

'The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's Lenny Bruce: The Real vs. The Fictional

Outlet: [Collider](#)

Lenny Bruce's role in 'Maisel' is special because we see him before the sad ending, unlike other dramatized depictions of his life.

Unlike many characters in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, like talk show host Gordon Ford (a Johnny Carson stand-in) or comic Sophie Lennon (Phyllis Diller/Totie Fields blend), Lenny Bruce was not fictional nor a composite character — he was real. Known as the Godfather of modern stand-up (along with Mort Sahl), Lenny paved the way for legendary comics such as George Carlin, Joan Rivers, and Richard Pryor, but not without a cost. He talked about politics, religion, race, sex, and drugs when it was unseemly to do so on stage, even for a man.

Rachel Brosnahan, who plays Midge Maisel, has described Lenny in Midge's fictional universe as her "fairy godmother." He flirts and floats out of Midge's life, helping her along the way, only to disappear in a pervertible puff of smoke. After all, this is Midge's story, and this fictional Lenny Bruce (played by Luke Kirby) is at the whim of the *Maisel* narrative. Many have argued that turning Bruce into this kind of romantic figure, in every sense of the word, goes against his true nature — except that Bruce has already been branded a mythical figure in the comedy world for years.

The ballad of Lenny Bruce is one of a "subversive" or "sick comic," a drug addict who pushed established social mores, the First Amendment, and obscenity laws until he spent more time in a jail cell than on a club stage. Bruce paved the way for modern comics and storytellers like monologists/playwrights Eric Bogosian (*Uncut Gems*; *Law & Order*), who hero-worshipped him. Bogosian even added the moniker of "Saint" to Bruce's spiritual monogram. But those who knew Lenny, like friend and comic contemporary Shelly Berman, said Lenny would consider the idea that he was "heroic" as "hypocrisy," according to George Nachman's book *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. And the fictional Lenny, according to *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, would agree. In the Season 4 finale, Lenny literally scoffs at Midge regarding the "pedestal" he feels she has placed him on and has no interest in being a "stand-up Messiah." All Lenny Bruce wanted, both in his real and fictional incarnations, was to do was his job, to be funny. And getting arrested was not a means to that goal, but a deterrent.

In *Maisel*, Midge and fictional Lenny strikes up a friendship that leads to romance through esteem for each other's talent. So much so that just as they are about to make the leap from friends to lovers, Midge makes Lenny promise her that "... you will never, ever forget that I am very, very funny." It isn't about ego; it's about respect. Midge doesn't want to lose the respect Lenny gives her as a comic. As a woman in 1960, let alone a female comic in 1960, respect was hard to find in the world at large. A time when women weren't seen as comics or writers but as "girl writers" and "female comics." And although Belle Barth was getting arrested in Florida as early as 1953 for her bawdy routines, it wasn't until 1960 that she recorded her first comedy album. 1960 was a critical year for funny women making their comic marks into a new decade,

but it was also the start of the fiery decline of the former Leonard Schneider, a Jewish kid from Bellmore, Long Island, known as Lenny Bruce.

The midnight show at Carnegie Hall in February of 1961 was the pinnacle of Lenny's success (changed to 1960 in the series). The fact that audiences would travel through a blizzard to see Lenny do stand-up confirmed his popularity. Yet, in the fall of that same year, he was arrested in San Francisco for saying "c**ksucker" on stage at the Jazz Workshop. His arrest led to an obscenity trial. He was acquitted, but the arrests didn't stop. In 1962, he was arrested again in California for shows at The Troubadour and The Unicorn. (one of his "offensive" words: schmuck). Both trials ended in a hung jury. In Chicago, he wasn't so lucky, and after his arrest on stage at the Gates of Horn, he was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail. While on bail awaiting his appeal, Lenny flew to London to perform, only to be banned from the country indefinitely. By 1964 he was arrested in Greenwich Village, NYC, his spiritual and literal home. The New York artistic community came out in droves to speak on his behalf, from Bob Dylan to James Baldwin. Unfortunately, their words weren't enough, and in 1964 Lenny was convicted and sentenced to four months in a workhouse.

