2 costs in a London magistrates court for assaulting a member of his audience. The assault, which the magistrate felt was provoked, occurred at the Shoreditch Olympia music hall after Rose had finished his act. A young Jewish man, Alfred Jacobs, had “expressed disapproval of some of the points the defendant put forward as to Jewish character” and had heckled “chuck it” and “rotten”. At the end of the act, Jacobs was taken out of the auditorium and was confronted by Rose who accused him of being the same person who had recently heckled him on stage in Brighton, which Jacobs denied. A witness, a Mr Cohen, testified that Rose had then “punched and kicked . . . [Jacobs] unmercifully”. Jacobs told the court that he objected to part of the act in which the question “How do you know they were Jews?” was answered with “because they went to a wedding and came away with the silver spoons”.⁷⁹ There is nothing as crassly antisemitic as this in any of Rose’s recordings and if the joke is indicative of some of his on-stage material, the antipathy which his act aroused among many Jews is understandable.

According to Paul Antonie Distler, the first historian to study the evolution and demise of old-style Hebrew acts in America, Rose was blacklisted in 1911 by the powerful Keith and Albee United Booking Office for mysterious reasons. As a consequence, wrote Distler in 1963, Rose’s career as a big-time vaudevillian largely ended and he thereafter had to be satisfied with less prestigious bookings in the United States or with working overseas.⁸⁰

Rose was a disciplined professional and regarded with respect by fellow vaudevillians. He had a great capacity to charm everyone, pressmen as well as unworldly Jewish clergymen. He seems to have been a bit of a hypochondriac, was married three times, and despite being a former accountant was not the wisest of investors. At some point in 1912 or 1913, according to an interview he gave a Montana newspaper in 1914, he had a nervous breakdown.⁸¹ It was a serious episode, he related, and to recover, he went “to take the baths” at the spa town of Carlsbad (now Karlovy Vary) in Austria-Hungary, where he met a young local woman whom he brought

79 *London Daily News*, 10 June 1909, 9; also covered outside London, e.g. in the *Yorkshire Post*, 10 June 1909, 3.

80 Distler, “Rise and Fall”, 166.

81 *Annaconda Standard*, 14 April 1914, 10.

back to America in 1913 and married. She spoke no English and so they conversed in German.

Domestic happiness was not matched by professional success. Several lean years followed Rose's blacklisting in which he worked small-time circuits. At the Lyric in Indianapolis in February 1914, he was doing ten cents a ticket matinees.⁸² And his material may have been stale, or, as correspondent of the *Nebraska Lincoln Daily Star* in November 1915 put it, having last seen Rose on stage five years previously, "the lapse of time has had little effect on his jokes; they are practically the same as they were in 1910".⁸³ Rose did manage to catch a break for a while by getting the role of Abe Potash in one of the *Potash and Perlmutter* troupes touring the States. There were more than seven at one time, so successful was the play.⁸⁴ He may have wished to return to Britain where his act had enjoyed success, but with a world war raging and a new wife and child, he would have been understandably reluctant to make the trip. He would have known that Charles Klein of *Potash and Perlmutter* lost his life on the *Lusitania* when it was torpedoed off Ireland by a German U-boat in May 1915. Rose did not go back to Britain until 1920 and was so pleased with his reception that he announced to the press in 1921 that he would be moving to Britain, which he did, bringing his family with him.⁸⁵ He settled in North London, first in Cricklewood and then in St John's Wood.

Julian Rose in Britain

Writing of this move and of Rose's subsequent success in Britain, the historian Harley Erdman states that having been stymied in America, Rose had to go overseas to pursue his career . . . in the British music halls of the 1920s, where racial typing continued to be the rage".⁸⁶ In reviewing Rose's career after 1920, it does indeed seem that the entertainment industry in Britain was more appreciative of his act than was its transatlantic equivalent, but the reasons for his success in Britain should also include Rose's adaptability and persistence and the lack of any sustained Jewish communal push-back.

Comparing listings in *The Performer* for 1915 with those four or five years later there appear to have been fewer Hebrew acts playing in Britain

82 *Indianapolis Star*, 21 Feb. 1914, n.p.

83 *Lincoln Daily Star*, 14 Nov. 1915, 7.

84 *Oakland Tribune*, 4 July 1914, 16.

85 *The Era*, 26 Jan. 1921, 14.

