



**COLLEGE
COMMONS**

FERNE PEARLSTEIN: THE LAST LAUGH

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host.

JH: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, and this episode interview's with Ferne Pearlstein. Ferne Pearlstein is a critically acclaimed filmmaker and renowned cinematographer. She won the Sundance Cinematography Prize for IMELDA about the former first lady of the Philippines. She has produced and/or directed dozens of films, including *The Last Laugh*, which was released theatrically in over 25 cities and screened at over 100 film festivals, including London, Munich, Jerusalem, and Rome. Pearlstein is a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and a 2018 inductee into the Brooklyn Jewish Hall of Fame. Ferne, welcome to the College Commons Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you.

Ferne Pearlstein: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

JH: So, I want to start off with *The Last Laugh*, which is getting a lot of press. You wrote and directed the 2017 documentary, which is about... If it's fair to sum up, it's about humor, the Holocaust and survival. And I wanted to invite you to introduce us to the film.

FP: In 1991, I was on an assignment in Miami for a totally different job when I was just a still photographer, and I brought a friend along, and one of the things that we were doing, they introduced us to the then new Holocaust Memorial in Miami. And there was a tour being given of the memorial by this elderly survivor, and it was right around when Art Spiegelman's *Maus* had come out. And it had just won the Pulitzer Prize, and it was a phenomenon. And there had been nothing like it. It was the first graphic novel. So, my friend and I started a discussion after the tour with the survivor, and she was very upset. She hadn't read it, but she was very upset by the very idea, because at that point, we were still...

FP: Anybody's knowledge of a cartoon was in the Sunday cartoons, basically. And she said to us, "There's nothing funny about the Holocaust. You can't put it in the funny pages." And we had a really long, thoughtful conversation with her about how we thought it wasn't necessarily humorous, although there were some humorous moments in the present day story with him and his father, but it just gave us a lot to think about. And then, my friend and I went back to New York where we were both living, and we both went off to grad school. In the process, he started thinking about this and wrote a

25-page paper called The Last Laugh, sort of examining is it okay to use humour in connection with the Holocaust? Inspired by this conversation. And is it okay and was there humor during the Holocaust?

JH: This is already 20-odd years after the producers.

FP: Well, 1991. Yes, the movie.

JH: I mean, it's a long time after the producers to be asking that question, isn't it?

FP: Yes, but he was... This paper was a 25-page paper about humour in the camps.

JH: Oh, actually as lived?

FP: Yes, yes, yes.

JH: Got it.

FP: In the displaced person's camps, in the ghettos.

JH: I see.

FP: And indeed, there was a ton of evidence that this existed and that's what this paper was about. So, it was a very academic paper. I was at Stanford getting my Master's in documentary film. I was working on a film in Seattle where he was, and he handed me the paper and he said, "Make this into movie." That was 1993. And of course, it took me until 2011 to actually be able to raise money for the film.

JH: Are you conveying the information that it took you so long, because it was still taboo, or because...

FP: Yes, because it was still taboo. And guess what? I think it's taboo again. I think it'd be very hard for me to make it now.

JH: Really?

FP: I don't know, we can try to make it...

JH: I find it interesting that it should be taboo. I can understand why media humor about the Holocaust might be taboo, because you are taking someone else's suffering and putting it in a comic context. But to talk about the actual victims and those who have experienced it, who have proverbial philosophical ownership over their own story to discuss their humor on their terms, it's strange to me that that should ever be taboo, because they kind of get the moral right to do that.

FP: Well, that is a major thing my film asks. So for instance, when Kent Kirshenbaum handed me the paper, I read it. It was very academic. It was incredible. It gave me the

permission to make the film, because it's, as you say, if the survivors are making the jokes, it's a big difference. But I knew the documentary had to open up to post-war humor, and it had to open up to things like the producers and now Curb Your Enthusiasm and what not. And now Joe Rabbit, for instance. And who could make the joke? Do you have to be a Jewish comedian? Do you have to be a comedian? Do you have to be... What happens when somebody retells the joke and they're not Jewish? And what happens if that person is a neo-Nazi? There's all these questions that the film asks.

JH: So without spoiling the movie, do you come to any, I don't know, conclusions or is it more an examination with an open-ended...

FP: It's an examination that asks all these questions. It does not give answers because the answer is different for every single person. You experience the context of the jokes, what makes them work, what makes them not work, who's telling them, who's hearing them. It's different for everybody.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more, just click sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now back to our podcast.

JH: You appeared on The Leonard Lopate Show, which is WNYC, together with Judy Gold and Alan Zweibel, and all of you, there was a lot of consensus amongst the three of you as interviewing...

FP: And Gilbert Godfrey.