Once again, he was out on bail while on appeal. In fear of booking him, U.S. clubs began to blacklist him. And although he wasn't banned from Australia, things didn't go well Down Under either. His drug use got worse and affected his health. In 1964, he fell forty feet outside a hotel window pretending to fly (his imitation of "Superjew") and broke his arm and hurt his back. By 1966 he was blacklisted by almost all the U.S. clubs, and the king of comedy, Lenny Bruce, could no longer do what he loved — perform stand-up. His worst fear was realized. By the summer of 1966, he was dead of a drug overdose. Many say his death was a slow suicide and that what really killed Lenny Bruce was comedy. Or lack thereof. Bruce's manager Jack Rollins felt that Bruce had "sinned against his talent." The first one through the door always gets hurt, they say, and his change from "degenerate" to holy man seemed to happen overnight, according to Joan Rivers, in Nachman's book.

"...so what does he get for this? He gets arrested for talking dirty and dies a broken man. Now people are calling him the Rabelais of his time. The day after he died, The Time's obituary included comparisons to Swift and Twain. And I said, "this poor slob couldn't get a cabaret card" -- which you needed in those days."

Rivers (whose real life heavily influenced Maisel) had a friendship with Bruce similar to Midge and Lenny's in the series. However, near the end of her life, Joan would waffle on whether their relationship had also turned romantic or not. Still, she wasn't shy about expressing her attraction to him.

"... sexy as hell — oh, ho ho, you have no idea! The women were mad about him.... And the men loved him because he was a man's man and told the truth."

According to Rivers, Lenny was the biggest influence on her life — he "changed it all" for her. Joan loved to tell a story about how after bombing at a club one night, she exited the stage to find a note from Bruce: "They're wrong, your right." It meant so much to Joan that she kept the note in her bra. Years later, she told the story to George Carlin, who confessed that Bruce had given him the same note, and not just him, but to all the comics he believed had talent. In Maisel,

Lenny shows this side of him through his encouragement and support of Midge's act and career. Lenny Bruce's role in *Maisel* is special because we see him before the sad ending, unlike other dramatized depictions of his life.

Due to Kirby's transcendent performance as Bruce (he won an Emmy for the role) and Kirby and Brosnahan's electric chemistry, Lenny's role went from pilot cameo to a continuous role over several seasons. Still, even with Lenny's beefed-up role in the series, he and Midge feel like two ships in the night, which ultimately feels by design. After four seasons of sexual tension, the final coupling of these two "will they or won't they" characters doesn't feel random but purposeful and specific. Based on Bruce's history and where the series appears to be headed, Lenny and Midge seem to come together at the exact point where their lives diverge in opposite directions. It is, in cosmic terms, called a "stellar collision." Two shooting stars with opposite trajectories, almost switching places as they collide in space and time. Midge on her way up and Lenny on his way down. What makes this moment unique and not just another "fan service" hook up of a highly anticipated coupling is that it does what many series before it have failed to achieve — it drives the story forward.

Later that night, after Lenny's Carnegie Hall performance, when he leaves Midge center stage with the parting line, "If you blow this, it will break my f***ing heart," it has the pathos of two characters who genuinely care for each other. It would have felt empty had it happened before this moment, like a god-like avatar or a *deus ex machina* who comes down from the heavens to push Midge toward success. But instead, Lenny's importance to Midge's path in the show gives him a purpose in the narrative that feels earned and important. He isn't romantic or mythical; he feels real. And Lenny's words are just what Midge needs to stop hiding and fight for her place with the legends of comedy and into *Maisel*'s filth and final season.

The assassination of John Kennedy in 1963 is considered an "end of innocence" seminal moment in history. It pushed many Americans out of their cloistered existence of the 1950s into reality. The finale of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* appears to take place between Halloween and the 1960 election — and Kennedy's win. But, like Bruce's future, we know Kennedy's tragic end is also coming. In the final moments of the season, Midge passes a car of celebrating Kennedy volunteers, excited for what lies ahead with a new president, all while Midge pushes herself against forceful snow gusts representing the hard-fought road she has ahead in her journey toward success. Then, as Midge reaches the subway, she sees a billboard for *The Gordon Ford Show*, complete with the 1960s NBC "brought to you in living color" peacock logo. Finally, Midge sees the words "Go Forward," like a snow mirage that disappears into the billboard of Ford's face. When the *Maisel* pilot first dropped, the slug line for the series stated that it would "...lead her to a spot on Johnny Carson's couch". For stand-ups, Johnny Carson was a kingmaker, launching thousands of careers. In many terms, his *Tonight Show* represents legitimation and stardom. Carson didn't take over for Jack Parr until 1962, but the NBC logo alone gives away who Ford represents in the *Maisel* world. In this final moment of the episode, we as an audience know that Midge will be taking Lenny's words to heart.