86 Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 152.

after the end of the First World War. It may be that popular enthusiasm for the sub-genre was starting to wear a little thin. Contemporaries were aware of this change. Clarkson Rose (no relation), an entertainer who had a column in *The Stage*, wrote in 1935: “When I first met [Julian Rose], Hebrew acts of all types were to be found all over our music halls. Gilday and Fox, Lowenwirth and Cohen . . . and Sam Stern . . . All these acts preceded ‘Potash and Perlmutter’. . . . Then there seemed to come a lull, but Julian remained and held the position for himself.”⁸⁷ Whether this postwar falling off in the number of Hebrew acts being performed was accompanied by any change in their style and content is less clear, a *Jewish Chronicle* columnist in 1920 contending that “the more undesirable characteristics” of these acts had been shed, while a number of his readers disagreed.⁸⁸

After 1920, Rose worked mostly in Britain and its Dominions. He toured in South Africa in 1922 and Australia in 1924, where he was lionized. For the rest of his career, he worked all over Britain. Press reviews were generally good, praising his mastery of the Hebrew act form. Should any journalist think that Rose’s act was considered antisemitic by his co-religionists, he would produce for them Reverend Green’s letter as evidence of absence of animosity by sensible fellow Jews.⁸⁹ Rose was sometimes compared with Lauder by friendly pressmen – “the Lauder of the Hebrews”⁹⁰ – which he encouraged, because it gave his act the stamp of authenticity and legitimacy (Lauder may not have minded this and respected Rose enough to send a wreath to his funeral). But the comparison had little foundation. Rose’s act was an ethnic act, like Lauder’s, but it lacked the element of heart that Lauder’s possessed, which made his Scottish turn well-loved – its pathos, sentimentality, and humanity. Nevertheless, Rose as Levinsky seemed to fill a niche that existed in British light entertainment for at least one performer capable of delivering a highly professional Hebrew act. If the content of his live act in the 1920s conformed to his recordings, and we do not know if it always did, then his use of antisemitic stereotypes was mild but always present. Nevertheless, there was no adverse criticism of Rose in the *Jewish Chronicle* until the late 1920s. Things changed, however, when he started to go on radio and millions of Britons could hear his patter in their living rooms.

87 Clarkson Rose in *The Stage*, 19 Sept. 1935, 2.

88 *JC*, 2 April 1920, 30.

89 See e.g. *The Era*, 15 Sept. 1926, 6.

90 *The Stage*, 1 Nov. 1923, 10; also in Australia, e.g. *Melbourne Sporting Globe*, 6 Feb. 1924, 6; *Sydney Evening News*, 26 Feb. 1934, 3.

Public radio broadcasting in Britain started in 1922, under the British Broadcasting Company (after 1927, the British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC). Rose was among the earliest comedians appearing on British radio.⁹¹ It was at first difficult for the BBC to get successful comedians to perform on air. On the one hand, some comedians believed that radio work used up material which ought to be kept fresh for the variety theatre. On the other hand, radio had the capacity increase popularity and boost a career.⁹² Rose seized the opportunity and chose to broadcast.

Although Rose's material may have displeased certain sections of British Jewry, it caused no embarrassment to the BBC, which repeatedly engaged him to broadcast. The date of his first transmission is not known, but his hundredth and last, as part of a one-hour "Music Hall" programme, took place on 12 January 1935.⁹³ He must have been professional in his approach to radio work or he would not have been asked back so often, and, in the character of Levinsky and using Jewish dialect, he would have been a distinctive radio voice and a change from the usual range of British accents. He appeared in a number of formats, including solo, with another performer, and as part of variety shows. He generally supplied his own material, which may occasionally have seemed a little tired.⁹⁴ He did not become a household name, but he certainly broadcast often enough to make himself widely known, and by the 1930s was being referred to in press advertisements as "Julian Rose: the popular Levinsky of Radio Fame".⁹⁵

In October 1928, the *Jewish Chronicle* criticized Rose's act. A Gentile newspaper critic was reported to have enjoyed the "healthy vulgarity" of a Rose performance at the London Palladium, but as far as the *Jewish Chronicle's* columnist was concerned, Rose had portrayed the Jew "in an unsavoury light".⁹⁶ Worse was to come when Rose was selected to participate in the Royal Command Performance of 1930.

The performance at the London Palladium before George V and Queen Mary was broadcast live on the BBC. *The Stage* reported that although the Queen appeared to get some pleasure from the show, "the King did not show such obvious signs of enjoyment." As for Julian Rose, he "grappled with tremendous odds in presenting a type of humour which appeared at times to puzzle Their Majesties."⁹⁷ A different view came from the *Jewish*

91 JC, 20 Sept. 1935, 12.

92 Double, *Britain had Talent*, 48–9, 58–9.

93 *Yorkshire Post*, 12 Jan. 1935, 6.

