

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

English Edition | Print Edition | Video | Podcasts | Latest Headlines

John Kosner

Home World U.S. Politics Economy Business Tech Markets Opinion Life & Arts Real Estate WSJ Magazine Search

lendingtree

Today's Refinance Rate

2.42%

APR

Calculate Payment >

Terms & Conditions apply. NMLSR1136

15-Year Fixed	2.25%	2.42% APR	➔
30-Year Fixed	2.25%	2.46% APR	➔
5/1 ARM	3.00%	2.96% APR	➔
\$225,000 (5/1 ARM)	\$944/mo	2.96% APR	➔
\$350,000 (5/1 ARM)	\$1,409/mo	2.74% APR	➔

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

'Funny Man' Review: Anything for a Laugh

Mel Brooks was a gifted monster—explosive, whip-smart, vulgar, histrionic, egomaniacal, yet miraculously able to make people laugh their guts out.



Mel Brooks in 'High Anxiety' (1977). PHOTO: ALAMY

By Edward Kosner
March 15, 2019 9:59 am ET



Rewatching "Blazing Saddles," Mel Brooks's 1974 sendup of western movies, may well shock and perhaps offend. The dialogue is full of "n—s" and "f—gs," the randy female lead played by Madeline Kahn is named "Lili Von Shtupp," and the moron Mongo commits animal abuse by K.O.-ing a blameless horse. Political correctness? What's that?

The movie was also deemed "culturally, historically or aesthetically" significant by the Library of Congress in 2006 and preserved in the National Film Registry. "Blazing Saddles" and a number of other Brooks movies, including "Young Frankenstein," were big box-office hits.

FUNNY MAN: MEL BROOKS

By Patrick McGilligan
Harper, 624 pages, \$40

Mr. Brooks is in that select circle of show-business people who have won an Oscar, an Emmy, a Tony and a Grammy (plus a Clio, for advertising excellence). And he's still alive at 92, having dinner on TV trays in Los Angeles and watching old movies with 96-year-old Carl Reiner, his interlocutor on the wonderful

"2,000-Year-Old Man" records. (Q: "You knew Jesus?" A: "Lovely boy. Thin. Wore sandals.")

In his brick of a biography "Funny Man," Patrick McGilligan, who has published a shelfful of books about movie stars and directors, takes his man from the impoverished Brooklyn of his boyhood to the SoCal Eden where he enjoys wealth and fame in his 10th decade.

"Funny Man" has more stupefying chronological detail than the kind of adroit writing that would animate its subject. In fact, one of the author's most illuminating observations is buried in his source notes on page 556: "I have never been faced with as many people who either did not reply to inquiries, expressly declined to cooperate . . . or spoke on the condition of anonymity. . . . People feared Brooks's temper or litigiousness."

Still, Mel Brooks is such a gifted monster—explosive, whip-smart, vulgar, histrionic, egomaniacal, yet miraculously able to make people laugh their guts out—that the book is worth reading.

Melvin Kaminsky was reared in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, a shortish subway ride north of Woody Allen, with whom he shared the writers' room toward the end of Sid Caesar's run as one of America's top TV comics of the 1950s and '60s. Indeed, as Mr. McGilligan observes, Mr. Brooks's membership in "Club Caesar" was the defining period in his long career. Over the years, he would collaborate again and again with Caesar veterans, and his working style never changed.

Mr. Brooks has always been a "talking-writer," not a "writing-writer." An insomniac and, at least during his first marriage to a gorgeous Broadway hooper, an obsessive skirt-chaser, he would mosey in to work around lunchtime and shpritz his colleagues with jokes, impersonations, lunatic monologues and angry outbursts. He would take other writers' material and massage it, top their jokes, insult them on the table. He rarely wrote down anything himself and needed someone to type up his stuff, eliminate the chaff and turn it into a script. In time, he earned his keep not only as a TV gagster but as a playwright for Broadway-bound flops, an ad producer, a showbiz party performer, and freelance jack-of-all-jokes.

He had less than a year at Brooklyn College after the Army in World War II, but he read the Russian novelists and other classics, obsessively watched movies, had years of psychotherapy and dreamed of making it big as a playwright, novelist or movie director. He noodled projects forever, most famously the germ of the idea that became "The Producers," first the 1967 movie starring Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder, then the 2001 Broadway smash with Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick.

"Funny Man" becomes more interesting when Mr. McGilligan puts Mr. Brooks in frenetic action as he directs the three movies that made him rich and famous, "The Producers," "Blazing Saddles" and "Young Frankenstein." Originally an idea for a novel or play about two London stage grifters, "The Producers" wound up a decade later as the rollicking adventures of the impresario Max Bialystock and his timid accountant, Leo Bloom. They figure that if they oversubscribe investments from randy rich old ladies in a musical called "Springtime for Hitler," they can make out like bandits when the show inevitably closes after one night and each backer thinks her share is lost. Instead, of course, it's a hit—and they wind up in prison (where they put on a show for the other convicts).

The genius of "The Producers" is not only its antic script and the Busby Berkeley-style Nazi choreography but the casting of the Vesuvian Broadway vet Mostel as Bialystock and newcomer Wilder as Bloom. Mr. Brooks was gentle with Wilder but warred with the equally egomaniacal Mostel, who often sulked in his trailer. "Is that fat pig ready yet?" the director would scream on the set.