Maisel's costume designer Donna Zakowski has referred to Midge's signature pink as the rose-colored glasses through which Midge sees the world. Midge's pinks have gone from baby pink to darker fuchsias/burgundies as each season, Midge's world is opened wider and wider

from her tight-knit life on the Upper West Side. So, if the death of President Kennedy threw off America's "rose-colored glasses," perhaps the death of Lenny Bruce will represent this same moment for Midge. Midge and Lenny aren't just a tragic romance; they represent the tragic romance between themselves and comedy — the good and the bad.

Adapting 'Ghosts': The Characters of the U.K. Series and Their U.S. Counterparts

Outlet: [Collider](#)

Both versions of 'Ghosts' stand out in the television landscape through their use of themes, characters, and experiences through time.

The concept of U.K. to U.S. television adapting isn't anything new to the genre, from their popularity in the 1970s with Three's Company (U.K.'s Man About the House) and Norman Lear's All In The Family (U.K.'s Till Death Us Do Part) to the 21st century with The Office, House Of Cards and Shameless, just to name a few. Not that there haven't been a few duds along the way (see 2003's U.S. version of Coupling). Still today, Trans-Atlantic conversion seems to be at its height for two countries that Oscar Wilde once famously wrote "have everything in common (with)... except, of course, language."

Since the popularity of The Office in 2005, literal adaptations and adherence to the source material, plot lines, characters, and themes have become the norm where previous reboots had mainly used the source material as a jumping-off point — often making the recent era of reboots feels like cookie-cutter imitations, depending on which series you watched first. This makes the recent CBS adaptation of the U.K. series Ghosts a refreshing change of pace.

Ghosts is a series about... well, a group of ghosts, spanning generations haunting one house after dying on the property. Their life, or afterlife, is forever changed when a married couple inherits the house with plans to turn it into a Bed and Breakfast. Chaos ensues when Allison (Charlotte Ritchie in the U.K. version) and/or Samantha (Rose McIver in the U.S. version), after hitting their heads, develop the ability to hear and see the ghosts, much to the chagrin of their husbands. (U.K.'s Kiell Smith-Bynoe and U.S.'s Utkarsh Ambudkar)

Baked into the original U.K. series is the history of the country in which it takes place. The ghosts in the house range from a World War II Captain to a headless Elizabethan to a Regency Jane Austen-style poet. The exciting aspect of the U.S. Ghosts is that while adapting many storylines from the original, the series has the leeway to be creative with characters due to differences between the two countries' land histories. Thoroughly American changes include a Viking, a Revolutionary officer, a 1960s hippy, a Native American, and a 1920s Jazz Singer. Both versions of Ghosts also stand out in the television landscape through their use of LBGTQ+ themes, characters, and experiences through time. Here are just a few of the characters from the U.S. series that come directly from the head of their U.K. counterparts.

Lady Stephanie "Fanny" Button (U.K.) / Hetty Woodstone (U.S.)

Played by series writer/co-creator Martha Howe-Douglas, the great Lady Button, much like her U.S. Victorian counterpart Hetty Woodstone (the superb Rebecca Wisocky), is set in her ways

based on the patriarchal indoctrination of her time, ideas such as that bike riding sexually arouse women (U.S.) or how overthinking is bad for a women's health and safety (U.K.). While both women had husbands who cheated on them, the biggest change is that Lady Fanny's husband killed her (causing her to reenact her death every night by screaming and flinging herself out of her bedroom window). In contrast, Hetty's husband (Veep's Matt Walsh), in comparison (a robber baron, i.e., see *The Gilded Age*), is not canonically LGBTQ+ as Fanny's husband is, which we find out when Fanny divulges that after finding her husband having sex with the male staff, he killed her. We later discover that Fanny and her husband, Lord George Button, were forced into marriage based on the societal pressures of the 1900s. (Fanny due to family money issues and being unable to enter business; George due to the archaic mores of the time.) An overall theme in the series that Fanny expresses the best:

"After all, if George had been free to love as he chose... well, I wouldn't have been murdered, and I could have had a husband instead who wanted to know me."