JH: And Gilbert Godfrey, thank you, and all of you spoke about the importance of the context and the audience with respect to humor, not just can a neo-Nazi make the joke, but also to whom can you make the joke, in what context can you do it? And there was a lot of consensus that the context matters, comedians speak to comedians in ways that they don't speak to audiences, etcetera, and that in some ways, Leonard Lopate himself asked if there was a line beyond which you couldn't cross and people seemed to agree in that interview that it depends on the audience, at least. And so, I wonder as a film maker, where you lose control of the audience, it's not stand-up, you're not in a room, you can't read the room, you're not giving a guest lecture where you've been invited by a certain constituency, you're putting it out there in the world more like a book or an article. And I wanna know if that's a different kind of risk from the film maker's perspective than from the comedian's perspective?

FP: In a film like this, where I wanted to get into more, some of that academic stuff in that original paper, it was harder because as opposed to a TV series, which I think I could have examined, one episode could have been all about humor during the war or have these certain experts. But the problem is when you have comedians and they're like Mel Brooks and clips from Joan Rivers and all these outrageous comedians, it's hard to then put an academic person next to them.

[chuckle]

JH: Right.

FP: And have it work. So the film is sort of divided in three parts. It's got clips from all these different movies and television shows and examples of using this sort of humor. And then it has a Greek chorus of comedians like Mel Brooks, Sarah Silverman, Rob and Carl Reiner, Susie Essman, etcetera, etcetera, who answer questions, talk about their line, all that sort of thing, but the heart of the film is a survivor who is now turning 95, Renee Firestone, who it's a more observational story that's inter-cut with all of that stuff and she's sort of our guide of what's okay and what's not okay.

JH: And she's particularly permissive, right?

FP: I would say she has a very good sense of humor, she has a dark sense of humor and a gallows sense of humour, she doesn't think everything's okay, but she has definitely a darker sense of humor than the other survivors. But you know...

JH: And she's your cover, she's your permission, because she's a survivor.

FP: She's my permission, but she's also a judge. I'll give you an example, so, which covers a couple of things we're talking about. As you know, I've been trying to make the film since 1991, so collecting research, and any time there was something of the subject matter, I'd either watch it or whatever. So, Sarah Silverman did Jesus' Magic live, then it became a film many, many years later, but we saw it live on Bleecker Street in the village and she did about 20, 25 minutes of Holocaust material and it was funny. We laughed, we were in a dark room, nobody was judging us. So when it came time to actually make the film, and I met Renee, I had this idea of showing the audience stuff like that, but then backing up and watching Renee watch that stuff. So there was a context of what you're watching because it was very safe for me to laugh at those jokes in a dark room with numerous people my age, with no consequences, right? So there are a number of scenes in the film where Renee and her daughter Claire are going through YouTube clips about Holocaust humor and watching them and responding, and sometimes you just see the clip, and you don't realize and then it backs up on her, not in a tricky way, but because you know she's part of the film.

FP: And because I wanted that off balance thing, I wanted you to be able to laugh and then remember what you're laughing at and who you're laughing at and I wanted people to be... I wanted that rollercoaster effect of it. And what's so interesting is when I would show people rough cuts of the film, especially younger audiences, they would have the response of, "I don't wanna see Renee, I don't want her to say, 'I don't think that's okay,'"

or, 'That's not funny,'" because it made them feel judged, but that was the point.

JH: And older viewers didn't have the same sensitivity?

FP: Older Jewish people loved my film. This completely caught me by surprise. I can't tell you how many screenings where people came up to me after, survivors or children and grandchildren of survivors telling me their stories about humor, because it's never been something they can talk about. So, it's... Right? It's not something that they were getting around telling, "Oh, let's talk about funny stories about the Holocaust." It wasn't happening. So that gave them, people in the audience, permission to tell me these stories, which was amazing. We're not talking about Gilbert Gottfried stories, we're talking about subtle humor, that might have happened in the camp. Like Renee tells a story about a woman in her barracks who was a Panamanian, and because they had to be quiet, it was sort of the perfect art form. And she would do all these things and pantomime all these things and skating, and they would smile ear-to-ear, and so, that's a tough kind of a story. Or we met a survivor we didn't get a chance to film, who... And this is shocking to me but he was an MC for a comedy show at Auschwitz. It was a small thing behind the barracks. They would do it for the guards, they were just telling jokes.

FP: In the film, somebody talks about how some of... Depending on where it was like, not in the death camps, they didn't have big cabarets in the death camps, but they did have them in Theresienstadt and Westerbork, and there's footage of it in my film. But even in Auschwitz, they could do something like that. But in Westerbork and Theresienstadt, there might have been double entendre and inside jokes amongst the Jews about the guards that the guards didn't understand. There was none of that at Auschwitz, it was straight like mother-in-law jokes.

JH: Yeah.

FP: And which was just a release, just a release and it was entertainment, for the guards.

JH: Well, listen, Ferne Pearlstein, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me. It's been a pleasure to get to know you and to hear your stories of telling stories.

FP: Thank you.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at the College Commons website, collegetcommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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