94 *Yorkshire Post*, 2 March 1929, 10.

95 E.g. JC, 31 March 1933, 48.

96 JC, 5 Oct. 1928, 12.

97 *The Stage*, 29 May 1930, 4.

Chronicle. In an explosive response to the broadcast, an unnamed columnist wrote: “I must say I have seldom heard a performance, even on the Variety stage, at which I felt more disgust. It was supposed to represent a Jew, his friends and his doings, but . . . it was untrue. It made Jews appear sordid, paltry cheats and low-down rascals without a redeeming characteristic – and I know no class of our people that answers to that description.” As for the audience,

the majority . . . listened to his sickening nonsense and laughed consumedly at his caricature of our people. Their ignorance of Jews and their consequent prejudice against them, which everyone knows is general among so many non-Jews, could only have been fed and accentuated by Mr Rose’s “turn”. It is regretted that a man with his undoubted talent should not put his abilities to better use. He would so employ them, if he felt an ounce of self-respect as Jew. All he seems to care about in his performances, however, is to gain the ribald laughter of his audiences at Jews by misrepresenting them and picturing them as debased and degraded creatures without even a glimmer of virtue in their composition. It is not in the least a feeling of hypersensitiveness or undue squeamishness that prompts me to say as I do; but the conviction that in holding up Jews, as Mr Rose does, to hatred, ridicule and contempt, he is distinctly not a “friend” to our people.⁹⁸

A few weeks after publication of this expression of communal humiliation and betrayal, the *Sunday Express* ran a piece by Hannen Swaffer, its drama critic, in which Swaffer reported a conversation he had had with George Black, the organizer of the Royal Command Performance, before the show took place. He had asked Black why he had invited Rose to perform and was told that as Jews were such great patrons of the music halls, “they are entitled to a representative Jewish comedian”. Rose had been invited in order to please them, said Black, a reply indicative of great ignorance – or perhaps apathy – regarding how Rose was viewed by many in the British Jewish community.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the whole affair seems to have had little impact on Rose’s work or his career. While criticism of Rose by the *Jewish Chronicle* did not cease,¹⁰⁰ he continued to be engaged for radio work by the BBC and to perform in variety theatres. Indeed, he began to branch out, with some success, into a new field: talking pictures.

The earliest talkies in British cinemas were made in Hollywood and it was not until 1929 that the first British-made feature film with sound was released. The production of talkies by British studios was stimulated by

98 JC, 30 May 1930, 9.

99 *Sunday Express* quoted in JC, 27 June 1930, 9–10.

100 E.g. JC, 24 Nov. 1933, 17.

the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927, which required British cinemas to show a quota of British films. Rose, by then over sixty, was swept up into this new cinematic world. During 1929–33 he appeared in five British-made pictures, from *Levinsky at the Wedding* (1929; print believed lost), *Looking on the Bright Side* (1931), *Money Talks* (1932), *Cash* (1933), to *L'Argent par les Fenêtres* (1933; French-language version of *Money Talks*). The musical comedy *Looking on the Bright Side* showcased the British singing star Gracie Fields, and featured Rose in a leading role, and he was the star in the comedy *Money Talks*. In both these films, Rose plays a Jewish businessman. He speaks in dialect and, like Levinsky, there are verbal misunderstandings and mispronunciations, but he is not heavily made-up and we see him on screen as he really was at the time, a portly, bespectacled, late-middle-aged man with a comb-over.

Money Talks is set in a Jewish milieu with a number of Jewish parts being played by non-Jews. There is only one joke of the “silver spoons” type, which alludes to the supposed Jewish penchant for fraudulent fire insurance claims. A Jewish character speaks reprovingly to his father: “You’re no businessman. You’ll be opening up a store in a fireproof building next!” There are also two short visual sequences cut into the Jewish wedding scene that imply Jewish meanness: decanters of whisky are surreptitiously watered down and a guest at the table is shown stealing quantities of food to take away in a bag. With these elements and their insinuations regarding Jewish ethical conduct, *Money Talks* harks back to the older style of music hall Hebrew act.

Looking on the Bright Side is a less creaky British cinematic offering than *Money Talks* and reinforced the reputation of Gracie Fields. Critics liked Rose’s contribution and his performance seemed to intimate a professional future for him in playing Jewish character parts in British films. But his age and health were against him. He was known to be ailing, seems to have done no stage work during the last year of his life, and a further Australian tour, which had been planned, did not take place.¹⁰¹ He died aged sixty-six on 13 September 1935 from kidney failure as a result of heart disease. He left an estate of £80 5s, and the smallness of the amount, a story in itself in many newspapers, was attributed to the failure of risky investments.¹⁰²

101 *Sydney Evening News*, 26 Feb. 1934, 3.