While it is best that the American version stayed clear of this storyline, with its history of tragic queer characters, thematically missing from the U.S. *Ghosts* (within more than one character), is that the group is better off when everyone can be their true selves. However, the U.S. version has explored a similar storyline in a deeper way than the U.K. version has yet to achieve. (More on that later.) Both Hetty and Fanny explore how to break from their literal corsets in different ways, and based on the trajectory of the U.S. version Hetty will be catching up to Fanny very soon.

The Captain (U.K.) / Captain Isaac Higgintoot (U.S.)

The Captain (played by writer/co-creator Ben Willbond) in the U.K. version hails from World War II, representing Britain's Churchill years, an archetypally English symbol. Therefore, it makes sense that his American counterpart reboot, Captain Isaac Higgintoot (Brandon Scott Jones), would be a Revolutionary War veteran. The Captain is a charming, sweet man with the famous Brit "stiff upper lip." Early on in the series, it is obvious that the Captain died in the 1940s, unable to express that he was queer and in love with a fellow soldier. Completely chaste, the Captain's longings are implied in scenes, never acted on or spoken.

In contrast, in the U.S. version, even though making Hetty's husband straight and changing the same-sex wedding in the house to a heterosexual one, Captain Higgintoot gets a love interest and a coming-out story. Isaac reunites with the ghost of a British officer throughout the first season, with whom he had a crush-worthy mutual flirtation in life. In a lovely touching scene (in the U.S.'s most recent episode), Isaac confesses to Hetty something he is excited but nervous to say out loud — that he is in love with British Officer Nigel Chessum, something he could never have imagined saying in his own time. Another addition to the U.S. version is that Captain Isaac, unlike the U.K.'s Captain, is played by an out actor. Jones told *Out Magazine* on playing the role and relating to his own time of feeling closeted in his past:

"The thing that has interested me from the get-go is, I remember that feeling. I remember that time in my life when I was somebody that just kind of wished I was somebody else or was struggling with my own identity... Then to sort of play this character who has held onto that

moment for much longer than any human could ever hold onto it for almost two and a half centuries, was so kind of sad, but also really, really exciting to me to play as an actor... Then to sort of play this character who has held onto that moment for much longer than any human could ever hold onto it for almost two and a half centuries, was so kind of sad, but also really, really exciting to me to play as an actor."

As the U.K. series has just finished filming their fourth season, one can only hope The Captain has a coming-out moment in this future when he's ready.

Pat Butcher (U.K.) / Pete Martino (U.S.)

Pat (U.K.) and Pete (U.S.), played by U.K. series writer/co-creator Jim Howick (*Sex Education*) and Richie Moriarty (*The Tick*), are the only characters with no noticeable gaps between their respective versions. Pat/Pete, dressed literally as a Boy Scout (killed with an arrow through his neck) is the sweet, cheerful goody-two-shoes from the 80s who loves Newhart, sports (well, maybe not archery anymore!), and his wife. They both have similar backstories, but it is the actors that bring their substance and likability to the role as the resident optimistic among the dead. From Howick's excitement and giant smile to Moriarty's bright naive spirit, they each bring their individual take to a memorable character.

Julian Fawcett MP (U.K.) / Trevor Lefkowitz (U.S.)

Both series depict the 1990s as a time of excess and greed, so what's more perfect than a character who died with their pants down to actually turn out to be a politician and/or a stock market bro? Although it feels deeply American to age down a character in a Brit-to-American transfer, the young Wall Street pre-9/11 type fits into the U.S. ensemble perfectly. The U.K.'s Jillian Fawcett MP (writer/creator Simon Farnaby), a career Member of Parliament, is the perfect satire of the end of Thatcherism, a hilarious buffoon who delivers some of the best lines (and improves — watch the outtakes). However, the U.S.'s Trevor Lefkowitz (Asher Grodman) fits the same mold but with moments of vulnerability, letting other characters on the show have the larger comic moments otherwise reserved for his predecessor. Still, at the surface, Julian and Trevor are both pompous sex maniacs who have never seen a modern H.R. department, but they also are doing what the series does best — shining a light on how far we've come and turning that into laughs.

Robin the Caveman (U.K.) / Thorfinn (U.S.)

Robin and Thorfinn are both the oldest characters in their respective series: a caveman and a Viking who have moments of brutalism and genius, alongside vulnerability. The concept behind Robin in the original series was that the oldest ghost was the smartest, having seen it all — only it is their way of speaking and presenting themselves that makes everyone assume otherwise. Often Robin is the one with the words of reason and a big heart. Thorfinn's juxtaposition from his appearance and his literal armor is also his soft heart from his past, singing baby Hetty to sleep, to his feelings of torture about killing his best friend: a squirrel. While Robin has all the answers, Thorfinn looks for them in therapy, making them both treasured characters.