In post-production, the director could be hyper, too. "[Mel would] become manic," recalled the film's beleaguered editor, "fly around the room with his arms waving and eyes bulging, suddenly become a little old man again, a vendor on Orchard Street, a weaseling schemer, a pontificating rabbi, a sleazy seducer, or Super-Jew with J on his pajamas. He would carry on this way for about an hour."

"The Producers" was a critical hit but didn't make much money, and it was followed by "The Twelve Chairs," based on an old Russian story, another *succès d'estime*. Then Mr. Brooks struck gold with "Blazing Saddles." Here he transformed a story by Andrew Bergman into a riotous social satire of a classic western about an intrepid sheriff fending off the outlaws in a terrified frontier town. The twist is that the sheriff, played by Cleavon Little, is black and the townspeople and outlaws are racist. As Mr. McGilligan tells it, the magic ingredient in the

movie was a month's writing by the brilliant, drug-addled black comic Richard Pryor. Egged on by the director, Pryor pushed the script so far over the line that "Blazing Saddles" became a sensation and the top grossing film of the year (in every sense of the word).

Gene Wilder again co-starred in that film and wrote and starred in the third great Brooks success, "Young Frankenstein," released just 10 months after "Blazing Saddles." Another parody, this is generally deemed the most professionally polished Brooks movie, with memorable performances by Peter Boyle as the monster, popeyed Marty Feldman as Igor, Teri Garr and Madeline Kahn as assorted sexpots, Cloris Leachman as the crazed housekeeper Frau Blucher, and a hilarious cameo by Gene Hackman as a blind hermit who entertains the monster in his rude hutch.

The parody cavalcade rolled on for the next two decades with, among others, "Silent Movie," "History of the World: Part I," "High Anxiety," "Spaceballs" and "Robin Hood: Men in Tights," none of them matching the quality or success of his first three hits but making Mr. Brooks immensely rich. He had always had shrewd lawyers making his contracts and maximizing his credits, and it all paid off. Also typically, he shortchanged his first wife and their three young children, Mr. McGilligan writes, by buying her out of a valuable alimony deal just as the "Blazing Saddles" bounty was about to roll in. Even so, he was discreetly generous to movie folk down their luck.

Mr. Brooks's father, Max, died at 36, and the son was haunted for years by the fear that he wouldn't live to make it big. Instead he has turned out to be one of the longest-running acts in show business. A sustained second marriage to the actress Anne Bancroft, who died of cancer in 2005, was a success. Critics increasingly found his comic movies coarse and repetitious, but in the early '80s he started a new film company that made "The Elephant Man" to great profit and acclaim. He recycled "The Producers" into a Broadway triumph (plus a second movie version) and, less successfully, staged "Young Frankenstein." He has countless credits as actor, writer, director, producer, composer and lyricist, and as a talk-show and game-show guest. At 91, he played Las Vegas.

That early turn as the 2,000-Year-Old Man proved to be prophetic. Guess who's got the last laugh now?

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News and the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

SHOW CONVERSATION (18) >

SPONSORED OFFERS

WALMART: Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments

KOHL'S: 20% off your entire order with Kohl's coupon

EXPEDIA: Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings

EBAY: Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon

HOME DEPOT: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code

TARGET: Target baby registry - 15% off site-wide + \$80 of coupons

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Get the facts on the technology of tomorrow.

CIO Journal Newsletter

Sponsored by **Deloitte.** [READ NOW](#)

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

- Is the Classroom Safe? One Community's Debate to Return to School
- Georgia Schools Grapple With Covid-19 Cases After Reopening
- Why Delaying a Stimulus Deal May Be a Political Win for Trump
- Coronavirus Pandemic Fuels China's Self-Driving Cars
- High-Stakes Arctic Race Heats Up for U.S., Russia and China

WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE

One Word at a Time

WSJ Puzzles is the online home for America's most elegant, adventurous and addictive crosswords and other word games.

[PLAY NOW](#)

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

- Hollywood Producer Emerges as Key Figure in Alleged NRA Financial Abuses
- Homeland Security Officials Chad Wolf, Ken Cuccinelli Invaldly Appointed, Congressional Watchdog Concludes
- Why It's Time to Upgrade to a Smart Air Conditioner
- Rent the Runway to Close All Retail Stores Permanently
- Remote Work Is Reshaping San Francisco, as Tech Workers Flee and Rents Fall
- Former FBI Lawyer Expected to Plead Guilty to Aiding Surveillance
- Tired of the People in Your Family? Some Are Teaching Their Dogs to Talk
- Facebook's Hate-Speech Rules Collide With Indian Politics
- This Fund Is Up 7,298% in 10 Years. You Don't Want It.
- Kamala Harris's Stance on Fracking Could Be Liability in Pennsylvania

Ads

- Advertise
- Commercial Real Estate Ads
- Place a Classified Ad
- Sell Your Business
- Sell Your Home
- Recruitment & Career Ads
- Coupons

More

- About the Newsroom
- Content Partnerships
- Corrections
- Jobs at WSJ
- Masthead
- News Archive
- Register for Free
- Reprints
- Buy Issues