102 *Daily Mirror*, 24 Oct. 1935, 2. Loney Harkell, secretary, Jewish Theatrical Guild of America, to Rose, 12 June 1931, refers to Rose’s problematic “South American bonds”; letter, Rose family.

The end of old-style Hebrew acts in Britain

After Rose's death, Jewish comedians in Britain continued to play comic Jews on stage, screen, radio, and comedy records, but they lacked Rose's elan, his fast delivery with "gag following gag with machine gun like rapidity".¹⁰³ They also did not have what the *Jewish Chronicle* had condemned as American vulgarity,¹⁰⁴ meaning an un-British crudeness, which when applied to a Jewish setting seemed to many middle-class British Jews to be an undignified representation of Jewish life that brought no lustre to the reputation of Jewry. Levinsky's Jewish world was one of ugly women, decrepit suitors, marital discord, fights at weddings, fear of burly Irishmen, penny-pinching, and general meanness. There were Jewish comedians in Britain after Rose, but their humour was much gentler – for example, Max Bacon (1904–1969), comedian, actor, big-band drummer, with an extensive filmography, and Issy Bon (Benjamin Levin; 1903–1977), comedian, actor, singer, later a theatrical agent. And gone were the bald-head wigs, false noses, and glued-on whiskers. In this respect, the historian Paul Maloney has traced the career of the Glasgow-based Jewish comedian Ike Freeman, who started performing in music hall in a Joe Welch style of costume, but by the 1930s was billing himself as "The Scottish Hebrew Gentleman" and appearing on stage in white tie, spats, and a cigarette holder.¹⁰⁵ It is not an exaggeration to say that in Britain the remnants of the old style of Hebrew act in which Jews ridiculed fellow Jews, albeit with humour, died with Julian Rose.

During the years in which Rose worked in Britain, he faced criticism from some sections of British Jewry regarding his material, but others were unconcerned. They enjoyed a Hebrew act. A few years after Reverend Green had gone to see Rose in *Little Red Riding Hood* in the 1908–09 season, Green wrote, "[if] there was any vulgarity at all, it was on the part of some of our co-religionists present who were apparently 'tickled to death' and shrieked the place down with laughter whenever there was the least suspicion of a Jewish expression".¹⁰⁶ These were Jews who welcomed the opportunity to see their own community represented on stage, even if it was being lampooned. It is also likely that many perceived Rose's Levinsky to be a parody of their own parents or grandparents, so that a trip to the music hall to watch him provided an opportunity to laugh at the speech and

103 *The Era*, 27 Jan. 1932, 11.

104 *JC*, 5 Oct. 1928.

105 Maloney, *Britannia Panopticon Music Hall*, 149.

106 *JC*, 1 Dec. 1911, 30.

behaviour of an older generation. London Jews did have their own Yiddish music hall entertainment, but many found its staging crude and material unoriginal, or, if they were British-born, were not sufficiently fluent in Yiddish to understand all the jokes and songs.¹⁰⁷ Many Jews therefore preferred to go to the ordinary music hall for their entertainment. If these Jews were then to laugh at a Hebrew act, it must have been difficult for theatre managers, and radio and film producers, to believe that among British Jews disapproval of this kind of comedy was anything more than the sentiment of an unrepresentative elite.

Rose was not a practising Orthodox Jew. His third and longest-lasting marriage was to a non-Jewish woman and he did not steep the children of this marriage in the Jewish faith. Yet throughout his time in Britain he consistently attended and performed at Jewish charitable events. While it is likely that Rose possessed a degree of genuine charitable impulse, the chief reason for his participation in these events was to market himself to British Jews and to build up support within the community.

Charity fundraisers were usually held on Sunday evenings and Rose courted British Jews assiduously through these events. The columns of the *Jewish Chronicle* record more than a dozen different Jewish charities that Rose supported by his attendance, some more than once. Despite being assailed by the paper, Jewish charities welcomed his presence and he was clearly not *persona non grata* in the community. This made it difficult for his Jewish critics to contend that Rose's humour was unacceptable to his co-religionists. In this respect, a few weeks after the Royal Command Performance in 1930, Rose was invited to and attended a variety concert organized by the Federation of Women Zionists,¹⁰⁸ notwithstanding the mighty broadside he had only just received from the *Jewish Chronicle*.