Thomas Thorne (U.K.) / Sasappis (U.S.)

Of all the characters on the series, the U.K.'s Regency poet Thomas Thorne (writer/co-creator Mathew Baynton) and the U.S.'s Lenape Native American Sasappis (Román Zaragoza) couldn't feel more rooted in the history of the land where they died. And while Sasappis does share DNA, so to speak, with Robin in the realm of the "oldest characters being the wisest" mantra, his genuine connection appears to be with Thomas Thorne, as they are each the storytellers of their group. While Thomas is a writer who could never tell his stories in his lifetime or get the girl (dead or alive), and he is neither as brave as Sasappis nor as wise — yet you can't help but fall in love with both of them. While Thomas Thorne, much like The Captain, is a symbol of a romantic version of the British Isles, Sasappis represents North America's true origins. And similar to Thomas, he was unable to fulfill his storytelling dreams while he lived. Speaking in a modern vernacular, Sasappis is quick and funny; he makes jokes about the living characters' experiences and prejudices and has moments of true honesty, making him the American reboot's stand-out character. One could say he is the truest character adaptation from British-to-American in the entire U.S. show.

Gracie Allen: Truth in Comedy

A Tribute to the great comedienne Gracie Allen

Outlet: Travalanche

They say the great ones never truly know how great they are -that the great ones do it without effort, without the knowledge of doing it any other way – doing what comes naturally. Gracie Allen was that kind of woman, that kind of comedian. But of course she wasn't as black and white as the medium in which she played. Gracie Allen never gave the same performance twice; she had no conception of it. If she had to eat on camera she ate on camera; if she had to darn a sock she'd darn a sock. Being truthful in her work was a given to Gracie long before the phrase "Method Acting" became part of our lexicon. She unknowingly went against convention in her Vaudeville days, wearing whatever she liked on stage (always a nice dress) at a time when performers wore the same outfit each night – costume was as much a part of the act as the lines or moves themselves. When asked by her husband and comedy partner, George Burns, one night why she brought her purse on stage when the previous night she had not, she replied simply, "A lady always carries a purse." When asked by a director of a Burns & Allen feature film if she could "cheat" towards the camera while eating, she answered, "But this is how I eat breakfast." Everything Gracie Allen the character said on stage, Gracie Allen the woman believed, and so in turn did the audience.

Gracie Allen's onstage persona was that of a scatterbrained woman with her own sense of logic – her mind was an open book. In real life, Gracie Allen almost never gave an interview as herself; to find an interview, usually very early in her career, where she speaks as herself, is rare. Gracie Allen was a very private and humble woman. She believed her own personality was not at all interesting and that the public cared only for her on stage persona, so why do interviews as herself. This kept Gracie Allen's real life shrouded in mystery and -whether she knew it or not – gave her a final vestige of privacy.

And who would have blamed Gracie's audience for being fooled into thinking she was her fictional persona? After all , Gracie Allen, wife of George Burns, mother and Vaudeville/Radio/TV/movie star, was playing a woman named Gracie Allen, wife of George

Burns, mother and Vaudeville/Radio/TV/movie star; even in almost all of Gracie's movies her

3

character had the first name Gracie and/or last name Allen. Not to mention Burns and Allen used many of the real-life names of Gracie's family members in the Burns and Allen comedy act. Even her real age is a mystery, as she never revealed it even to her husband and family. It was only after the 1900 census as well as her high school yearbook were discovered that her true age came to light. What is mostly known about Gracie, beyond her ditzy character, is from second hand sources, such as George Burns himself as well as her friends and family. Therefore, reconstructing the real Gracie Allen is more complicated than her character's sense of logic.

She was kind, giving, fiercely loyal and fought for what she felt was fair and just in the world. Her motto was simply, "To be professional; on time and don't push me around because I'm small." (Burns 1988) The 5'1" slip of a woman had that Irish passion and never let anyone forget it. Once in a Vaudeville act, after George refused to take a joke out of the act she didn't think was funny, Gracie refused to answer George's straight line – each and every time until George took the joke out of the act. Another time, in New Orleans, a local dry cleaner ruined an expensive dress of Gracie's and refused to reimburse her for the damage; Gracie stepped out of the act in different intervals each night in the middle of a joke, to let the audience know of her dissatisfaction, until the dry cleaner paid her back. Once, outside the Brown Derby, Gracie literally kicked George in the ass for not opening a door for her.

She helped her friends (and enemies) out with money when Vaudeville died, adopted two children including a son whom most would have considered sickly at the time, and made sure her sisters had everything they needed when they both were lost in a sea of dementia (Something she feared would happen to herself) She did all this while remaining, as Gracie would refer to herself, "a lady." She was embarrassed by the large burn scars on her left arm from a childhood accident (She always wore long sleeves because of it), and the fact that she had two differently-colored eyes, but according to George she never complained about either flaw. In fact, if she did complain about something one knew it was a big deal – she was a Vaudeville trooper on-and-off-stage. This made her appearance very important to her; something she was proud of. George remarked she never left the house with a hair out of place or her make-up less than perfect.

Gracie had unresolved issues with her father, also a Vaudeville hooper, who had abandoned her family when Gracie was a child – so much so that when Gracie's father came backstage to see his now-famous daughter, Gracie's only comment on the matter was: he had nothing to say to her when she was growing up and therefore she had nothing to say to him now. She was however very close to the rest of her family, her mother and sisters, and she loved her children fiercely.

She didn't think she was funny, even though American considered her its comedy sweetheart, stating that she knew funny, but wasn't funny. When asked to say something funny her response was, "Charlie Chaplin." George Burns says the only real joke he ever heard Gracie tell, after being egged on by friends was, "An Irishman walked out of a bar." She hated her feet, loved gossip and her only wish was to be able to wear a strapless, sleeveless, evening gown – the one thing her money and fame could not provide her.

In August 1932 The World Telegraph interviewed George and Gracie in their NY hotel room; it's one of the rare interviews where Gracie speaks as herself. She remarks, in the interview, how she is not looking to play Shakespeare and someday hopes to have enough money to retire and never work again. The reporter even mentions how during the interview Miss Allen kept staring out the window, waiting for her daughter and nanny to come back from a stroll in the park. This would be in direct parallel to her husband George Burns, who felt performing was his life and performed well into his 90's – one might say that after Gracie's passing, show business was what gave him the reason to live so long.

It is a lovely interview and a rare glimpse into Gracie's personality and her dynamic with George. Her excitement about their travels around Europe lifts off the page with the same enthusiasm George had talking about show-business. At one point, George, ever the raconteur, exuberantly tells the interviewer that he can't sit still when he talks: "I have to walk around and act out everything," to which Gracie mutters, "But perhaps you noticed that," looking on him lovingly before sharing an admiring smile (The New York World Telegraph 1932).

The love between George and Gracie is well-documented; he adored her and lauded her as the genesis of all his success, which was half-true. They were both responsible for each other's successes and they each referred to the other as the talented one. The difference was George lived longer to tell the tale. But after all, being the literal brains behind their act as the writer, storytelling was George's talent. Their love story sounds like something out of a storybook. He loved her, and pursued her, in Vaudeville while Gracie claimed she loved another. And like a great act one finish, after giving Gracie an ultimatum to marry him and drop her fiancé, or break up the act, Gracie called him early Christmas morning and agreed to marry him.

Together his sense of humor and her rare talent for the stage brought them great success as a team in real life as well as show business. And although their Dumb Dora act – the girl/boy double act with a nitwit woman and smart straight man – wasn't anything new for the time, Burns and Allen brought their originality – themselves -to their work, making it something new and innovative. But that wasn't how it started. When Gracie first met George he was doing an act that was just imitations of other, more established Big Time acts. But his act was breaking up and George needed a new partner. Enter Gracie Allen, stage right, an out-of-work hooper whose short respite from show business in stenography classes was a bust. They both needed new partners and George's act was cheaper so they agreed to do his "new" act. Only just like George's old act his "new" act was neither new nor innovative. The act consisted of jokes straight out of joke books – safe material – material that was sure to keep the fearful Burns employed, as new untested material was far too risky. George would later admit he had spent so much time in Small Time Vaudeville he was fearful of being more; he was happy coasting—he just couldn't admit it. But the more George and Gracie worked together the more confidence he seemed to get and the more new material he wrote – until it was the whole act. George went from a twenty-eight-year-old playing it safe to a confident star that played The Big Time, The Palace. They were each other's loves and muses – each encouraging the other.