This use of charity events for self-promotion was encouraged by agents. In order to promote themselves, American Jewish entertainers, such as the singer Sophie Tucker, would frequently make a point of attending Jewish charitable events when working in London. This is how Rose came to be on the same bill as the Marx Brothers when he and they agreed to entertain schoolchildren at a high tea organized at the Jewish Free School in London in 1922.¹⁰⁹

When the American actor Robert Leonard had made his comments in April 1915 about the way British Jews failed to complain about Hebrew acts,

107 Landa, *Jew in Drama*, 296–7; Lachs, *Whitechapel Noise*, 53.

108 *JC*, 4 July 1930, 22.

109 *Daily Herald*, 27 June 1922, 8.

Britain was at war. America, by contrast, did not enter the war until 1917, and its forces did not become fully engaged until 1918. Leonard perceived differences between British and American Jews, but in 1915 the greatest difference was that British Jews were part of a nation that was consumed by the requirements of war. The outbreak of war had not come at an easy time for British Jews. In preceding years, anti-Jewish feeling in the country had intensified appreciably.¹¹⁰ The leaders of the Jewish community took the view that in order to protect the social and political gains of a century and to ward off prejudice and discrimination, British Jews needed to commit fully to the war effort. This sentiment was encapsulated in the slogan on the banner that hung outside the *Jewish Chronicle* building throughout the war: "England has been all she could be to the Jews; the Jews will be all they can to England."¹¹¹ Although the issue of stage ridicule never went away during four years of war, British Jews were distracted by more pressing matters, including discrimination, internment, conscription, and kosher food supplies. War was a time when it was prudent to be uncomplaining and patriotic and to put national good above Jewish particularism.

Another difference between Jews in Britain and those in the United States was in population size, as noted earlier. One reason why American Jews organized against Hebrew acts is because they had the numerical heft to make a theatre boycott a credible threat. Such were the numbers of Jews living in New York, Chicago, and other great cities, and such was their reputation as keen theatre-goers, that few theatre managers would lightly dismiss a deputation of local Jewish notables who requested changes to a comedy act or that the act to be taken off altogether. In Britain, the numbers were not there, except perhaps in London.

The lack of any organized lobbying against Hebrew acts by British Jews was the result of a number of factors. Those who wanted to take action knew they did not have the whole of British Jewry behind them. Furthermore, even though some theatre managers were said to be receptive to complaints about on-stage caricatures of Jews,¹¹² music hall/variety remained largely a Gentile business without the level of understanding or concern for Jewish sensibilities existing in the entertainment industry in New York or Chicago. Another difference relates to religious organization and ethos. The driving force behind the protest groups in America came

110 David Caesarani, *The Jewish Chronicle and Anglo-Jewry, 1841–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 110.

111 *Ibid.*, 115.

112 *JC*, 5 Jan. 1923, 21.

from highly assimilated middle-class members of the Reform movement, forceful in their desire that Jews be treated respectfully and fully accepted as Americans. In Britain, the Reform movement had made little headway in the Victorian period, and most middle-class British Jews remained happily Orthodox in an unimpassioned way.¹¹³ In the years before the First World War, Britain did not possess a strong cadre of modernizing, activist, Reform rabbis comparable to the CCAR. Even so, it will be remembered that it was the Chief Rabbi, Hermann Adler, who in 1909 had been sufficiently alarmed following rumours regarding Rose's performance as to propel Reverend Green to investigate.

It was perhaps during the years immediately before the First World War that some kind of organized activity similar to that which took place in America might have arisen, but it did not, and there does not seem to have been any serious discussion about setting up a pressure group to prevent stage ridicule. A Jewish Drama League was set up to promote more positive portrayals of Jews on British stages but the project was not a success.¹¹⁴ The music halls, entrenched and broadened in appeal as "variety", were a national cultural institution and no easy target for members of an unloved minority. And confrontation was not the practice of British Jewry. Patience, forbearance, and quiet lobbying was generally thought to be a better course.¹¹⁵ Once the war came, the moment had passed, and after the war old-style Hebrew acts became less prevalent on British stages, although the sub-genre had sufficient life in it to continue into the 1930s. That it was able to do so is chiefly a consequence of the perseverance of its principal exponent, Julian Rose. After his death, there were no more comic Jews with big false noses in British light entertainment – and their disappearance does not appear to have been missed.

113 Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 114–15.

114 Landa, *Jew in Drama*, 298–310; JC, 20 May 1932, 9.

115 Endelman, *Jews of Britain*, 267.