And although Gracie Allen spoke of retirement as early as 1932, and not too long after she had the money to do so, Gracie didn't retire until her heart became too weak to continue in 1958. Gracie Allen's heart perhaps had loved too much to go on. She loved her husband George so

much that she stayed in show business longer than she would have wanted to for his sake. She

5

knew that show business was the breath of life to her husband – “He needs it for his metabolism,” She told Carol Channing on teaching Carol her old Burns and Allen act, when Carol appeared with George in Gracie’s place. (Burns 1988) And once George ventured out on his own she reminded him of the lessons she had taught him when they first met- truthfulness. If he didn’t believe what he was saying, how could the audience? “All you need in acting is honesty, and if you can fake that you’ve got it made, “George would always joke later in his life. But George believed as early as the 1940’s that, according to his biography on Gracie, “a joke just isn’t funny unless it has some truth in it;” he just needed to learn how to incorporate that into his delivery. (Burns 1988) George said he learned a lot from Gracie, but the most important was, “She taught me that you’ve got to make it sound like you’ve never said it before ...A lot of Gracie rubbed off on me.” (People October 31, 1988 Vol. 30 No. 18)

*George Burns won the academy award for Best Supporting Actor in 1976.

Milberger on “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel”

Outlet: Travalanche

The Marvelous Mrs Maisel: A Woman in Redux

Many people would consider the modern Golden Age of Comedy to be the 1950s and 60s, when what we know today as stand-up became all the rage and television was in its infancy. When the comedy from vaudeville finally had its eyes back again (after years of being in the dark with radio) and was able to take its experience to mint legends for the ages. Television turned nightclub raconteurs into instant celebrities, thanks to the likes of Jack Paar, Ed Sullivan and soon – the king of them all – Johnny Carson. But except for Lucille Ball, how many women from this era have seen their strengths and struggles dramatized, their stories told? For all the plays, films and TV based on Neil Simon, Mel Brooks or Carl Reiner’s fond memories of the 1950’s classic sketch show Your Show of Shows (and later Caesar’s Hour), sporting a writing staff that included most of the comedy legends for the latter part of 20th century (Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, Mel Tolkin, etc.), where are the stories solely about Lucille Kallen or Selma Diamond? Where are the lavish odes to Madelyn Pugh, who wrote most of I Love Lucy’s classic episodes and who was given the moniker of “Girl Writer” because of the oddity of such a thing at the time? Because for every Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Alan King, Bob Newhart and Richard Pryor, there was a Joan Rivers, a Moms Mabley and an Elaine May. Today, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are household names, but the female narrative of comedy they came from seems mostly forgotten or glossed over. That was until Gilmore Girls creator Amy Sherman-Palladino gave us the new Amazon pilot The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.

Written and directed by Sherman-Palladino, The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel tells the story of Miriam ‘Midge’ Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan), whom we first meet at her wedding reception, doing stand-up (unbeknownst to herself) and regaling her family and friends with the cleaned up version of her 1950’s teen life at Bryn Mawr College. Four years later, Midge has two kids and the seemingly perfect New York Upper-West Side Jewish life of 1958, and one would assume to find her spending her nights in Greenwich Village trying her hand at stand-up comedy. However, this is 1958 after all, and Midge is just a “housewife” making brisket, worried about keeping her figure and beauty for her husband – all while having time to prepare the perfect Yom Kippur break -fast for the Rabbi and for her family. It’s only when a family crisis (which I won’t give

away) sends Midge's "happy life" into upheaval that she finally discovers that she is the talented stand-up in the family, not her wannabe husband. A talent that, based on the synopsis, will take Midge all the way to Johnny Carson's couch – the pinnacle and seminal moment for stand-ups of her generations.

Within the short pilot, Sherman-Palladino is able to establish Midge as a smart, confident and funny female who knows what she wants, even if it took her 26 years to know that she, as a woman, could achieve it. Midge belongs in the company of other Sherman-Palladino heroines: a witty, fast-talking brunette you want to root for. What the pilot also does well is establish the obstacles Midge will be up against in her upward rise to fame. The fact that Midge didn't even expect herself to go into comedy, that it was her husband's job, is a red flag on its own; but what the pilot does best for a layman of this era is to establish this pre-feminist environment Midge will have to push against to succeed. Midge, for example, keeps a journal of all of her measurements, something she has done since she was a child, and even goes so far as to hide her night beauty regimen from her husband to make him believe she wakes up with perfect hair and make-up – behavior that appears to have been passed down from her own mother who in the pilot worries her baby granddaughter has too big of a head and bemuses that her daughter is officially done wearing sleeveless dresses. Even Midge's own father blames her for her husband's failings – something that even shocks Midge. Sherman-Palladino's music choices, as with *Gilmore Girls*, do a wonderful job to establish mood, tone, and style of the time period. Paired with the vibrant colors and sets of 1958 New York City, it all makes the audience feel like they've stepped back in time. What you ultimately get with Mrs. Maisel is the fast, witty dialogue of *Gilmore Girls* mixed with the epic scope and social commentary of *Mad Men*, and a comedy history lesson to boot.

Along the way Midge meets *Gilmore Girls* alum Alex Borstein who plays a hardened (West) Village bartender Susie at the comedy club "The Gaslight Cafe" – which appears to be a fictitious stand-in for "The Bitter End". Susie sees the rare comic talent in Midge, comparing her to Mort Sahl (an icon in his day). Finally at one point Susie tells an unsure Midge, "I don't mind being alone. I just do not want to be insignificant. Do you? Don't you want to do something no one else can do? Be remembered as something other than a wife... a housewife..." – a universal question women, hell, humans ask themselves. It resonates with Midge as it did me and it pushes Midge to take the first steps to go after her own dreams with as much gusto as she put into making a brisket or we can only imagine she put into getting back in her Rabbi's good graces. It's fitting that what will one day become one of the most important days in Midge's life takes place on Yom Kippur. It is a day of atonement of sins, yes, but is also a day of starting over. Of re-birth. Of having your sins forgiven and wiping the slate. (In fact, she literally ends the day wearing wearing someone else's shoes)

Also making an appearance are The Kingston Trio and, in a more substantial role, Lenny Bruce himself (played wonderfully by Luke Kirby), establishing that there are rules to this world (which includes being arrested for indecency) and that being innovative means sometimes you have to break these rules. Every actor in the pilot is a knockout, led by the adorably charming Rachel

Brosnahan as Midge, and (as Sherman-Palladino always does) casting stalwart actors such as Tony Shalhoub and Marin Hinkle as Midge's parents.

For me, what really struck home this piece in my heart was not just that it was about a woman who will pioneer comedy, but that this is the story of a Jewish woman in comedy. See, a short time ago I had a revelation. And hear me out, here. It may sound crazy... but... as a Jewish woman I feel unrepresented within the comic Jewish narrative. No seriously I do. Think about it... 99.9% of what we know as the traditional comic Jewish persona is male-driven. And I don't

just mean this in the sense that this narrative is mostly populated by men. What I am talking about is the ideas or tropes that are usually identified as the classic heritage of Jewish comedy, or voice, comes from the point of view of a strictly male narrative. The style, the attributes, what consolidates a comic Jewish stereotype – from Alan King to Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld. And yes, this is a history that stems all the way from the ethnic comedy of vaudeville to the dining rooms of the Catskills “Borscht Belt,” so of course it comes from a male dominated society. But for me it was a persona I had adopted as my own, that I thought I was a part of. It wasn’t until I saw more of myself in the works of Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson (Broad City) and of Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh-McKenna (Crazy Ex-Girlfriend) writing actual Jewish women that I started to notice it more: I wasn’t represented. Where I had previously thought I saw myself in

the worlds of Allen and Seinfeld, and even Aaron Sorkin to a degree, I only had to take a step back to see that alongside their “Jewish avatars” were mostly goyisha women. And that when any token Jewish women actually appeared, they were nags or annoying stereotypes with funny voices for laughs. And yes, to a non-New Yorker, Midge has a funny voice, but what her voice is in so many ways is authentic. Here is a familiar, confident, Jewish woman I recognize. And this is a good thing not just for seeing myself represented in the narrative, but also for what it does to the public at large. To show that we aren’t just jokes and nagging mothers in a punch-line. Or bad dates their mother sets them up with. We are also part of this heritage of comedy. And I think there is no better person than Amy Sherman-Palladino (whose own father was a comedian during this era) to use her own Jewish voice to tell us all about Mrs. Maisel and how she made it to the top of comedy. So I recommend you watch this pilot and vote for it to be picked up for series (or else it won’t, that’s how Amazon works) And if the male in your life or the ones reading this still aren’t sold on “Mad Men/ PunchLine for chicks” ... just tell ‘em there are also tits in it.

Published work upon request